

A GEOGRAPHY OF QUEER WOUNDINGS | *Joshua Whitehead*

When I find myself in bouts of depression inked with anxiety, I lull myself into an easy silence with music. “This is what it looks like right before you fall,” hums Mac Miller. “I don’t have no name, who am I to blame?” Miller’s lyrics, which come from his posthumous song “Circles,” situate me in my current predicament, here, during my own fall, which is less inclined to position itself biblically but more so Indigenously. The past six months have been a whirlwind of depressive bouts sprouting from loss, mourning, sexual assault, abandonment, colonial violence, imperialism, state-sanctioned genocide—which for me, normalizes an absurd fact of Indigenous life: it hurts to live.

Trying to find joy, I seek out others, here I log in to Tinder, Grindr, Hinge, and Bumble. I go on dates, have casual encounters with others, and, in July 2019, I am forced to perform fellatio in the front seat of a car. We are parked in the industrial area of Calgary, he, coming down from the high of Calgary Stampede machismo, all bravado and buckskin and PBR. We talk briefly on Grindr, I find myself in an isolated pocket, one where I’ve drained myself of confidence and douse myself in Viktor and Rolf cologne, a musky spice, here I pepper myself as fungible and edible: two primary components of queer hook-up culture. Devour me, I say, unlatch the maw and swallow me—I pang to be caressed even in, or perhaps I mean to say amongst, the masochistic violence of anonymity and starved intimacy.

Beneath my grandmother, who looms above us with a dusty eye, the rumble of the CPR drones by, the hum of electrical boxes and generators fills the air—the soundscape of the city pollutes my cochlea, Calgary betrays me so as to drown out my whimpering “no,” and the darkness of industry emerges imperially. Here, the night cloaks whiteness, and I am granted my own death-wish. In this moment, I think of the tattoo on Miller’s left forearm that reads, “Only so much time left in this crazy world.” I defeat myself and let him wrap himself up into me with a mallet culled of ermine to quicken his release—there is no softness here. I tell myself: *this is it, I’ve become a number*, statistically, I become an arithmetic here, removed from my body entirely, I float aromatically watching myself churn into industry, mechanical almost. I let him spill into my mouth and spit out a river of semen that quickly dries into a wash on my kokom scarf that’s been torn from my head. When I remove myself from the situation and return home, I crumble onto my carpet and cry into my dirtied scarf, I become arroyo, flash flood. I craft semicolons beneath my feet made from

tear and blood and snot and cement them beneath my wet black moccasins—I *thought I was going to die*, I repeat to myself, and laugh maniacally to the point I terrify myself. This is what it looks like before I fall: I crash into matte fiber like a thunderstorm; I birth anew into a carpeted condominium, falling like Sky Woman did, except, no one catches me here: I melt into the floorboards and am greeted by water bear. When they ask me my name, I reply, “I don’t know,” that too has been stolen from me—“just hold me awhile, won’t you?” I ask of no one visible. And here I am held epidermically by germs, this is all I can muster in this mousing.

It’s funny, I still talk to you—without your knowledge, of course, to ask with a pained valence: why?

To relieve my body of its disposability, I find myself having to distance myself from queer life. I find no pleasure in hook-up culture, I shy away from gay bars, I turn my eyes away from men who attempt to meet mine, I self-sabotage any attempts anyone makes to get to know me intimately. I continually find myself asking: am I queer enough to be queer? I try to deploy my gender, sexuality, and sex as ceremonious beings; something I was taught by my epistemologies, so as to be cradled like a spirit plate—small portions for ephemeral hungers. Whiteness and masculinity are the crooks of queer culture, the essentialism of bodies into categorizations of thin, toned, or fat—the latter often met with racialized preferences against blackness and brownness. I must interpolate annihilation as an Indigenous person in the throes of queer desire, whose teeth are whitened from charcoal; here, even my mineralized skin becomes the buck from which you sharpen incisors.

