

Research Reflective Essay

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In *GWSS 405: Social Movements and Resistance* I decided I wanted to do my final research project on LGBTQ activism working to ban conversion therapy. Step one in my research was to identify the problem. Spoiler alert, what I thought was the problem was actually just the beginning of the research. As I did my preliminary exploration of National organization websites that were working on trying to pass bans on conversion therapy, I noticed that many of the descriptions and campaigns used images and narratives that centered white gay youth. Dr. Levitt's course had focused on intersectional activism, transnational solidarity work, and used examples of movements that pushed back against mainstream whitewashing of feminist histories. I began to wonder, what were LGBTQ organizations missing? So much of the scholarly literature, mostly in psychology, discussed "conversion" or "reparative" therapy as being in conflict between sexual orientation and religion. So much of what I read and found through K-State library's "Search It" function with terms like "conversion therapy," "reparative therapy," or "Christian counseling," produced psychology, religion, and other disciplinary discussions. Drawing on what I read in those journal articles I kept looking up concepts and topics, scanning other articles published in the same issue of the journal. Eventually, and I can't remember exactly how I got there, I came across the library of congress's Native American Boarding Schools archive. I remember writing down a note about how heartbreaking and similar the dehumanizing approach was in both conversion therapy and Native American Boarding Schools during the 1860-1990's in both the U.S. and Canada. I don't remember if that spurred my search in the Library of Congress, or vice versa. But looking at the history and impacts of Boarding Schools made me look deeper into Christianity's role in settler colonialism and the articles and books that addressed that connection.

Step two for me was evaluating the literature, but that led me back to re-evaluating what the core problem was. I decided given the literature I had accumulated researching through K-State's journal databases, the Library of Congress Native American Boarding School Archives, and thinking about what I have learned about intersectionality and coalition building that I needed to reframe the problem. With a new issue to address in my paper—the problem of anti-conversion therapy activism ignoring the ways Native American Boarding Schools are the foundation for anti-LGBTQ Christian Nationalist violence we see today, but often ignored in activist organizing—I was looking into queer Native histories, special issues of journals that addressed queer Native studies, queer Native studies monographs, etc. I was going to ask my professor to teach me how to do interlibrary loan, and when we sat down in their office to do it, they walked me through the

process, but before we pressed submit, they said, “that’s how you would do it, but here is the book you need” and turned around and pulled the book I needed off their shelf. Lucky me!

I struggled with if it would be acceptable to use non-scholarly sources in my paper. Peer reviewed scholarly sources are the gold standard for many disciplines, but my topic seemed like it called for scholarly peer reviewed, popular sources, primary and secondary, given the immediacy of some of topics, how long it takes for something to be published in a journal or book, and social movement’s websites and current leaders in power produce media that are their own primary sources that are rich texts for analysis.

I utilized the online resources as well as physical holdings of the library to write my paper. However, if you look at my works cited page you might think I didn’t use that many sources, and you’d be right. Most of what I researched was not included in my paper. Dr. Levitt had us present our projects to our classmates for our final presentation grade. I remember when they asked us “what information did you have to cut out? What hard editing choices did you make?” I said that ninety percent of my research was in my notes, not in my paper. Most of what I learned was actually in the research process. Narrowing my argument, using the examples and data that provided warrants for my analysis was hard. However, I feel like this experience has taught me that research is the majority of the work. Narrowing my argument based on what I found, pushing for better, more complex social movement activism, and finding examples rather than assuming they don’t exist or are not happening was an important part of my research. Showing that queer Native activism and scholarship exists, trying to offer a more accountable version of activism research, teaching myself the vocabulary and history to be able to see connections, tying everything together even though making critiques of people in power and organizations can be scary...the more details I learned through the research I did, the more empowered I was to make specific critiques of abuses and forthright calls for change. I know the phrase knowledge is power is a trite saying, but for me, the more research I did, the more I knew, the more I knew, the more I was able to articulate a critique of LGBTQ organizing that asked for more justice, not less.

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Conversion Therapy:

Recognizing and Recentering the White Christian Nationalist Settler Origins

Conversion therapy has been at the center of several political debates, but rather than exploring the debate about conversion therapy as if there were two sides—pro and con—I want to draw attention to the larger intersecting systems under which conversion therapy exists and thrives. In this paper, I argue that conversion therapy has a vexed political history based in colonial violence, geared at upholding white supremacy, settler colonialism and capitalism, oppressing the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, Indigenous people, and those who exist at the intersection of those identities. So much of the anti-conversion therapy activism and organizing has centered a vision of the impacted person as a white gay young gay man. Instead of recentering this white normative gay subject that so many anti-conversion therapy movements frame their work around, I want to call on alternate framework for discussions surrounding conversion therapy—an anti-colonial, anti-racist intersectional understanding of the white supremacist, colonial settlement that continues to protect and justify the profiting off of conversion therapy. With this framework, I hope to work toward coalition building between movements against cis-hetero settler violence that has used conversion therapy and continues to support the practice of religiously based forced assimilation into cis-hetero settler white nationalism.

