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## **“I want to taste your language”: Sovereign Erotics and Language in Indigenous Women’s Poetry on Turtle Island**

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In 2002, Deborah Miranda, quoting Chrystos’ assertion that “Native women’s love poetry and erotics are so invisible, so far back in the closet, that they’re practically in someone else’s apartment,” confirms Chrystos’s words as “the most astute analysis of the situation to date” (146). Two decades after Miranda analyzed the invisibility of Indigenous women’s erotics, this is changing. The American Indian Workshop’s 42<sup>nd</sup> annual conference, “The Sovereign Erotic” (2021), and the present special issue of *Transmotion* clearly celebrate the flourishing and ever-growing presence of Indigenous erotica in arts and academia.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the also growing body of Indigenous erotic literature is produced by Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. As keepers of knowledge and language in their communities (Anderson 71), Indigenous women are “caretakers of this land” (Maracle 42), they embody and promote resurgence (Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* 27-37), and they contribute to “the well-being of the community and the nation as a whole” (Maracle 41). Because of this, Indigenous women have been disproportionately targeted by settler colonialism, which makes their critiques of heteropatriarchy, racism, and settler colonialism as interlocking systems even more telling.<sup>2</sup> As I will demonstrate in this article, Indigenous women’s erotic poetry in Turtle Island affirms their importance in cultural and linguistic continuity and reflects the linguistic variety found in Turtle Island, which includes more than 150 Indigenous languages spoken on these lands as well as colonial languages such as French, Spanish, and English.<sup>3</sup> While some texts are written in one of these colonial languages, others are composed in an Indigenous language (e.g., Inuktitut, Cree,

Innu), and many include several languages. In what is now called Canada, Indigenous writers, scholars, and translators question and confront the colonially-imposed English/French divide to revitalize Indigenous languages and knowledges and to challenge colonial languages and ontologies.<sup>4</sup>

For many authors, artists, and scholars whose work explores questions of sex and gender, sovereignty and sexuality, and decolonization and erotic – including the authors presented here – the erotic is not only sexy but also political since “decolonizing sexuality, and sex positivity and healing more broadly, [are] key to curbing violence in our society in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities” (Tallbear, *Tipi Confessions*). Even more so, for them

to address Indigenous sexuality is to multiply decolonize: the lands overtaken by white settlers; the sexual Puritanism, capitalism, and heteronormativity that necessarily accompanied colonization and that continue as the dominant cultural form in postcolonial societies; and the Indigenous cultural and social histories overwritten by self-serving missionaries and politicians and further obfuscated by well-meaning academics who believed the words of the former. (Mayer 3)

The power of the erotic then lies in dismantling colonial structures and (re)imagining Indigenous present and futures. The importance of language – both the revitalization of Indigenous languages and the reinvention of colonial languages – in Indigenous literatures has also been well documented (e.g., Harjo and Bird; Maria Campbell; David; Bradette). However, to my knowledge, the intersection between the erotic and language in Indigenous women’s erotic poetry has not previously been analyzed and this is what I set out to do here. Both Indigenous languages and sexualities/erotic have been colonized by white settlers. And colonial languages have been wielded to oppress Indigenous erotics: “a Christian language of sexual sin [and] condemnatory language” indeed targeted/targets Indigenous erotic, sex, sexuality, and joy (Mayer 3). It is in

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this context that exploring Indigenous women's erotic poetry as a decolonizing intervention that challenges and transcends linguistic boundaries becomes significant.

Building on an extensive pool of Indigenous women's creative and intellectual expressions, this analysis thus aims to reaffirm Indigenous women's vital role in language preservation and to emphasize the erotic as a communal language that connects individuals, bodies, and communities. In this paper, I analyze selected poems by Melissa Begay (Dine), Tiffany Midge (Hunkpapa Sioux), Chrystos (Menominee), Tenille Campbell (Dene/Métis), January Rogers (Mohawk/Tuscarora), Marie-Andrée Gill (Innu) and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine (Innu) to see how the erotic and language are interrelated. Through this trans-Indigenous (Allen) analysis of Indigenous women's poems, I demonstrate that the erotic contests and transcends the colonial languages and connects to and takes root in Indigenous languages. This paper thus examines the potential of an Indigenous sovereign erotics across languages in Indigenous women's erotica.

Since settler concepts of sexuality have impacted Indigenous peoples and are intrinsically linked to sovereignty and colonialism, "a return to the body" is necessary (Driskill 51). A return to the body is part of what Driskill<sup>5</sup> calls "sovereign erotics" – "an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations" (51). Language, I argue, is an essential part of such histories, traditions, and resistance, especially in the move to revitalize Indigenous languages and in the argument that Indigenous resurgence is rooted in these languages (e.g., Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*). Even more so, the poems show that "erotic wholeness" can be achieved by grounding the erotic in Indigenous languages to affirm community and kinship.

