

Why the 90s Were so Sexy:
*locating sexuality, pleasure and desire in work produced by Indigenous women identified
artists during the 1990s and early 2000s in Canada*

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A major research paper submitted to OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts in
Contemporary Art, Design, and New Media Art Histories

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

Abstract

This major research paper explores the surge of sexually thematic artworks produced during the 1990s and early 2000s by Indigenous women-identified artists in Canada, and the political and cultural events that possibly informed them. The artworks explored contribute to the discourse of Indigenous sovereignty as they actively work to reclaim Indigenous women's identities from settler-colonial representations and pop culture stereotypes. This major research paper posits that Indigenous representations and/or assertions of sexual pleasure and desire inherently enacts sovereignty as it functions to push back against a colonial history that has distorted and vilified Indigenous sexuality and pleasure seeking.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my primary advisor, Ryan Rice, whose labour and presence in the history of Indigenous curation should not go unmentioned. I am grateful for his guidance, mentorship, and critical perspectives that pushed me to think harder and write better.

Thank you to my secondary advisor, Gabby Moser, who was consistently thoughtful, critical, and immensely helpful in assisting me locating my voice throughout this writing process.

I am thankful to OCAD University and the Dean's Scholarship that funded my studies and made it possible to write this major research paper. Thank you to the artists discussed in this paper whose creative genius I am forever indebted to.

Many people have supported me during the research and writing process. Thank you to my family, partner, and friends for their support over these two years, as well as my impressive cohort in CADN and CCP. Lastly, thank you Adrienne Huard, Erin Szikora, Cierra Frances and Laura Grier. I am so grateful for your support, love, and kinship.

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Introduction: locating Indigenous sexual pleasure and desire

To ignore sex and embodied pleasure is to ignore one of our greatest resources. It is to deny us one of our most precious gifts. Every orgasm can be an act of decolonization.

-Daniel Heath Justice, quoted in "Introduction: Writing in the Present," in *Sovereign Erotics* (2011)

Within the Canadian art climate there is what seems to be a surge in contemporary Indigenous art that addresses themes of sexuality, sexual pleasure and desire. Indigenous artists are depicting what *making native love* looks like, illustrating pleasure and desire in all the forms they may take.¹ Established artists such as Shuvina Ashoona, Kent Monkman, George Littlechild and Adrian Stimson have been celebrated for their notable depictions of Indigenous sexuality and queer sexual pleasure, respectively, while emerging artists such as Quill Christie-Peters, Chief Lady Bird, Kablusiak and Dayna Danger have brought Indigenous female and two-spirit sexuality,² masturbation, and kink into their work. In a social media post, Chief Lady Bird stated on Instagram that, "My sexuality is essential to my well-being as an Indigenous woman because it connects me to my body. In a fractured Western world wherein colonization has unbodied Indigenous folx, reclaiming one's sexuality is a natural process to reclaim our connection to our bodies, culture, language and

¹ Throughout this major research paper, I define pleasure as the physical or emotional satisfaction gained through sexual or intimate acts; or the giving of sexual enjoyment or satisfaction to someone through sexual or intimate acts. I understand desire, on the other hand, as strong sexual feelings, urges or appetites.

² Two-spirit identity will be discussed further and defined in chapter four, "artistic representations of queer NDN pleasure and desire."

land.”³ Chief Lady Bird’s post highlights the importance of addressing an Indigenous specific sexuality that cannot be understood through a colonial lens.

This major research paper analyzes art produced by Indigenous women artists during the 1990s and early 2000s who engaged with themes of pleasure and desire and argues that the representation of sexualities within their artworks enacts sovereignty and self-determination. The political climate of the 1980s and 90s saw Indigenous political resistance movements such as the Oka Crisis and Indigenous responses to the Columbus Quincentennial, Canada’s 125th anniversary and Montreal’s 350th, as well as towards Bill C-31’s amendment to the *Indian Act*, accompanied by the emergence of an specific Indigenous feminist theory. These political events, policy changes and shifts in theory allowed for a swell of pleasure driven artwork and a reclamation of sexuality by Indigenous women artists that located the Indigenous body as a site of both love and lust that exists separate from colonial fetishization and sexual oppression.

Artworks depicting pleasure, the desire to attain pleasure and the act of seeking out such pleasure have been critically praised throughout the canon of Western art history. There is no shortage of artwork from around the world that clearly indicates that people are having sex and, more importantly, enjoying it, with sexual and erotic scenes drawn on the sides of illuminated manuscripts, painted onto terracotta pots, carved into marble and printed with woodblock. The agency given to sexual and sensual works would, and should, leave any viewer with the understanding that pleasure and desire are culturally relevant and important to all communities and their art makers. However, if one were to attempt to locate a history of pleasure and desire within historical Indigenous art or visual and

³ Chief Lady Bird (@ChiefLadyBird), Instagram Photo, September 9th, 2019.

material culture in North America, they would find a significant void. Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson's short essay "Making Native Love" accompanying the 1995 exhibition *Native Love* by the First Nations artist collective Nation to Nation argues, "If we were to trust popular and scholarly representations of Native People we would have to conclude that they, unlike any other peoples in the world, are without love."⁴ *Native Love* pioneered to counter the post-Oka pervasive negative stereotypes of Indigenous people, depicted as loving instead of violent, and exhibiting works that addressed kinship, kink and sexuality. *Native Love* has since been described as an early articulation of Indigenous resurgence enacted through sex, love and care.⁵

Due to the extraordinary steps formally instituted by the colonizers of Turtle Island and then continued by the Canadian government, Indigenous peoples have had to fight back against imposing foreign cultures and genocide that have sought to remove their loving nature, their sexual pleasures and their desire to experience them. In *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (2005), scholar Andrea Smith examines and documents the connections between different forms of violence. By radically rethinking the historical scope of colonial violence perpetrated against Indigenous women, Smith puts into perspective the rapid increase of sexual violence as a normalized feature of settler patriarchy that has historically become inseparable from violence against Indigenous women. Her research supports the correlation presented by the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women+ (MMIW+) investigation in groups targeted as victims of sexual violence, as we see with Indigenous women in Canada, indicates their personhood and

⁴ Audra Simpson, "Making Native Love," *Nation to Nation*, (1995).

⁵ Lindsay Nixon, "Nation to Nation," *Canadian Art*, July 10, 2017.

their identities as pleasure- or desire-seekers are then pitted against racist stereotypes and indoctrinated beliefs that fit a colonial paradigm of what Indigenous people are and what they are not.⁶ Simpson's essay supports the research done by Smith, arguing that for Indigenous people, "Rarely however, are they in love (the tragedy of Pocahontas aside), rarely are they contemplating love, acting out of love or simply being, as they are—their Native selves in love or out of love, in the funk out of the funk. How can this be?"⁷ If Indigenous people are believed to be unable to experience love or pleasure then they will always be considered lesser than their loved-up European-settler counterparts who have no shortage of portrayals of sexual pleasure or desire that one may turn to as evidence of a Western loving nature.

Despite the void of a historical record of Indigenous art representing sexual desire and intimacy,⁸ Indigenous artists over the past 60 years have been addressing this lack by presenting Indigenous sexuality, pleasure and desire in their artworks. In works by influential Indigenous artists such as Robert Markle, Daphne Odjig and Norval Morrisseau, we can see early contemporary Indigenous artists depict themes of pleasure, sex and intimacy to the Canadian art world while groups such as the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporation, better known as the Indian Group of Seven, and the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) made waves for Indigenous self-representation in the 1970s and 80s. It was in the 1990s that a specific change in artistic

⁶ Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit, known under the acronym MMIW+, is discussed further in chapter 5, "Northern erotic representations."

⁷ Audra Simpson, "Making Native Love," *Nation to Nation*, (1995).

⁸ This is not to suggest Indigenous communities were not previously making or creating sexually themed art, rather that the mass destruction of Indigenous material and visual culture as well as Canadian laws prohibiting the creation of visual and material culture (for example the Potlatch ban which lasted from 1885 to 1951) over the past 500 years of Canadian colonization has led to this void in Indigenous art history.

agency and Indigenous self-determination took place, encouraging sexuality and the right to express sexuality more forcefully into the conversation of Indigenous sovereignty. Federal and provincial policy changes and political events of the 1980s and 1990s left Indigenous Nations across Canada in new positions to re-determine and assert their treaty rights and fight for their sovereignty at a national scale.⁹ Subscribing to Hawai’ian scholar and political scientist Haunani-Kay Trask’s definition of decolonization as “a collective resistance to colonialism including cultural assertions, efforts towards self-determination, and armed struggle,”¹⁰ and invoking Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s definition of colonialism, as “a choice that Canadians make every day. It is a choice to maintain and uphold a system that is based on the hyperexploitation of the land and of Indigenous peoples,”¹¹ Indigenous sovereignty can be understood as the fight for self-governance, self-determination and agency against an oppressive colonial structure.¹² Considering these definitions, this major research paper posits that if the representations of Indigenous pleasure and desire have been repressed through a colonial agenda of assimilation, and in turn misrepresented by oppressive manufactured

⁹ The Mohawk Resistance or Oka Crisis, The Columbus Quincentennial, Canada’s 125th, and Montreal’s 350th are all mentioned or discussed further in Chapter 3, “Exhibitions and sexy self-determination.” Each of these events lead to significant exhibitions or artworks that focused on Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty, responding to colonial culture and celebrations that sought to determine for and diminish Indigenous communities. The alteration to the *Indian Act*, known as Bill C-31, in 1985 is discussed further in Chapter 2, “Indigenous art, feminism and policy change.”

¹⁰ Haunani-Kay Trask, “Typology on Racism and Imperialism,” in *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 251.

¹¹ Leanne Simpson, “Liberated peoples, liberated lands,” in *Buffalo shout, salmon cry: Conversations on creation, land justice, and life together* (Windsor: Herald Press, 2013), 53.

¹² Audra Simpson theorizes that the Indigenous experience of simply existing within colonial settings is tumultuous as the Indigenous peoples of North America are forever struggling for “sovereignty within sovereignty” (10), and that true sovereignty and agency can only come about through the decolonization and destruction of colonial structures as “Canada can only come into political being because of Indigenous dispossession.” Audra Simpson, “Indigenous Interruptions: Mohawk Nationhood, Citizenship, and the State,” in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 10-12.

stereotypes, then the action of reclaiming pleasure and desire must be acknowledged within art historical and political contexts as a method of enacting sovereignty and agency and a feat of self-determination by Indigenous peoples.