CONTEXTUALIZING CONVERSION THERAPY & WHO BENEFITS

In the United States, conversion therapy has become a billion-dollar industry that harms LGBTQ+ youth and helps those in power profit. Conversion therapy is a pseudoscience practice that claims to change someone's sexual orientation from gay to straight (Fenaughty et al.). This is particularly harmful to Queer youth in the United States who are grappling with their identity¹. Yet, despite the harm that it inflicts, conversion therapy has been made profitable by Christian conservatives looking to oppress and eradicate the LGBTQ+ community from the United States and the world.

Even those in the biggest public spotlight at best have been complicit in conversion therapy abuses, and at worst actively promoted the practice, using the money gained to rise to the third highest office in the U.S. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and his wife, Kelly Johnson, both profit from anti-gay, pro-conversion therapy work. As a lawyer, Mike Johnson, “gave legal advice to an organization called Exodus International and partnered with the group to put on an annual anti-gay event aimed at teens” (Kaczynski). Exodus International has been at the forefront of the Christian anti-gay movement that has connected ministries across the world to bolster conversion therapy for Queer people; they were also involved in the passing of Uganda's “Anti-Homosexuality Act” which prohibits acts of homosexuality that can now be punished with death. While Mike Johnson has taken a step back from his promotion of conversion therapy and anti-gay rhetoric during his political career, his wife, Kelly Johnson continues this work.

¹ Some harmful results of conversion therapy include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and an increased risk for suicide. For more information on the effects of conversion therapy on queer youth, see Mallory, Christy, et al. “Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth - Update” and “So-Called ‘Conversion Therapy’ and LGBTQ Youth Mental Health” published by the Trevor Project.

Ms. Johnson more directly engages in conversion therapy as a “Christian Counselor.” Ms. Johnson runs an organization that specializes in Christian counseling named “Onward Christian Counseling.” According to their operating documents, this Onward Christian Counseling believes that “the Bible teaches that any form of sexual immorality, such as adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bisexual conduct, bestiality, incest, pornography or any attempt to change one’s sex, or disagreement with one’s biological sex, is sinful and offensive to God” (Onward Christian Counseling Services, LLC 7). This operating agreement, alarmingly, compares homosexuality to incest and bestiality, a common talking point from the early 2000’s. ; Having been signed in 2017, two years after the legalization of gay marriage these sorts of demonizing comparisons that decry homosexuality as against god along side being trans, watching pornography, or having sex speak to a biblical bigotry of a bygone era. On the Onward Christian Counseling website (that has now been taken down since Mike Johnson took his seat as Speaker of the House), Kelly Johnson was described as a “pastoral counselor.” She is not a licensed therapist, yet she was still able to counsel other individuals and actively profit off of her involvement in conversion therapy. Ms. Johnson’s lack of license is significant because licensure is one of the ways counselors are made to adhere to a professional code of ethics, held accountable, and kept from doing harm. As an unlicensed counselor, Ms. Johnson can’t be held accountable by any licensing board nor is she overseen by other mental health professionals, which means any ethical violations could go unchecked. Mike and Kelly Johnson are great examples of how people in power are able to cause incredible harm, but still profit financially and politically. This is a double benefit to them. On the one hand in the spreading of Christian values and queer elimination; on the other, is increased financial profits from the business side of conversion therapy as a practice helping support their political consolidation of power. This is not new. In the next section I discuss how residential

Indian boarding schools of the 1800's-1900's were a key part of the foundation on which North American conversion therapy was built.

INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS AS FOUNDATION OF CONVERSION THERAPY

Processes of assimilation and annihilation are the very foundation on which America and Canada were built. Residential schools were the proto version of today's conversion therapy, the goal being the paired physical genocide of some Native people alongside a cultural genocide through conversion to white Christian cultural norms (Carasik and Bachman). Similar to conversion therapy's roots in the Residential Schools, the Johnson's and their profiteering off of conversion therapy highlights the true power and control that is gained with conversion therapy. It is not just about controlling sexuality, conversion therapy is a part of a larger system that upholds white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism to oppress the LGBTQ+ community and solidify white Christian Nationalist power.

