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**Surveilling Wolves, Reticent Rabbits, and Pecking Parties:  
Discourse as Power Mechanism for Policing Queerness in Ken  
Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**

Sarah E. Darling  
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Surveilling Wolves, Reticent Rabbits, and Pecking Parties: Discourse as Power Mechanism for  
Policing Queerness in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

by

Sarah Darling

Under the Direction of Gina Caison, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

## ABSTRACT

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) presents a mental health institution, which, through narrator "Chief" Bromden's eyes, is a factory for "the Combine," the all-encompassing, normalizing power structure throughout society. Nurse Ratched, a caricature of the emasculating villainess, controls the men inside the ward through surveillance, forced confessional discourse, and discipline. Scholarship has primarily focused on the misogyny and hypermasculinity in the novel, wholly ignoring the queerness that undercurrents Bromden and fellow patient Dale Harding. Bromden—inherently queered as a Native man in a settler state—and Harding—symbolic of internalized heteronormative pressures— together represent how institutions and relationships alike function to forcibly "straighten" queer individuals. Evoking Foucault, Sedgwick, and queer Indigenous scholars, this thesis argues that Kesey's novel, despite its dated and offensive depiction of women and people of color, nevertheless remains a relevant warning of power's influence and shifting technologies of control over queer individuals.

INDEX WORDS: Queer theory, Queer Indigenous Studies, Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Foucault, Normalization

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2021

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August 2021

## **DEDICATION**

For Penny-- without your unwavering support and optimism, I never could have completed this thesis. Thank you for being my lifeboat every day.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

A quintessential product of an era defined by consumerism, militarism, and the lasting effects of McCarthyism, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) is a dark critique of what happens to individuals in post-war American society once they are labeled as abnormal and confined to institutions for "rehabilitation" or otherwise normalized. Though in many ways a celebration of individual and personal freedoms, the novel by its conclusion paints a picture of inescapable oppression propagated by an all-consuming, illusive network of power. Kesey is representative of many countercultural ideas from the 1950s-60s, such as questioning the status quo and challenging power structures that defined who and what is "normal" or "abnormal," "sane" and "insane." As a bridge between the Beats and the Hippies, Kesey's psychedelic movement celebrated mental illness and abnormality, viewing those experiences as enlightening or liberating from the confines of "normal," and therefore constrained, consciousness. A contemporary of Kesey, famous "anti-psychiatrist" R. D. Laing claimed in his *The Politics of Experience* (1967) "that mental illness was not a physical medical condition, but a politically laden label affixed to certain deviant people in order to enforce conformity and normalized standards of behavior" (Mettler 174-5). Although many counterculturalists, Kesey included, championed "freaks" and the "insane" as people who were able to rise above these oppressive (and as they argued, superficial) labels<sup>1</sup>, his novel suggests that there are limits to overcoming systemic oppression for those labeled abnormal or deviate from the heteronorm.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, now most widely known through the critically-acclaimed 1975 film adaptation, uncovers a mechanical, dehumanizing mental health institution through the eyes of a patient with apparent schizophrenia, "Chief" Bromden, who pretends to be

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<sup>1</sup> See Mettler's "Anti-Rationalism and the Celebration of Madness in 1960s Counterculture" for a more nuanced exploration of the various ways and extents to which counterculturalists glorified "madness."

deaf and dumb as a survival mechanism. Though his perspective of the ward contains paranoid hallucinations of obfuscating fog machines, walls filled with cogs and gears, and an incessant ringing sound, Bromden's account of the asylum's operation represents a deeper truth about power and medical psychiatry. In her 2015 article titled "Anti-Rationalism and the Celebration of Madness in 1960s Counterculture," Meghan Warner Mettler argues that "Though [*Cuckoo's Nest*] never explains the Chief's condition in medical terms, one of its main aspects is an inability to discern the difference between dreams and reality. In Kesey's interpretation, the Chief's supposed mental defect is in fact a gift, allowing him to see the world in its true state" (Mettler 178). Though what Bromden narrates is hyperbolic, bizarre, and at times frightening, what he sees is closer to the "truth" of which neurotypical people may be ignorant. This truth that Bromden elucidates is a literalization of "the countercultural fear that technocracy was turning postwar society into a vast impersonal machine" (Mettler 178). Bromden forces readers to see society through his eyes for what it really is, which, as many psychedelic counterculturalists believed, only those "out of their minds" were able to see: society as a cold, unfeeling factory of normalized bodies, devoid of any eccentricities or differences that make us human.

The central conflict of *Cuckoo's Nest* begins when Randle P. McMurphy, "the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set," enters the ward, sent there for evaluation by a judge after multiple infractions (Kesey 171). His free spirit and loud masculinity immediately butt heads with the lead nurse, Nurse Ratched, who runs the ward with a strict sense of routine and order through unrelenting networks of surveillance. McMurphy strives to empower the belittled patients of the ward— all men— through leading a rebellion against "Big Nurse." Since the novel's primary conflict is between a controlling, "ball-cutting" female antagonist and a rambunctious, brawny male protagonist, the majority of

scholarship on the novel has, for good reason, examined the gender dynamics and the problematic depiction of women and femininity in the novel (Keseey 54). Undoubtedly, the novel at times relies on stereotypes of powerful women as villainous, consequently romanticizing the male protagonist's journey toward liberation from being "victims of a matriarchy" (Keseey 56). As Michael Meloy notes in his article "Fixing Men: Castration, Impotence, and Masculinity in Ken Keseey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" (2009), the postwar period in the United States propagated an unhealthy standard of masculinity. In the 1950s, McCarthy propagandized hyper-masculinity as being truly American, while Freud and Kinsey "undermined traditional notions of normative sexuality, contributing to a national obsession with homosexuality and placing sexual preference and performance at the forefront of the public's perception of manhood" (Meloy 5). Meloy argues that "Keseey's critique of a feminizing postwar culture parallels similar national concerns. In an era where many Americans worried about an emasculating nation state, Keseey's own reaction roughly coincided with a common national reaction, in which Americans embraced a bolder sexually aggressive, promiscuous, heterosexual male" (Meloy 8). It makes sense, then, to see the novel as a product of an era that celebrated the virile male and chastised the independent, empowered woman; this was, after all, the era that produced works such as Friedan's seminal *The Feminine Mystique* in opposition to these toxic masculinities.

Though the scholarship examining the conflict between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched is foundational and nevertheless indispensable, some of this scholarship is reductive and fails to examine the larger themes at work in the novel. I want to provide a reading of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that does not rely on pointing out the sexism of the novel (which is nearly impossible to argue against in 2021) but rather explores both the homosocial and queer bonds that permeate the novel and that are at the mercy of the same larger powers that oppress all

Othered individuals. As Stephen Tanner explores in his biography of Kesey, “Big Nurse is certainly a personification of some negative aspects of our society... It can reasonably be argued, however, that Kesey’s attack is not directed against women per se but against the perversion of the feminine... And the suppression or perversion of the natural in Big Nurse corresponds to a similar situation in American society: nature and the personal perverted by misguided technology and the impersonal” (262). While it is possible that Kesey demonizes women and consequently upholds the patriarchy through his novel, my argument focuses instead on how through characters such as Harding and Bromden, Kesey questions how power structures, through their “misguided technology,” control men and their sexuality until they become impersonal and suppressed. Amy Fatzinger maintains in her article “Echoes of Celilo Falls and Native Voices in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*” that despite racist and sexist elements, there remains value in the larger argument the novel makes:

Some of Kesey’s critics have highlighted the offensiveness of his extremely negative portrayal of blacks (the aides) and women (particularly Nurse Ratched) in *Cuckoo’s Nest*; certainly these characterizations are not palatable for the contemporary reader. The cruelty of the acts committed against the patients by the black aides and Nurse Ratched are all the more horrific, however, because Kesey demonstrates how members of oppressed groups of society will often inflict oppression upon other powerless groups... if the opportunity arises. (126)

Aside from top-down oppression, there is also horizontal normalization that forces groups to patrol each other, even if they themselves have less power in a heteropatriarchal system; heteropatriarchy oppresses all people— women, queer people, and even straight men— though undoubtedly in varying degrees. Whether or not Kesey saw it this way, as major theorists had not

yet reached these conclusions, the novel nevertheless purports that these far-reaching tentacles of power control male-male desire and relationships in general.

There remains a significant void in the scholarship of *Cuckoo's Nest* that is integral to understanding the novel in the 21st century: there has been no substantial study of the novel's queerness, which looms large in the background throughout. Gender studies of the novel have stopped short of pushing past the feminine/masculine dichotomy, leaving characters who do not fit the traditional gender molds behind: most notably, Chief Bromden and fellow patient Dale Harding. Bromden has been analyzed substantially, but more in regards to his emasculation and past trauma, not the intersection of his Native identity and sexuality. His far-from-normalized perspective and homoerotic accounts of McMurphy's exploits make his narration inescapably queer. Scholarship has ignored Harding in particular, except for a few mentions here and there, despite his character symbolizing so strikingly the result of damaging heteronormative aspects of American society. The critics who *have* mentioned Harding in their analyses have either simply viewed him as emasculated, wrongly equated femininity and "homosexuality"<sup>2</sup>, or flat-out mischaracterized him: "Harding has been thoroughly feminized by the women around him" (Meloy 8); "in the face of his own sexual impotency, Harding cannot help but subordinate himself to a female sexual power that intimidates him" (Meloy 10); "Harding is an intellectual whose *sexual dysfunction* has led to his voluntary incarceration" (Lupak 82; emphasis added). Meloy even goes so far as to conclude that "the novel thus suggests that men who do not have an outlet for their masculine sex drive will go mad ... will cease to be men ... will become Harding"

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the term "homosexuality" is in reference to the language used in the scholarship I reference. Any use of the word is paraphrasing a source text; in my own language, I will employ the more inclusive and less pathologized term "queer."

(11). Other earlier scholars completely gloss over Harding's queer identity<sup>3</sup>, erasing his character's significance to Kesey's larger argument about the medicalization of deviance.

The deficit of robust scholarship of *Cuckoo's Nest's* queerness leads to the central questions of this thesis: why has the queerness in this novel been overlooked for so long, when many works in the American modern era discussed and even celebrated various forms of gender expression and sexuality? How is the queerness of both Harding and Bromden critical to the novel's overall allegorical message and legacy? How can Kesey's novel continue to be valuable today to learn about power, deviance, and normalization? I argue that the ward is a metonymic expression of society at large, one that through surveillance, forced confession/discourse, and medicalization of abnormality, polices queer individuals. With a specific focus on Harding and Bromden, I explore how both discourse and silence are critical mechanisms of power, but also potential acts of rebellion against said power; these two characters and their trajectories, both in and ultimately outside the ward, construct a larger commentary on American society's detrimental policing and treatment of Other and/or queer individuals. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, "The scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large. No major institutionalized discourse offers a firm resistance to that undertaking" (*Epistemology* 42). Kesey's novel in many ways attempts discourse that provides a "firm resistance" to these anti-queer undertakings, but the lack of scholarship on it perpetuates said institutional heteronormativity.

Of all the patients on the ward, Harding's sexuality is most publicly called into question through Nurse Ratched's "group therapy" meetings, or, as McMurphy deems them, "pecking parties" (Kesey 51) The purpose of these meetings is not rehabilitation but rather communal

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<sup>3</sup> See Forrey and Allen for two such examples.

surveillance and division amongst the patients. Nurse Ratched knows the men's weaknesses and forces confession-like discourse as a means of control. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) traces the development of this mechanism of power; beginning with compulsory religious confessions in the 18th century, confessional discourse became a means of cataloging, specifying, and medicalizing sexual abnormality, ultimately leading to institutionalizing and normalizing individuals. Harding's character is a prime example of Foucault's concept of how sexual abnormality is surveilled and normalized because he displays no overt signs of mental illness, and in fact is often a voice of reason and wisdom among the other men on the ward. Harding is voluntarily in the asylum, both hiding from the outside world and adhering to what he believes is expected of him. I will not attempt to diagnose Harding, nor am I working to "out" him<sup>4</sup>; those labels are part of the problem that I aim to delineate. What I am working to prove, however, is how a man like Harding—labeled queer, abnormal, and therefore in need of medical treatment—represents the masses of people pushed through life-ruining institutions for traits that before the modern era were not even given labels, let alone medical diagnoses.