I have come to understand the term "sovereign erotics" through translation. In an earlier stage of working on this project in French, I was propelled to think through translational choices, particularly for "erotics." Erotics can be translated in French as "érotisme," a noun referring to the

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erotic character, tendency, or theme of something, or “*érotique*,” an adjective meaning related to physical love, pleasure, and sexual desires distinct from procreation. Occasionally, the adjective “*érotique*” can be used as a noun and should, in that case, be understood as the concept or practice of eroticism. I thus understand “erotics” as an Indigenous concept and practice of the erotic as it seems more aligned with various Indigenous understandings of the sovereign erotic that consider the erotic as a source of power. As Audre Lorde argues, the erotic gives individuals and communities power: “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives” (11).

**“in the dark / we become the / entire tribe”: sex, sovereignty, and solidarity**

Mark Rifkin argues that struggles for sovereignty and decolonization also need to be struggles for sovereign erotics; he notes that decolonization based on a sovereign erotic will transform how the relation between sexuality and sovereignty is understood and articulated (174). Instead of seeing (Indigenous) sexuality as a reason to exclude an individual or a nation from sovereignty, as colonial discourse does, a sovereign erotic proposes that reappropriating the body and reclaiming the erotic lead exactly to sovereignty and contribute to the decolonial process (Rifkin 174; Finley 41). As Chris Finley argues, bringing “sexy back” to Indigenous Studies

can imagine more open, sex-positive and queer-friendly discussions of sexuality in both Native communities and Native studies. This not only will benefit Native intellectualism but also will challenge the ways in which Native nationalisms are perceived and constructed by Native peoples, and perhaps non-Native peoples. (32)

The poems read here present such a sovereign erotic as they use the erotic to question and rethink various aspects of sovereignty. For example, Chrystos’s “Song for a Lakota Woman” represents Indigenous people’s bodily sovereignty:

As we came  
 around the curve  
 of a bluff      the lake opened on spread wings  
 of a white egret  
 You turned to me with tiny wildflowers in your hands  
 murmuring softly *Winyan Menominee*  
*Anpetu Kin Lila Wasté*  
 all my feathers shone in your voice  
 Brushing through leaves growing from fiery earth  
 we came to a place where we knew  
 our mouths would meet  
 Hurrying to an anonymous room  
 we showered & plunged into bed  
 Your soft arms shining brown over me turning  
 me wild in your hands  
 a flying lake you drank  
 flowers in your eyes  
 as I shouted too loudly coming  
 open (42, emphasis in original)

The poem presents a contrast between a natural environment (“lake,” “white egret,” “wildflowers”) and a contemporary urban setting, “an anonymous room / [where] we showered and plunged into bed.” The anonymous room paints a picture of a one-night stand and the desire between the two women, thus underscoring their individual sovereignty as they determine

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themselves who has access to their bodies and when. Despite their differences, their respect is mutual: the poem is a song for the Lakota woman, and this woman recognizes the Menominee identity of the other saying in Lakota « *Winyan Menominee / Anpetu Kin Lila Wasté* » (translated in a footnote as « Menominee woman, you are good & beautiful »). Additionally, these words in Lakota emerge, just like their desire, in an otherwise English poem (and collection of poetry). As Chrystos herself pointed out during her keynote address at “The Sovereign Erotic” conference, this poem is the first time that an Indigenous language has been used in an erotic Indigenous poem. The very inclusion of an Indigenous language in erotic Indigenous writing embodies sovereignty since the self-determination of one’s language of expression is vital to sovereignty.

Moreover, the other woman is recognized, significantly, in Lakota, which appears here as an intimate language. If the lovers each speak a different language (Lakota and Menominee), expressing oneself in Lakota presents oneself “with a full knowledge of who [one] is and what [one] is to [their] community” (Brant 45) and as such speaks to the intimacy of that moment. The enjambment after the verse “we came to a place where we knew” highlights the power of “presenting oneself” (Brant) and underscores the lovers’ intimate connection to each other as well as to their communities. As a result, where Indigenous erotic and Indigenous language (Lakota) meet, kinship is embodied. Readers are distanced from that intimate moment and only have access to it through the poem and through the poem’s translation into English, unless they are Lakota readers. The appearance of the English translation in a footnote further underscores the reader’s distance. This displacement decenters the supposed “dominant” language and relegates it to the margins to make space for the erotic affirmation and transformation in Lakota. Lakota as language of intimacy and secrecy thus becomes the “private-in-public” to resist colonial conceptions of Indigenous sexualities and erotic writing. Also, the erotic is located precisely within Lakota, and the two lovers, although from different linguistic backgrounds, speak the common language of the erotic to connect them. This way of “presenting oneself” in Lakota and in the

Menominee song allows the lovers to transform their world into one of Queer Indigenous love, joy, and sovereignty.