To quote Cree-Métis-Saulteaux researcher, curator and Indigenous Editor-at-Large for *Canadian Art*, Lindsay Nixon, in their 2017 article “Making Space in Indigenous Art for Bull Dykes and Gender Weirdos”, “Indigenous cisgender women artists of the 1980s and early ’90s have provided lineages of love and embodied womanism that Indigenous artists of today are undoubtedly indebted to in their own ventures into the material.”¹³ Nixon cites artists such as Rebecca Belmore, Napachie Pootoogook, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Shelley Niro. The work of Niro alongside artists Faye HeavyShield, Lori Blondeau, Annie Pootoogook, Thirza Cuthand and Rosalie Favell, as well as collaborators Rose Spahan and Jeanette Armstrong, who created artwork in the 1990s and into the 2000s is explored in this paper. I analyze their efforts towards creating artistic means of sexual self-representation that, as Nixon writes, “drew from their bodies, using flesh, bone and blood.”¹⁴ These artists created new artworks that shifted settler perspectives on Indigenous women’s agency, sexuality and self-determination.

One method of colonialism is the act of removing the self from the body, forcing Indigenous peoples to un-know themselves and their pleasures. The aforementioned artists— Blondeau, Pootoogook, Favell, Cuthand, HeavyShield, Spahan, Armstrong and Niro— locate their body and what their body desires, a radical act that has served Indigenous artists contemporarily. The legacy of the artworks created by these women

¹³ Lindsay Nixon, “Making Space in Indigenous Art for Bull Dykes and Gender Weirdos,” *Canadian Art*, April 20, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

cannot be understated as contemporary emerging and established Indigenous artists alike have continued the conversations started by these highlighted artists' works. As described by emerging Anishinaabe artist Quill Christie-Peters,

While Indigenous scholars have long discussed, theorized, and emphasized the practice of returning to the land or presencing our bodies on our homelands, less is said about the practices that create intimacy between the self and the body. Self-pleasure is a practice that helps me land in a body that has often felt so far away from me.¹⁵

In this way, representations of pleasure—whether self-pleasure or shared—attest to Indigenous people as sovereign to the land and to themselves, connected to traditional understanding of body agency and also as contemporary people with sexual urges and desires that exist outside of a fetishized frame.

¹⁵ Quill Christie-Peters, "Kwe becomes the moon, touches herself so she can feel full again," *GUTS Magazine*, March 26, 2018. <http://gutsmagazine.ca/kwe-becomes-the-moon/>

Chapter One: What we talk about when we talk about Indigenous sexual desire and pleasure

Anishinaabe author Drew Hayden Taylor's collection of essays exploring Indigenous sex and sexuality, *Me Sexy* (2008), begins with the assertion that, "It has been said that how a peoples make love or expresses love says more about who they are than all their political, social and economic writing."¹⁶ In this way, Hayden Taylor locates sex and sexuality as culturally defining, but what if a people's traditional ways of knowing and understanding sexualities had been, more or less, severed from them? This chapter assesses the historical context of settler colonialism that has made Indigenous sexuality un-representable in Canada and argues that Indigenous representations of sexuality act as a reclamation of body agency and speaks to a pre-colonial understandings of sex and sexuality. In particular, this chapter looks at artwork by Daphne Odjig to examine early contemporary demonstrations of Indigenous sexually thematic artwork that changed the landscape of Indigenous art in Canada. It contributes to my broader thesis by locating Indigenous self-determined sexual representations in art as acts of resilience, of survivance, of agency, dignity and of sovereignty. It is resilient because it stands against a history of colonial forces that have tried to stop Indigenous peoples from loving and expressing that love through consensual sex acts. It is an act of survivance because, by definition, survivance is the vitality of surviving and pushing away from victimization, and what is more vital to survival than sharing our bodies and possibly creating new loving generations.¹⁷ It is an act

¹⁶ Drew Hayden Taylor, "Introduction," in *Me Sexy* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008), 1.

¹⁷ Chippewa theorist Gerald Vizenor coined the term 'survivance' in his text, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* to mean "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere

of agency and the human condition as it demands that one act upon their desires and pleasures. It is an act of dignity as it enforces an inherent right over one's own body and personhood; and it is an act of sovereignty as it connects back to traditional Indigenous knowledges and ways of being.

Indigenous sexualities, pleasures and desires have been purposefully oppressed and suppressed since settler/European contact in both Canada and the United States, where colonizers systemically targeted Indigenous sexual practices through efforts that included religious conversion and violence. These early, yet consistent through time, strategies functioned as a means to suppress population numbers by introducing Christian morality alongside biopolitical measures that left Indigenous communities in unsafe or unhealthy locations, leading to a decrease in birth rates.¹⁸ In Canada, the intent to decimate Indigenous populations has continued since confederation through procedures such as forced and coerced sterilization of Indigenous women, with at least one verified case occurring as recently as 2017 in Saskatchewan.¹⁹ In *Native American art and culture and the New York Avant-garde, 1910-1950* (1995), scholar W. Jackson Rushing addresses the lasting colonial effects of settler manufactured Indigenous stereotypes and how they have been used to attack Indigenous sexuality:

...as a vehicle for cultural criticism, and in particular, the dichotomous trope of the good/bad Indian has been ubiquitous in the Columbian period. The bad Indian-

reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry." Gerald Vizenor, "Preface," in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), vii.

¹⁸ Cathy MacDonald, Audrey Steenbeek, "The Impact of Colonization and Western Assimilation on Health and Wellbeing of Canadian Aboriginal People," *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 10 no 1, (2015): 36.

¹⁹ The Current, "Indigenous women kept from seeing their newborn babies until agreeing to sterilization, says lawyer," *CBC*, November 13, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-november-13-2018-1.4902679/indigenous-women-kept-from-seeing-their-newborn-babies-until-agreeing-to-sterilization-says-lawyer-1.4902693>

naked, treacherous, violent, unlearned, sexually licentious, communistic, lazy, filthy, and godless—represented a negative standard against which the Euro-American peoples could judge themselves. Viewed in retrospect, the results of such a comparison naturally appear predictable and self-serving because they reinforced the notion of Euro-Americans as superior beings. Especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such a comparison provided the justification necessary for committing genocide against native cultures and for stealing their lands.²⁰

The lasting effects of colonization and Western moralizing have demonized Indigenous sexuality and pleasure seeking. Settler-Christian dominance has left a legacy of trauma in need of healing and whole cultures of people whose loving natures exist without representation.

A significant aspect of Canada's ongoing colonial history is the reality of sexual violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples which must be discussed as part of the country's relationship with Indigenous communities, as well as part of the legacy of the residential school system—a structure that attempted to remove one's Indigeneity from the thousands of Indigenous children who were forced to attend these schools.²¹ According to Health Canada, the lifetime effects of Residential School attendance for survivors also lead to higher rates of infant mortality and poor birth outcomes.²² A consequence of the architecture of residential schools was the removal of the human spirit, containing

²⁰ W. Jackson Rushing, "The Idea of The Indian/Collecting Native America," in *Native American art and culture and the New York avant-garde, 1910-1950*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 5.

²¹ Canada's first church-run Residential Schools opened in 1828. The system became a government structure officially in 1883 with Indian Affairs beginning to open large schools across the country, reaching the system's peak of 80 schools and more than 17,000 enrolled students across Canada in 1930. Over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis students passed through the system with an unknowable death toll. It is assumed that over 6,000 children passed away at the schools, though hundreds more never returned home. Most of these deaths are undocumented. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Introduction," in *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 3-4.

²² Health Canada, *A Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada for the Year 2000* (Ottawa: First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, 2005), 33-36.

magnitudes of loving and pleasure seeking, through religious indoctrination and forced acts of sexual violence, replacing these inherent loving characteristics with repressive Christian attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Cree curator Morgan Wood wrote in the catalogue for the 1999 exhibition *Exposed* on the Indigenous experiences of sexual pleasure and the erotic, "People who had escaped residential school saw the erotic as part of life; we are born, we die, and in between we have some erotic moments, some are funny, some are good for our spirit."²³ Wood emphasizes here how Indigenous communities understood sex as a natural and important part of life that we can draw pleasure and purpose from, outside of procreation. Further, Inuk actress and writer Makka Kliest explains that before colonization, "Sex was not just connected to our genitals or just an act of procreation; it was a necessity to our sanity."²⁴ Kliest grounds Inuit sexuality and the enjoyment of sex as a vital element for their traditional life, speaking back to a time with fewer taboos around bodily functions and sex, due to the dangers of degeneration for communities who lived in small settlements where the mixing of genetics was vital to survival.

In contrast to a Eurocentric history of misconstrued narratives and misinterpretations, art by Indigenous peoples that examines the themes of a focused pleasure and desire is tasked with the labour of writing new histories. In 1974 the publication *Tales from the Smokehouse* introduced Canada to the more sensuous side of Indigeneity through a collection of 'personal experiences' interpreted or translated by Dr. Herbert Schwarz. *Tales from the Smokehouse* are all interpretations by Schwarz, stories that were shared with him or interactions he witnessed that he crafted for a Euro-Canadian

²³ Morgan Wood, "Foreword," in *Exposed: Aesthetics of Aboriginal Erotic Art*, Exhibition Catalogue (Regina: Merit Printing, 1999), 12.

²⁴ Makka Kliest, "Pre-Christian Inuit Sexuality," in *Me Sexy* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008), 17.

audience to enjoy. Schwarz commissioned Odawa-Potawatomi artist, and only woman member of the Indian Group of Seven, Daphne Odjig to illustrate the collection (fig. 1). Odjig's artworks reassigns an Indigenous perspective, depicting the climax of each story with often sexually explicit renderings accompanying the texts. This was a risky undertaking by Odjig, who was commissioned to represent sexual intimacy at a time where the taboos around depicting sex and sexuality were heightened and risked being met with negative responses from those who did not consider the work morally appropriate or authentically Indigenous.²⁵ In a 2008 interview, Odjig addressed how audiences responded to her erotic illustrations saying that, "People were shocked at the time, although things have changed now. The native community was the least shocked of all, though. We were brought up as children to accept these things. Sexual matters were a part of life."²⁶ Odjig's artwork located Indigenous peoples, their sex, and sexuality as aspects of human expression that are integrated into everyday life.