In 2022, the United States Department of the Interior published the first volume of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report. In that publication it documented over 400 residential institutions aimed at the forced cultural assimilation of Native American, Kanaka Maoli, and Alaska Natives. Part of this process was also the dispossession of Indigenous people's land. I would be remiss if I didn't mark Kansas State University a part of this process of land dispossession—the very institution from which I am receiving my Bachelors education was and continues to be part of a concerted land theft routed through the Morrill Act as a “Land Grant” that took Native land and helped expand settler colonial land theft. Residential schools

according to the report used corporeal punishment, harsh manual labor, forced assimilation to Christianity, and had a significant death toll.

The collusion between Christianity, boarding school human rights abuses, and State sponsored terror is thorough! However, rarely is the LGBTQ+ activism around conversion therapy linked to the history of Christianizing Native Americans. However, there is a significant link. The Spaniard Balboa used his dogs of war to literally tear queer Native people apart during colonization as part of the attempt at Christianizing the South West. Deborah Miranda called this process of targeting third gender Native people with murder a “gendercide.” Miranda explains gendercide as the genocide of a gender. Here the targeting of third and gender expansive Native people for systematic murder or eradication through other means was not just carried out during the first wave of Spanish colonization. According to Scott Morgensen, Native children taken to Boarding schools were also subjected to Christianized gendercide. Morgensen tells the story of one night where the school had a disease outbreak. All the children were forced to undress and be assessed for the disease. One of the children who had arrived had been kept safe by her peers in the girls wing but upon being stripped naked and examined was discovered to have a penis. She was removed and never seen again by her peers at the school nor her family back home. And is presumed to be among the missing and murdered children of that era. In another instance Morgensen tells the story of a young Native 3rd gender person being threatened by the headmaster that if they keep dressing as the *wrong gender* they would be killed and the headmaster would put a tree over where they buried them. The child was told all the trees outside the headmaster’s office were markers of where previous two-spirit children were buried and that he could be reminded of what would await him if he chose to keep acting like a girl (Morgensen). The kinds of threats and punishments queer Native people experienced under the

Boarding school era were different from modern day conversion therapy, but they are part of the same settler colonial white Christian Nationalist tool box.

Present day conversion therapy can happen in one-on-one therapy sessions, at residential troubled teen camps, in church, or through mandated legal medical information sessions depending on the state or country. In Canada some of this history of Native residential schools and the links to LGBTQ+ conversion therapy are way more clear. For example, there was an evangelical group of Mennonites that ran some of Canada's last residential schools up until 1991 that now run conversion therapy programs in Northern Ontario that target and abuse LGBTQ2 youth. The group runs Christian camps, troubled teen workshops, and even does interventions in Wapekeka, a remote First Nation to do suicide intervention work. According to Jody Porter, the bible-based interventions are part of what may be contributing to the suicide crisis, so "say LGBTQ2 youth familiar with the pressures of evangelical Christian teachings" (Porter 2020). While the history of residential schools and conversion therapy is a venn diagram with a lot of overlap, unfortunately the organizing and movements to end both practices are often very separate. While movements are important to the goal of ending conversion therapy, by centering a white normative gay subject queer advocates often fail to recognize or actively erase the racialized settler colonial logics that have justified this practice for years.

ACTIVISM TO END CONVERSION THERAPY

Instead of repeating the same call to action that bans conversion therapy, I want to look at movements that offer an alternative, intersectional framework in their work calling for the banning of conversion therapy.

First, to establish what the movement to ban conversion therapy looks like, I want to highlight movements in the United States that call for a ban and some of their statements on the

matter. The Movement Advancement Project (MAP), an organization that uses data to advocate for progressive policies, calls conversion therapy a “widely discredited practice” (Movement Advancement Project) and is working toward banning it in all 50 states. They even have an interactive map on their website to learn more about the bans: in the United States, 22 states have already banned conversion therapy for minors and 5 have partial bans. Next, The Trevor Project, an organization that focuses on suicide prevention for LGBTQ+ youth, are advocating for conversion therapy to end by working “with lawmakers in generating policy, providing survivor testimony, and demonstrating public support for ending conversion therapy” (The Trevor Project) all to protect Queer youth. Lastly the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), an LGBTQ+ lobbying organization, has resources on their website that outline different organizations, particularly ones that are focused on the medical field, that call for conversion therapy bans. It is important to note that these movements and organizations such as the Movement Advancement Project, the Trevor Project, and the Human Rights Campaign have a focus on the danger and harm that conversion therapy causes for LGBTQ+ youth. While this makes sense for an organization like the Trevor Project, one that already has a focus on protecting Queer youth, MAP and HRC have unique positions in which they could advocate for more widespread protections instead of solely focusing on legislation targeting LGBTQ+ minors. Conversion therapy is not exclusively offered/forced upon youth, adults also face it within their faith communities even though it has been widely discredited. According to a report done by the Williams Institute, about “698,000 LGBT adults (ages 18-59) in the U.S. have received conversion therapy, including about 350,000 LGBT adults who were subjected to the practice as adolescents” (Mallory et al. 1), proving that Queer youth are not the only ones affected and targeted by conversion therapy and adult victims should not be forgotten.

