
Erotic Art as A Material Cultural Representation of Indigenous Decolonial Sexuality

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This paper theorizes the importance of Indigenous erotic art as a sexual imagining and analyzes its use as the material representation of an Indigenous decolonial sexuality in the *Native American Body of Art* exhibit. I argue that Native peoples can imagine alternative decolonial sexual realities by drawing from Indigenous self-representations, traditions, and histories represented in art by showing Indigenous depictions of matrilineality and Native women's traditional or pre-colonial influence in society.

Indigenous erotic art offers visual creations about the body, motherhood, and sexuality by centering the perspective of Native artists and self-representations. I reference Indigenous erotic art as the material for imaginings that promote a future where Indigenous decolonial sexuality is a cultural norm in Native communities. As I develop herein, the guiding principles of Indigenous decolonial sexuality are respect, open communication, awareness of Indigenous sexual stories, living as a sexually sovereign person who acknowledges the effects of settler colonialism upon gender and sexuality, and actively works to decolonize their own sexuality. Indigenous imaginings in Indigenous erotic art contribute to Indigenous decolonial sexuality as representations of what the erotic is, according to Indigenous perspectives. My conceptualizations of the erotic as a useful form of self-expression and power draws from self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde, specifically *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* and her poem *The Black Unicorn*.

Lorde's writings about power and sexuality are unique given that she breaks several boundaries through her cultural critiques and rejection of forms of social domination, while offering new imaginings of what could be. As a poet, Lorde understands the influence of writing poetry to promote change by altering peoples' feelings (*Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*, 0:44). Lorde's intersectional contributions are grounded in her own identities, contributing to the feminist movement in a manner that recognizes difference amongst women. This acknowledgement of difference that exists amongst women refuses a limited monolithic view of women and allows me to embrace her ideologies of the varying degrees of sexism experienced by women and find the places where she “fits” with an Indigenous feminist analysis of Indigenous erotic art. Lorde's attention to difference amongst women allows for specific interpretations of experiences with violence. The differences amongst women when centering the topic of sexuality is essential to the critiques of settler sexuality. Lorde states, “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 117). Lorde's contributions actively work against gender and sexual dominance through recognizing the fallacy of accepting white American normativity as the ideal standard with specific critique aimed at heteropatriarchal dominance. Lorde states,

It is not the destiny of Black America to repeat white America's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life. If Black men continue to define “femininity” instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic European terms, they restrict our access to each other's energies. Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 63).

Lorde's reference to a “sick society” is about white supremacy that continues to terrorize American society today. Lorde cautions African men in the US to avoid sexism by understanding the

European ideals of femininity as a white male disease within a sick society.¹ Lorde later claims that Africana men who assume privilege and harm Africana women are only serving colonial interests by perpetuating oppression within Africana communities (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 63).

Rather than idealize the norms of white American society, Lorde encourages Africana communities to actively reject white ideals of femininity because they are based in dominance over others and ultimately serve white supremacy. Black sociologist Patricia Hill Collins states, “All women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, [W]hite femininity as normative” (193). These standards of femininity and beauty create dominance over all other women that serves patriarchy. For example, while Africana men may benefit from the privilege of being men within a heteropatriarchal society, these practices are based in a society of supremacy and sickness that is nothing to be endorsed (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 63). This caution is also important to Indigenous peoples because it demonstrates the need to reject white supremacist ideals, rooted in sexism and ideals of femininity, which relate to sexuality and the process of decolonizing sexuality. The re-definition of beauty and femininity based in Native standards is necessary and artwork can provide those examples.

In a similar way, I advocate for Indigenous peoples to critique and ultimately reject heteropatriarchal oppressions within Indigenous communities based on two main points: 1) The current status quo of sexual hierarchies that exists in the US are based in oppression and dominance over others and serves a heterosexual, white male agenda and 2) There are other ways of sexually relating to each other, as human beings, that are culturally distinct and worth recovering based within Indigenous conceptions and representations. As an example, Indigenous erotic art offers sexual imaginings based in Indigenous perspectives about motherhood, body types, and sexuality—all of which I address in this essay through my discussion of contemporary Indigenous artists.