In addition to Harding's more overt struggles with the policing of his sexuality, Bromden also presents signs of suppressed sexuality in instances of homoeroticism and homosocialism between him and McMurphy. His entire narration, in fact, queers<sup>5</sup> the novel due to his skewed, disorienting perspective. Wilson Kaiser's definition of disability studies, a field that "critiques the categories of normativity that have guided the medical and social classifications of disability according to the models of rationality and consistency," shares a similar purpose with queer

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<sup>4</sup> See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (pp.67-69) for explanation of the risks of "outing" others

<sup>5</sup> I use "queered" to mean "brought into a critical/oppositional relation to its dominant formulation so as to shift the terms of public debate and engagement" (Rifkin 28).

studies, unearthing an interesting crossroads of Bromden's identity. Kaiser asserts that Bromden, and I would argue Harding, as well, is a "mind-body matri[x]" that reveals "the compulsory nature of cultural hegemony" (192). As Kaiser connects this "political nature of 'disability'" with the position of the stereotypical figure of Native American people to the countercultural movement, I argue that this connection extends to queer studies, as well, because what is "queer" if not by definition different from the compulsory norm (Kaiser 192)? This point of intersection between three facets of Bromden's identity have yet to be examined in tandem yet are intertwined in social and political spheres.

The way in which sexuality is surveilled and policed in this novel, especially through the incitement to discourse, is a new, but undoubtedly significant, angle through which to view the novel. It is not just institutions like the asylum that control sexualities; as Harding's home life and Bromden's hallucinatory musings prove, these control mechanisms extend from concrete institutions and permeate all aspects of modern society. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault asserts that sex and sexualities are far from repressed in the modern age— in fact, we discuss it more than ever— but sexuality is nevertheless controlled through positive power mechanisms, especially through forced confession-like discourse (17). Foucault establishes that "The central issue, then... is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex... but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all 'discursive fact,' the way in which sex is 'put into discourse'" (*History* 11). The "storing and distributing" of this information is the method of the Combine, and their agent on the inside of the asylum, Nurse Ratched. The "transformation into discourse, a technology of power, and a



will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former” negative forms of power such as “defenses, censorships, [and] denials” is the main way in which sexuality is surveilled to find deviants, the “abnormal,” in order to force normalization (Foucault, *History* 12). Though not the only way in which positive power mechanisms are present in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, discourse and silence are integral to Harding and Bromden’s trajectories through the asylum as queer men.

The forces that landed the men in the ward, especially men like Bromden and Harding, are infinite and omnipresent. The only scholarship to combine the writings of Kesey and Foucault, Andrew Pepper’s “State Power Matters” discusses how Nurse Ratched’s ward represents Foucault’s conceptualization of power. Pepper argues that “Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* usefully anticipates Foucault’s conceptualization of power as a boundless network of decentered force relations in the guise of the Combine; an entity that is both a projection of the narrator, Chief Bromden’s paranoid imagination, and a mechanistic, all-encompassing apparatus dispersed throughout the social realm to ensure conformity and order” (Pepper 472). Bromden even says so himself: “[McMurphy’s] onto what I realized a long time back, that it’s not just the Big Nurse herself, but it’s the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that’s the really big force, and the nurse is just a high ranking official for them” (Kesey 164). Although Nurse Ratched holds complete dominion over her ward, she is merely one cog in a much larger machine that works all over the country to maintain order through power mechanisms. As Pepper argues, “the production of docile, self-policing subjects such as Harding, Billy, Cheswick and even Bromden is a consequence not of Ratched’s undoubted despotism but of a regime of introspection, surveillance and confession that has been instituted in the ward with the patients’ own consent” (Pepper 472-3). The men were impacted outside the ward and carried that discipline into the ward, where they consented to be controlled and normalized— after all,

most of the men on the ward are voluntary, meaning they have elected to be “remediated” by the Nurse’s surveillance and control. They have become “self-policing subjects,” viewing themselves as in need of treatment, despite those labels being complete constructions used to control outliers.

As Foucault argues, there are many centers of power and therefore not one centralized “State” that is in charge of all aspects of normalization. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that “never have there existed more centers of power; never more attention manifested and verbalized; never more circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere” than in the time in which he was writing— the 1960s and 70s— which is closely contemporaneous to *Cuckoo’s Nest* (49). Foucault’s argument that power functions as an elusive web comes to life in the scene in which the men have left the ward for a fishing excursion; on the drive to the docks, Bromden examines the cookie-cutter suburbs on the outside for the first time in years:

There were five thousand kids in green corduroy pants and white shirts under green pullover sweaters playing crack-the-whip across an acre of crushed gravel. The line popped and twisted and jerked like a snake, and every crack popped a little kid off the end, sent him rolling up against the fence like a tumbleweed. And it was always the same little kid, over and over... The houses looked so much alike that, time and time again, the kids went home by mistake to different houses and different families. Nobody ever noticed. They ate and went to bed. The only one they noticed was the little kid at the end of the whip, He’d always be so scuffed and bruised that he’d show up out of place wherever he went. He wasn’t able to open up and laugh either. It’s a hard thing to laugh if

you can feel the pressure of those beams coming from every new car that passes, or every new house you pass (Kesey 206).

This moment is a pronounced allusion to Jesus providing for five-thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish, especially considering McMurphy is leading twelve men, his disciples, “toward the ocean” for this excursion (Kesey 205). Although this allusion Biblically represents Jesus’s compassion, Bromden views the suburban scene as a disturbing representation of the conformity of mid-20th century America. The five-thousand residents have been provided for, perhaps to a consumerist extreme, but this conformity comes at a cost to those who are different, or “queer”; the one kid who always gets thrown during crack the whip and stands out anywhere he goes due to his “scuffs and bruises” parallels men like Bromden or Harding.

Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) explores the nature of sexuality and space, of queerness and experience. She argues how forms and lines, such as the paths one is able to take, are repeated so much until they are forgotten or become the unnoticed familiar: “Rather than just seeing the familiar, which of course means that it passes from view, I felt wonder and surprise at the regularity of its form... as forms that get repeated, again and again, until they are ‘forgotten’ and simply become forms of life. To wonder is to remember the forgetting and to see the repetition of form as the ‘taking form’ of the familiar” (Ahmed 82). The forms she refers to are “desire lines,” or (hetero)sexual orientations, which are repeated so much that it is difficult to realize they are there, having become the invisible compulsory norm, until of course someone deviates from them. Straying from this line that is so oft repeated it disappears from view is analogous to the one child who loses in crack the whip: he breaks the monotony, but in doing so, is viewed as deviant and suffers from an “inability to laugh” as he is always on display, always benign viewed and judged by passersby. Heterosexuality has molded into a compulsory

backdrop, repeated by force, and similar to Foucault's idea of power, does not easily come into view. As Ahmed asserts, "heterosexuality functions as a background, as that which is behind actions that are repeated over time and with force, and that insofar as it is behind it does not come into view (87). Compulsory heterosexuality is available for everyone to see, yet it is so ingrained that it falls to the background.

On the boating excursion itself, the twelve "disciples" of McMurphy, Harding and Bromden included, reach the pinnacle of their learning to break free of these tangles of power and control. After a fishing debacle that leads to a few minor injuries, McMurphy responds with laughter, something the men have not experienced in the asylum for years. As the men join in the laughter with McMurphy, Bromden illustrates this pivotal moment in the men's journey toward humanization: "[The laughter] started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger. I watched, part of them, laughing with them— and somehow not with them... and watch[ed] them, us, swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave" (Kesey 215). Bromden's out-of-body experience strikingly imagines the laughter radiating outward from their boat to shores around the globe; the men's laughter is contagious and serves as a reminder of the importance of homosociality and bonds between men to the human experience. When they return to the dock, the men who had harassed them before "could sense the change that most of us were only suspecting; these weren't the same bunch of weak-knees from a nuthouse that they'd watched take their insults on the dock this morning" (Kesey 218). Despite power's far-reaching arms, the men's laughter spreading in "ever-widening circles" is the antidote to forces of normalization and mechanistic control.

It is possible that the queer men, Bromden and Harding, are the ones who are truly free by the end of the novel. Bromden and Harding both gain their autonomy through discourse and although they are in the ward for societal pressures, they end up free and outside the ward, breaking out from the rigidity of heteropatriarchy. McMurphy, on the other hand, unwaveringly conforms to traditional definitions of masculinity, and “[f]or Kesey, any sort of conformity means a loss of individual sanity” (Madden 110); since McMurphy continued to conform to hyper-masculine structures (rebellion, sacrifice, machismo), he had to die within the ward. There is a darker side to the conclusion, however, one that does not allow us to see a future for any of the characters outside the asylum walls. Pepper argues that “for Foucault, since there is no single central point of control in society, or rather since control is exercised at innumerable points across the social realm, power cannot be seized at least in any kind of straightforward way” (471). Though Bromden breaks out of the ward in a powerful, symbolic moment, his options seem intransigent, and there is even a reading of the novel that suggests he ends right back in the ward where he started. Similarly, even though Harding finally has the strength to check himself out, he is returning to a wife that cannot accept him and a society that will continue to apply the same forces that pushed him into the ward in the first place.

This second, more pessimistic reading of *Cuckoo's Nest's* conclusion is the very reason why this queer undertaking is relevant: though Bromden and Harding escape Ratched's control, they will continue to experience normalizing pressures outside the asylum, only in different forms. As Pepper notes, “Foucault asserts, more pessimistically, that the most we can hope for are ‘mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shifts about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings’” (472). McMurphy's rebellion on the ward is certainly a significant moment of resistance, one that may have some lasting effects, but since

the Combine is much more than just the Nurse and the physical asylum, there is more to do than can be done by one man and his twelve followers. Power will shift and regroup, perpetuating the forces of normalization in different, disguised forms. Civil rights for the LGBTQIA+ community have progressed incredibly since the 1960s and 70s, but there nevertheless remains a culture of compulsory heterosexuality and oppressive heteropatriarchal forces. Marriage equality is federally mandated, but the fight has shifted alongside regrouped power that aims to control trans youth participation in athletics and reinforce “religious freedom” bills, just to name a few in contemporary news. Queerness continues to be pathologized through the *DSM*, though its terminology and methods have adjusted over the last seventy years. Pepper argues that “particular post-war American novels,” such as *Cuckoo’s Nest*, “can help us in this move [to focus more on state power] precisely because they would seem to be centrally concerned with the repressive potentiality of the US state in a way that contemporary novelists are not” (Pepper 467). Kesey’s novel serves as an important warning of society’s hidden-in-plain-sight methods of normalization, and it is especially through the queer characters (and their neglect in most scholarship) that we may examine our own roles in reinscribing heterosexuality.

The following two chapters will each be dedicated to a character, first Harding and then Bromden, to analyze the ways in which they represent queer policing and normalization. The queer critique of Harding will rely more heavily on close readings from the novel due to the lack of existing scholarship on his character. These readings, however, will be grounded primarily in theoretical works by Foucault, Sedgwick, and Ahmed in order to prove that Harding’s placement in the ward is not due to any mental illness but rather his queer identity. My queer critique of Bromden will draw from various queer Indigenous scholars, such as Rifkin, Morgensen, and Finley, along with queer of color scholar Muñoz. Their arguments for the inherent queering of

Native bodies will shape my understanding of Bromden as a queer narrator through both his style of discourse and homoerotic attention to McMurphy. I will conclude with a discussion of the acclaimed 1975 film version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, examining the queer and Native erasure on the big screen. The recent airing of Netflix's *Ratched* (2020) brings the same questions of compulsory heterosexuality into contemporary popular culture as creator Ryan Murphy reimagines Nurse Ratched as a queer woman. As I will confirm in my conclusion, revisiting Kesey's quintessential yet contested 20th century American novel remains worthwhile because it serves as a warning of the various mechanisms of power that police and shape us all.