Sioux poet Tiffany Midge also demonstrates the relationship between sovereignty and sexuality in "Sweetheart." In this poem, the erotic is linked to individual and collective sovereignty as it not only allows individual bodies to become a symbiotic couple but also for them to become the whole tribe:

when we make love

press brown skins

& lovely bones

together

& are 2 half-

breed hearts

grooving

to the same fullblood

dance

we create not only

a whole indian song

(your chippewa chants

to my lakota tune)

but sweetheart

in the dark  
we become the  
entire tribe (WR 54)<sup>6</sup>

While the lexical field of division (“half,” “2”) and the ampersands underline that this poem is about two individuals, the recurring plural first-person pronoun “we” and the lexical field of wholeness (“together,” “same,” “whole,” “entire”) underscore the union between the two bodies/people/lovers. The intermingling of division and union reinforces the relationality between the individuals as well as between their different communities and cultures while considering their differences altogether. In this respect, the poem’s and the lovers’ inscription in traditions – dance, music, and language (Chippewa and Lakota) – is all the more significant. The sexual relationship is a dance through which the two characters create a “whole indian song.” Strikingly, the verse “(your chippewa chants / to my lakota tune)” has been placed between brackets, suggesting these differences are a side thought all the while acknowledging these differences between the two characters and communities during their sexual interaction. Different tribal ties do not restrict their sexual relationship; rather, they appear as the very source of desire, and they enhance their relationality.

The erotic connects two bodies, two individuals from different tribes beyond their communities and cultures to “become the entire tribe.” Given the historical relations between the Lakota and Chippewa – who were enemy tribes in the mid-1600s (Risch 23; Bray 8) – the union of the characters is even more telling; in this way, the poem showcases both individual and collective sovereignty. Individual sovereignty appears in the individuals’ self-determination of and responsibility for their body and erotic encounter, similarly to Chrystos’ poem. Collective sovereignty – which designates self-determination with respect to the organization and government of territories, the preservation and revitalization of language(s), and the continuation



of ceremonies and governance in order to ensure a nation or community can function autonomously – occurs in the characters' respect for each others' community ties. It materializes when these two individuals – one Chippewa, the other Lakota – build their own tribe “in the dark” through their sexual encounter despite the historical differences and relationships between the two tribes.

While “in the dark” might simply refer to it being night in the poem, it also could suggest that the relationship is private and/or hidden. In that sense, the verse refers to Indigenous sexualities being pushed into the dark corners of the closet, to build on Miranda's metaphor cited earlier, since colonization forced Indigenous people into silence around sexuality as a way to survive (Finley 32). At the same time, in that private/ hiding place the differences between the two bodies become invisible which contributes to creating mutual recognition. The lack of capitalization in the terms “indian,” “lakota,” and “chippewa” support this recognition by placing the tribes on equal footing with each other – showing simultaneously that historical tensions between tribes can be overcome. In this way, Midge transforms the dark, colonial space of hidden sexualities into an erotic space of individual and collective sovereignty and community-building through the lovers' sexual encounter.

In a different but related way, January Rogers challenges the sovereignty of Canada as a nation-state in the poem “Confederation 150.” From the first verse, “Ah Canada,” Rogers calls Canada's national anthem into mind. Later, she writes: “there is no home if there is no native land,” which is a criticism of the anthem's line “our home on native land,” which continues to erase Indigenous peoples as original inhabitants of these lands. Amidst the numerous other criticisms of the anthem, confederation, and celebrations of “Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” Rogers also critiques the country's official bilingualism:

did you remember

to ask permissions

or make paper consultations

using the queen’s english

ah Canada

do not slip me the tongue

and call it a french kiss

how do two languages survive 65 or more? (30)

Addressing the state (“you”), Rogers critiques the consultations and treaties that were carried out and written in English without regard for Indigenous languages, knowledges, and treaty-making practices. In fact, at the time of numbered treaty signings, many Indigenous signatories did not speak or read English. And, even more importantly, Indigenous treaty-making practices, which are relational, have been ignored by settlers – the British in particular (Vowel 248).<sup>7</sup> Referring to English as the “queen’s english,” Rogers underscores the colonial nature of the language and of said documents and consultations. However, the lack of capitalization of ‘english’ challenges its power and supposed superiority. Capitalization of words is indeed closely related to recognition of identity and power: capitalization of Indigenous terms recognizes Indigenous peoples’ identities, institutions, and collective rights and “redress[es] mainstream society’s history of regarding Indigenous Peoples as having no legitimate national identities; governmental, social, spiritual, or religious institutions; or collective rights” (Younging 77). While Rogers capitalizes most terms related to Indigenous identity and rights to acknowledge them, she refuses to capitalize ‘english’ and ‘french’ in this poem, thus displacing them as institutional and rightful languages.