I am reminded of a conversation I once had, where I am interpolated as “other” through the notation, “Josh, I recognize it’s easier for me to navigate queerness because I’m standardly attractive.” Whether you mean to say it or not, what this tells me is that my aestheticism is merely a curiosity, that desire for me is simply a query, and queerness has limited room for those outside of the descriptors of “standardization:” cisness, masculinity, whiteness, thinness. Like when I don Savage Rose beadwork, a touch of This Claw, a flash of Mad Auntie, a Thunder Voice hat adorned with baby’s breath and sage, and decide to go dancing with friends—here, beneath the scrutiny of queerness, my body’s boundaries are violated when you grab my earrings, touch my coat, fondle my hat, pull my arm as if I were the artifact and you the surveyor. Here, I am the head within the scaffold, a cabinet of queerer curiosities. Queerness beheads me in these situations much to the point I am bereaved and my body reels back to that moment of breakage. So much of queerness has already beheaded itself in pixels—now you place the onus on me to do the same, I refuse to be dismembered: digitally, literarily, or literally.

Have you ever witnessed a phantom dance to Doja Cat?—the only death that is dealt is to the non-human, the spirit, who loses yet another life, and I am running out of hands to splay.

Or, perhaps I mean to ask: who names an event apocalyptic and for whom must apocalypse affect in order for it to be thought of as “canon?” How do we pluralize apocalypse? Apocalypses as ellipses? Who is omitted from such a saving of space, whose material is relegated to the immaterial? Here too, I craft a theory of Indigiqueerness by rejecting queer and LGBT as signposts of my identity, instead relying on the sovereignty of “traditional” language, such as Two-Spirit, and terminology we craft for ourselves, “Indigiqueer.” How does queer Indigeneity upset or upend queerness? Am I queerer than queer? Who defines queerness and under whose banner does it fly? Whose lands is it pocked within? I churn these words over in my mouth, taste that queered Cree on my tongue and wonder if they are enough? Like waneyihtamisâyâwin, the nêhiyâw word for queer, as in strange, but it is also defined as uncanny, unsettling; or waneyihtamohiwewin, the act of deranging, perplexing—I find Indigiqueerness a hinterland. I like the fluidity, but my life is not a primer in performance: I am fluid as the water, water who owns itself, body who owns itself, I who own myself. What does it mean to be Two-Spirit during apocalypse? What does it mean to search out romance at a pipeline protest—can we have intimacy during doomsday? How do we fuck in a sleeping bag outside of city hall when the very ground is shaking beneath us—military tanks and thunderous gallops, don’t you feel that resurgence contracting when you’re inside? Here again I become a phantom in this historic amnesia—I will my face to quartz and hope I become the “crisis” of resistance, the tearing inherent within its etymological rooting: recovery or death. Sometimes I find you in the dreamscapes. Here too I talk, whisper into your ear, “Never sleep again,” in the hopes you find me a bladed glove, a clawed feral, when you next contract your seminal vesicles I will you stones and sieve.

Sometimes I’m the reddest in the shadows cast by my veins.

I’m in New York City, downtown Manhattan, in the Little Sister Hotel with a crush I’ve brought. Here, in this web of relations we later let blow into the wind, we practice an ethics of touching as a shared intimacy. In thinking about queerness, I tire of resigning myself into preordained roles: top or bottom, dom or sub, masculine or feminine, and instead choose to see another whose sexual histories are aligned with mine—I wonder: when two bottoms fuck do we angle our bodies toward a vector of queerness, queerness in its verb form, that intersplices us into both a queer past and future? But then again, this is a limited scope of my history as an Indigiqueer—my vertebrae arcs back to originality. But it feels truly radical to explore our bodies outside