Odjig's images have gone on to be celebrated for their depictions of Indigenous sex and intimacy—inspiring many more Indigenous women artists to represent their sexuality, sensuality and pleasure in their artworks, bringing to light histories and voices that are too rarely given the audience or art historical care they deserve.

²⁵ When the illustrations were exhibited at the Winnipeg Art Gallery the exhibition "was censored and closed down by the police." Jann L. M. Bailey, "Firebrand Artist Daphne Odjig," *Horizons*, Spring, 2011, 27.

²⁶ Peter Goddard, "Family feeling," *Toronto Star*, March 15, 2008.
https://www.thestar.com/opinion/columnists/2008/03/15/family_feeling.html

Chapter Two: Indigenous art, feminism and policy change

Since its formation Indigenous feminism has had and continues to hold a complex position within the history of Indigenous women's activism and scholarship due to feminism's relationship to white supremacy and colonialism. In "Moving Beyond the Feminism Versus Nationalism Dichotomy: An Anti-Colonial Feminist Perspective on Aboriginal Liberation Struggles" (2000), Oneida author Lina Sunseri states that in response to the oppressively racist, sexist and patriarchal colonial society Indigenous women have had to live within for centuries, many came together to create what is considered an Indigenous feminism, a social structure that fights to reaffirm and restore the ability for Indigenous women to govern themselves.²⁷ Sunseri emphasizes the connection between Indigenous bodies and the nuances of land, addressing the historical mistreatment of recognised Indigenous land and how this manifests in Indigenous loss of political and body agency. As described by scholar Julia Emberley, many Indigenous women resisted alignment with "the colonial assumptions in academic feminist theory," claiming that the feminism of the 1980s and what came before it "failed to consider what Aboriginal women said about their particular concerns within the movement."²⁸ As argued further by Sto:lo poet and author Lee Maracle, "Until white women can come to us on our own terms we ought to leave the door closed. Do we really want to be part of a movement that sees the

²⁷ Lina Sunseri, "Moving Beyond the Feminism Versus Nationalism Dichotomy," *Canadian Woman Studies* 20, no 2 (2000): 144.

²⁸ Julia Emberley, "Aboriginal Women's Writing," in *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), 100.

majority as the periphery and the minority as the centre?"²⁹ Indigenous feminist theory addresses the significant but often overlooked reality that the settler colonial nation-state and settler colonialism, as a structure, has been and continues to be a gendered system of oppression: "Native feminist theories offer *new* and reclaimed ways of thinking through not only how settler colonialism has impacted Indigenous and settler communities, but also how feminist theories can imagine and realize different modes of nationalism and alliances in the future."³⁰ Women-identified artists have responded and engaged with feminist theory since its' first wave, producing works that pushes back against patriarchal expectations of femininity and broadening the expectations of what art produced by women can look like. This chapter examines how Indigenous artists mobilized Indigenous feminist theory from this period to make artworks that counters white-feminist perspectives that all women's experiences can be understood within one movement, creating artwork that speaks to an Indigenous specific feminist worldview. Their work offers representations that collapse sexuality and Indigeneity, which contributes to my wider argument that by locating body agency and the right to self-determine as paramount Indigenous feminist artists enacted methods of sovereignty in their artwork.

In the 1990s, Kainaiwa-Blood artist Faye HeavyShield was achieving national recognition as a Canadian and Indigenous feminist artist with numerous artworks engaging with the politics of an Indigenous femininity and womanhood. During 1993 and 1994, HeavyShield produced two works; *Sisters* (1993) (fig. 2) and *She: a room full of women*

²⁹ Lee Maracle, "The Women's Movement," *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1996), 138-39.

³⁰ Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, Angie Morrill, "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy," *Feminist Formations* 25, no 1 (Spring, 2013): 9.

(1994) (fig. 3). In *She: a room full of women* HeavyShield utilizes twelve pairs of women's pumps spray-painted matte black and multiple items of women's clothing spray-painted ochre red which are laid throughout the gallery space. Framed documents of HeavyShield's poetry, journal entries and stories from her life and the women in it hang on the wall above the shoes. HeavyShield alters selected pairs of heels so that they are cloven toed. Modifying the high heels, described by HeavyShield as a way of denoting femininity,³¹ depicts the strength and vitality of Indigenous women, "It demonstrates that women must defend themselves from whatever life sends them."³² HeavyShield explained in her artist talk for *She: a room full of women* at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in 1994, that she viewed the hoofed foot as a symbol of strength and resistance of Indigenous women within settler colonialism, similar to that of a bull forced into a bull fight.

Sisters and *She* both examine how Indigenous women's bodies are considered as objects by settler society and attempts to dismantle this narrative by bringing the shoes, understood as women themselves, together into powerful formations. *Sisters* is a sculptural installation in which a circle is created through the placement of six pairs of high heels with the toes all pointed outward. Utilizing high heels, a common aesthetic tool to denote sexual attractiveness in women,³³ HeavyShield complicates their meaning from western femininity by once again adding hooves to the heels and Indigenousizing the footwear through

³¹ Faye HeavyShield, "Thunder Bay Art Gallery Artist Talk," *Windspeaker Publication* 12, no 17 (1994).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ In an article titled "Sex, power, oppression: why women wear high heels," journalist Summer Brennan writes about high heels that, "It's a shoe for when we're on, for ambition; for magazine covers, red carpets, award shows, boardrooms, courtrooms, parliament buildings and debate lecterns. Rather paradoxically—or maybe not—according to the 150-year-old fetish industry, it has also consistently been viewed as a shoe for sex." Summer Brennan, "Sex, power, oppression: why women wear high heels," *The Guardian*, March 20, 2019.

placing the shoes in circular configurations on a circular plinth—one of the most important structural forms within First Nations Plains cultures, as well as many Indigenous Nations, for its multi-symbolism of values, world views and practices—the circle represents the medicine wheel or pimatisiwin, which translates to “life” in Cree. Using a circle to exhibit the footwear Indigenizes the work, better demonstrating to the viewer that Indigenous women are wearing the high heels on display and are the one’s self-determining their strength and sexualities.

The sexual connotation from the use of high heels is crucial to understanding the works at large and speaks to the importance of representing Indigenous women as sexual beings with agency to express and act upon their sexuality. By deforming the high heels, HeavyShield pushes back against a fetishized version of Indigenous sexual expression. The shoes are in some ways made repulsive by their warped shape, forcing the fetishized gaze to recoil and make clear that Indigenous women and their sexual bodies are not for colonial consumption. By highlighting the deep connections between settler colonialism—a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there³⁴— and heteropatriarchy—the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent³⁵—as they relate to Indigenous women’s experience of sexuality and identity, HeavyShield’s *She: a room full of women* and *Sisters* can be understood as Indigenous feminist artwork. HeavyShield too enacts methods of

³⁴ Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, Angie Morrill, "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy," *Feminist Formations* 25, no 1 (Spring, 2013): 12.

³⁵ *Ibid*: 13.

sovereignty and self-determination by reclaiming sexual identities outside of Western standards of womanhood. She uses intersecting femininities and sexualities with Indigenous spiritual identities, placing the two together as naturally interconnected ways of being, and locating within them strength and resilience.³⁶

As aforementioned, the Indigenous feminist movement developed as a means to address specific issues pertaining to Indigenous women's disenfranchisement that were not being brought into the larger conversation within feminism. One issue advocated by the Indigenous feminist movement that gained national media attention in Canada during the 1980s was the fight against gender inequality under the Indian Act.³⁷ Under the Indian Act, Indigenous women who married non-Indians (men who are not racially Indigenous or non-status Indigenous men)³⁸ would be victim to being "excommunicated from Indian reserves and never allowed to return, even upon divorce."³⁹ In the wake of persistent criticism of Canada's federal government's proposed White Paper policy in 1969, major Indigenous organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations and the League of Indians of Canada gained political recognition and began advocating for Indigenous rights on a national scale. In 1985, following years of pressure from Indigenous activists, the Canadian federal government introduced Bill C-31. It removed some of the gender discrimination within the

³⁶ Arthur Renwick, *Faye HeavyShield: Into the Garden of Angels* (Toronto: Power Plant, 1994), Exhibition Catalogue.

³⁷ First passed in 1876, The Indian Act is a Canadian federal law that governs in matters pertaining to Indian status, bands, and Indian reserves. The Indian Act is administered by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), formerly the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). "The Indian Act is a part of a long history of assimilation policies that intended to terminate the cultural, social, economic, and political distinctiveness of Aboriginal peoples by absorbing them into mainstream Canadian life and values." *The Indian Act*, University of British Columbia Indigenous Foundations (2011).

³⁸ The term "non-status" describes an Indigenous person who is not enrolled with a band, meaning they do not have the ability to gain an Indian Status Card.

³⁹ Sharon D. McIvor, "Aboriginal Women's Rights as 'Existing Rights'," *Canadian Women Studies* 15, (1995): 34

Indian Act but it did not remove the male-female hierarchical structure determined by the Canadian Government in 1876. Instead, Bill C-31 entrenched it by creating category 6(1)(a), for (mostly male) Indians [sic]⁴⁰ and their descendants who already had full status prior to April 17, 1985, and the lesser category 6(1)(c), for women whose status had been denied or whose status had been removed because of marriage to a non-Indian [sic]. The women were considered “re-instatedes,” and were assigned a lesser status that restricted their ability to transmit that status to their children.⁴¹ Due to this legislature, the Indian Act not only determines who legally qualifies for Indian status but also who is included and excluded from their own communities, which Mi’kmaq lawyer Pam Palmater argues is a form of discrimination that violates section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.⁴² Following Bill C-31’s amendment of the Indian Act, approximately 40,000 individuals regained their previous Indian status.⁴³

Though some Indigenous women still choose to not align themselves with feminism due to the presence of white supremacy and colonial structures that appear in many feminist movements and spaces, the development of an Indigenous-specific feminism during the 1980s and 90s is representational of Indigenous women at the time in their fight for sovereignty, as discussed earlier. Understood alongside the surge of sexually thematic artwork, the development of Indigenous feminism and the artists involved in that movement brought new methods of representing and engaging with Indigenous

⁴⁰ ‘Indians’ in this case meaning a recognized member of a First Nations Band.