Rogers’ critique of French that follows is embodied and connected to the erotic through the slang/colloquial expression “slip someone the tongue,” meaning French kissing. The negative imperative (“do not”) is used here not only to stop the other from kissing the poem’s speaker but also to prevent them from “slipping her the language,” so to speak, thus establishing sovereignty by setting physical boundaries and determining which language one speaks. The poem’s speaker

does not want to be forced to speak French – or English as affirmed in the previous verses. Moreover, the verse “and *call* it a french kiss” (emphasis added) alludes to the state’s tendency to wrap truths in distracting words to cover up their real meaning and avoid making significant changes, especially regarding reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> Whereas a French kiss is often regarded as erotic, here it disguises the ugly truth of colonial languages still being forced upon Indigenous peoples, as confirmed in the last verse of the poem, “how do two languages survive 65 or more?” These verses show that the speaker’s being slipped the tongue, in both senses of the word (kiss and language), is non-consensual: this links colonial sexual violence toward Indigenous women to the attempted erasure of Indigenous languages and imposition of colonial languages. Hinting to the erotic, Rogers thus criticizes and challenges the state’s sovereignty by including various critiques such as that of Canada’s supposed bilingualism.

In her poem “La Cueillette” (the gathering or harvest in English), Innu poet, artist, and activist Natasha Kanapé Fontaine also mobilizes the erotic to create lines of solidarity across peoples. While Midge portrayed community building between two Indigenous individuals from different tribes, Kanapé Fontaine displays relationality between Indigenous peoples and BIPOC elsewhere, specifically Haitians. In the poem, the *bleuets*, blueberries, represent Indigenous people in Canada, and the *abricots*, apricots, represent (Creole) Haitians. Although I have analyzed this metaphor in detail in previous work (see Brouwer 2017), I want to emphasize here how solidarity and community between Indigenous peoples in Canada and Haitians is expressed partly through the erotic. This solidarity is underlined by the poetry collection’s title, *Bleuets et abricots* (*Blueberries and Apricots* in English translation). This metaphor is intertwined with an erotic image of these two fruits entering the speaker’s body, amounting to the union of the speaker and a male lover:

mes artères draineront mon sang

monte la fièvre

gonflent mes seins  
 gonfle ma vulve  
 exalte le fruit du désir  
 rien que pour poindre le jour  
 avec la sensation d'être pleine  
 il viendra  
 à moi  
 bien-aimé  
 gonfler mes songes (43)<sup>9</sup>

It is through this sexual encounter that the speaker finally feels full or complete. The erotic character of the poem is strengthened by the enumeration that follows later on:

femme indigène  
 femme front  
 femme territoire  
 femme terre noire  
 femme plaisir (43)<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, accumulating various recognitions of women across boundaries, “Indigenous woman, territory woman, black earth woman,” the stanza ends – or climaxes, if you will – in “pleasure woman.”

The reference to Haitians, especially in relation to sexual pleasure, is also strengthened by Kanapé Fontaine’s intertextual references to one of the key texts of Négritude, namely Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. In another poem, for example, Kanapé Fontaine writes, “*aho pour la joie / aho pour l’amour*” (58 and 60, emphasis in original), referring to Césaire’s words “*Eia pour la joie / Eia pour l’amour*” (121). Négritude was developed by francophone intellectuals, writers, and politicians from the African diaspora in the 1930s and recognizes a

Black African culture – including economic, political, intellectual, moral, artistic, and social values – among the people of Africa and its diaspora across continents.<sup>11</sup> According to philosophers of Négritude, it is crucial to connect with Black roots. So, through these references to the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, as well as the symbolism of the apricots representing Haitian Creole people, Kanapé Fontaine's poem (and her collection of poetry) brings together Africans, Haitians, and Indigenous peoples to show that origins play an essential role in identity as well as to demonstrate that differences can be surmounted. And, significantly, the erotic plays an important part in that return to and reconsideration of origins, as “femme plaisir” and “*aho pour la joie / aho pour l'amour*” demonstrate.

Strikingly, “La cueillette” contains verses both in Haitian Creole and Innu:

Une douce langue dira à toutes les oreilles

*Mwen fou pou li*

*Tshetshue nitshishkueikun, tshetshue nishatshiau* (42, emphasis in original)<sup>12</sup>

In the English translation in *Asymptote*, Howard Scott translates these verses in a footnote: “I am crazy about him / it is true he makes me dizzy, it is true I love him” (Kanapé Fontaine, “Gathering”). Interestingly, Fontaine uses two languages to express love, while the first verse suggests there is only one language. Similar to Rogers' play on the expression slipping someone the tongue, Kanapé Fontaine uses the ambiguous meaning of ‘langue’ for “une douce langue” to mean both a soft/sweet tongue and a soft/sweet language. As both language and body part, this one ‘langue’ positions love and the erotic as a universal language, which is underscored too by the metonymy « à toutes les oreilles » referring to all humanity. In addition, the double meaning of “douce” as soft and sweet is not only appropriate in a poem about fruit, but also positions the language as something that can be tasted and is embodied. The collection of poetry in French does not provide any translations of the verses in Innu and Haitian Creole, which could create a sentiment of distance or exclusion in the non-Innu or Haitian Creole-speaking reader and

a sense of inclusion among those who do speak (one of) those languages.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the absence of translation refutes the supposed domination of the colonial language, even more so since this affirmation of the erotic and love is done in two « minority » languages. However, the idea of the erotic as a universal language suggests that a literal understanding is not needed to comprehend the language of the body, the erotic, and love. In this way, the colonial language becomes superfluous. Situating the erotic in two Indigenous languages, Kanapé Fontaine thus positions the erotic as a universal language to demonstrate the relationality and solidarity between peoples, in particular Haitians and Innu.