## 2 “THE RABBITS OF THE RABBIT WORLD”: DALE HARDING AND PSYCHIATRIC NORMALIZATION OF QUEERNESS

Dale Harding is arguably one of the most instrumental characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: he dubs himself the reigning “bull goose loony” upon McMurphy’s arrival on the ward, is the center of discussion throughout the “Therapeutic Community” meetings, and delivers much of the novel’s central philosophy, providing some of the most critical and poignant insights. Despite the weight he carries in the novel, Harding goes wholly ignored in the body of literary criticism. I can’t help but question if the lack of scholarly discussion of Harding’s character is related to the same reason he is in the ward: he is queer. *Cuckoo's Nest*’s place within the “New Western” genre, along with the unavoidable misogyny and racism, have pervaded the last fifty years of critical analysis, but the queerness of character and form remain excluded. An examination of Harding’s character is long overdue because he quintessentially exemplifies the destructive forces of normalization on the Other that are not unique to the 1960s, the period in which the novel was composed, and the insight we can gain from examining his character today is important to understanding how these forces operate in a heteropatriarchal state.

When Harding is first introduced in the novel’s exposition, his hands are depicted as a metaphorical synecdoche for his person. Harding’s initial characterization at this moment expresses his internalization of how others have perceived him:

Harding is a flat, nervous man with a face that makes you think you seen him in the movies, like it’s a face too pretty to just be a guy on the street. He’s got wide, thin shoulders and he curves them in around his chest when he’s trying to hide inside himself. He’s got hands so long and white and dainty I think they carved each other out of soap,



and sometimes they get loose and glide around in front of him free as two white birds until he notices them and traps them between his knees; it bothers him that he's got pretty hands. (Kesey 19)

His features, dainty and pretty, reflect the stereotypical qualities of gay men, especially when it comes to hands. Harding is not proud of these features and tries to hide them from others in what presents as a defense mechanism. He curves his shoulders "in around his chest when he's trying to hide himself," establishing his character as an insecure man who needs to hide, turtle-like, within himself. Like caged birds that naturally need to be free, his hands repeatedly throughout the novel "glide around in front of him free" when he is talking or excited, but they are always subsequently "trap[ped] between his knees." Harding's dainty and animated hands represent the softer qualities about him that he feels need to be hidden from others since they are not the normalized ideal of masculinity. The introduction of Harding's character through his hand description establishes him as someone with something to hide.

When McMurphy enters the ward, he instantly juxtaposes Harding due to his loud, masculine persona of a cowboy out of the movies. When McMurphy first arrives on the ward, he asks, "Who's the bull goose loony here?" really asking who he needs to assert his male bravado over in order to "be the boss" around the ward (Kesey 18). The men do not know the answer because they are all equally weakened, but Billy Bibbit suggests Harding because he is the president of the Patient's Council (which readers later learn is only "on account of he has a paper that he says he graduated from college") (Kesey 19). McMurphy, without knowing Harding at all, orders Billy to "tell this Harding that he either meets [him] man to man or he's a yaller skunk and better be outta town by sunset" (Kesey 19). This classic American-Western style challenge to manliness echoes the same oppressive hypermasculine structures that pushed Harding into the

asylum in the first place. Harding retorts, ““Bibbit, you tell this young upstart McMurphy that I’ll meet him in the main hall at noon and we’ll settle this affair once and for all, libidos a-blazin”” (Kesey 20). As Harding unnaturally attempts to match McMurphy’s performative masculinity, Bromden critiques how “Harding tries to drawl like McMurphy; it sounds funny with his high, breathy voice” (Kesey 20). Harding tries to meet McMurphy’s challenge with equal masculine virulence, but cannot hide his “flat”, “nervous”, and “thin” characteristics. In a duel for masculine control, the typical persona of power, Harding cannot rival the loud and large McMurphy, instantly lowering Harding’s status in the ward’s hierarchy. Although Harding was once the de facto leader due to his intelligence, the masculinity of McMurphy overpowers and consequently overshadows him.

As Harding’s character develops, his intelligence becomes more evident as he often pontificates, albeit insightfully, about the men’s power positions in the ward using scholarly vocabulary and terminology, even mocking psychoanalysis. Though it can be futile and problematic to attempt to diagnose a character’s mental state, Kesey provides no clear, medical reason as to why Harding is in the asylum: he does not display signs of hallucinations, seizures, disorientation, or violent behavior like the other men. This lack of evident mental illness leads us to ask: why *is* Harding in the asylum? This lack of illness is the point of his character to the novel as a whole. Michel Foucault in *Abnormal* (1974) traces how all irregularities and acts of deviance came under the umbrella of medicine and psychology:

Nineteenth-century psychiatry is able to bring into the ambit of illness and mental illness all the disorders and irregularities, all the serious disorders and little irregularities of conduct that are not, strictly speaking, due to madness. On the basis of the instincts and around what was previously the problem of madness, it becomes possible to organize the

whole problematic of the abnormal at the level of the most elementary and everyday conduct. (132)

The policing of the “little irregularities” that Foucault speaks of eventually turns to sexuality, which is key for a society to control. Foucault continues to argue that in the late 1800s, sexual abnormality “emerges as the root, foundation, and general etiological principle of most other forms of abnormality” (*Abnormal* 168). All differences and moments of deviance are tied back to sexuality through medical psychology, making sexuality one of the main components of a person’s identity that is policed and normalized. Sexual abnormality, which is of course a subjective label, requires highly individualized focus for control. As Foucault asserted succinctly in his earlier series of lectures, *Psychiatric Power* (1973), “Abnormality is the individual condition of possibility of madness” (272). Being abnormal, especially sexually, indicated the *potential* for madness, especially considering its designation in the *DSM* from 1952-74, leading to control and normalization of queer individuals. In the time before his self-commitment to the asylum, Harding was labeled “abnormal” for his presumed sexual orientation, which in return designates him as one with the “possibility of madness,” in need of “curing,” or, in this case, straightening.

The group therapy meetings present the best insight into Harding’s character and the path that led him to the asylum. These “Therapeutic Community” meetings, run by Nurse Ratched, at first seem beneficial on the surface, but have a more insidious purpose when considered in conjunction with Foucault’s theory of psychiatric power. Bromden explains how he has “heard the theory of the Therapeutic Community enough times to repeat it forwards and backwards—how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he’ll be able to function in normal society; how the group can help the guy by showing him where he’s out of place; how society is what

decides who's sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up" (Kesey 44). The group, as preparation for "normal society," defines where an individual has deviated from the norm, and therefore where he needs to align himself in order to gain freedom. The meetings function through delving into the ward's "log book," a place for the patients to record instances of their fellow patients getting out of line. Bromden paraphrases the doctor's justification of the log: "If you hear a friend say something during the course of your everyday conversation, then list it in the log book for the staff to see. It's not, as the movies call it, "squealing," it's helping your fellow. Bring these old sins into the open where they can be washed by the sight of all... Help yourself and your friends probe into the secrets of the subconscious" (Kesey 44). These points of deviance are viewed by the doctors and nurses as "sins" rather than differences, implying that the abnormalities are evil and in need of urgent remediation. Encouraging the men to help each other "wash away the sins" harkens back to the original purpose of religious confession: policing of sexual deviance.

Aside from a complete lack of privacy and trust, the log book creates a hostile atmosphere of panopticism<sup>6</sup>: what Nurse Ratched cannot see or hear, she will most certainly learn about through the men snitching on each other. Foucault illustrates how psychiatric power relies on writing to discipline: "this is first of all to ensure that everything that happens, everything the individual does and says, is graded and recorded, and then to transmit this information from below up through the hierarchical levels, and then, finally, to make this information accessible and thereby assure the principle of omnivisibility" (*Psychiatric Power* 48). In order for Nurse Ratched to maintain complete control of the ward, she must know

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<sup>6</sup> For a full explanation of Foucault's concept of "panopticism" in the asylum model, see *Psychiatric Power* (pp.102-5).

everything that goes on, and despite her attempts at panopticism through her nurses' station, she is only human and therefore must rely on the men to surveil each other. Since "any little gripe, any grievance, anything [the men] want changed" (Kesey 44) should be recorded, the log book allows "disciplinary power... to intervene without halt from the first moment, the first action, the first hint" of deviance (*Psychiatric Power* 51). Thanks to the pangraphic panopticism of the log book, Nurse Ratched can swiftly squash any inkling of rebellion or revolt and learn about the men's weaknesses, which may later be used to her manipulative advantage.

The Therapeutic Community meetings represent Foucault's concept of hyper-individualization as a mode of disciplinary power. The group meetings depicted in the novel focus solely on Harding and his marital relations, highlighting his character as the one most in need of his "sins" getting "washed by the sight of all" his peers (Kesey 44). The meetings function as an individualizing control mechanism in two key ways: "by means of a system of supervision-writing, or by a system of pangraphic panopticism" (through the log book) and by forced confession of sexuality (*Psychiatric Power* 55). The first group therapy meeting in the novel depicts Nurse Ratched examining Harding's feelings of sexual inadequacy with his wife:

Now. At the close of Friday's meeting... we were discussing Mr. Harding's problem... concerning his young wife. He had stated that his wife was extremely well endowed in the bosom and that this made him uneasy because she drew stares from men on the street... According to the notes listed from various patients in the log, Mr. Harding has been heard to say that she 'damn well gives the bastards reason to stare.' He also has been heard to say that he may give *her* reason to seek further sexual attention. He has been heard to say, 'My dear sweet but illiterate wife thinks any word or gesture that does not smack of brickyard brawn and brutality is a word or gesture of weak dandyism.'... He

has also stated that his wife's ample bosom at times gives him a feeling of inferiority. So.

Does anyone care to touch upon this subject further? (Kesey 39)

According to Harding, his wife has accused him of "weak dandyism," a derogatory stereotype of queer men, when he acts in ways that do not "smack of brickyard brawn and brutality;" she clearly thinks Harding is not masculine enough for her, and he even admits that that has given her reason to seek sexual attention elsewhere. Nurse Ratched, as a master manipulator of the men, knows Harding's central weaknesses: his wife and sexuality. Harding's private life was already the subject of a previous meeting, but Ratched returns to the subject to force more discussion on it. By opening up the discussion for anyone to "touch upon," Ratched is drawing out the men's reactions, forcing more discussion until she hears the "truth" she wants to hear. With psychiatric power, "Questioning is really a particular way of fixing the individual to the norms of his own identity... Questioning is a disciplinary method and its effects can in fact be identified at that level" (Foucault, *Psychiatric Power* 234). Through repeatedly questioning Harding and his "feeling of inferiority," Ratched is forcing confessional discourse from Harding in regards to his sexuality with the goal of discipline.