of the register of simple penetration, to consent to being cupped between the thighs, to taste the salt road of a navel, to put pressure on perineum and bloom into thyme—all womb and nerve endings. Afterwards, we lie on our stomachs atop the bed facing one another, they pull up a *New York Times* article: “The 36 Questions That Lead to Love.” The night prior, we are on Christopher Street dancing in Pieces to a remixed version of Justin Bieber’s “Yummy.” A looping video of ripped, naked, white men plays in the background and everyone’s eyes glance towards it every time they need a refill of desire. A drag queen comes up to us, we are holding one another and dancing, and asks, “So how long have you two fags been together?” I clear my throat, the word “fag” being one I don’t like pinned onto my skin, but they answer, with a stoic confidence, “Two months.” It’s the first time we’ve attempted an answer, and I resign myself to saying, Yes, okay, I suppose we’re “together.” You wrap yourself around me for the remainder of the evening, we dance until even our pores cry in beheld joy. While we’re on the bed, the question, “Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common?” I ask you how you feel about that word, you tell me you prefer the word “interlocutor.” I resign myself back to a state of circumlocution, we talk around the subject and I am never objective. Another question from the article prompts you to ask, “If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?” But my futurity is bound by finality; I try to conjure effects of joy, companionship, success but my body betrays me, and I simply mutter, “Will I live?” You question me, as I have mumbled this answer, and I raise my eyes to look at you, blankly state, “I have to live.” I have stolen the excitement from this unveiling act and neither of us questions the immediacy of “have.”

We decide to go back to Christopher and go to drag queen bingo at Stonewall. You’ve never been here before, and I am happy to lead you into a staple of queer history, a site rich with blackness, brownness, trans, and non-binary excellence. I revel in the affirmation you receive as a non-binary person in this site that bubbles with trials and triumphs. We go in, you order us a round of Stonewall Lager, and we sit in the back. The hosting drag queen, an older queen and self-proclaimed insult comic, asks us to come up to her. She asks how old we are, if we’re together, and ultimately where we’re from. We note Canada and she quickly looks to me, here wearing my shirt that proclaims “Cree,” and she delves into the tired old jokes: “Do you live in teepees, what about igloos?” and ultimately, “so are you an Eskimo?” I roll my eyes and return to the table. I begin to play the cards that are placed in front of us, desperately trying to Indigenize the limited space around me, call myself back into those bingo halls. They don’t play their cards, instead you give them to me, and you watch an old Katherine Hepburn film while white twinkles come up to ask if

we're really Canadian—you entertain them while I withdraw to my eardrum and wait for the beat of another B to be called.

In Calgary this winter, I have decided to explore my sexuality on my own terms, so I am looking for sex toys down at DevaDaves. The owner is doing a woman's hair and smiles up at me. I nod back, that kind of nod that every prairie person understands as a greeting but only in passing so as to be left alone. I'm in the back of the store, browsing dildos, a prostate massager, fleshlights, blow-up dolls, wigs, whips, and handcuffs. Someone comes back to help me, and I ask where I can find a cock ring—I feel the sexiest when I'm linked to my own membership. The person helps me find a rubber ring, one without the cap on the bottom so it won't snap open when I bind myself. I begin to browse the rest of the shop; I am feeling risky and empowered in my curiosities. It's then I hear two men talking in the hair parlour of the shop about an upcoming date. "I was asked out by an Aboriginal man, but I've never dated one of them before, have you?" His companion responds, "I haven't, but I mean I'd try it?" and shrugs. The companion then looks over at me, "Hey you, over there," he raises his voice and points at me, "What about you? Would you date an Aboriginal?" I place down the items back onto the shelf and move towards them, "Well, I am Indigenous so of course." To which everyone in the room stops talking and looks at me, here I am stripped and laid bare, naked as the histories written on my skin, "Oh, what kind?" "I'm Cree," I respond, my hands beginning to shake, "from Treaty 1." I begin to make my way towards the door, until one hails me, "Wait, you're like perfect—are you single?" he asks. I stop, momentarily, my back to him, the sunlight pulling me along by the little hairs on my arm, "Not for you," I reply and exit. What is witnessed in the room is a glob of ectoplasm exteriorized as I leave my body and flee into memory—what is left in the room is a pelvic bone licked clean of tendon and three men playing Columbus to my losses.

These days my pick-up line has been a Barthesian pun: "To speak of love is to confront the muck of language."