As mentioned, a piece of conversion therapy that is often forgotten, is the connection to Native American boarding schools. To expand, we must first look at how the history of conversion therapy is told and the rise of the practice especially in religious institutes. The history of conversion therapy is often told in the following progression: In the early 20th century, the practice of converting homosexual people to heterosexual rose to practice in the professional psychiatric field; some treatments included shock therapy, castration, and lobotomies. Queer people protested these practices and argued cruel treatment, however, due to homosexuality being considered a disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), their objections were largely ignored. It wasn't until the 1960's and 70's when the Queer community became more visible, vocal, and accepted by the general public that the profession turned against their previous beliefs. In 1973, homosexuality was no longer considered a disorder by the APA.

Although psychiatric associations no longer believed the pseudoscience surrounding conversion therapy, the seed was already planted and religious groups began to take control over the practice and belief that you can 'pray the gay away.' Self-proclaimed experts began to advertise conversion therapy and had many harmful faith-based practices that advertised to convert people from being gay to straight. A defining moment was the implementation and rise of 'gay conversion camp' in which "LGBTQ people were isolated from family and friends, hypnotized, told to pray until their homosexuality subsided, instructed to beat effigies of their parents, mocked, coached on 'proper' gender roles, and told their sexuality was unnatural and sinful" (Blakemore). All of these practices caused great harm and trauma for LGBTQ+ people who were forced to go through them but in telling this particular version of the history of conversion therapy the origins in early Native American boarding schools is obscured and LGBTQ+ people become victims siloed without the links to earlier religious terror.

The camps and isolation techniques still used today have a connecting history to settler colonialism, particularly Native American boarding schools and the trauma Indigenous people are still facing today. A more accurate history of conversion therapy as a practice would start in the mid-late 19th century in the early U.S. when Indigenous children were taken from their families and sent to white-Christian (some Mormon, some Catholic, and others of different denominations) run boarding schools. By the 1930s, “nearly half of all AIAN (American Indian/Native Alaskan) children attending school were enrolled in institutions often hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of miles away” (Evans-Campbell et al. 421). At these institutions, “students were forbidden to engage in cultural practices or speak their languages and suffered harsh punishment if they disobeyed ” (Evans-Campbell et al. 421). Similar to the same methods used at conversion therapy camps, abusive and fear-based tactics were used to forcefully assimilate Indigenous children into white, heteronormative culture because the “missionaries in boarding schools... enforced strict compliance with European and Christian standards of conduct, including prohibition of cultural practices and conformity to rigid gender roles” (Evans-Campbell et al. 422; Newland 2022). While at these boarding schools many Native children died, and those who survived, faced intense trauma that has carried down to their children.

As mentioned above, boarding schools were built on a foundation of Christianity and the strict gender roles that are enforced by the religion. This part of boarding schools has been harmful to Indigenous culture as a whole, but it has been especially harmful for Two-Spirit acceptance and to tribes with cultural knowledge of more than two binary genders. Two-Spirit individuals represent Native people who do not fall onto one side of the gender binary and before boarding schools, they were “often revered... held sacred positions in our societies and

ceremonies... honored for their unique perspectives... respected for the wisdom, love, and life they brought through the creative expression of their extraordinary spirits” (NABS). Colonialism and forced assimilation through boarding schools changed how Two-Spirit members were viewed and accepted by their communities and society as a whole- usually caused by the forced Christian conversions at boarding schools. Similarly, some Native Nations had more expansive understandings of gender. The Diné for example had four named genders, including a third gender nadleehi and fourth, dilbaa that both conquistadors and early Christian Nationalists targeted for eradication (Miranda; Epple).

The treatment of Two-Spirit people, dilbaa, and nadleehi at boarding schools laid the groundwork for what happens in modern day conversion therapy. However, in discussions surrounding banning conversion therapy, they are rarely considered or listened to. Because while the increase of LGBTQ visibility caused an increase in Christian conversion therapy services during the 60’s and 70’s, they had been practicing for over a century and already had the tools needed to forcibly assimilate Queer people into white, heteronormative, settler society (Blakemore).