⁴¹ Pam Palmater, Sharon McIvor, Shelagh Day, “Equality Delayed is Equality Denied for Indigenous Women,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 33, no.1-2 (2019): 171-173.

⁴² Sharon D. McIvor, “Aboriginal Women’s Rights as ‘Existing Rights’,” *Canadian Women Studies* 15, (1995): 32.

⁴³ Ibid: 34. Despite Inuit and Métis being recognized Indigenous peoples of Canada, they are considered ‘other’ to their First Nation counterparts and are excluded from the Indian Act and do not receive Indian status.

sovereignty and the fight towards self-determination, reinforcing the importance of Indigenous bodily agency and the inherent right to exist as Indigenous women without colonial interruptions.

Chapter Three: Exhibitions and sexy self-determination

In 1990, Canada witnessed the largest Indigenous political resistance movement of the century take place over the 78-day standoff between Quebec's provincial and Canada's federal governments and Indigenous land protectors, widely known in settler media as the Oka Crisis.⁴⁴ As Audra Simpson describes it, "It was a spectacular event that pronounced the structure of settler colonialism in Canada, illuminating its desire for land, its propensity to consume, and its indifference to life, to will, to what is considered sacred, binding and fair."⁴⁵ The Oka Crisis saw Kanien'kehá:ka women taking a public stand against settler-colonialism. Chosen by the People of the Longhouse of Kanesatà:ke, activists such as Ellen Gabriel, an artist from the community, became a significant figure for the Oka Crisis blockade but was later overshadowed by her male counterparts at the turning point when the crisis grew larger and national media began using images of Indigenous men to denote thuggish and violent stereotypes to tarnish the Indigenous land protectors claims.⁴⁶ Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) has become an iconic Canadian documentary filmed during and following the stand-off. Obomasawin produced seventeen films following the *Kanehsatake* release including the documentary short, part of the three-film Kanesatà:ke series, *My Name Is Kahentiiosta*

⁴⁴ The standoff followed a peaceful demonstration lead by many women from Kanesatà:ke. Despite the Oka Crisis being recognized as lasting 78 days Kanesatà:ke and Kahnawake experienced ongoing occupation by the Canadian army over a year later.

⁴⁵ Audra Simpson. "The Gender of Flint." in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 147.

⁴⁶ Gabriel has continued advocating for Kanesatake and Mohawk land rights to date. She has also brought changes to the Indian Act in the form of Bill C-31 and spoken at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

(1995), which followed the story of a young Kahnawake Mohawk woman arrested after the standoff but held in custody four days longer than any other woman due to a Quebec judge who would not recognize her Indigenous name.

This chapter examines how Indigenous artists and curators located self-determination in a post-Oka climate in Canada. In particular, this chapter looks at examples of artworks and exhibitions that responded to the Oka Crisis and colonial anniversaries through self-representation that explore what it means to be contemporarily Indigenous against a continually oppressive political landscape. It contributes to my broader thesis by focusing on exhibitions and artworks that highlight Indigenous representations of love and sex as methods of enacting sovereignty and countering settler stereotypes.

Following the oppressive social and political climate that followed the Oka Crisis, Indigenous artists began responding with new works that championed the nature of what Indigenous sovereignty looked like nearing the end of the millennium, articulating/representing a sovereignty rooted in body agency and the right to self-determine one's desires and pleasures. Mohawk photographer Shelley Niro's 1991 photography exhibition *Mohawks in Beehives*, named after one of Niro's photographs of the same name, (fig. 4) at Mercer Union in Toronto featured Niro's suite of photographs that introduced Indigenous women in high glam, teasing the audience with coquettish glances and a seductiveness that Indigenous women are rarely allowed to publicly express in art or media. In the series Niro, her three sisters and her mother, take to the downtown streets of Brantford, ON dressed to the nines with high hair and bold makeup. Described by the Virtual Museum of Canada, "This was a way of reclaiming the urban territory and re-appropriating their individuality. Ignoring the rules of public behaviour, the sisters invaded

the city in flamboyant, outrageous style.”⁴⁷ According to Niro, these works were an act of liberation born from the tension following the Mohawk defense of Kanehsatà:ke, a tension that could only be broken by subverting expected stereotypes and paving a new way for the plays of desire through an affirmation that Indigenous women are in control of their own pleasure.⁴⁸ *Mohawks in Beehives* also enact Haudenosaunee sovereignty through her focus on matriarchy. As described by Lina Sunseri,

Colonization of the Americas ultimately transformed all structures, including Aboriginal gender relations. Prior to this, women in most Aboriginal societies enjoyed a large amount of status and power. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois, or a more appropriate translation, People of the Longhouse) women, for example, occupied prominent positions in all aspects of indigenous life.⁴⁹

Mohawks in Beehives highlights Haudenosaunee women as self-determined in their agency and sexuality, speaking to matriarchal traditions that inherently cannot fit within the patriarchal nature of the Canadian state, thus subverting an expectation of Indigenous women as subservient or without power within a settler-state.

The early 1990s saw other politically charged Indigenous exhibitions that sought to place Indigenous artists and people in positions of self-determination. The 1992 exhibition *Indigena*, a contemporary perspective on Indigeneity and Indigenous artistic determination countering the Columbus Quincentennial, marked the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the land that would become known as the Americas. 1992’s *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations*, which coincided with the 125th anniversary of Canada’s confederation, focused on the resurgence of self-determination. Then-National Gallery–

⁴⁷ Virtual Museum of Canada, “1991, Reopening History,” 2017.

⁴⁸ Richard Hill, “10 Indigenous Artworks that Changed How We Imagine Ourselves,” *Canadian Art*, April 28, 2016.

⁴⁹ Lina Sunseri, “Moving Beyond the Feminism Versus Nationalism Dichotomy,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 20, no 2 (2000): 147.

curator Diana Nemiroff wrote of the exhibition *Land, Spirit, Power*, “Aboriginal issues, in particular the inherent right to self-government, are a central part of the discussions and are being formally recognized for the first time.”⁵⁰ It was the first large-scale exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art to take place at the National Gallery of Canada and included work by six Indigenous women artists of the nineteen artists. Both exhibitions responded to an insurmountable mix of political events and colonial celebrations, focusing instead on Indigenous perspectives at the time. These exhibitions can also be understood as curatorial responses to previous exhibitions that attempted to exhibit Indigenous art through a settler lens. Exhibitions such as 1988’s *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples*, exhibited 650 historical objects but did not involve any Indigenous curators.

Mohawk curator Lee-Ann Martin wrote of *The Spirit Sings*:

I was angry and frustrated to learn that the curatorial committee included no Indigenous curators. My anger was exacerbated by the fact that the exhibition would include only historical objects, without regard to contemporary realities – typical of the exclusionary practices of museums that had amassed significant collections of Indigenous historical objects while denying intellectual and physical access to the objects by the very communities from which they were taken.⁵¹

Cree curator Gerald McMaster, who worked alongside Lee-Ann Martin at the Museum of Civilization on the exhibition *Indigena*, wrote about the realities of self-determined

Indigenous curation at the time, stating:

Native peoples—and this includes artists—have inherited a system of representation that has caused considerable tension. Lacking opportunities to represent ourselves, Native people have had, historically, to play the role of the subject/object, the observed, rather than the observer. Rarely have we been in a

⁵⁰ Scott Watson, “Whose Nation?: First Nations Art Past and Present,” *Canadian Art* (Spring, 1993): 34.

⁵¹ Lee-Ann Martin, “Anger and Reconciliation: A Very Brief History of Exhibiting Contemporary Indigenous Art in Canada,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* no. 43 (Spring/Summer, 2017): 109.

position of self-representation. Native peoples have always been the informant, seldom the interrogator or initiator.⁵²

Native Love, a touring exhibition in 1995 organized by Montreal-based First Nation artist collective Nation to Nation, took place three years after the 350th anniversary of the founding of Montreal as a settler city, and five years following the Mohawk Resistance. It featured thirty-eight artists in its inaugural exhibition whose works considered a topic rarely expected of Indigenous artists at the time: Indigenous perspectives on love. As curator and Nation to Nation co-founder Ryan Rice stated, “Native Love allowed us to let down our guard and contemplate our personal voice and experiences. It wasn’t surprising that most of the artists paired themselves with a writer who was a family member, a lover, or a friend.”⁵³ In the moments following the Oka Crisis that sought out “machine gun, razor wire” Indigenous art,⁵⁴ *Native Love’s* focus on collaboration emphasized the spirit of solidarity, community and the diversity of personal experience and voice.

Produced for *Native Love* was Okanagan artist Jeannette Armstrong and Salish artist Rose Spahan’s collaboration *Indians After Sex* (1995) (fig. 5). The mixed media collage work depicts two figures in Northwest Coastal-style masks lying side by side in a bed. Both are tucked under a blanket leaning back against their respective pillows, the hair of the masks is disheveled, and a cigarette juts out of the mouth of one, suggesting the scene we are viewing is post-coital. This approach to addressing Indigenous love, sex and intimacy is done through a de-fetishized lens, presenting Indigenous beings as sexually active without using nude or sexually suggestive bodies. By removing a human body, in a settler colonial

⁵² Gerald McMaster, “INDIGENA: A Native Curator’s Perspective,” *Art Journal* 51, no 3 (1992): 69.

⁵³ Ryan Rice, “Presence and Absence redux: Indian Art in the 1990s,” *RACAR: revue d’art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 42, no. 2 (2017): 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

context in which Indigenous bodies, especially women's bodies, have been hypersexualized, Spahan and Armstrong are able to depict a scene of the aftermath of sex through animating masks. In doing so, Spahan and Armstrong give the masks agency as sexual and desire-experiencing beings. The concept of visual sovereignty is located within Spahan and Armstrong's work, as the masks can act against a colonial gaze that wishes to diminish all that Indigeneity may represent, instead celebrating their communities through the use of incorporated material culture and poking fun at sexual interactions through an Indigenous aesthetic. Seneca author Michelle Raheja defines the act of 'visual sovereignty' as controlling and directing the colonial gaze through determined imagery, and, in doing so, subverting the position of power established by colonial structures and reclaiming lost Indigenous bodily agency. As Raheja states, "This strategy offers up not only the possibility of engaging and deconstructing white-general representation of Indigenous people, but more broadly and importantly how it intervenes in larger discussions of Native American sovereignty."⁵⁵ Raheja's concept expands upon Tuscarora artist and art historian Jolene Rickard's theory that, "As part of an ongoing strategy for survival, the work of Indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization and identity politics."⁵⁶

Also exhibited and addressing visual sovereignty in the same exhibition was Cree-Saulteaux-Métis artist Lori Blondeau's photograph *COSMOSQUAW* (1995) (fig. 6), in collaboration with Cree artist Bradlee Larocque. Satirizing and appropriating

⁵⁵ Michelle Raheja, "Visualizing Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)," *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 193.