Foucault discusses in *Psychiatric Power* the tactics of forced psychological confession: although this confession may not be a full truth, it is necessary for a "cure," which is really just control of an individual. Foucault assumes a personified voice of psychiatric power to explain the way in which confessional discourse is a form of extortion:

"Give me the reasons why I confine you; really give me the reasons why I deprive you of your freedom, and, at that point, I will free you of your madness. The action by which you will be cured of your madness is also that by which I will assure myself that what I do really is a medical act.' Such is the entanglement between the doctor's power and the

extortion of confession in the patient, which constitutes, I think, the absolutely central point of the technique of psychiatric questioning.” (*Psychiatric Power* 275)

Although the Therapeutic Community meetings do not exactly comprise of a doctor questioning a patient, they serve the same purpose as they too contain a figure of power eliciting a confession of secrets and subconscious desires, but with the additional pressure of peers as onlookers and participating interrogators. The confession Nurse Ratched is searching for in these meetings is Harding’s sexual orientation, which she clearly already knows through her prodding; this truth she is searching for is deemed essential to his identity, a “biographical truth” to use Foucault’s term. “This biographical truth which is asked of the patient, and the confession of which is so effective in the therapy, is not so much the truth that he could say about himself, at the level of his actual experience, but a truth imposed on him in a canonical form: cross-examination of identity, the recall of certain episodes already known to the doctor... [etc.]” (*Psychiatric Power* 159). The key here is that the truth is “imposed on him,” not something organic or self-determined. This “biographical schema” carries identity with it, creating an individual that consequently can be controlled (*Psychiatric Power* 160). Furthermore, “the technique of psychiatric questioning... is not a way of getting information from the patient that one does not possess... Questioning is a way of quietly substituting for the information wormed out of the patient the appearance of an interplay of meanings which give the doctor a hold on the patient” (*Psychiatric Power* 185). Nurse Ratched already knows the “biography” of Harding, but the forced confession of it is a power play; she gains more of a hold over Harding through each meeting and consequently is able to apply increasing normalizing pressure.

The content of these meetings is never about Harding’s well-being, but rather his relationship with his wife and feelings of inadequacy in relation to her. His sexuality becomes

the foremost component of his constructed identity; constructing an identity for individuals is both at the heart of the “asylum machine” and part of the “cure.” Foucault claims that “The statement of truth,” such as a confession of sexuality, “has a performative character in the game of the cure,” meaning much like gender and identity, this “truth” is performative and not essential (*Psychiatric Power* 159). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick echoes Foucault’s argument in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990); the concept of “the closet” is largely based on discourse and is not necessarily the acquisition of new information. When it comes to sharing sexuality, people are damned if they do (in terms of ostracization) or damned if they don’t (seen as keeping a secret). As with all instances of “coming out,” Harding’s “coming out” that Nurse Ratched is trying to elicit has “nothing to do with the acquisition of new information,” but is nevertheless a required speech act by society (*Epistemology* 3). Sedgwick contends that this “excruciating system of double binds” “systematically oppress[es] gay people, identities, and acts by undermining through contradictory constraints on discourse the grounds of their very being” (*Epistemology* 70). Harding illustrates in the group therapy meetings how this “system of double binds” is “excruciating”; if he discloses the fact that he is queer, he is giving Ratched what she wants and will get her off his back, but at the expense of potential social ostracization or further medical psychiatry practices. Navigating “the closet” is tricky, which is why it is the key figure of gay oppression in this century and so closely connected to secrecy and disclosure, according to Sedgwick (*Epistemology* 71).

The manner in which Ratched runs the meetings with the strong focus on Harding’s relations with his wife indicate her knowledge, or supposed knowledge, of Harding’s “secret,” and her reveling in the power position that provides her. During the meeting, “She looks around to see if anybody else is about to interrupt her, smiling steadily as her head turns in her collar.



The guys won't meet her look; they're all looking for hangnails" (Kesey 39). Her psychiatric questioning gives her power over Harding, but over the other men in the therapeutic community as well since they are witnesses to her unwavering, threatening attempts to force confession. According to Sedgwick, "the position of those who think they *know something about one that one may not know oneself* is an excited an empowered one— whether what they think one doesn't know is that one somehow *is* homosexual, or merely that one's supposed secret is known to them" (80). Nurse Ratched position as both questioning medical professional and knower of secrets gives her illimitable power over the patients. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault notes that "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*" (35). Sexuality, *the secret* to be revealed, carries with it a lot of power, and as Ratched shows in her meetings, is worth talking about "*ad infinitum*" in order to maintain her position of knowing and having leverage.

Harding's sexuality is an "open secret" on Nurse Ratched's ward: the men all know about his relationship with his wife and appear genuinely empathetic with his powerless position in the group therapy meetings. After Ratched reads the log book entries regarding secrets Harding has shared, "Harding shuts his eyes, and nobody else says anything" (Kesey 39). After some more probing and questioning, however, Nurse Ratched gets the other men to join in on her quest for confession, and she allows the other men to go on for forty-five minutes "chopping a man to pieces," in Bromden's words (Kesey 50). Once Nurse Ratched is done conducting the meetings, "the Acutes click out of their trance, look for an instant in Harding's direction. Their faces burn with a shame like they have just woke up to the fact they been played for suckers again... They've been maneuvered again into grilling one of their friends like he was a criminal and they

were all prosecutors and judge and jury” (Kesey 50). Nurse Ratched is reliant on the other men and their willingness to normalize one another to perpetuate her control. Nurse Ratched has them in a trance of normalization, her way of keeping them all in line. The men know better than to hurt their friend, but the force of normalization is stronger. This form of “therapy,” which is really a technology of power, can only function with prompting statements like, “he has been heard to say...” that she draws straight from her form of pangraphic panopticism.

After the Therapeutic Community Meeting, Harding retreats back to his state of subjection and submission. Bromden observes that “Harding’s got his thin shoulders folded nearly together around himself, like green wings, and he’s sitting very straight near the edge of his chair, with his hands trapped between his knees” (Kesey 51). Bromden again illustrates Harding as someone forced to hide his true self, with his wing-like shoulders folded in and his bird-like hands trapped between his knees. His body is presented through imagery of a bird that would be capable of flying away, over the “cuckoo’s nest,” but cannot due to his internalized self-policing. When psychiatric power is seeking a confession, as Ratched does in this scene, Foucault argues that “The process of the cure is effectuated, accomplished, and sealed when truth has been acquired through confession in this way, in the effective moment of confession, and not by piecing together a medical knowledge” (*Psychiatric Power* 11). In this meeting, however, no confession was made; despite being a man completely at the will of psychiatric power, Harding does not give Nurse Ratched the satisfaction of “curing” his “illness.” That is not to say these meetings do not take a toll on Harding, as evidenced by his body language at the end of the scene. Foucault contends that “What is essential in all power is that ultimately its point of application is always the body. All power is physical, and there is a direct connection between the body and political power” (*Psychiatric Power* 14). Harding as a subjugated body folds in on

himself, taking up less space as there is no designated path or space into which he may extend<sup>7</sup>. Although this power is applied to the body, it does not necessarily need to be violent, a correction from Foucault's earlier theory in *Madness and Civilization*. The physicality here is part of a larger "rational, calculated, and controlled game of the exercise of power"; blatant physical violence from power structures is not tolerated as much in the 21st century (although there are of course bouts of violence in the novel), so the exercise of power on the body must take more covert forms (*Psychiatric Power* 14).

Despite the meetings themselves being clear examples of physical effects of power on the individual, Harding and McMurphy have a crucial conversation after that further solidifies the meetings' violent purpose on the subjected bodies. McMurphy, astounded by the format of therapy meetings, asks Harding, "Is that the usual *pro-cedure* for these Group Ther'py shindigs? Bunch of chickens at a peckin' party?" (Kesey 51). Harding at first rejects the idea, so brainwashed to think that what happens in the meetings is truly therapeutic. McMurphy forces Harding to think more critically about the meetings, claiming Nurse Ratched isn't pecking at their eyes, but at their "everlovin' *balls*" (Kesey 53). As McMurphy crudely explains what he means, "Harding flinches... and his hands begin to creep out from between his knees like white spiders from between two moss-covered tree limbs, up the limbs toward the joining at the trunk" (Kesey 53). Harding's hands are zoomorphized again as an insect "creep[ing] out" from their hiding place, but this time in an act of protection rather than expression; he understands what McMurphy is saying and perceives the threat physically as a physical application of power on the body. McMurphy further muses on Nurse Ratched's tactics in these so-called "pecking parties" :

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<sup>7</sup> This is a reference to Sara Ahmed's theory *Queer Phenomenology*, which I quote in more detail in the Introduction (pp.11-12) and later within this chapter (pp. 14-15, 18).

No, that nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter. I've seen a thousand of 'em, old and young, men and women. Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes— people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to. And the best way to do this, to get you to knuckle under, is to weaken you by gettin' you where it hurts the worst... If you're up against a guy who wants to win by making you weaker instead of making himself stronger, then watch for his knee, he's gonna go for your vitals. And that's what the old buzzard is doing, going for your vitals. (Kesey 54).

This excerpt is often viewed as evidence of Kesey's sexist views of the potential terror of a matriarchy<sup>8</sup>, and rightfully so, as McMurphy inherently associates this normalizing force with women. Despite McMurphy's preliminary blaming of women like Ratched, it is worth noting that McMurphy later says that "they" are all over the country and are not just women; "they" want to normalize, force everyone to live the way "they" see fit. McMurphy is referring to people and institutions who set the rules, ones he often wants to break, but without realizing it he philosophizes a greater idea on the intangible forces of power that exercise control on the body. Harding's queerness is what hurts him the most, so attacking his competency with his wife is an apt comparison (albeit low-brow) to getting kicked in the testicles. Even the use of the phrase "toe the line," though a common idiom, hints at the straightening devices throughout society that promote compulsory heterosexuality, the "straight line" that is so engrained and repeated that it falls out of sight. As Sara Ahmed purports, "Heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation toward others, it is also something that we are oriented around, even if it disappears from view" (90).

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<sup>8</sup> For examples, see Allen, McMahan, and Sullivan.

McMurphy's disavowal of the therapy meetings is hard for the men to bear at first, and even the erudite Harding tries very hard to prove him wrong by listing all of the good deeds Miss Ratched, the "veritable angel of mercy," has done (Kesey 55). As Harding rejects McMurphy's theory, however, "he lets his hands and face move like they want to and doesn't try to hold them back" and "they flow and gesture in a way that's real pretty to watch, but when he worries about them and tries to hold back, he becomes a wild, jerky puppet doing a high-strung dance" (Kesey 54). When Harding notices his hands and tries to control them, he resembles a puppet, which could not be a more apt descriptor of his position in society: when he does what is unnatural for him, adhering to heteropatriarchal ideals of "normal," he looks like an unsettling, jerky puppet. He is controlled by the invisible strings of the web of normalizing power. His denial of Ratched's manipulative disciplinary techniques causes him to spiral out of control, leading to a somewhat manic monologue and a laugh that sounds "like a nail being crowbarred out of a plank of green wood"; after calming down, Harding finally concedes to McMurphy's point and concedes, "You are right... About all of it" (Kesey 56). This is a turning point for Harding, but he is not yet ready to fight back against these forces; it will take more time with McMurphy to unearth his suppressed humanity that has been covered for years, both inside and outside the asylum.

After Harding accepts McMurphy's truth about the pecking parties, he is ready to explain the patients' state of control to McMurphy, indicating he has known deep-down the truth about their subjugation all along. Harding extrapolates an extended metaphor of the men being rabbits in the ward. He argues, "We're not in here *because* we're rabbits— we'd be rabbits wherever we were— we're all in here because we can't *adjust* to our rabbithood" (Kesey 57). Harding sees himself and his peers as meek rabbits, creatures at the bottom of the food chain regardless of

their environment. “Adjusting” here would entail changing who one is and conforming to societal standards. In Harding’s case, that would mean realigning himself since “queer desire is read as off line,” deviating from the path of heteronormativity (Ahmed 71). Harding says to the other men on the ward, “That’s why I hold no grudge against you for the questions you asked me during the meeting today. You were only playing your role” (Kesey 59). Harding aptly notes that the men were “playing a role,” indicating the performative nature of discipline and power over identity. When Harding accuses McMurphy of being a rabbit just like the rest of them, McMurphy first accepts it since rabbits are known for their “whambam,” or mating capacity; Harding retorts:

“the point you bring up simply indicated that you are a healthy, functioning and adequate rabbit, whereas most of us in here even lack the sexual ability to make the grade as adequate rabbits. Failures, we are... We comical little creatures can’t even achieve masculinity in the rabbit world, that’s how weak and inadequate we are. Hee. We are—the *rabbits*, one might say, of the rabbit world!” (Kesey 59-60).

