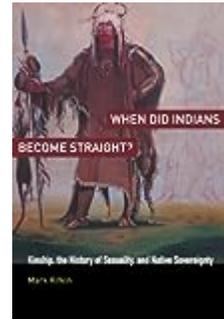


**Mark Rifkin.** *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. viii + 436 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-975545-5; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-975546-2.



**Reviewed by** Garrett Nichols (Texas A&M University)

**Published on** H-Histsex (February, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

## Translating Sexuality and the Question of Kinship

The question in the title of Mark Rifkin's *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* is deceptively complex. The question rests on a number of assumptions that Rifkin proceeds to identify, unpack, and dismantle by the end of the book. For example, in order to even ask this question, one would have to assume that Indians are straight, that they became so at some perceptible point in history, and that, perhaps most importantly, Indians are, and have always been, a coherent and identifiable race of people. To acknowledge and critique even one of these assumptions would be a significant undertaking, and it is to Rifkin's credit that he not only tackles them all but shows how each of these assumptions is complicit in supporting the others.

Making significant contributions to critical studies of race, sexuality, and citizenship, Rifkin launches several unsettling assertions in *When Did Indians Become Straight?* I say "unsettling" because, if taken seriously, Rifkin's claims open up several avenues through which to destabilize the fundamental logics of settler culture in

the United States. Central to Rifkin's analysis is his claim that settler nationalism relies on the nuclear homemaking and conjugal domesticity of heteronormativity to establish a recognized relationship between the citizen and the settler state. Non-settler forms of socialization and conjugality are translated by the settler state into concepts that remove their implicit threat to settler life and governance. So, for example, distinct native cultures are grouped into together as a race, called "Indians," a move that allows the United States to deal with them not as political entities but as a group of people available for assimilation into the parameters of settler citizenship.

One means by which this accomplished is through the interpellation of native sociality and governance practices as *kinship*. The descriptive application of kinship as it pertained to native peoples, Rifkin argues, was an attempt to force indigenous social and sexual relations into the rubric of "proper" settler domesticity. Rifkin writes, "The rhetoric of kinship functions as a matrix of translation in which social formations that do not fit a liberal framework are recast as deviations from heteronor-

native homemakingâ (p. 12).

This translation of native sociality into kinship works hand-in-hand with the U.S. government's decision to recognize the sovereignty of native nations. Rifkin argues that *sovereignty* is less a descriptor of the inherent quality of native groups as it is a settler designation by the U.S. government, who can choose to grant or withhold this designation depending on how successfully native peoples reflect what the U.S. considers nationality. Recognition of sovereignty by the United States carries with it what Rifkin terms the "bribe of straightness," a tactic by which native communities defend indigenous socialization, government, and kinship practices in ways that are acceptable to settler cultures, and involves denying or hiding forms of sexuality and sexual practices considered deviant by settler standards (p. 23). Despite the "translational" qualities of kinship and sovereignty, Rifkin makes explicitly clear that these are critically important concepts for native thinkers and leaders who must engage settler discourses to protect indigenous self-interests. Terms like *kinship* and *sovereignty* take on meaning specific to native histories and experiences that activists employ in the face of settler encroachment.

Rifkin traces the effects of this "bribe of straightness" through each of six chapters, frequently setting into juxtaposition native and settler depictions of native homemaking and sexualities. Rifkin largely focuses his analysis on literary representations of native sexuality and sociality, including James Seaver's biographical *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (1824), James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Zitkala-Å's *American Indian Stories* (1921), Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), and Craig Womack's *Drowning in Fire* (2001), among others. The readings Rifkin conducts of these texts are insightfully drawn, weaving in several histories, native and non-native, and straight and queer alike.

Though literary analysis is the vessel through which Rifkin launches his argument, the strength of *When Did Indians Become Straight?* is its ability to situate these texts decisively within the competing discourses of native sexuality that flow through and around them. For example, Rifkin reads Ella Deloria's depictions of kinship and the politics of interdependence in *Speaking of Indians* (1944) and *Waterlily* (1988) through the lens of regulatory writing related to the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. His analysis opens up a counter-hegemonic drive within Deloria's novels, showing how her writing reveals the heteronormative impulse of settler attempts to frame native cultures, legally and geopolitically.

*When Did Indians Become Straight?* is a complicated book, its analysis spanning close to two hundred years, multiple native and non-native cultures, and several genres of writing. Rifkin's arguments can be frustratingly dense at times, and the reader will find that he frequently restates significant claims more than once in an attempt to clarify (or drive home) his conclusions. But Rifkin might be forgiven for such opacity when one considers that the power of sexual/settler discourses he unpacks in this book relies on their invisibility. Rifkin is quite good at qualifying his claims, not to avoid making strong points but to forestall the possible (and actual) appropriations of these ideas in the service of settler hegemony. Rifkin's work should be read in conjunction with another recently published book on the intersections of native and settler sexualities: Scott Lauria Morgensen's *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (2011), which argues against the colonization of indigenous sexual and kinship practices by non-native queer rights activists. Together, Rifkin and Morgensen reveal how the perpetuation of the settler state requires the sexual colonization of Native Americans, regardless of the sexual orientation of the individual settler.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

**Citation:** Garrett Nichols. Review of Rifkin, Mark, *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36812>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.