⁵⁶ Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," *Aperture* 139 (1995): 51.

Cosmopolitan—a popular women’s magazine that gives readers the chance to learn tips and tricks on sex, weight loss, relationships and featuring covers photos of young, mostly white, actresses and models—*COSMOSQUAW* can be read as an intervention that counters the expected by placing Blondeau in all her Indigenous sensuality, front and centre on the cover. Like much of Blondeau’s work, *COSMOSQUAW* is presented as a tool used to challenge manufactured stereotypes of Indigenous people and as an act of self-determination and resilience. In the photograph, Blondeau appears as cover girl, leaning forward, lifting her breasts and pursing her bright red lips towards the camera. Her blow out slightly distorts the header of the magazine—*COSMOSQUAW*—that advertises articles such as, “10 *Easy* make-up tips for a killer *Bingoface!*” and “How to Spoon-feed *your* Man!” These titles challenged community’s expectations of gender roles by holding a mirror up to Indigenous viewers. Blondeau is done up in high glam with bold red earrings, a red corseted dress with frill that accentuates her cleavage and sultry eye make-up. Historian Édith-Anne Pageot describes *COSMOSQUAW* as a postmodern send up in which, “Blondeau appropriates and parodies, simultaneously, the aesthetics of the classic pin-up, with the ‘squaw’ embodying a licentious sexuality, and of Princess Pocahontas’s idealized virginal beauty.”⁵⁷ Exploring popular media and culture and its effects on Indigenous self-identity, Blondeau re-envisioned oppressive stereotypes put onto Indigenous women, playing upon the tropes of the ‘Indian princess’ and ‘squaw’ to juxtapose what a settler audience expects to see versus what is being presented while also emphasizing the power of embedded stereotypical representation that Indigenous communities may believe or internalize as

⁵⁷ Édith-Anne Pageot, “Postcolonial Territorial Landmarks within Canada’s Multiculturalism: The Myth of Virility,” in *Landscapes and Landmarks of Canada: Real, Imagined, (Re)Viewed* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2017), chapter 10.

well. Blondeau channels a similar vivaciousness in her 1997 *The Lonely Surfer Squaw* (fig 7), a series where the artist plays bathing vixen in matching fur bikini, mukluks and an oversized bright pink surfboard—evoking something both phallic and vaginal—that pops against the bright white snow on a frozen riverbed which is the backdrop.

Blondeau's *The Lonely Surfer Squaw* can be seen here engaging with the concept of 'imaginary Indianism.' In Tsimshian-Haida art historian Marcia Crosby's "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," an essay included in the *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art* (1991), Crosby introduces the phenomenon of 'Imaginary Indianism.' The notion that an 'Indianness' has been created by the colonizer as a means to fit colonial ideals and desires without having to ever truly understand Indigenous people.⁵⁸ The 'Imaginary Indian' is set up to allow for colonial mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, as a method of structural dehumanization. This is supported in *The White Man's Indian* (1979) by scholar Robert Berkhofer, where he writes, "For most of the past five centuries, the Indian of the imagination and ideology has been as real, perhaps more real, than the Native American of actual existence and contact."⁵⁹ The choice to use the word 'squaw' in Blondeau's work shows her active resilience against the stereotype that Indigenous women can either be princesses or squaws, loving or vile, sensual or sexually exploitative. This choice was not appreciated by all Indigenous women and in some cases incited anger in those who do not see the use of the word as radical but instead a continuation of negative stereotypes. Neither princess nor squaw control their own sexual agency nor can act on

⁵⁸ Marcia Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, (Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1991), 185.

⁵⁹ Robert Berkhofer, "The Colonial Foundation of White Indian Policy: Theory," in *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, (New York City: Penguin Random House, 1978), 121.

their pleasures or desires without outside scrutiny. It is important to note that these works, as well as Blondeau's performance personas Betty Daybird and Belle Sauvage, were all manifested in a climate post-*Pocahontas*, specifically the enormously popular Disney animated version of the historical figure (1995). As stated by Blondeau in her Masters' thesis, *Some Kinda Princess*,

Today we can see the image of the Indian Princess is still alive and well in the 1995 Disney film of *Pocahontas* which is educating a new generation of non-Natives and Native children on how an Indian princess should look. As I am confronted with these new images of old stereotypes, I feel an urgency to document my own stories and the stories of the women in my family. This is a story of my journey through oppression, consciousness, and finally resistance.⁶⁰

Strategically using humour, satire and irony to subvert stereotypes, Blondeau's self-portraits demand a recognition of the ownership she, and all Indigenous women, have over her body, her sexuality and how she chooses to express it. Using her own body as an instrument for Indigenous agency and self-determination, Blondeau's art becomes a political tool and method of enacting sovereignty against oppressive determinations of Indigenous womanhood created by the imaginary of the settler state.

Niro, Blondeau, Spahan and Armstrong as well as the curators behind *Indigena, Land, Spirit, Power* and *Native Love* enacted sovereignty through self-determining Indigenous narratives of collaboration, strength, love and sexuality that did not have a place in media or settler culture at that time. Due to these efforts undertaken in the early and mid 1990s, Indigenous curators and artists would bring these empowering narratives into the latter half of the decade and the millennium.

⁶⁰ Lori Blondeau, "Some Kinda Princess," (MFA diss., University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, 2002), 23-24.

Chapter Four: Artistic representations of queer NDN pleasure and desire

Many queer Indigenous people have refused and disidentified themselves from Western concepts of gender and sexual orientation by reconnecting with Indigenous terminologies that understand and properly represent their identities. As expressed by Cherokee two-spirit writer Qwo-Li Driskill, this process is often nation specific and can complicate distinctions of sexual expressions and gender expressions as many phrases do not have clear English translations or cannot be truly expressed through Western understandings of gender and sexuality.⁶¹ This chapter explores artworks made by queer and two-spirit women-identified artists that locates sexuality and pop culture at the centre of their work. In particular, this chapter examines artworks by Thirza Cuthand and Rosalie Favell which respond to a lack of Indigenous queer representation and explores their own sexual pleasures and desires as queer Indigenous women.

In *Gender, Race, and Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States* (2003), Mi'kmaq scholar Bonita Lawrence addresses the politics of Indigeneity as relational to dominant social, cultural and political histories. Lawrence concludes that, "Understanding how colonial governments have regulated Native identity is essential for Native people, in attempting to step away from the colonizing frameworks that have enmeshed our lives, and as we struggle to revive the identities and way of living that preceded colonization."⁶² In this way, Lawrence reveals how colonialism has continued to

⁶¹ Qwo-Li Driskill, et al, "Anders Awakening," in *Sovereign Erotics* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 156.

⁶² Bonita Lawrence, "Gender, Race and the Regulation of Native Identity," *Hypatia* 18, no 2 (Spring, 2003): 4.

affect Indigenous identity and suppress Indigenous expressions of gender and sexuality to fit a colonial doctrine. This reality is heightened for queer Indigenous people who experience homophobic colonial dogma engrained from Christian conversion tactics and settler government legal structures that introduced homophobia and transphobia to Indigenous communities across Canada.

In 1990, at the third annual Native American/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference, the term two-spirit (also written as 2S, 2Spirit, TwoSpirit) was adopted as a means to self-identify nuances held within Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality. Two-spirit identity has become associated with a means of Indigenous resilience and resurgence, reclaiming traditional ways of understanding one's own sexual and engendered self. As Michelle Cameron explains, "The term two-spirit is thus an Aboriginal-specific term of resistance to colonization and non-transferable to other cultures."⁶³

Two-spirit Cree artist Thirza Cuthand's short films *Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory* (1995), first exhibited in *Native Love*, and *Helpless Maiden Makes An "I" Statement* (1999) (fig. 8) are both expressions of disidentifications with queerness and the communities she found herself in at the time.⁶⁴ *Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory*, Cuthand's first film, follows a teenager who is saddened by the lack of lesbians at her school and expresses her desires of how different her life would be with more lesbians around. *Helpless Maiden Makes An "I" Statement* is an ode to the villainous animated Disney women of Cuthand's

⁶³ Michelle Cameron, "Two-spirited Aboriginal people: Continuing cultural appropriation by non-Aboriginal society," *Canadian Women Studies* 24, no 2/3 (2005): 125.

⁶⁴ 'Disidentifications' was coined by José Esteban Muñoz and explored in the text, *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Disidentifications is meant to be a description of the survival of 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." José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction," *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

childhood, an early source of sexual desires. In *Helpless Maiden*, a naked and handcuffed Cuthand speaks to the camera and expresses her arousal in response to the act of maiden abduction and the power these villains had over the women they kept locked up. Both films express the queer desires Cuthand has and the structures that make it hard for her to always act on them. Cuthand's short films function to address the lack of lesbian representation found in popular media with a clear objective to represent a queer voice by utilizing a combination of humour and sexuality in her works. Cuthand's 1997 short film *Untouchable* (fig. 9) follows a young lesbian and an older gay man as they explore their distinct sexual desires towards people of vastly different ages and the dynamics of relationships between adults and teenagers. Cuthand focuses on the intensity of desire, echoing her teenage urges from *Baby Dyke Theory* and foreshadowing her developed kinks and sexual wants in *Helpless Maiden Makes An "I" Statement*, and the taboos that surround queer sex and intimacy in the search for consensual and reciprocal pleasure. *Untouchable* was exhibited in the 1999 exhibition *Exposed: aesthetics of aboriginal erotic art* at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, co-curated by Mohawk curator and writer Lee-Ann Martin and Stony Mountain Cree artist and curator Morgan Wood.