**“lécher la surface de l'eau avec la langue que je / ne parle pas”: the erotic as a universal language and embodied language learning**

The erotic as (universal) language and means of communication is explored by other authors as well to demonstrate how the erotic brings people and communities closer together. The body speaks, and bodies connecting speak. Dine poet Melissa N. Begay, for example, writes in her poem ‘Clips from a desert in Arizona’:

what has become my unfinished dialogue  
 emerges in the strength of your kiss  
 speak with the rapid movement of your quiet hands  
 the tongue is a metaphor of love and evolution  
 (...)  
 the scorching sun blinds my view of you  
 complete and unbroken  
 pieces of wet dirt fill my spaces where you will  
 return later and cleanse my wounds (WR 99)

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Intimacy and the erotic are portrayed as a language, as is underscored by the lexical field of communication (“dialogue,” “speak,” “tongue”). Begay positions the body as a means of communication through expressions like “speak with the rapid movement of your hands” and “speak through gestures.” Additionally, the ambiguous meaning, again, of “the tongue” connects communication and the body into one. If the tongue, in both meanings, “is a metaphor of love and evolution,” the erotic becomes a universal language.

Erotica and the language of the body have long been silenced by colonialism and the fear that came with it, as Midge alludes to in “The Night Horse”:

(Remember) those nights waiting  
for the dark flash of motion  
to repeat our names  
in a language we feared to speak? (WR 69)

In the same poem, however, Midge suggests that love and eroticism can liberate Indigenous people from this (colonial) fear:

We say the night  
is the only sense  
there is  
because only in the darkness  
can we begin to see.  
And so we say  
love is a delivery  
from something called fear (that  
terror like entering  
the throats of wounded animals).  
(...)

Night and day  
 darkness and light  
 exchange elegant gestures  
 like dreams captured in a net  
 of frozen stars.  
 And we say  
 only in the dark  
 can we begin to see. (69)

The repetition of “only” positions eroticism as the sole means to connect to someone and to understand the world. The recurrence of the verb “say,” in turn, indicates that the erotic as language has an essential role in that. Moreover, the enjambments in “night and day / darkness and light / exchange elegant gestures” put the onus on the communication that exists between two opposite but complementary elements, while the ambiguous meaning of “darkness” in these lines referring to it being night, to dark times, as well as to the “private-in-public” (similar to “in the dark” cited earlier) strengthens the importance of the common language of the body that liberates Indigenous erotica. Here too, eroticism is a form of communication and connection between human beings; one that, even in the dark and amidst fear, allows us to see hope and love. As Audre Lorde writes,

The sharing of joy whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessons the threat of their difference. (Lorde 10)

As we have seen so far, several authors play with the double meaning of tongue, thus inscribing language in the body and the erotic: Rogers uses the double imagery of “slipping the tongue” to denounce sexual violence against Indigenous women and the imposition of colonial languages on Indigenous peoples; Kanapé Fontaine and Begay use their word play on ‘langue’ and ‘tongue’ to



position the erotic as a universal language. Two other authors, Marie-Andrée Gill and Tenille Campbell, use its double meaning to explore language learning as an embodied process.

In *Fruiter*, Gill writes: “lécher la surface de l’eau avec la langue que je / ne parle pas” (24). The enjambment in the first verse evokes at first glance that “la langue” is simply the speaker’s mouth’s tongue that licks the water’s surface. However, the second verse, “ne parle pas,” grammatically connects to “langue” and translates to “the language that I don’t speak.” Gill thus creates an image of an unspoken language licking the water’s surface. This can be read as a testimony to language loss and revitalization among many Indigenous peoples: the poem’s speaker does not really speak her language, Innu, which enables her to access the knowledge only on the surface. Several Indigenous writers assert that understanding traditional knowledge comes from speaking (and learning) one’s ancestral language(s). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, for example, argues that Indigenous resurgence is deeply rooted in Nishnaabewomin, and possibilities for decolonization are embedded within the language itself (*Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* 49-64). In that sense, these verses point to the limitations one might experience from not speaking the language and being able to access only the surface of what there is to know. At the same time, however, the connection from the language to the land – or the water in this case – is not to be underestimated. In her famous “Land Speaking,” Jeanette Armstrong asserts that Indigenous languages are born and learned from the land:

As I understand it from my Okanagan ancestors, language was given to us by the land we live within. (...) I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me that it was the land that changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place. All my elders say that it is the land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings – to its

language – and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations. It is the land that speaks N’silxchn through the generations of ancestors to us. It is N’silxchn, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan people, which surrounds me in its primal wordless state. (146)

If language can be learned from the land, the speaker in Gill’s poem might just learn a piece of her language each time she licks the water’s surface. In that sense, the tongue is both the tool used to learn and that which is learned. Language, body, and land thus become closely intertwined as embodied language learning.