Though Harding acknowledges that everyone is a rabbit in a sense, controlled by discipline and power mechanisms, the men in the ward are the most rabbit-like of them all, unable to adjust to fit the masculine norm under the weight of “the Combine.” A “healthy, functioning and adequate rabbit” like McMurphy does not even know he is a rabbit, which is the point of invisible power. The fact that Harding is focusing on the sexual inadequacies again, however, is yet another indicator that he has internalized equating masculinity with heterosexuality and therefore views himself as “feeble, stunted, weak.”

Though the novel progresses to focus on McMurphy’s brewing battle against Nurse Ratched, *Cuckoo’s Nest* returns to Harding and the “open secret” of his sexuality when his wife,

Vera, briefly visits the ward. Foucault examines in *History of Sexuality* that the codes that governed sexual practices in the 18th and 19th centuries “were all centered around matrimonial relations” and “[the marriage relation] was under constant surveillance: if it was found to be lacking, it had to come forward and plead its case before a witness” (37). Whether it was in front of the courts (as in the 19th century) or in front of the psychiatrist (as in the 20th century), “those who did not like the opposite sex” had to “step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were” (Foucault, *History* 38-39). Though no longer criminalized in the time of *Cuckoo’s Nest*, queer desire still had to be confessed, only now in a medical setting, and Vera’s visit is yet another pressure forcing this confession from Harding. Before Vera makes an appearance, she is spoken about in the Therapeutic Community meetings as a harmless, dissatisfied housewife harmed by her husband’s “lifestyle.” From the moment she steps onto Nurse Ratched’s ward, however, it is clear that she is one of the forces of normalization that aggressively scolds Harding’s deviance and led to his labeling as “abnormal.” Vera enters the ward already flirting with the ward attendants in front of her husband, and after he awkwardly introduces her to McMurphy, she asks for a cigarette. When Harding explains that they have been rationed by Nurse Ratched and “that doesn’t seem to leave a man any margin for chivalry,” she retorts, “Oh Dale, you never do have enough, do you?” (Kesey 157). Bromden listens in on the subsequent exchange:

She talks some more about some of Harding’s friends who she wishes would quit dropping around the house looking for him. “You know the type, don’t you, Mack?” she says. “The hoity-toity boys with the nice long hair combed so perfectly and the limp little wrists that flip so nice.” Harding asks her if it was only him that they were dropping

around to see, and she says any man that drops around to see her flips more than his damned limp wrists. (Keseey 158)

Much like Nurse Ratched in the Therapeutic Community discussions, Vera holds the power in this situation as she publicly “outs” him in front of his friends. She implies that men coming by to see her are more masculine than Harding and the men with whom he associates through her use of the derogatory descriptor, “limp wrists.”

Vera is overly performative with her feminine sexual prowess, perhaps viewing her own perceived sexuality in danger due to its relational value to Harding’s. Sedgwick notes that all people involved in a relationship may feel threatened in a “coming out” situation because “erotic identity, of all things, is never to be circumscribed simply as itself, can never not be relational, is never to be perceived or known by anyone outside of a structure of transference and countertransference” (Sedgwick 81). Although we can assume Vera is already well aware of Harding’s sexuality, Sedgwick’s point about the relational quality of erotic identity is clear here in Vera’s sarcastic, challenging attitude. She feels the need to overcompensate for Harding’s “inadequacy” through her cutting remarks and public shaming. Vera’s attack on Harding’s characteristics associated with traditional femininity is just another “straightening device” — a force to the “straight line,” anything that “conflate[s] this line with what is right, good, or normal” (Ahmed 72). Psychiatric power and the family are inextricably linked not only because returning a “healthy” individual to his or her family is the goal, but also because the family becomes the “agency of the abnormalization of individuals” and it is up to the family “actually designate those who are mad” (*Psychiatric Power* 114). The unease with which Harding interacts with his wife alludes to her presence as one of the forces that helped “abnormalize” him in the first place, though just like Ratched and her control, Vera is merely one agent in this



accumulated pressure toward normalization. The home is an important place for the identification of abnormality especially in terms of queerness because it is “the place where sexuality circulates,” according to Foucault, and therefore the starting point for detecting sexual “abnormality” (*Psychiatric Power* 115).

Harding is prominent in the background of the rest of the novel, especially as one of the symbolic disciples, one of the twelve men who follow McMurphy on the deep-sea fishing trip. Though Jesus’s apostles were not outcasts per se, they were ordinary men from various walks of life in search of love and salvation. Among the twelve men McMurphy leads to the ocean, Harding aptly represents a follower in need of grace and hope due to his internalized abnormalization. By the “last supper” for Christ-figure McMurphy, the party with women, alcohol, and sex toward the end of the novel, Harding is one of the main actors alongside Bromden. When the men are caught in their debauchery, Harding points out the “complexities of the situation” and tries to express how much trouble they are in and McMurphy tries to get Harding to escape with him (Kesey 264). Harding replies, “I’ll be ready in a few weeks. But I want to do it on my own, by myself, right out that front door, with all the traditional red tape and complications. I want my wife to be here in a car at a certain time to pick me up. I want them to know I was *able* to do it that way” (Kesey 265). Harding wants to prove that he can overcome the pressures to conform through embodying the hope McMurphy has inspired, yet he makes the decision to return home to his wife. Despite the new-found strength and confidence that he has gained, the powers outside of the ward are still too strong to allow him to live his authentic life (without Vera).

The last we hear from Harding is his most consequential moment as he finally confesses his sexuality but in his own way and on his own terms, not in a forced, accusatory “pecking

party.” In their final moments at the party before getting caught, McMurphy gravely asks Harding why things are the way they are in the asylum; Harding replies:

I don't think I can give you an answer. Oh, I could give you Freudian reasons with fancy talk, and that would be right as far as it went. But what you want are the reasons for the reasons, and I'm not able to give you those. Not for the others, anyway. For myself? Guilt. Shame. Fear. Self-belittlement. I discovered at an early age that I was— shall we be kind and say different? It's a better, more general word than the other one. I indulged in certain practices that our society regards as shameful. And I got sick. It wasn't the practices, I don't think, it was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me— and the great voice of millions chanting, 'Shame. Shame. Shame.' It's society's way of dealing with someone different. (Kesey 265)

Harding knows it wasn't the practice itself that made him “sick” but rather the “great, deadly” judgment from “millions” telling him he should be ashamed, which understandably is internalized. McMurphy then points out that he too is different and questions why that didn't drive him crazy; Harding shifts his argument a bit and agrees with him: “No, you're right... there's something else that drives people, strong people like you, my friend, down that road... It's us.’ He swept his hand about him in a soft white circle and repeated, ‘Us’” (Kesey 266). He reaches an interesting conclusion that it is not always the obscure “society” pointing the finger, saying “you're wrong,” but rather it is interpersonal relationships that uphold power structures through horizontal normalization rather than top-down control. Mettler claims that this moment “echo[es] some disability theorists” because “several patients argue that it was not their inherent difference that made them damaged, but the torment they were forced to suffer when they dared deviate from the norm” (183). Peer pressure to normalize is a formidable force that works in

tandem with “the deadly forefinger of society,” but can be more effective on the “strong people” such as McMurphy who are anti-establishment at their core.

Harding explains what disability and queer theorists know today, that people who live their lives authentically, yet are viewed as “out of line” or “abnormal,” suffer from power’s exercise on the body. Over the nearly one-hundred years since the inception of the *DSM*, the pathologization of queerness has taken many forms, continually shifting to accommodate power’s propensity to normalize the abnormal. At the time of *Cuckoo’s Nest*’s publishing, “homosexuality” appeared in the *DSM*, deemed a psychological illness that required treatment according to the American Psychiatric Association. “Homosexuality” was replaced with “Sexual Orientation Disturbance” in 1974, which was later replaced with “ego-dystonic homosexuality” in 1980 (Drescher). Psychiatric power then shifted focus to gender expression disorders which were another form of pathologizing abnormality; gender dysphoria is of course not synonymous with sexual orientation, but due to stereotypical gender roles and expressions of gender, the two are easily conflated leading to misdiagnosis. Many critics have made the argument that in 1987, “GIDC [gender identity dysphoria of childhood] was introduced into the *DSM-III-R* as a “backdoor maneuver,” or an indirect way for the APA and mental health professionals to continue pathologizing homosexuality” (Toscano and Maynard 250). Despite a name change to gender identity disorder (GID) in 1994, “some clinicians continued to agree... that ‘the GID diagnosis . . . is an attempt to prevent adult homosexuality via psychiatric intervention with children’” (Toscano and Maynard 250). The *DSM-V* in 2013 finally removed the word “disorder” from GID, now just GD (gender dysphoria), but “for many in the LGBT community, the retention of GD in the *DSM-5* is nothing less than the continued pathologizing of nonconforming individuals” (Toscano and Maynard 256). Though incredible strides have been

made in the fight toward demedicalization and destigmatization of queerness, psychiatric power continues to shift to function in the policing and normalization of queer individuals, and Harding's character aptly demonstrates the dehumanizing roots of such queer pathologization.

### 3 “IT’S GONNA ROAR OUTTA ME LIKE FLOODWATERS”: “CHIEF” BROMDEN’S QUEER JOURNEY FROM SILENCE TO LIBERATION

Not nearly as ignored in the scholarship as Harding, “Chief” Bromden, pseudo-omniscient narrator of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, has been put through the psychoanalytic ringer over the last four decades. It wasn’t until the 2000s that scholarship on *Cuckoo’s Nest* moved past Freud’s heteropatriarchal ideas and began to examine Bromden’s trauma and Native identity, critical components of his paramount perspective to the novel. Numerous scholars have investigated various important elements to his character, but none have fully meshed his queerness and Native identity with the larger arguments about normalization and power that Kesey purported. Though Kesey’s depiction of Bromden, a Native American man, is undoubtedly fraught with problematic stereotypes and cliché American literary tropes, Kesey nevertheless was cognizant of specific details regarding the Native peoples of the Celilo Falls region on the Columbia River and used the history of the Dalles Dam construction to further his argument about a mechanized, dehumanizing post-war America<sup>9</sup>. As Wilson Kaiser explains in his essay on disability and Native American counterculture, “this ideal image of the Native American was largely fantasy, but it came from a real set of concerns that were integral to the social changes in the United States after World War II” (189). Counterculturalists appropriated a great deal of Native culture, romanticizing and generalizing Native clothing, ritual customs, and spiritual drug use, and though Kesey’s vision of Bromden is based on some cultural and historical truths, his presence nevertheless begs the question: why does a white, non-Native author need to employ a Native narrator to present a counter view to the majoritarian culture?

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<sup>9</sup> For a thorough explanation of Kesey’s acknowledgment of the Dalles Dam impact on the Celilo Falls Indigenous peoples, see Fatzinger “Echoes of Celilo Falls and Native Voices in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.”