Exposed was a result of a series of discussions between Martin, Wood, and their elders, friends and family members regarding the insufficiency of dialogue on sexuality, intimacy and sexual imagery in Indigenous communities.⁶⁵ Wondering 'what is erotic to the original peoples of this continent,' Wood and Martin curated artworks, poems and texts by twelve Indigenous artists, which included Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Lawrence Paul

⁶⁵ Morgan Wood, "Foreword," in *Exposed: Aesthetics of Aboriginal Erotic Art*, Exhibition Catalogue (Regina: Merit Printing, 1999), 9.

Yuxweluptun, Marilyn Dumont, paintings by Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig as well works by others.

Métis artist Rosalie Favell's triptych *Pillow Box #1-3* (1999) (fig. 10-12) was also featured in the exhibition. For *Pillow Box #1-3*, Favell uses three video monitors playing video footage from the popular 90s television show, *Xena: the Warrior Princess*. Favell draws upon an episode's sexual innuendo of two women sharing water between their mouths, Xena stroking and undressing another woman, and two hands reaching through a waterfall gently caressing one another's palms with their fingertips. Focusing on what Martin describes as the "lesbian or two-spirited subtext and consisting of a grainy central image bordered by strips of smaller prints, the boxes offer a sensual meditation on longing and desire."⁶⁶ *Pillow Box #1-3* examines sexual intimacy versus explicit sexual contact. Unlike many of the other more definitively sexual artworks exhibited in *Exposed*, *Pillow Box #1-3* highlights intimate moments and actions of touching and teasing that allude to the possibility of sex, without every depicting sex acts. In this way Favell lures the viewer to tap into their imagination and fantasize with her about where each scene may lead. Thematically, *Pillow Box* highlights sexual desire and sexual subjectivities as even the title is suggestive. Contradicting softness with hardness and alluding to a vagina, which is colloquially referred to as a "box", as well as playing upon lesbian sexual terminology such as "Pillow Princess." *Pillow Box* asks us to consider all the different meanings Favell could be touching upon by focusing on sexual desire and the ways in which we experience being aroused without taking part in sex acts. As described by Lee-Ann Martin,

⁶⁶ Greg Beatty, "Exposed: Aesthetics of Aboriginal Erotic Art," *Artichoke* 12, no 1 (2000): 34.

She captures intimate moments from the original production and invests the images with her own personal interpretations of the erotic. The touch of hands, mouths and bodies—and the anticipation of the caress—define and arouse desires. The central image is repeated as the border, framing and reinforcing these intimate longings.⁶⁷

Favell's analog photography shifted into a digital photo collage and performative practice during the latter half of the 1990s, allowing her to incorporate imagery and stills from popular media with her self-portraiture. Collaging her body with scenes from specific moments in pop culture and film, Favell purposefully brings an Indigenous and queer narrative into heteronormative settler scenes. Described by Anishinaabe multimedia artist Barry Ace, "The collected images act as an aide-memoire, igniting personal and collective memory, while photo-digital practice provides her with an expansive tableau for visual expressions of self, family, identity and sexuality."⁶⁸

Favell returns to *Xena: the Warrior Princess* across her body of work, namely in the 1999-2003 series *Plain(s) Warrior Artist*. Favell superimposes her face onto actress Lucy Lawless' Xena's hyper sexualized body throughout the series, creating a confusing yet sexually stimulating final form that demands we as viewer acknowledge her power and strength. In this way, Favell not only re-appropriates a representation for queer and Indigenous women in roles of power but also in scenes that explore sexual desire and the search for pleasure. Using images and stills of Xena, Favell explores the anticipation of intimacy and the desire for sexual relationships by placing herself within intimate scenes, longing to be the main character while at the same time longing to be with her too. By

⁶⁷ Lee-Ann Martin, "Reclaiming Desire," in in *Exposed: Aesthetics of Aboriginal Erotic Art*, Exhibition Catalogue (Regina: Merit Printing, 1999), 35.

⁶⁸ Donna McAlear, Barry Ace, Christiane Becker, *Rosalie Favell: I searched many worlds*, Exhibition Catalogue (Winnipeg: The Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2003), 21-22.

becoming Xena in scenes with pseudo-sexual and semi-erotic lesbian narratives, as in *Maybe I did love her that way* (2003), Favell's body becomes a metaphor for the desire she experienced watching television and films throughout her youth. By locating her pleasure within these moments and finding strength in exploring her queerness and Indigeneity as they intersect Favell enacts sovereignty through determining her own pleasures and desires. By celebrating her queerness and re-appropriating Western heteronormative media to serve her queer desires, Favell is able to Indigenize and queer the media she was once unable to see herself, or other Indigenous queer women, represented within. Favell places her own body into these narratives and in doing so locates her own agency, emphasizing her pleasures and desires as paramount in her work. In this way, Favell and Cuthand alike both reject heteropatriarchy and enact sovereignty through the act of negating a settler imposed regressive understanding of sexuality.

Scholar Mark Rifkin's *When Did Indians Become Straight: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (2011) links the emergence of sovereignty to the emergence of heteropatriarchy within Indigenous communities. His inquiry sees sovereignty as the response to the colonial "investments in native straightness" and classification of the deconstruction of Indigenous ways of knowing as sovereign acts. He describes it as, "the uneven and fraught dynamics by which the settler state recognizes/disavows indigenous modes of peoplehood and indigenous peoples negotiate the shifting imperatives/contingencies of settler rule."⁶⁹ If colonial sexual discourses have aided in the erosion of Indigenous sexual self-determination, then the creation of

⁶⁹ Mark Rifkin, "Introduction," in *When Did Indians Become Straight: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17.

Indigenous pleasure and desire based artworks can be read as sovereign acts. Locating Indigenous sexual pleasure and desire goes further by enacting kinship within sovereignty. Rifkin defines kinship as central to the ongoing struggles over personhood within Indigenous communities.

If “every civilization” has acknowledged the “unique bond” of heteroconjugality, what about those parts of history, and peoples, that have not been characterized as having “civilization,” that have provided the savage counterpoint against which to define the civilized and that have been made the object of a mission to bring to them the saving grace of enlightenment?⁷⁰

Indigenous love, sex, pleasure and desire—especially queer acts of love, sex, pleasure and desire—exist outside of the colonial binary of gender and sexuality that functions to determine gender and sexual expression without nuance and separates the body from an Indigenous way of knowing. By creating artworks that complicate colonial expectations of sexuality and pleasure, Rosalie Favell and Thirza Cuthand enact methods of Indigenous sovereignty by resisting Euro-Canadian/American structures that attempt to determine what Indigenous people *are* and instead create artworks that challenge stereotypes of Indigeneity, pushing back against homophobic and transphobic attitudes that seek to limit expressions of gender and sexuality.

⁷⁰ Ibid: 4.

Chapter Five: Northern erotic representations

Inuit are more often represented in terms of their trauma than of their pleasures and desires. Harsh living conditions in the North, extreme food costs and the suicide epidemic effecting many Northern communities would lead many to consider that Inuit live exclusively in a state of hardship than one of warmth, comfort and healthy sex lives. Canada's colonial efforts carried into the North (not unlike those in the South), during the latter half of the 20th century were devastating and have only served to harm Inuit communities throughout Inuit Nunangat to this day.⁷¹ Yet, despite these recent atrocities, Inuit have fought for their resilience and sovereignty and have maintained Inuit qaujimajatuqangit.⁷² With some traditional cultural relaxation around non-monogamy and informal shared sleeping practices, Inuit sex and sexuality has been of interest to qallunaat for centuries.⁷³ Titillating settler depictions of traditional Inuit lifestyles have led to fetishization and an increase in sexually tabooed stereotypes of Inuit. An example of this can be found in the highly staged and lauded 1922 "documentary" *Nanook of the North*, which put a spotlight on supposed Inuit eroticism for western audiences to gape at and added to the fascination of the other. Inuit sex and pleasure were understood by the Canadian-Christian mindset as "offensive but titillating; censored but studied; ubiquitous

⁷¹ Inuit Nunangat is the homeland of Inuit across colonial Canada, America, Russia and Greenland. Within Canada Inuit Nunangat consists of four regions called Inuvialuit (in the arctic Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (in northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (in Labrador).

⁷² An Inuktitut term meaning 'that which Inuit have always known to be true'.

⁷³ Inuktitut for 'white people' or non-Inuit. Presumed original meaning, "people who pamper their eyebrows." Minnie Aodla Freeman, *Life Among the Qallunaat* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 86–87.

but rendered invisible.”⁷⁴ This chapter assesses the more contemporary context of settler colonialism in the North and the subsequent stifling of Inuit sexuality. Examining drawings by artist Annie Pootoogook which explore Northern representations of sex and Inuit women’s sexual pleasure, these artworks contribute to my broader thesis by locating Inuit ways of knowing in the depictions of women’s sexual pleasures and Pootoogook’s comfort detailing sex acts. These acts negate imposed moral taboos that go against traditional Inuit approaches to sex and sexuality in the North.

The response to the lifestyle practices of Inuit lead to the aggressive push towards settlement by the Canadian government.⁷⁵ This Western introduction for a traditionally nomadic people sought to assist in the Christian conversion of Inuit, the ability to impose Canadian law and practice onto the North, as well as claim the Arctic as Canadian territory during the Cold War. The history of Inuit art in Canada has been similarly colonized, with forced settlement being tied to government-run art production—such as the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative (WBEC) in Kinngait (Cape Dorset), NU, established in the 1950s—built as a means to make Inuit dependent on the financial gain from selling artworks to Southern and European audience. The 1950s and 60s thus became an extreme period of settler introduced illness, imposed poverty and colonization for Inuit.⁷⁶ The policing of

⁷⁴ Norman Vorano. “Inuit Men, Erotic Art: Certain Indecencies...That Need Not Be Mentioned,” *Inuit Art Quarterly* 23, no 3 (2008): 22.

⁷⁵ Beginning in 1920, the Canadian Government facilitated Inuit relocations. These relocations came at violent hands with threat of starvation and the deliberately killing of sled dogs in the Eastern Arctic by the RCMP as tactics to force Inuit to settle in communities, ensuring Canadian rule over the Arctic. As stated by Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Development Canada, “Although relocations of Inuit families were supposedly conducted to areas of resource abundance where Inuit could live self-sufficiently, the federal government also had a de facto concern for sovereignty of the Canadian Arctic.” Sarah Bonesteel, “Arctic Sovereignty and Inuit Relocations,” *Canada’s relationship with Inuit: a history of policy and program development* (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs, 2006), 28.