Lorde offers a new way of thinking about women’s sexuality as a sensory connection to the erotic, based on the complicated relationship between women’s erotic power and society. When I read *The Black Unicorn* by Lorde, I understand the possibility that the Black unicorn is Black women’s sexuality.

The black unicorn is greedy.
The black unicorn is impatient.
The black unicorn was mistaken
for a shadow
or symbol
and taken
through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury.
It is not on her lap where the horn rests
but deep in her moonpit
growing.

The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free (Lorde *The Black Unicorn* 3).

To reimagine Black women’s sexuality as both greedy and restless, impatient and unrelenting, and mistaken and free reveals a tension in wanting to be understood on Black women’s terms, after all Black women are the one’s living Black women’s sexuality. Black women’s sexuality, like all women’s sexualities, are never solely their own but defined by those outside of women’s

categories. The projection upon Black women's sexuality, like Native women's, is stereotypically fraught with problematic ascriptions of hypersexuality, sexual availability, and promiscuity that all align with the settler colonial agenda of *taking*. Instead, Lorde promotes a Black women's sexuality that wants redefinition and has grown impatient from being misunderstood. She wants a Black women's sexuality that is free, like my desire for Native women's sexuality to also be free.

This new way of thinking about women's sexuality allows for other possibilities to exist outside of the current violence many Native women experience in their sexual encounters. The ongoing violence waged against Native girls' and women's bodies results in a dearth of sexual self-expression and awareness. My understanding of the erotic is based on Lorde's approach, given the expansive way she employs mythical poetic expressions as a means of connecting the erotic to sensorial experiences. Re-defining the erotic is useful for decolonizing Native women's sexualities, especially as this topic remains predominantly centered in colonial violence. Indigenous women's re-definition of sexuality should not be informed by white male viewpoints, similar to the way Indigenous feminisms defines itself as not wanting to inherit the objects, positions, or worldviews of white men in dominant society (St. Denis 48). Instead, a rejection of sexual violence, exploitation, and predatory behavior/thoughts is going to encourage differing sexual expressions with the possibility of creative rebirth and sexual significance. Indigenous women have sexual expressions and desires that are their own, rooted in cultural framing. For example, Lorde shares a perspective on ethical lovemaking through being conscious of our erotic feelings and to *share* in the power of each other's feelings, as an antidote to heal the damage previously done to the body through living in a violent society (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 58).

This is a new way of viewing women's sexuality that can be useful to Native women's re-defining of sexuality because it is based in experiences with multiple ways of knowing joy within the erotic that does not prioritize penile-vaginal sex. It is this longing for joy within the erotic that is relevant to an Indigenous decolonial sexuality, as demonstrated in some of the Indigenous erotic

art I analyze in this paper. Indigenous erotic art can represent this heightened sensual awareness and should be shared amongst Indigenous peoples for greater understanding of how sexuality and the erotic is understood.

The ways Native women are interrogating the erotic for themselves and how other women who view their work in the exhibit makes a valuable contribution to an Indigenous decolonial sexuality. One reason for this meaningful contribution of Indigenous erotic art is that it is rare, and representation is crucial to imagining *how* Native women’s sexuality can be expressed. Unsurprisingly, Native women do not portray Native women’s erotic life as damaged, sexually exploitative, shameful, or having inclinations to non-consensually dominant others. I argue that Indigenous erotic art materially supports Indigenous decolonial sexuality as a representation of what is possible. Indigenous erotic art is demonstrated through Lorde’s theory of the erotic as power, leading the artwork itself to represent Indigenous decolonial sexuality.

Many of the women artists I spoke with who contributed to the Indigenous erotic art exhibit were met with concerns about community critique and disapproval of their work due to the sexualized nature of the project. Some of the artists shared concern about the anticipation of criticism, which could have held them back from participating in an exhibit featuring nude Native bodies, yet they bravely contributed. In US society, broadly speaking, women are overtly sexualized, but once women re-define their own sexuality by returning the gaze through their art, they are often met with harsh criticism, shame, and other ways of controlling women’s sexual self-expression. To challenge colonial patriarchal systems, Native women must be encouraged to self-actualize and self-define Indigenous sexuality.