In *Good Medicine*, Tenille Campbell connects language and the erotic to demonstrate how language is learned during and through erotic encounters, thus positioning language learning as an embodied experience as well:

I want to taste your language  
 as you whisper it into my mouth  
 let my tongue lick and suck  
 your vowels and consonants (20)

Language learning is here a physical, embodied experience. This is underscored by the sensory verb “to taste” and by the lexical field of the mouth (“mouth,” “tongue”). The mouth gives a double image: on the one hand, language is spoken through the mouth by the movement of lips and tongue; on the other hand, language is here an erotic experience. In the verse “as you whisper it into my mouth,” the verb “whisper” paints an intimate image. Usually, language is whispered into someone’s ear, so it is easier to hear and so that the information conveyed stays intimate and confidential. However, in Campbell’s poem, it is not the ear that receives the language but the mouth, again highlighting the physicality and erotic aspects of language learning. In that sense, language learning happens through feeding of each other and appears as a form of nourishment. The next verse confirms this as the speaker’s tongue “lick[s] and suck[s]

[their] vowels and consonants,” thus connecting language and the body again through sensory, sensual, and sexual experience. Indeed, the senses play an important role in these verses: taste (“taste”, “mouth,” “tongue,” “lick and suck”), hear (“whisper”), and touch (“lick and suck”) are essential parts of the sensory, erotic, and embodied way of language learning.

**“make me / speak pleasure / once again”: language, erotic, and tradition**

By challenging sovereignty and linguistic power imbalances and situating the erotic as universal language and embodied language learning, the poems discussed here assist in a (partial) return to Indigenous languages and cultures. Even more so, the sovereign erotic traced across languages in these poems constitutes a resurgence and a continuance of the complex dynamics and traditions of gender and sexuality among Indigenous peoples that have often been hidden and targeted by colonial discourses and cultures. In that sense, the erotic enables access to ancient languages, traditions, and knowledges. In *#IndianLovePoems*, Tenille Campbell writes:

broken Cree words

whisper down my body

between my legs

into my universe

where you tell me stories

with tongue and lips

and I take

tradition into me

until I burst

I feel invincible

almighty and woman

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with legs splayed

letting him see

what pleasure looks like

without shame

this is what my ancestors

must have felt like

come to me again

my gifted Cree man

taste your language

on my skin

in my pleasure

make me moan

in those forgotten

syllables

make me

speak pleasure

once again (42)

Language is indeed a physical experience. The verses "broken Cree words / whisper down my body" and "taste your language on my skin" show that language is felt on the body. The first stanza positions the erotic as tradition: storytelling is not only a physical act, being spoken "with tongue and lips," but also an erotic one. If "tak[ing] tradition into me" symbolizes the act of sexual penetration and "until I burst" the female climax, Indigenous erotica is celebrated as a continuing

tradition – as Chris Finley notes, in Indigenous communities “sex is always there” and “sexy never left” (42). Campbell indeed portrays this continuance as she writes, “this is what my ancestors / must have felt like,” thus inscribing the erotic (back) into generations of Indigenous peoples and making the body a translator of the past into the present and future. Similar to Roger’s poem, Campbell links the attempted erasure of Indigenous languages to the colonization of Indigenous (women’s) bodies. The verses “broken Cree words” and “in those forgotten / syllables” refer to the loss of Indigenous languages, while the fact that these “forgotten syllables” are “moaned” suggests that the erotic had been suppressed as well. The last stanza of the poem portrays the erotic as a language: “make me / speak pleasure / once again.” The adverbial phrase “once again” underlines the renewal of the erotic language. Although the poem deals with language loss and colonized Indigenous bodies, it focuses on the continuance of languages and the erotic as a tradition that is accessed through the interconnection between them (and their bodies).

In another poem, Campbell develops this idea of erotic tradition by including several Dene words and verses to express eroticism and intimacy:

I want to kiss  
 dënësuliné  
 back into your skin  
 lips to your shoulder  
 nails tracing kinship  
 down your back  
 down to your feet  
 where you are grounded in us

I want to give you ceremony  
 under gentle moons and watchful stars

I want you to moan nezų  
 taste the language on your tongue  
 as you enter me  
 I want my ehaskëth  
 to be your first taste  
 of our oldest medicine

lie in my bed  
 under thick mink blankets  
 arms curled around you  
 tracing features  
 them dene naghé from black lake  
 cheekbones from fond du lac  
 those lips from la loche  
 helch'ul from patuanak  
 don't you know you are one of us  
 neᓃá nohonᓃë nechá  
 come back to us  
 sehel hıgqı (*Good Medicine* 90-91)