⁷⁶ A third of the Inuit population is thought to have been infected with tuberculosis in the 1950s. A common form of treatment was removal to sanatoria in southern Canada: in 1956 the largest concentration of Inuit

Inuit physical and psychological agency was enacted through Canadian laws and suppressive Christian morality, placing a stigma on traditional Inuit practices around love and love making. As described by curator Daniella Sanader, “As the presence of Christian missionaries grew in the North—and the first Residential Schools were established—Inuit forms of intimacy, partnership and sexuality were increasingly stifled and suppressed.”⁷⁷ The closing of Residential Schools in 1997 was a massive triumph for Indigenous peoples across Canada and a testament to the resilience of Indigenous communities in the country’s North and South. Though the closing of Residential Schools was done quietly and slowly over the 1990s, the end of the Residential School system meant the possibility for a new vision for Canada’s Indigenous peoples, “one that fully embraces Aboriginal peoples’ right to self-determination.”⁷⁸ This self-determination can be found in artworks by many contemporary Inuit artists who go beyond the expected aesthetic and narrative of Inuit art that was determined by the Canadian government as ‘authentic’ and sellable.⁷⁹

The late Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook’s (1969-2016) pencil-crayon drawings exposed the possibilities of a contemporary Inuit sexuality, depicting a sexiness and sensuousness that locate Inuit pleasure and desire as culturally Inuit and contemporary to

people in the entire country was the 332 Inuit in the Mountain Sanatorium in Hamilton, Ontario. In that year over 1,500 Inuit were undergoing often lengthy treatment for tuberculosis. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “Introduction, Bureaucrats replace missionaries: Residential schooling in the North after 1950,” in *Canada’s Residential Schools: The Inuit and Northern Experience* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 74.

⁷⁷ Daniella Sanader, “Soft Shapes & Hard Mattresses,” *Inuit Art Quarterly* 31, no 2 (2018), 42.

⁷⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “The Challenge of Reconciliation,” in *Final Report: Canada’s Residential Schools: Reconciliation* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 20

⁷⁹ Established in 1958 by the Canadian government, the Igloo Tag Trademark became an internationally recognized symbol of ‘authenticity’ for Inuit visual arts for over six decades. The Igloo Tag is, to date, only given to prints and sculpture and was distributed by the government to art considered “authentically Inuit” until 2017. Inuit Art Foundation, *Igloo Tag Trademark*, <https://www.inuitartfoundation.org/igloo-tag-trademark>

modern Inuit life. Pootoogook's comfort with depicting explicit sexual scenes speaks back to a history that held far fewer taboos around sex. Described by Makka Kliest, "In our pre-Christian culture sexuality was considered a necessity, as much as food and water."⁸⁰ In drawings such as *Erotic Scene (four figures)* (2001) (fig. 13) and *Making Love* (2003-2004) (fig. 14) Pootoogook depicts Inuit in the act of sex and, most importantly, thoroughly enjoying themselves. *Erotic Scene (four figures)* depicts an orgy taking place on the floor of a living room—a plant, a television and a stereo in the background as the central figure is captured with her head thrown back and mouth open in a moment of pleasure as her male partner performs oral sex on her. Similarly, in *Making Love* an Inuk woman is shown in the midst of climax with her partner on a mattress lying on the tile floor. The male partner holds the back of the woman whose red lipstick highlights her open mouth, lifting her arms and hair above her head, exposing her breasts as her partner smiles up at her. A single outlet on an empty wall and linoleum flooring locate the image as a Nunavut modular home, an example of Northern detailing that Pootoogook added in many of her works. In *Composition (man approaching woman)* (2002) we see a couple so eager to get intimate the woman has stripped down to just her socks, her legs raised in the air excitedly awaiting her ever nearing lover who is shown as nearing erection. In all three works the focus of the composition is on a woman and her sexual pleasure with the men depicted as means for the woman to achieve sexual fulfilment. The men are not shown as ecstatic or as sole recipients of sex acts, rather they all appear as eager players in their partner's orgasm: their own desires are secondary. In this way Pootoogook places an importance on Inuit women's sexuality and represents it as something to be celebrated and not ashamed of.

⁸⁰ Makka Kliest, "Pre-Christian Inuit Sexuality" in *Me Sexy* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008), 16.

Woman at her Mirror (Playboy Pose) (2003) (fig. 15) and *Woman Masturbating* (2003) explore female sexuality separate from men as both compositions depict a sole female figure. In these images, the women's pleasure and sexual agency is portrayed as *literally* in their own hands. *Woman at her Mirror* depicts a woman wearing nothing but a pair of red high heels as she pulls back her hair, reminiscent of the woman figure in *Making Love*. *Woman Masturbating* features a woman lying on her back beside a window with closed curtains, holding a pink vibrator to her genitals, the only colour in the composition save for her blue eyeshadow and red toe polish and lipstick. Both works display the intimacy of sexuality for Inuit women. The seduction of one's self is shown through both women's choices to elevate their sexuality by donning high heels and makeup, despite being alone. By spending time alone with their nude bodies, "a subject matter with long and loaded histories in all forms of artmaking, but specifically in relation to the depiction of Indigenous bodies,"⁸¹ Pootoogook determines a sovereignty for the women in her compositions, giving them agency over their body and their sexual pleasure.

Pootoogook's works depicting sex and sexuality are not only critical works in representing present day Inuit life in the North, exploring both banalities and excitements, but also act as counter archive to her works depicting the physical and sexual abuses that too many Inuit women experience. The choice to place the women in control of their pleasure is vital in regaining the loss of control that takes place during violent encounters with men. As described by writer Juliette Allen of Pootoogook's drawings, "...female characters are in control, which is hugely symbolic and an almost revolutionary change in representation of female erotic. These erotic pieces show that while women may have been

⁸¹ Daniella Sanader, "Soft Shapes & Hard Mattresses," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 31, no 2 (2018), 46.

sexually abused by white colonizers or males of the community having internalized patriarchal order, Indigenous females also continue to claim great power in their body.”⁸² Pootoogook’s pencil crayon drawings depict the specificities of sexuality in the North, the nuances and pleasures that can be found living within contemporary colonialism. They harken back to a time where presenting a nude body or enacting a discussion on Inuit sex and desire would not be revolutionary, let alone notable. As Sanader writes, “It reminds us that there is resilience in seeking pleasure where you need it.”⁸³

Annie Pootoogook’s legacy will unfortunately and quietly be associated with the history of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit people.⁸⁴ The fight for reclaiming sexuality, sexual pleasures and desire as Indigenous people is also tied to the histories of sexual violence done onto Indigenous women for centuries. It is with this history and correlation that Indigenous women artists who create work around their sexual pleasures and desires enact sovereignty and agency. Demanding their sexuality be recognized as based in pleasure and not trauma, determined by themselves separate from harmful stereotypes and colonial fetish. In this way, sexual pleasure and desire-driven artworks are proof of the resilience of Indigenous women in their wholeness, their agency

⁸² Juliette Allen, “Indigenous Erotic Art in the Process of Decolonization,” *Canadian Content* VI (2014): 132.

⁸³ Daniella Sanader, “Soft Shapes & Hard Mattresses,” *Inuit Art Quarterly* 31, no 2 (2018), 47.

⁸⁴ The missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two spirit (MMIW+) epidemic is an issue currently affecting Indigenous people in Canada and the United States, including the First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and Native American communities. It has been described as a Canadian national crisis and a Canadian genocide. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) launched a national inquiry into this crisis with one of the most significant findings of the June 2019 report, “National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls” was that there was no “reliable estimate of the numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA persons in Canada” as Canada did not maintain a database for missing people until 2010. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, ““I am here for justice, and I am here for change”: Commemoration and Calling Forth,” in *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Volume 1b (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 2018), 65.

and ownership of their bodies and their resistance towards a history of abuse and ongoing trauma.⁸⁵

As described by Haida artist and filmmaker Gwaii Edenshaw for their 2014 exhibition on contemporary representations of Indigenous sensuality and sexuality *RezErect: Native Erotica*, co-curated with Haida curator Kwiaahwah Jones, “When we hear about Native sexuality and through how it’s fed to us through media, it’s within this context of dysfunction and it’s always sort of a painful story that we hear associated with it and that’s our experience. But it’s not the whole of our experience, Native people have full sexual lives outside of all that hard stuff. I think it’s good to reinforce those messages.”⁸⁶ Pootoogook’s depictions of Northern sex and sexuality brought nuance to Southern understandings of Inuit life, which is more often assumed to be without moments of sexual pleasure and desire than with them. The conversation started by Pootoogook on Inuit life and sex has been continued by contemporary Inuit artists whose work echoes what Pootoogook’s drawings shared to the South on the banalities and complexities of sex, pleasure and desire in the North.

⁸⁵ An erotic wholeness is discussed by Qwo-Li Driskill in their analysis of the sovereign erotic which speaks to being healed or healing from the historical trauma that Indigenous peoples continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions and resistance struggles of our Nations. Qwo-Li Driskill, “Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no 2 (2004): 50-64.

⁸⁶ Gwaii Edenshaw quoted in “‘RezErect’ Reveals Secret World of Native Erotica,” *The Tyee* September 21, 2013.

Conclusion: Reflections on Indigenous pleasure and desire

Kwe touches herself at night and as she does, her ancestors tell her she is beautiful, perfect and worthy. They wrap her in the certainty and warmth of her homelands and remind her of the teachings she carries in her body, whisper sweet visions of the future into her ears. Kwe becomes the moon often now, touches herself so she can feel full again. She is full. She is whole.