Scholarship of Chief Bromden has undergone a curious evolution since the 1970s when first appearing on the academic scene (likely due to the 1975 film adaptation and its great success both critically and popularly). Originating most notably with Robert Forrey in 1975, questions of masculinity and “latent homosexuality” in the novel emerged. In his article “Ken Kesey’s Psychopathic Savior: a Rejoinder,” Forrey provides one of the first extremely critical publications of the novel and asserts that McMurphy, as a reflection of Kesey himself, equates women with the enemy and forms a “band of brothers” with the patients to fight against the oppressive patriarchy ruled by Nurse Ratched. William C. Baurecht provides a more nuanced focus on the male love at the core of *Cuckoo’s Nest* in his 1982 essay, “Separation, Initiation, and Return: Schizophrenic Episode in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.” Baurecht makes the argument that the novel is a “radical departure from American tradition” due to Bromden and McMurphy’s “genuine, profound male love that transcends friendship, male bonding, and comradeship in arms” (89). Baurecht is correct when he asserts that true love is at the core of the novel, and though he acknowledges that the love comes at the expense of reinscribing the “underlying mythology... [of] the traditional flight from women expressed in American literature and popular culture,” he rather focuses on “the emotional withdrawal of men from themselves,” failing to acknowledge the homoeroticism pervading in the novel (Baurecht 85). Robert P. Waxler wrote the next most significant article exploring manhood and sexuality in the novel, “The Mixed Heritage of the Chief: Revisiting the Problem of Manhood in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*” (1995), relying heavily on psychoanalysis to explain Bromden’s inability to achieve his manhood due to his “mixed race” and the crushing patriarchy around him. Waxler relies perhaps too heavily on a fantasy of Bromden’s fractured identity due to his Native father and non-Native white mother, consequently presenting a much too narrow focus on the true

locus of power. Despite Waxler's flaws, his call for more focus on Bromden's character is certainly founded, yet the focus might be better served by a queer Indigenous critique, one that will examine his place in the larger settler society in which he finds himself institutionalized.

Kesey's novel certainly depicts a "castrating matriarchy", but he explores masculinity and power more broadly through Bromden's conceptualization of "the Combine," an all-encompassing power structure that represents the U.S. colonial heteropatriarchy. As a Native person in this system, Bromden is queered<sup>10</sup> regardless of his sexual orientation(s). Mark Rifkin, in *When Did Indians Become Straight?* (2011), argues that "nonwhite populations are cast as nonheteronormative regardless of object choice" in a colonial heteropatriarchy such as the United States (11). Scott Morgensen similarly asserts, the "imposition of colonial heteropatriarchy relegates Native people and all non-Native people of color to queered statuses as racialized populations amid colonial efforts to eliminate Native nationality and settle Native lands" (1). This "pathologized relation" that is projected onto him indicates the need for normalization, which in Bromden's case, falls to the mental health institution (Rifkin 11). The asylum is merely one mode of Native erasure which, similar to the Native American boarding schools, infantilizes and pathologizes Native peoples' differences to the heteronorm. As Chris Finley asserts in "Decolonizing the Queer Native Body," it is "not only Native women who are (hetero)sexually controlled by white heteropatriarchy, for Native men are feminized and queered when put in the care of a white heteropatriarchal nation-state" (35). Bromden's life, from the reservation to the army to the asylum, has been controlled fully by the "heteropatriarchal nation-state." Rifkin asserts, "U.S. imperialism against native peoples over the past two centuries can be understood as an effort to make them 'straight' — to insert indigenous peoples into Anglo-

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<sup>10</sup> For how I use the term "queered," see footnote 4 in the introduction.

American conceptions of family, home, desire, and personal identity” (Rifkin 8). Nurse Ratched’s ward is one of these “straightening” devices, an institution that uses surveillance, peer-to-peer normalization, and physical control mechanisms that make the argument that those inside the ward are “ill” and in need of “readjusting.” Finley argues that Native erasure can be literal or metaphorical, meaning Native people may be “eliminated discursively” to “save the heteronormative body politic from possible contamination by Native nonheteronormativity” (Finley 37). Bromden epitomizes this “discursive elimination” from society— by being forced into silence and then pathologized for his abnormalities, Bromden has been effectively erased from society through institutionalization.

Kesey’s employment of a Native narrator is itself a method of queering by attempting to challenge the norm through Bromden’s voice. Rifkin points to the “tradition of non-native representations” that have “employed native peoples as a counterhegemonic symbol of resistance to heterohomemaking, *queering* the norm by citing native customs as a more affectively expansive and communalist model for settler sociality” (Rifkin 8). Bromden, as the true hero of the novel who is able to escape the asylum at the end, represents an idealized version of America for the counterculturalists, one that resists oppressive contemporary structures for a more communalist and cooperative imaginary. Morgensen evokes Philip Deloria’s argument that “white Americans associate marginality and resistance with the Indian as an internal antagonist to settler society,” therefore positioning the voice of a Native man as integral to Kesey’s novel (6). Bromden is queered by society due to being Native, but he also queers the narration, which acts as subversion through discourse of the heteronorm. Morgensen critiques “indigeneity’s recurrent appearance within and as settler subjectivity” by arguing that “[w]hether erasing or performing indigeneity, omitting or celebrating it, settlers practice settlement by turning Native



land and culture into an inheritance granting them knowledge and ownership of themselves” (Morgensen 18). Bromden is a non-Native performance of indigeneity, and although Kesey was granted knowledge and inspiration through his character, his presence is an act of settlement, dominance over the Native perspective made queer.

Bromden’s Indigeneity and mental health are not inherently intertwined, yet within the novel they function concurrently to represent the normalizing forces that have pathologized him and landed him in the asylum in the first place. Bromden’s perspective, made unique by the freedom that his feigned deafness and muteness affords him, pushes the boundaries of “reality” due to his PTSD and schizophrenic episodes. Kaiser categorizes Bromden’s narration as a “disjointed and often disorienting cognition” that “constantly remind[s] the reader of the subtly normative expectations that pervade language as well as culture” (Kaiser 191). Bromden’s otherness is closely tied to his language due to his hallucinatory narration and lack of discourse with other characters, which raises questions about the relationship between discourse and power. Kaiser further notes that “Bromden situates the reader’s experience in an atypical point of view from the beginning, thereby deracinating the audience from a *normative* perspective” (Kaiser 192, emphasis added); his hallucinatory descriptions, which point to a deeper truth about the hegemonic forces of the Combine, allow for a narrative voice that challenges normative views of society. As Sara Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology*, queer people in a straight space appear slanted, oblique, and out of focus, which Bromden literalizes through his keen but at times bizarre and askew frame of mind (92). Bromden’s narration must be queer: he is pathologized not due to any “real” mental illness but rather due to his Native status in a settler state. As Kaiser summarizes from pioneering (anti)psychiatrist R. D. Laing, “in this topsy-turvy world, the once privileged distinctions between sanity and insanity lose their traditional

valances... because insanity may well be the only remaining response to an environment that presents irrational choices as the only alternative” (Kaiser 190). Laing (and Kesey) unarguably romanticize mental illness, but the label of “insanity,” a social construct, functions alongside Bromden’s queered position in society to argue that being “out of line” might well be the only way to make sense of the copacetic culture of post-war America. Through his journey from silence to discourse, which is closely tied to his self-conceptualization of his own sexuality and masculinity, Bromden presents a queer perspective, one that challenges the oppressive normalization at play in Nurse Ratched’s ward and in the greater American society.

Bromden’s narration is extremely perceptive and detailed due to his omniscient affordances, and his focus is most intently centered on Randle P. McMurphy, specifically his physical and performative manifestations of masculinity. In his examination of the homosocial bonds at the core of the novel, Baurecht notes, “Because Ken Kesey does not directly reveal McMurphy’s thoughts and motives, one must examine the implications of what he does, and everything he does is in relation to Chief Bromden” (83). Bromden’s descriptions of and interactions with McMurphy *are* the novel, situating Bromden’s love for McMurphy at the center. With a first-person, psychedelically-omniscient narrator such as Bromden, “Form and content are inseparable... The Chief as narrative consciousness accounts for the novel’s understatement and for the universal suggestiveness regarding masculinity in American culture” (Baurecht 84). Bromden observes every move McMurphy makes, which often takes a homoerotic tone due to McMurphy’s loud and proud sexuality. As a man struggling with the power exercised on his body, Bromden sees himself as small and weak but with the potential to be strengthened by McMurphy.

From the moment McMurphy first saunters into Nurse Ratched's ward, he leaves a palpable impact on Bromden. McMurphy "wasn't fooled for one minute by [Bromden's] deaf-and-dumb act," and instantly expressed a lot of interest in him (Kesey 22). Bromden, who is used to being a fly on the wall, defined by his utility to the ward as his nickname "Broom" suggests, feels truly seen for the first time in ages. Before McMurphy appears, "Virtually [Bromden's] only moving appendage, the broom symbolizes his impotence, both in American society and in the institution that serves as a microcosm of that society. Yet his metamorphosis from a man once so mighty that he speared salmon barehanded to a mere tool for the Nurse's staff has more than a sexual dimension; it also illustrates the central contrast of the book, of machine... vs. nature" (Lupak 67). The homoerotic undertones of Bromden's first meeting with McMurphy furthers the idea that the men's power, or lack thereof, in the mechanized microcosm of the ward is closely tied to their sexuality. Bromden meticulously details the Band-Aids, dirty nails, cuts and calluses on McMurphy's hands as he greets Bromden with a handshake, but Bromden concludes his observation with the corporeal impact they leave: "I remember the fingers were thick and strong closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. It blowed up near as big as his, I remember..." (Kesey 23). The first meeting between the men is both inspiring and homoerotic as McMurphy metaphorically provides Bromden with his blood, his life force. From Bromden's perspective, McMurphy makes the men on the ward big again when they have been made small by the Nurse, the ward, and the Combine as a whole. As Harding points out in his explication of his rabbits theory, it is the men's lack of sexual virulency that has landed them and keeps them in the ward. McMurphy,

from acts as simple as fighting to watch the World Series and campaigning for a fishing excursion, revitalizes the men, which Bromden feels physically and emotionally.

On McMurphy's first night on the ward, Bromden observes as McMurphy takes the bed next to his, which becomes a significant setting for their homosocial and erotic bond. As Bromden watches McMurphy undress, he observes, "The shorts under his work pants are coal black satin covered with big white whales with red eyes. He grins when he sees me looking at the shorts. 'From a co-ed at Oregon State, Chief, a Literary major.' He snaps the elastic with his thumb. 'She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol.'" (Kesey 74). McMurphy becomes a symbol to Bromden here, too, one of sexual freedom and strength. As many scholars have noted about this scene, the *Moby-Dick* boxers may be interpreted in various ways, but they undoubtedly reflect McMurphy's sexual virulency. In her article "Of Menace and Men: The Sexual Tensions of the American Frontier Metaphor," Morey-Gaines asserts that the shorts' "double entendre is unavoidable as the whale's name simultaneously suggests the physical size and the metaphysical significance of the organ that is the center of attention" (144). Although the boxers are most notably the "center of attention" when he taunts Nurse Ratched with them, they are first the center of attention for Bromden, who admiringly recounts the power of the undershorts; through using them as a tool against Ratched, McMurphy cements the male bonds among the men on the ward. Responding to the report of McMurphy singing in the shower, Nurse Ratched confronts McMurphy:

Then, just as she's rolling along at her biggest and meanest, McMurphy steps out of the latrine door right in front of her, holding that towel around his hips— stops her *dead!* She shrinks to about head-high to where that towel covers him, and he's grinning down on her... He looks down at the part of the towel she's eye to eye with, and it's wet and skin

tight... He finally winks at the nurse and shrugs and unwraps the towel, drapes it over her shoulder like she was a wooden rack. I see he had his shorts on under the towel all along. I think for a fact that she'd rather he'd been stark naked under that towel than he had on those shorts. She's glaring at those big white whales leaping round on his shorts in pure wordless outrage. (Kesey 85-8)

McMurphy is able to put a stop to the "big and mean" Nurse Ratched simply by flaunting his sexuality; his "wet and skin tight" towel causes her to shrink in Bromden's perception and "like a vampire checked by a cross, she is temporarily thwarted by the unseen organ" (Morey-Gaines 144). The shorts, symbolic of the Ahab versus white whale psychosis that grows between McMurphy and Ratched<sup>11</sup>, also represent the potent sexuality that Bromden admires. Although this moment (among others) problematically glorifies sexual harassment, it nevertheless signifies McMurphy's sexual power and Bromden's admiration of said power, which serves as the antidote to the men's oppression at the hands of the normalizing asylum.