Tradition made physical and erotic can be read throughout the poem through the themes of kinship, ceremony, and medicine. Kinship is first made physical in the verses "nails tracing kinship / down your back / down to your feet." Later, it is expressed through the physical traits from other Indigenous communities/nations: "them dene naghé from black lake / cheekbones from fond du lac / those lips from la loche / helch'ul from patuanak." Once again, cultural difference becomes

the very source of sexual desire as the poem's speaker seeks Indigenous people from various Indigenous communities. Similar to Midge's poem, Campbell uses the erotic to surmount differences between lovers from different communities. Despite their differences, these individual bodies become part of collective bodies as is affirmed in the verse "don't you know you are one of us." This kinship building is further expressed through ceremony and medicine.

In this poem, erotic encounter is ceremony. The repetition and parallelism of "I want" in the second stanza indeed build up to the ultimate ceremony: "I want you to moan nezų / taste the language on your tongue / as you enter me." And as this ceremony takes place "under gentle moons and watchful stars," it is witnessed by the whole universe. In that sense, the lovers affirm their place in the universe through their sexual encounter. These verses connect back to the previous poem in which the speaker took "tradition into [her] / until [she] burst[s]." The third repetition of "I want" introduces, literally, the climax to this stanza and to this ceremony: "I want my ehaskĕth / to be your first taste / of our oldest medicine." According to the glossary provided in *Good Medicine*, "ehaskĕth" is Dene for orgasm. Thus, Campbell portrays orgasm as ceremony and even more so as Indigenous peoples' "oldest medicine," good medicine. The use of Dene throughout the poem (notably "nezų" meaning "good" and "ehaskĕth" orgasm) reflects the desire to kiss the Dene language back into the body as the first verses of the poem announce: "I want to kiss / dĕnĕsulĭnĕ / back into your skin." "Dĕnĕsulĭnĕ" can refer not only to the Dene language, which confirms here the intrinsic connection between the language and the erotic, but also to the Dene people, which then suggests that eroticism connects Indigenous people to their languages, communities, ancestors, and future generations. This connection to other Indigenous people through the erotic is also confirmed in the last stanza that recognizes people from other nations and communities through their physical traits. Moreover, the last verses contain a call to the lover to "come back to us," their people, since "neᵗá nohonıᵗĕ nechá," "because of you our story is big."

The erotic, rooted in Indigenous languages, is a way back/to community. The intersection between the erotic and language here thus amounts to kinship building across differences, spaces, and generations.

### **“I want to taste your language”: Conclusion**

These poems reveal a deep relationship between erotics and Indigenous languages; as Tenille Campbell writes, “when we fuck (...) ancient languages are understood” (*Good Medicine* 83). These poets employ Indigenous languages to convey the erotic and thereby challenge colonial languages and discourse, while the erotic as a language overcomes linguistic boundaries between various languages/individuals/bodies. The erotic as a universal language connects the Indigenous speakers and characters in the poems to the land, their ancestral languages, their communities, other Indigenous communities, and other BIPOC communities. That is, the erotic, as it appears in these poems, creates lines of solidarity across languages. A sovereign erotic across languages thus lays bare how state sovereignty is challenged (Rogers) and Indigenous sovereignty achieved (Chrystos; Midge); how community and solidarity are built among Indigenous peoples (Chrystos; Midge; Campbell) and between Indigenous peoples and BIPOC elsewhere (Kanapé Fontaine); and how the erotic becomes a language for connection (Chrystos; Kanapé Fontaine; Begay) and embodied language learning (Gill; Campbell). In this respect, the cross-lingual sovereign erotic in Indigenous women’s poetry is anti- as well as decolonial and firmly places itself within Indigenous languages, cultures, traditions, land, and knowledges. After all, Indigenous sovereign erotics is sexy and political: Indigenous presence and continuance, sovereignty, language learning, connection and solidarity and pleasure are, to borrow from Campbell, “why we [Indigenous people] erotica Indigenous” (83).



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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's ground-breaking anthology *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica* appeared in 2003, only a year after Miranda's observation. Single-authored books of Indigenous erotics have been published by writers such as Tenille Campbell, Chrystos, Arielle Twist, and Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau (author of the first erotic novel written in French by an Indigenous woman). Artistic expressions comprise the exhibition 'Native American Body of Art' (2017) by Brent Learned and the "sexy performance laboratory" *Tipi Confessions* produced by Kim TallBear, Tracy Bear, and Kirsten Lindquist. In academia, key work in Indigenous erotics and sexuality comes from Mark Rifkin, Deborah Miranda, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Daniel Heath Justice, Chris Finley, and Lisa Tatonetti, among others.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Barker, Alison Hargreaves, Dian Million, and Grace Ouellette, among others, have demonstrated the uneven impacts of the Indian Act's regulations on Indigenous women and children. Rita Dhamoon, in turn, analyzes how settler colonialism, racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, and classism intersect in the matrix of domination. In addition to Indigenous women, 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people have also been disproportionately affected by settler colonialism. Two-spirit and queer bodies were/are seen as an extreme threat to settler society and colonization, resulting in a repeated attacks on their bodies, beings, and knowledges (Simpson; Belcourt). For more information on queer Indigenous resistance, see, for example, the work in *Queer Indigenous Studies*. And see *In Good Relation*, edited by Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr, for an exploration of the interconnections between Indigenous feminist theories and Indigenous queer studies.