- Quill Christie-Peters, "Kwe becomes the moon, touches herself so she can feel full again,"
GUTS Magazine 9 (2018)

In his 2009 documentary *Reel Injun*, Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond spoke with Inuk director Zacharius Kunuk about the struggles in filming a love scene for his award-winning epic *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001). Kunuk told Diamond, "I had a problem, I wanted to do a romantic scene where people are kissing. French necking. But French necking is not our culture...I'm sitting down, sat with elders, asking them, how do you get married? What do Inuit kiss like?"⁸⁷ Kunuk's experience of attempting to locate a history of love-making in the void of Indigenous sexual representation meant he had to forge his own path in finding ways to depict an authentic Inuit love scene that did not rely on colonial stereotypes or Western normalcies, creating new histories for future ancestors to look back upon as a means of cultural continuance and sex-based knowledge-keeping. Sensual and sexually stimulating Indigenous art comes out of a long history of fighting to self-represent what Indigenous love, pleasure and lustful desire can and does look like. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Indigenous art community was pushing to self-determine and represent,

⁸⁷ Zacharius Kunuk, interviewed by Neil Diamond, *Reel Injun*, 2009, 1h 19m.

through their artistic practices, all of what Indigenous peoples can be: their sexual and loving nature included.

The artists examined in this paper have each enacted methods of sovereignty and self-determination through their depictions of pleasure, desire and sexualities that negate a colonial framework that functioned to suppress Indigenous sexual ways of knowing. The denial and subsequent erasure of Indigenous sexualities and the demonization of Indigenous pleasure is one of the prevailing ways in which the Canadian settler state has continued to exert control over and enact harm onto Indigenous women's bodies. The suppression and repression of an Indigenous eroticism brought on by colonial policies and forces, the Residential School system's lingering effects and the physical harm done to Indigenous bodies and land reflect the nature of Canada's colonial system as having "a deeper necessity to control Native configurations of gender and sexuality in order to assure their total domination in the process of colonization."⁸⁸

Returning to Audra Simpson's essay "Making Native Love," I conclude by locating why the artworks discussed are acts of sovereignty and why the recognition of Indigenous sex, sexuality and sexual pleasure and desire is paramount to Indigenous agency and self-determination. As Simpson argues, "All of these westerners acted out of love, but what about us? Why the oversight when it comes to our history and our present? What is this strange perception of us, which is so inconsistent with our sassy, our funky and our desiring selves?"⁸⁹ This oversight, I conclude, is a structured method of colonialism that

⁸⁸ Juliette Allen, "Indigenous Erotic Art in the Process of Decolonization," *Canadian Content VI* (2014): 128.

⁸⁹ Simpson, Audra. "Making Native Love." *Nation to Nation*. (1995).

serves a colonial doctrine of “us vs them” that can only function if the ‘them’ can be truly other, and what is more other than those who cannot feel pleasure. As Simpson continues,

But to be Indian is to love, to have an ache for someone, something -- for the land, for the past, for the present, for the prose that wouldn't come, the lighter lost in a bar fight or the lover lost to AIDS. To be Indian is to feel these emotions, strong, hard, fast and slow and to be Indian is to look at the images of us on screen, on butter containers and then laugh like hell from the knowledge that this is not us. And to be Indian is to take those images, laugh at them again and then do what we will with them.⁹⁰

The women artists discussed in this paper do “what they will” with the notion of Indigenous lovelessness or pleasurelessness by turning that notion on its head and presenting an Indigenous approach to sex and sexuality that cannot be whitewashed by a settler state or a colonial gaze.

The value of these responses must be acknowledged with the social and political climate of the time. These include the colonial anniversaries taking place alongside Canadian policy changes such as the amendment of the *Indian Act* known as Bill C31, the largest Indigenous activist movement and subsequent government response in Oka, QC, the closing of Residential Schools and the emergence of an Indigenous specific feminism. The 1990s and early 2000s became a prime time for Indigenous women artists to take the reign of their own sexual agency and sovereignty from the hands of a culture that, to date, means to determine what and who Indigenous sexual pleasure and desire is for, marking the 1990s as Canada’s sexiest decade.

The artists throughout this paper recognized the importance of representation and what it would mean for future generations to look back and see Indigenous pleasure and

⁹⁰ Ibid.

desire as something beautiful and shameless, beginning to fill a void that left so many previously without the ability to locate their own pleasures as there was no guide to what Indigenous sexualities could look like. It is through these artists' labour of creating that we can understand the weight of a loving touch, a sensuous glance or a moment of ecstatic pleasure as resistance and resilience, as ways of knowing.

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Appendix A: Figures



Fig. 1 *The Lady Teacher*, Daphne Odjig, (1970)



Fig. 2 *Sisters*, Faye HeavyShield (1993)



Fig. 3 *She: a room full of women*, Faye HeavyShield (1994)



Fig. 4 *Mohawks in Beehives*, Shelley Niro (1991)



Fig. 5 *Indians After Sex*, Jeannette Armstrong and Rose Spahan (1995)



Fig. 6 *COSMOSQUAW*, Lori Blondeau (1995)



Fig. 7 *Lonely Surfer Squaw*, Lori Blondeau (1997)



Fig. 8 *Helpless Maiden Makes An "I" Statement*, Thirza Cuthand (1999)



Fig. 9 *Untouchable*, Thirza Cuthand (1997)

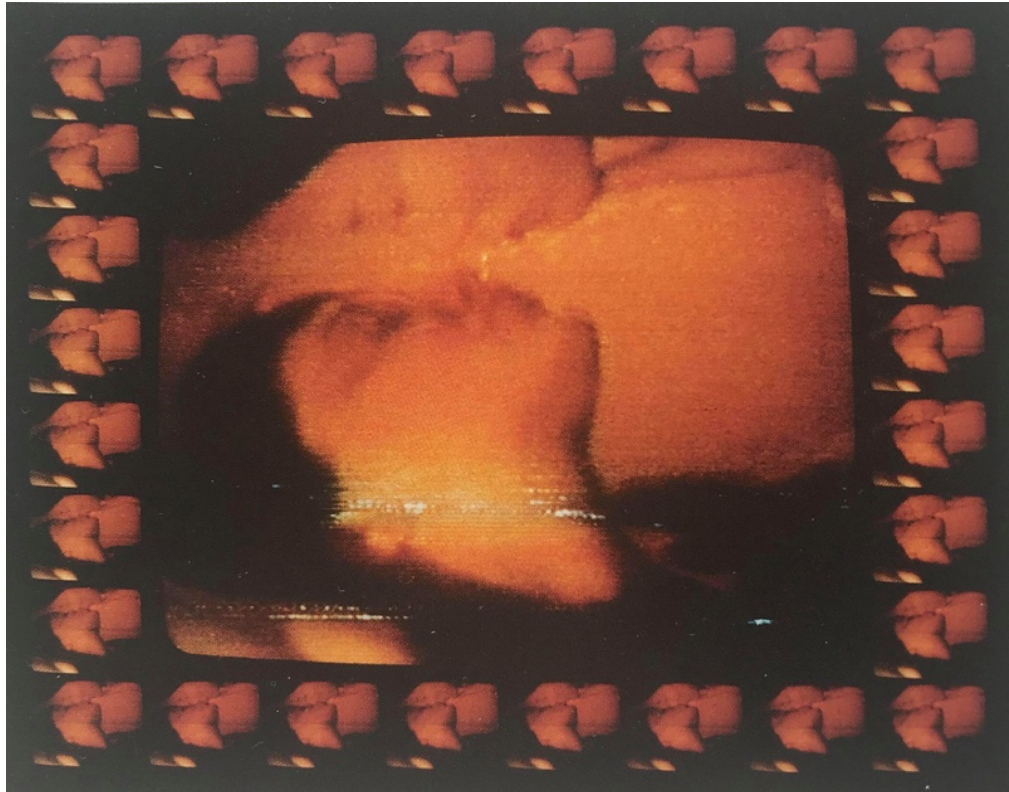


Fig. 10 *Pillow Box 1*, Rosalie Favell (1999)



Fig. 11 *Pillow Box 2*, Rosalie Favell (1999)

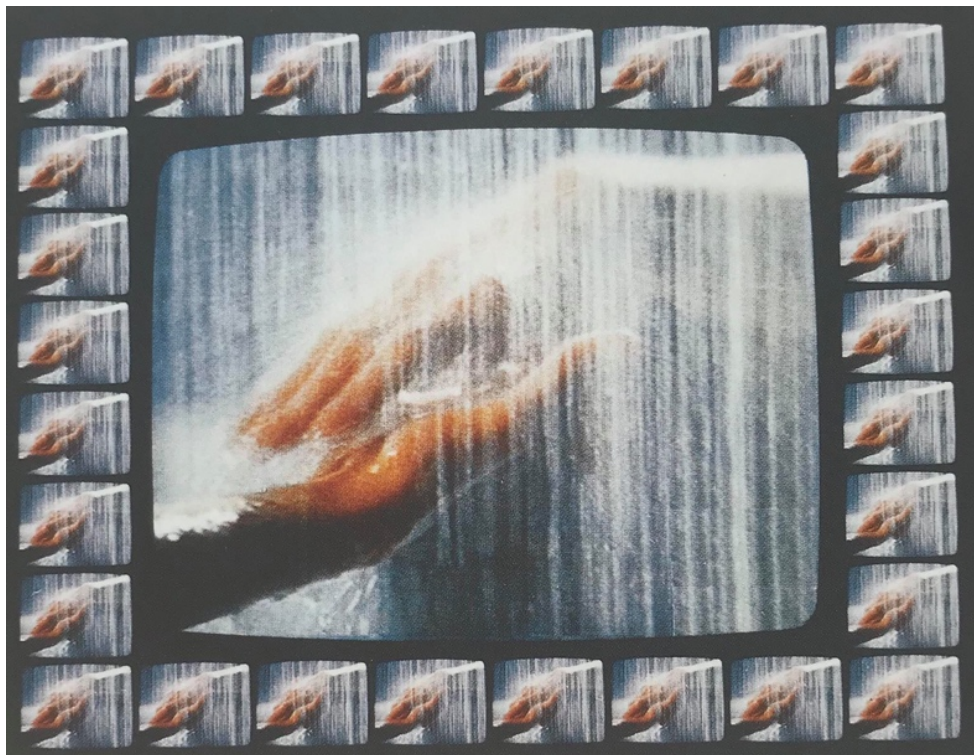


Fig. 12 *Pillow Box 3*, Rosalie Favell (1999)



Fig. 13 *Erotic Scene (four figures)*, Annie Pootoogook (2001)



Fig. 14 *Making Love*, Annie Pootoogook (2003-2004)



Fig. 15 *Woman at her Mirror (Playboy Pose)*, Annie Pootoogook (2003)