Despite the treatment of Indigenous Queer people being largely ignored in white, activist spaces, there are movements by and for Queer Native people to help them and their communities heal from boarding school trauma. One organization that is focused on healing boarding school trauma is located in Lawrence, Kansas, the location of Haskell Indian Nations University, a boarding school turned Tribal Nation’s University. The Indigenous Community Center (ICC) was formed in Douglas County in 2021 and they are working to help the Indigenous community in the county, who mostly graduated from Haskell. They have held healing events in response to the deaths of children at boarding schools coming to light. At these events they “welcomed

everyone in Lawrence to connect in a safe space, so that community members of all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds could come together to have meaningful conversations and learn” (Herlihy). This event, and the ICC’s partnership with the local United Way, shows their commitment to community building and coalition building for the greater good of everyone in Douglas County. Overall, they have the goal that people living in Lawrence “recognize that we have a boarding school gravesite right here in Lawrence... a huge indicator of how our people were treated, and ignorance is no longer an excuse” (Herlihy). So, they hold conversations with all community members to address how colonization is the root affects everyone. The ICC also hosts healing programs for Indigenous people in the area to “provide a space for people to work on their emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health” (Herlihy). The ICC understands the need to address the trauma caused by boarding school and the recognition needed in non-Native spaces because as the ICC Board President, Robert Hicks stated, “healing will begin once recognition is made. Recognition in the families affected, and recognition in society” (Herlihy).

While the Indigenous Community Center in Douglas County is focused on community healing for all affected by boarding schools, there are specific movements and projects around the Two-Spirit experience in boarding schools, something that is left out in conversations. A storytelling project organized by Fierté Canada Pride was created to address Two-Spirit histories that have been left behind. The project was focused on Two-Spirit “stories and finding commonalities between their experiences” (Lisk), another focus “is to share their knowledge so that people will understand some of the things they went through and why” (Lisk). With this, they released digital/video copies of the stories to spread more awareness of the Two-Spirit identity and allow for complete recognition of the “intergenerational and community trauma” (Lisk) that has “resulted in a warped sense of self, sexuality, and relationships” (Lisk). This

storytelling project and the stories that came from it, highlights how Two-Spirit individuals have been ignored in activist work and the need for colonialism to be addressed not just in Indigenous spaces, but in Queer spaces as well.

COALITION WORK TO BE DONE

Overall, given the settler colonial history of conversion therapy and the prominence of it today, there is an intersecting system that upholds white supremacy, settler colonial violence, and capitalism through conversion therapy practices. Instead of Queer activists focusing solely on the typical white gay who *has been* and *is wounded by* religious practices, activist groups need to recognize the long history of Christian Nationalism's impact that has driven the abuses of Native people, queer people, and importantly queer Native people. Colonialism is the structure on which modern conversion therapy was built. Instead of repeating the colonial logics that ignore and erase Native existence, I want to push for using anti-colonial, anti-racist frameworks to form intersectional coalitions between Queer activists and Indigenous organizations that are working so diligently to tear down the systems and structures that maintain these abusive practices. A core component of this work needs to be preventing people, religious organizations, and political entities from being able to profit from forced assimilation to espoused "biblically mandated" cis-hetero white supremacist settler eradication of Native and Queer life ways.

First Nation leaders and activists stand as possibility models for this kind of coalition and solidarity work as well. Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), Alvin Fiddler, who represents 49 Native communities in Ontario's remote North said he would stand against anti-LGBTQ2 messages and organizations in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory. Grand Chief

Fiddler said "For any organization that works with us, that promotes those [homophobic] views, they're not welcome. They're not welcome in NAN"" (as cited in Porter 2020). Grand Chief Fiddler has been open about being the father of a LGBTQ2 child as well as understanding much of the pervasive homophobia in his community being taught by either Christian organizations or created by Christian boarding schools through sexual abuse committed by sexual predators at the schools (Porter 2020). Part of coalition work means facing these hard truths and working together to create change going forward. The Trevor Project has started to follow the lead of Native leaders in this process by looking into the mental health needs of LGBTQ2 Indigenous Young People as of November 2023 ("The Mental Health and Well-Being of Indigenous LGBTQ Young People"). There is still a lot more work to be done by LGBTQ organizations in terms of being more accountable to Native liberation and engaging in reparations for their investments in settler colonialism. Part of the process is telling a deeper and richer history of conversion therapy so we can strive to ground our movement work in better moorings.

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