An ultimate form of control over women’s sexuality is expressed in the ways people restrict themselves and each other (Lorde and Rich 730). In short, Native American communities can challenge perceptions of what is considered perverse in dominant society rather than adhering to normative understandings that discussions about sex are to remain silent (Foucault 4).

Indigenous erotic art has a great potential to open these conversations and make it acceptable to talk about sexuality within Native societies.

I consider the *Native American Body of Art* exhibit a contribution to the erotic as a form of power and analyze the art of three Native American women artists who presented their artwork at this exhibit. It is my intention to show Indigenous erotic art as a valuable contribution to Indigenous decolonial sexualities through the creative force of the art that re-imagines the Native erotic.

Native American Body of Art

As a trained artist, Cheyenne-Arapaho member Brent Learned paints nudes. During a phone call with Learned in 2018, he shared he has seen many nude artworks of people from a variety of races represented in museum artwork, but never nude Native American bodies. Learned opened the exhibit to both men and women artists but prioritized having women be the majority of the contributing artists to this exhibit. Learned wants to challenge some Native Americans who think that any nude artwork is taboo, which he attributes to assimilationist ideals perpetuated through churches and boarding schools (2018). Colonial assimilation erases and replaces ideas, including those about sexual taboos. Key to Indigenous resurgence is uncovering and tracing Indigenous ways of being, given the significant colonial influence upon Indigenous peoples.

As a Native artist, Learned chose to commission an art exhibit in Oklahoma City at A. Art Gallery, now JRB Art at The Elms, with primarily Native artists to control the dialogue from a Native perspective. Learned wants to tear down boundaries and provoke conversation, rather than remain silenced in shame about the human body, specifically the Native body. The exhibit primarily features nude Native women, which is intended to provoke conversations about Native women, abuses against Native women, and overall dehumanization of Native women. The exhibit is meant to feature Native women in realistic and erotic ways as multi-dimensional peoples.

Many of the representations of Native women are inundated with colonial influence and violence, robbing Native women of significant histories that define roles, responsibilities, and imaginative spaces. The absence of these histories makes this work more important in a contemporary and immediate sense as an addition to Indigenous feminisms. Indigenous feminisms make Indigenous women visible in both the material and theoretical spaces, and that is what the exhibit intends to do (Hall 31).

Indigenous Mothering in Indigenous Erotic Art: Oneka Jones and MaryBeth Timothy

Many of the Indigenous artists in the exhibit depict Native women in gender-specific roles, like mothering. These artists were asked to depict nude Native American women's bodies for the exhibit and symbols of traditional mothering are featured as erotic moments, including breastfeeding and bathing children. The erotic power of women as a source of strength and information that is deeply female and spiritual is represented in traditional Indigenous mothering roles. Following Lorde's interpretation of the erotic as deeply feminine experiences with honor and self-respect, once women become aware of this power, they begin to seek life pursuits that are supportive of these beliefs (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 57). This is certainly not merely a sexual erotic power, but a sensual power related to a deep influence within women, including mothers. The women in the paintings could be said to be fully conscious of what they are doing in these moments with their children while evoking an assertion of the literal lifeforce of women.² As a use of the erotic, Indigenous mothering has great potential to service Native families, starting with women's acknowledgement of this power.

Within numerous Indigenous histories are examples of how Native women's experiences existed in stark contrast to the stereotypes Native women face today. Traditional Indigenous motherhood is a sacred role that has strategically been under colonial attack (Anderson 83-85). Some of the paintings created for the exhibit depict Native mothers in various expressions of

typical parental activities, including bathing with their children, breast feeding, and pregnancy, which shows one area that Native women are experiencing a sense of power and visibility (see Figures 1 and 2). Oneka Jones and MaryBeth Timothy imagined Native mothering when creating their art for an exhibit about a Native nude woman (2018). The power of the erotic is demonstrated in their artwork through these traditional representations of motherhood, but each painting also supports Lorde's theory that the power of the erotic should not be relegated to the bedroom or sex as an act but in *all* aspects of our existence (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 57).

Indigenous mothering practices relate to the erotic as power by connecting intimate moments in life to a creative, powerful, feminine force that represents life-giving joy (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 57). These moments include bathing children, breast feeding, and pregnancy, to mention a few examples.