<sup>3</sup> Turtle Island is used by some Indigenous peoples to refer to the continent of North America. As this paper focuses on language and particularly the use of Indigenous languages in Indigenous women's poetry across Turtle Island, my referring to the continent as Turtle Island rather than North America mirrors the poems to challenge settler colonial geographies and ontologies. While I only mention French, Spanish, and English as colonial languages present in Turtle Island (since these seem to be the major ones), I recognize that other colonial languages (e.g., Dutch, Portuguese, German) are also spoken here and that they have impacted Indigenous peoples. This article is influenced by my position as a settler scholar fluent in three colonial languages – Dutch, French, and English.

<sup>4</sup> Around the challenging of the English/French divide and the importance of Indigenous languages in Indigenous literatures, see for example Bradette; Brouwer, "Comparative Indigenous Literature" and "Indigenous Literatures at the Crossroads of Languages."

<sup>5</sup> In October 2023, the Tribal Alliance Against Frauds issued a report stating that Qwo-Li Driskill does not have Cherokee, Lenape (Delaware) and Osage ancestry (as Driskill had claimed) which is supported by genealogical documents and "letters from all the nations they falsely claim ancestry from, who all clearly state that neither they nor their ancestors are citizens of their nations" (Tribal Alliance Against Frauds). Much of their academic work is based on their "experience" as a two-spirit Cherokee person putting into question the validity of these works. I, nevertheless, engage the notion of the sovereign erotic, proposed by Driskill in their 2004 essay "Stolen from Our Bodies," and its basic definition by Driskill here since this theory of the erotic has been used in similar and expanded ways by other queer Indigenous writers including Chrystos, Deborah Miranda, and many of the poets in this article. Additionally, *Sovereign Erotics*, co-edited by Driskill, Justice, Miranda and Tatonetti, includes essays by many respected Indigenous scholars, so the term "sovereign erotics" itself is recognized and used in the academic community. Although I briefly mention the introduction of the "sovereign erotic" by Driskill here, the article centers other (poetic) interpretations of the sovereign erotic.

<sup>6</sup> The poems by Tiffany Midge and Melissa N. Begay referenced in this article have been cited from Kateri Akiwenzie Damm’s anthology *Without Reservation*. I will cite these poems with the abbreviation WR followed by the page number.

<sup>7</sup> See Chelsea Vowel’s *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, & Inuit Issues in Canada* (notably chapters 27 and 28) for an overview of treaty-making and the different kinds of treaties (e.g., friendship, numbered, and modern treaties). Vowel points out that the renewal of treaty relationships is a core aspect of treaty-making.

<sup>8</sup> There have been several critiques of Canada’s reconciliation discourse which, as some argue, sounds promising but has not produced (enough) significant change. Rachel Flowers, for example, is critical of the pressure to forgive placed on Indigenous peoples in the context of reconciliation. She proposes a refusal to forgive as a powerful form of resistance to “this old relationship in new clothes” that is steeped in a politics of recognition (42). A politics of recognition ultimately upholds settler superiority and power (Coulthard). David Garneau, in turn, argues that the use of the word reconciliation provides a false understanding of our past and “constricts our collective sense of the future” (30). Instead, he proposes to think of Indigenous-settler relations in terms of conciliation, an ongoing process, and a continuous relationship.

<sup>9</sup> “my arteries will drain my blood / fever rising / my breasts swell / my vulva swells / excites the fruit the desire / just to see the break of day / with the feeling of being full / he’ll come / to me / the beloved / to swell my dreams” (Kanapé Fontaine, *Blueberries and Apricots* 24-25).

<sup>10</sup> “indigenous woman / cheeky woman / territory woman / black earth woman / pleasure woman” (Kanapé Fontaine, *Blueberries and Apricots* 25).

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Aimé Césaire, other writers and philosophers of *Négritude* include Léopold Sédar Senghor and Leon Damas. The three are often considered the “fathers” of the movement. More recently, the work of sisters Paulette and Jeanne Nardal has been recognized as also having played a vital role in laying the theoretical foundations of *Négritude*.

<sup>12</sup> “A sweet tongue will say to all ears / Mwen fou pou li / Tshetshue nitshishkueikun, tshetshue nishatshiau (Kanapé Fontaine, *Blueberries and Apricots* 24)

<sup>13</sup> I have analyzed the translation and non-translation of Innu in Natasha Kanapé Fontaine’s poetry in more detail elsewhere. See Brouwer 2021.

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