Despite Bromden's growth as a result of McMurphy's admittance to the ward, he remains silent throughout the first two-thirds of the novel, symbolic primarily of his internalized oppression that began in his childhood. The intersection of Bromden's Native identity and queerness materializes when Bromden recalls the first time he was made to feel invisible, which led to him choosing silence. Bromden recalls, "I lay in bed the night before the fishing trip and thought it over, about my being deaf, about the years of not letting on I heard what was said, and I wondered if I could ever act any other way again. But I remembered one thing: it wasn't me that started acting deaf; it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all" (Kesey 179). As Bromden noticed that society was labeling him as deviant

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<sup>11</sup> See Morey-Gaines, Forrey, and Baurecht for greater discussion on this.

and therefore less, he shut down rather than fought back. When Bromden was a child, some government representatives visited his reservation in an attempt to buy the land to build a hydroelectric dam. About the government officials, agents of the Combine, he recalls, “I can see the... *seams* where they’re put together. And, almost, see the apparatus inside them take the words I just said and try to fit the words in here and there, this place and that, and when they find the words don’t have any place ready-made where they’ll fit, the machinery disposes of the words like they weren’t even spoken” (Kesey 182). The adults act like Bromden does not exist, falsely assuming he does not speak English, so Bromden in this moment chooses to instead silently observe the intricacies of people. The words he *did* say did not register with their expectations for him, so they were simply disposed of, communicating to Bromden that his words have no value. By not accepting Bromden’s attempts at discourse, the government officials, cogs in the great machine of the Combine, force him into silence, an infantile and powerless state.

Bromden is constrained by silence and pressured “into line,” but after growing “big” from McMurphy’s presence, he learns that silence can have subversive power, as well. As Foucault argues in *History of Sexuality*, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (*History* 101). Initially, Bromden certainly does not fully accept the oppressive policies in the ward, but he is also not “big enough” to reject them; instead, he hides in the fog and takes pride in his reticence: “If my being half Indian ever helped me in any way in this dirty life, it helped me being cagey, helped me all these years” (Kesey 4). Bromden’s silence grants him admittance to meetings of hospital officials, where he gathers inside information that ultimately helps him survive. José Esteban Muñoz’s argues that for queer people of color, there is a “survival

mechanism” outside of the assimilation/rebellion binary: disidentification. In Muñoz’s own words, “[d]isidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.” Though Bromden is removed from the “public sphere” through his institutionalization, he is nevertheless an acute example of a minority subject who is continuously punished for not conforming. Bromden is able to hide in his silent fog, but that comes at the expense of dehumanizing shaving, probing, surveillance, and recurrent EST treatments. Once Bromden is inspired by McMurphy, however, he begins to rebel by fighting through the EST treatments and silently aligning with McMurphy, providing him insight and support. Morgensen synthesizes Muñoz’s theory of disidentification as “working ‘on and in’ power to expose and disrupt its effects,” which Bromden is able to do through his silence, observation, and selective alliance with McMurphy (26).

As Bromden snaps out of the memory of his childhood on the reservation, he notices that one of the ward attendants is clearing out his chewed gum stash from under his bed, and once he leaves, McMurphy tosses Bromden a pack of Juicy Fruit. With his subconscious likely lingering on his forced silence, Bromden impulsively speaks to McMurphy for the first time: “before I realized what I was doing, I told him Thank You” (Kesey 186). McMurphy is proud that his hypothesis of Bromden’s “deaf and dumb act” was correct all along, but he is kind and patient, waiting for Bromden to talk more on his time. Bromden recalls, “I thought for a minute for something to say to him, but the only thing that came to mind was the kind of thing one man can’t say to another because it sounds wrong in words” (Kesey 186). Bromden wants to tell McMurphy how he feels, how much he loves him and appreciates the sacrifices he has made to

help the men on the ward regain their humanity, but since it “sounds wrong in words,” Bromden proceeds by sharing his life story instead. Bromden explains his father’s history to McMurphy, comparing him to his father as big men who get “busted” by the Combine. Most scholars have credited this message to Kesey’s misogynistic critique of a so-called castrating matriarchy; however, this inability of men to demonstrate any feelings toward one another is rather the result of a (colonial) *patriarchy*, a consequence of Sedgwick’s concept of “homosexual panic.” In *Between Men* (1985), Sedgwick asserts that male homosocial desire is a glue rather than the solvent of patriarchal power, but the arrival of “homosexual panic” suppressed the opportunity for these bonds (25). The “[s]o-called ‘homosexual panic,’” Sedgwick writes, “is the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail; even for them, however, that is only one path of control, complimentary to public sanctions through the institutions described by Foucault and others as defining and regulating the amorphous territory of ‘the sexual’” (*Between Men* 89). Bromden’s fear of “sounding wrong” is founded not only in the panic most men experience, but also in the sexually-controlling asylum and larger institutions that have already labeled him as queer.

Another clear example of “homosexual panic” emerges just moments later when Bromden ends his explanation of the Combine and observes McMurphy lying in the bed next to him:

I wanted to reach over and touch the place where he was tattooed, to see if he was still alive... That’s a lie. I know he’s still alive. That ain’t the reason I want to touch him. I want to touch him because he’s a man. That’s a lie too. There’s other men around. I could touch them. I want to touch him because I’m one of these queers! But that’s a lie too.



That's one fear hiding behind another. If I was one of these queers I'd want to do other things with him. I just want to touch him because of who he is. (Keseey 190)

Bromden feels extremely connected to McMurphy in this moment, but due to the fear of being perceived as queer, he is paralyzed with inaction. As Baurecht notes about this scene, “[t]he fear of latent homosexuality lurks behind the fear of wanting to embrace his friend as an expression of love, in order to show his appreciation and vulnerability, and to allow affection to pass between them physically” (Baurecht 86). Whether or not Bromden is “one of those queers” is not what is central in this scene; it is the *fear* of that label, which he knows would be further proof of his “illness” and need for normalization, that holds him back. Sedgwick argues that because “homosexuality” and “homophobia” “concern themselves intensely with each other and... assume interlocking or mirroring shapes, because the theater of their struggle is likely to be intrapsychic or intra-institutional as well as public, it is not always easy (sometimes barely impossible) to distinguish them from each other” (*Between Men* 20). Bromden’s confusing, mixed feelings of homoeroticism and homophobia are here an “intrapsychic struggle,” but as a symbol for resistance to oppressive systems, Bromden’s feelings point to an “intra-institutional struggle,” as well. “Homosexual panic” functions to accommodate power both within and outside institutions: “[n]o man must be able to ascertain that is his not (that his bonds are not) homosexual. In this way, a relatively small exertion of physical or legal compulsion potentially rules great reaches of behavior and filiation” (*Between Men* 89). The fear of being seen as queer in a heteronormative society allows power to function relatively easily as “homosexual panic” is a form of self-normalization.

At the end of this intimate conversation between Bromden and McMurphy, there is a critical (but often overlooked) moment of homoeroticism. McMurphy paints a fairy-tale for

Bromden about what his life will be like once they break out of the ward, “with all the men scared and the beautiful young girls panting after” him. McMurphy then “untied my sheet, cleared my bed of covers, and left me lying there naked. ‘Look there, Chief. Haw. What’d I tell ya? You grew a half a foot already.’ Laughing, he walked down the row of beds to the hall” (Kesey 191-2). The vitality of the story McMurphy weaved and the power he inspired gave Bromden an erection, another moment of McMurphy pumping blood, or life, into Bromden. Though before (with the initial handshake) this phenomenon was more imagined for Bromden, this time it is literal and noticeable by McMurphy, indicating his palpable impact on Bromden’s rejuvenation as a man. This is a pivotal moment for “the restoration of a part of Bromden’s psychological manhood long repressed... just by talking about the spectacular results Chief will see from Mack’s special “body-building course,” he helps Chief to experience his first erection in years... His potency regained, Chief does not need the broom’s dead wood to define him ever again” (Lupak 80). Bromden’s erection more than simply indicates a renewal of masculine rejuvenation, however, due to the explicit homoeroticism. Reminiscent of Sedgwick’s concept of the homosocial/homosexual continuum, McMurphy here, like any “man’s man,” is “separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men’” (*Between Men* 89). This humanizing and erotic exchange between the two men asserts the power that may come with queer desire: Bromden is again “big” enough to defy the Nurse’s orders and attend the fishing excursion, help throw the unsupervised party on the ward, and back up McMurphy while fighting the “black boys” threatening fellow patient George in the shower.

Bromden’s final interaction with McMurphy is the act of mercy killing after McMurphy is lobotomized. As Foucault notably argues, power is defined by resistance, so Bromden therefore had to kill McMurphy so he could no longer be a symbol of what happens if you try to

resist the power of the Combine. “This resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (*History of Sexuality* 95), however, so McMurphy’s body, as the bold resistance to Ratched’s power, would not survive or have any purpose outside the ward; therefore, he had to die there. Bromden describes the act through sexual and violent, though dissociative, terms:

The big, hard body had a tough grip on life. It fought a long time against having it taken away, flailing and thrashing around so much I finally had to lie full length on top of it and scissor the kicking legs with mine while I mashed the pillow into the face. I lay there on top of the body for what seemed like days. Until the thrashing stopped. Until it was still a while and had shuddered once and was still again. Then I rolled off. (Kesey 279)

McMurphy is now nothing but a body to Bromden, but one which still resembles the man he loves. In *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968), Leslie Fielder purports that Bromden “creeps into the bed of his friend for what turns out to be an embrace— for only in a caricature of the act of love can he manage to kill him” (Fielder 182). Through this erotic mercy killing, Bromden may accept the final “transfer of sexual energy” (Waxler 232) from McMurphy, a process that began with their first handshake but has now come full-circle, darkly mimicking a consummation of his love for McMurphy. Some critics have downplayed the homoeroticism of this scene— such as Barbara Lupak, who boldly argues that “there is no suggestion of homosexuality in this scene” and “Chief’s suffocation of Mack is a remarkably moving consummation of a different kind of affection, of a deep and abiding friendship based on mutual respect” (81) — but the violent meeting of their bodies, the energy and reciprocity of the moment, rather indicates a “a poignant blending of homoerotic love and death” (Waxler 232). Bromden is now strong enough to break out of the ward on his own by throwing the tub room

control panel out the window, an act McMurphy earlier tried to convince Bromden to do, but to no avail.

With Bromden free and McMurphy dead, the end of the novel does not romanticize the male hero but rather the resilience of those queered by the heteronorm. McMurphy's resistance could not beat the system, but Bromden's method of disidentification could continue to adapt and live within it without full assimilation. Madelon Heatherington, in her article of "The Sterile Fiction of the American West," similarly claims that Kesey is not necessarily glorifying McMurphy's brand of masculinity: "Granting McMurphy's powerful appeal, granting his vigor and necessary potency as an antidote to the entrenched sickness of the asylum, nevertheless, Kesey's central point is that balance rather than extremes produces health, and McMurphy is as unbalanced in one direction as Big Nurse is in the other" (Heatherington 651). Bromden learns from both sides of this battle through his desire and subversive silence, making him the ultimate winner in the quest to live within a web of power that will never stop controlling, surveilling, and normalizing. Bromden escapes carrying some of McMurphy's teachings with him, but unfortunately, he will have to continue finding ways to live within the Combine outside the asylum walls. Bromden knows that "The thing [McMurphy] was fighting, you couldn't whip it for good. All you could do was keep on whipping it, till you couldn't come out any more and somebody else had to take your place" (Kesey 273). Bromden has not indicated that *he* will be the one to take McMurphy's place; instead, he plans to return to his homeland and hide from the most institutional places of normalization.

As Mark Rifkin maintains, "attempts to cast native cultures as a perverse problem to be fixed or a liberating model to be emulated both rely on the erasure of indigenous political autonomy" (8). Bromden is not portrayed as a "perverse problem," but he is queer; as the star of

a countercultural text, however, that is celebrated, casting him as a “liberating model” who is able to (literally) break free from the systems of oppression. Through this depiction from a non-Native author, Bromden’s character echoes the lack of Native sovereignty that undergirds the colonial heteropatriarchal state. Bromden’s queer, Native narrative presence is nevertheless indispensable to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Considering the time of the novel’s publication, Bromden is given rare depth and richness for a Native character and even amounts to the hero of the narrative, even if he represents the silenced, pathologized, queered Native person to us today.