It's January 2020 and I am in Pennsylvania. I'm invited to an event, "Solidarity not Appropriation: Full-Metal Indigiqueer," with a fellow Nádleehí Diné, for a conference hosted by UPenn's LGBT Center for the Martin Luther King Jr. Symposium on Social Change. There are many wonderful QTBIPOC folk in the center and I feel welcome for once in such a space designated as queer. I'm filled with joy in being in their Diné presence. I am conducting a reading and Q&A at the Kelly Writers House where, after my reading, someone comes up to thank me, "You're so inspiring," they note, "You know, I used to study the berdache," that outdated terminology. My mind immediately flows back to George Catlin's 1830 painting, "Dance to the Berdache," to which he

announced that this, that is queer or Two-Spiritedness, is “one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have ever met in the Indian country ... where I should wish that it might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded.” Here the ceremonial flame I carried from Mohkinstsis is so quickly extinguished, and I a limp wick ready to be licked into yet another forceful slumber—Riel won’t you wake me when we’re willing? Afterwards, I find my Diné kin—it is sublime how queer NDNS latch onto one another like magnets that when they find one another, they run up against each other in such a way so as to make their bodies a type of kindling.

Afterwards, my Diné kin and I are both in the Penn Law House, which is this beautiful ornate semi-gothic historical building, for a panel on social change. This is singlehandedly the most expansive and expensive building I have ever set foot in—all marble, gold, and aged oak. Here the organizers asked, “So how has your time at UPenn been?” and while I am aware of the optics of gratitude, the emboldened statue of Columbus in full display down the street haunts me, like the statue is living, monumental and horrific, as if his ears were ablaze from his beckoning name and his cold white head was peeking at us through the large stained-glass windows. I am empowered in the vicinity of kin, I answer, “I was just in that back room sneaking out to have a cigarette because my anxiety was boiling. And it was boiling because I’m in a space that I was never meant to be in, in an institution with an Indigenous academic population of less than 1%, with no classes regarding settler colonialism being offered, and in a place that trains lawyers to incarcerate black and brown bodies without the pedagogy or ethics to think through systemic and historic preconditioned ideologies. I should not be here, and yet here I am, sitting as the brief bridge to knowledge that you’re all pining over—and for what? Will you use it? Does my personal trauma of being the son of a father in and out of incarceration systems his whole life challenge you?”

Sometimes ceremony is two spirits holding hands and never letting go in the pressurized state of empire’s forearm. Sometimes ceremony is a lone drive on the highway and Buffy St. Marie telling me that god has always been a foot that can crush and magic never dies. Sometimes ceremony entails driving past Gimli, Manitoba, and the old graffiti sign that used to read “honk if you’re horny” but now reads “honk if you’re happy” and you honk either way.

I have taken non-Indigenous kin to see Tanya Tagaq. Many of these folks have told me they felt terrified afterwards, as if they had just witnessed an exorcism—I want to say: you have, of whiteness. Like New York City, this is now a test I deploy more locally. Upon doing this, I tell them, “If you survive this, know we will not.” Driving home, I find myself unable to summon a word. One of you will ask, “What’s wrong?” I’ll try to talk but my mouth will

open galactic, like a well you continually pour yourself into me, talking louder, more intensely, in longer bursts with sharpened punctuation. I strangle from grammatology, I am betrothed to linguistic entanglements to the point that verbs begin to mutate beneath my tongue. I find myself saying I “wounded” instead of “wondered.” How does one caretake for a word, or a world, when the belly button is such an exhausted mouth? A memory emerges here to instruct me: I am trying to make bannock like the women in my family do—hands a mimicry of femininity. Slightly burned around the edges and bottom, I feed you, you tell me you like it, but I know it’s soured from too much lard. I say, “This is no good,” and want to immediately burst into tears, yet you continually reassure me it’s delicious. I say, “You don’t understand. I’ve gambled my bodies just to make this.” You don’t question the weight of “this” because it’s a gravity foreign to your own. Then when I come back I finally know how to answer. “Have you ever wondered why you see bones when you turn me on?” I’ll ask, “Where dirty talk becomes an obsequy?” I want to ask if you’ve ever opened your eyes when you’re beside me to see that I’m sometimes a skull in a flowerbed—blown righteous with holes? “What’s wrong,” I’ll reply, “is that you speak so much you drown me. What’s wrong,” I’ll reiterate, “is that you have never died—least of all in my mind.”