#### 4 CONCLUSION: *CUCKOO'S NEST* IN MEDIA AND CONTEMPORARY EXIGENCE

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest's* legacy lives most notably through the 1975 film directed by Milos Forman. The film, starring Jack Nicholson as McMurphy, Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched, and Muscogee-Creek actor Will Sampson as Bromden, won all five major Academy Awards that year (best picture, actor, actress, director, and screenplay), only the second film to ever do so in the history of the awards. The film is effective in its own right, humorous without detracting from the horrific realities of the ward under Ratched's control. Ken Kesey refused participating in the filmmaking process, however; he famously walked off the set one day, arguing "It's the Indian's story," enraged at the omission of Chief Bromden as the narrator (Fatzinger 129). In a letter to Kirk Douglas, who played the role of McMurphy in the Broadway production and whom Kesey wanted to star in the film, Kesey explained the significance of Bromden's point of view to the novel: "in the distorted world inside the Indian's mind these people [McMurphy, Ratched] are exalted into a kind of immortality. To do this you need fantasy. You need to jar the reader from his comfortable seat inside convention. You need to take the reader's mind places where it has never been before to convince him that this crazy Indian's world is his as well" (Tanner 23). Kesey believed that Bromden's narration was the only method of achieving such a "jarring" effect, so when Bromden's narration, and much of his character's agency, was erased from the film, the story's symbolic and thematic poignancy was lost. McMurphy becomes the obvious hero of the film, an erasure of Kesey's (albeit fantastical) employment of a queered Native narrator. As Kesey declares in a 1989 interview with Terry Gross for *NPR's* "Fresh Air", "without the character of that Indian, the book is a melodrama.

You know, it's a straight battle between McMurphy and the Big Nurse but that Indian's consciousness to filter that through, that makes it exceptional."

*Reel Injun* (2009), a documentary tracing the history of Native representation in film, applauds Sampson's performance of Bromden. Critic Jesse Winte acknowledges the stereotype of Bromden's character at the film's outset, but argues that Sampson effectively reclaims the stereotypes of the character and gives Bromden an admirable sense of dignity. Actor Wes Studi similarly agrees that Sampson takes Bromden's character to a new level of humanity, making him into an ultimate symbol for freedom in America, which arguably remains true to his effect in the novel. When Bromden is on the screen, it is hard to ignore his silent dignity for which Winte celebrates him, but the problem lies in his limited appearance and attention in the film. When compared to the depth of character in the novel, Bromden as Kesey's vision of a jarring narrator does not translate to the film. Bromden is stricken from numerous significant scenes, such as the powerful fishing trip scene (which still happens in the film, only with much less symbolic weight), and his rich backstory is wholly eliminated. Amy Fatzinger, in her article connecting the history of Celilo Falls and Bromden's backstory, argues that the film "ignores Bromden's identity insofar as it is connected to Celilo, thereby missing a main theme in the novel and further silencing not only Bromden as a character but a critical moment in history for Native communities in the Celilo area" (118). Bromden's character could have been revolutionary at the time, and although Will Sampson's performance "did make some small strides toward delineating the Native voice in American cinema at the time," his character remained a silent sidekick figure whose liberation at the end consequently "may be interpreted as an act of vanishing since viewers have no way of knowing he is headed home" (Fatzinger 129-30). Fatzinger cites Kesey's purpose of Bromden's narration, to "regain control of reality so it's

no longer presented by public relations people of funneled through a Coca-Cola bottle,” but the film’s minimization of Bromden’s character does exactly what Kesey wanted to avoid: silencing a Native voice through a commercialized and mainstream point of view (Fatzinger 123). The loss of Bromden as narrator ironically parallels Bromden’s voicelessness due to the Combine, proving that the silencing of minoritized voices is not unique to Kesey’s work of fiction.

The novel, as previously argued, suggests that all forms of abnormality, from racial identity to sexual orientation to mental illness, are surveilled, pathologized, and normalized by power mechanisms, making the Combine a formidable foe for most American readers. Nearly all queer elements of the novel are erased in the film adaptation, however, removing a key aspect of the struggle between trapped and free that lies at the heart of Kesey’s text. All instances of homoeroticism between Bromden and McMurphy are missing in the film, trivializing their bond and further erasing Bromden’s queer identity. Returning to Deloria’s assertion in *Morgensen*, white Americans often view Native people as inherently rebellious and resistant to settler society, and Bromden’s character so aptly celebrates rebellion with the novel’s audience. Kesey’s non-Native imagining of a Native character certainly relies on cultural appropriation, as Hippie culture often did in the 1960s (*Reel Injun*), but when compounded with the loss of first-person narration, much of Bromden’s power is erased, especially in terms of his queerness. Without Bromden’s narration centering the novel, the lack of his queered status and nonnormative narration detract from the novel’s anti-establishment poignancy. It is hard to imagine the film reaching the same levels of critical success if Bromden’s queer narration was maintained; though the film made significant strides for Native representation in film and the destigmatization of mental illnesses, it fell short of highlighting a queer voice and experience.



Similar to Bromden's character, Harding appears in the film but is both minimized and warped. In his article analyzing the Forman film, Thomas Slater argues that "using the camera as narrator also accounts partially for Forman's creation of Dale Harding as a more negative character than he is in the book" (132). Slater continues, "Forman makes him a negative figure because he challenges McMurphy for power... He is weak because he is more committed to holding empty power than to resolving his personal problems and becoming a real leader" (131). Without any of his insightful speeches, the vicious "pecking parties" forcing a confession of his sexuality, or his wife's visit verifying his pressures inside and outside the ward, Harding is flattened into character that does little to advance Kesey's argument. In the film adaptation, Harding even makes a joke to the other patients about him being queer, acknowledging and quickly dismissing that critical aspect of his character to the text. Harding's "straightening" in the film version classically exemplifies Hollywood's tendency to value white hetero males. Slater argues that the "film does by no means condemn homosexuals" because there are other characters, such as Scanlon, Sefelt, and Frederickson, who are portrayed as queer in the film, and McMurphy has no problem with them; "Harding's offensiveness, therefore, is clearly because of his desire for power, and in this respect, he is no different from either Nurse Ratched or McMurphy" (Slater 132). Though there is little in the novel to support the other characters' queerness in the film (which is minimal at best), the fact that Harding is depicted as a version of a power-hungry villain with no character arc reinforces the societal demonization of those deemed abnormal.

The legacy of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* continues to reemerge in popular culture, most recently in ABC's *Once Upon a Time* and Netflix's *Ratched*. Her character has become an iconic symbol in popular culture, and she is oddly the only character in *Once Upon a*

*Time* whose origin is not from a fairy tale or nursery rhyme, but rather a work of contemporary literature. More notably, in 2020, Ryan Murphy created *Ratched*, a Netflix series delving into the origin story of the infamous Nurse Ratched. Though it did not garner very positive reviews, the series interestingly explores Nurse Ratched as a queer woman manipulating her way to the top in the days before her tenure at the *Cuckoo's Nest* asylum. Linda Holmes's review for *NPR* critiques the show's attempt at a humanizing backstory for Mildred Ratched:

The things that are meant to unlock Mildred's psyche — that she's a lesbian, that she suffered horrible childhood trauma, that she lost her parents very young — are baubles that dot the characterization, but none feel like insights into her behavior. It goes without saying that being a closeted lesbian doesn't cause violence or cruelty, and Murphy surely doesn't mean to suggest it does. But when you set out to give a backstory to a heartless character and this is so much a part of it, it's awfully easy to be misunderstood. Mildred's gentle romance with Gwendolyn (Cynthia Nixon) is likely intended as a tragic grace note, given that we know where all of this is headed and what Mildred's future holds. But these are potent tropes with which to play.

Her lesbian romance is significant to queer representation in film and television, but as Holmes notes, it may be interpreted as too closely tied to her character flaws. Though Holmes makes a compelling point, it is worthwhile to consider *Ratched*'s character in a similar position to that of Harding or Bromden; perhaps *Ratched*, like those men who were identified as “abnormal,” had to find a way to survive in a system that was consistently pressuring and straightening. *Ratched* displays disturbing moments of early psychiatry's medicalization of queerness: mandated lobotomies, scalding “hydrotherapy”, and forced confessions of sexuality. Due to witnessing the horrors, *Ratched* accepts a “if you can't beat them, join them” mentality, shaping her into the

controlling Nurse of the novel. Rather than internalizing the normalization and accepting the label of having a disorder, she joins the rankings and projects her critiques onto others, giving her power in a system that would otherwise make her powerless.

The novel *Cuckoo's Nest* reinforces the point that Nurse Ratched is merely one cog in the Combine machine, only one factor that works to normalize men in this one ward, but as Bromden (and Foucault's similar theorizing) purports, the same power is functioning everywhere throughout society. In "The Big Nurse as Ratchet: Sexism in Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest*," Elizabeth McMahan critiques the novel's focus on controlling women and questions, "why is the Big Nurse so eager to emasculate the men in her charge? Why does *she* serve as a dedicated tool of the Combine?" (146). McMahan criticizes Kesey for not considering these elements when writing the novel and points to the larger issue that must be explored: what does Nurse Ratched represent in the novel's larger argument about power and control in society? As an answer to these hypotheticals, McMahan asserts, "women are not likely at this point to give up bossing their men around when this remains their only means of achieving a semblance of importance in society" (McMahan 148). Though McMahan's 1975 essay is a bit outdated, the underlying assertion continues to be relevant, and it is perhaps this line of thought that prompted the need for a more humanizing backstory of a key icon of institutional emasculation in American popular culture. In his forward to the 2007 edition of *Cuckoo's Nest*, Chuck Palahniuk identifies the novel as part of a larger literary tradition, a pattern of characters who either rebel, conform, or escape to freedom. He echoes McMahan in asserting that "[i]f the book does anything wrong, it is to fail to show how Big Nurse suffers and must continue to suffer as the undead Billy Bibbit, always a grown child, following directions and staying clean, but with fewer and fewer rewards. The person trapped and forced to always deny every alternative freedom, doomed to living the

limited, careful life perfected by a five-year-old girl” (xii). Palahniuk’s proposed pattern and the series *Ratched* both portray why *Cuckoo’s Nest* remains relevant; viewers and readers alike are able to empathize with the characters’ plights of the pathologization of abnormality and the desire to escape that same sense of entrapment fundamental to any capitalist Western society.

Kesey’s novel is clearly a relic of the 1960s, fraught with sexist caricatures, racist stereotypes, and cultural appropriation, but *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* nevertheless anticipated many of the most significant conceptualizations of power and sexuality of the following three decades. Much of what Kesey purported regarding power and control is especially relevant today in a world dominated by social media and surveillance that create unimaginable levels of normalization. Michael Meloy sees *Cuckoo’s Nest* as “a story replete with issues of particular immediacy in contemporary America: heightened surveillance, the corruption of administration, the degradation of the individual, and a fundamental terror of perceived feminization” (4). Meloy’s writing from 2009 rings even more true in 2021 as we transition out of the Trump administration that celebrated a “macho-man” mentality and belittlement of those who deviated from the heteronorm. At the time of writing this, shifting technologies of power are on full display as the U.S. Congress debates the Equality Act, a bill to federally prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The necessity of such a bill, and its improbable passing through the Senate due to allegiant voting by party lines, proves that the fight for LGBTQ rights is far from over, and the mechanisms of discipline and normalization will continue to shift to accommodate heteropatriarchal power. Although the ending of *Cuckoo’s Nest* does not necessarily inspire hope that “the system” can be beaten by everyone, queer critique can provide a necessary perspective of the issue of pathologizing abnormality that lies at the heart of Kesey’s text.

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