Figure 1. *Motherhood* by Oneka Jones

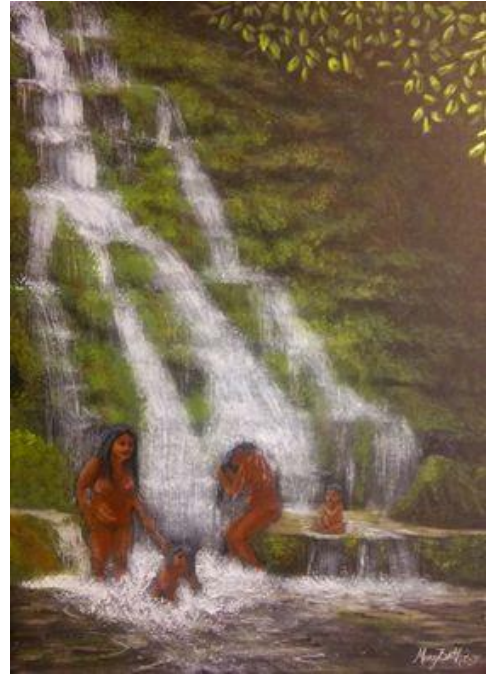


Figure 2. *Bathing at Mingo* by MaryBeth Timothy

In efforts to include expansive interpretations of Native womanhood, traditional Indigenous histories again provides stories of Native women having and representing power. For many Indigenous societies, Native women held these positions of influence prior to colonization, and through acknowledging the use of erotic power in Indigenous erotic art, Native women may find this source again as a spark to continue to shape the efforts of Indigenous feminisms and understand the erotic as significant to daily life.

Native Women and Body-Image: MaryBeth Timothy

Cherokee artist MaryBeth Timothy agreed to participate after confirming with Learned that she would be free to create whatever she wanted. Timothy made a commitment to create historical and empowering pieces along the theme of nude art. Timothy is critical of the pressure women experience to possess certain body types and believes that body shape does not determine how

beautiful women are (2018). This was a significant motivation for her participation in the exhibit. To challenge beauty standards, as they largely relate to body type, is a contribution to Indigenous decolonial sexualities.

As a result, for the *Native American Body of Art* exhibit, Timothy created *Ancient Soul: Shedding Her Skin* (Figure 3). This piece shows a woman baring her insides by pulling apart her skin. Timothy describes the piece as empowering and historical. The Native woman in the painting has a heavier build, a visible C-section scar, and stretch marks. The insides of the woman reveal southeastern tribal symbols, illustrate that women are more than just what the physical body looks like and to make an internal cultural connection. For Timothy, Indigenous peoples carry within them history, family, and stories that “make us who we are, and that’s what makes us beautiful” (2018). Timothy knows that this woman’s body would be considered less-than-perfect due to her heavier build, scar, and stretch marks.



Figure 3. *Ancient Soul: Shedding Her Skin*

For Timothy, depicting this woman as someone with deep connections to tribal histories, and as a representation of the past and present, as well as ties to family, friends, and life experiences is

more important than depicting an ideal body type. Timothy states, “We are made up of so many things. It’s those things and our individual stories that mold us and shape us into the beautiful beings we are. It’s in your spirit, your soul...the mirror cannot reflect that” (2018). To focus more on the cultural and social ties within an individual Native woman’s body rather than imagine an “ideal” body type for women is an empowering choice that challenges colonial constructions of Native women’s bodies and contributes to Indigenous decolonial sexualities.

Indigenous erotic art can encourage a healthy and culturally based body-image for some Native women seeking visibility, reference, and understanding about sexuality. For many women, body-image is a significant factor in sexual function. How one feels about their body is a significant factor in how one relates to their sexuality. While engaging in sexual activity, studies show that if a woman thinks negatively about their appearance, it can lead to a decrease in levels of sexual satisfaction (Pujols. et al. 906). How women conceptualize their physical appearance is important to a healthy sexual life. Moreover, my vision for an Indigenous decolonial sexuality promotes body satisfaction, especially when considering a recent study of urban Native American youth that shows, “approximately one-third of the boys and one-fourth of the girls were satisfied with their bodies” (Rinderknecht and Smith 322). For many, having a healthy sex life will require the decolonization of ideal body image and challenge normative beauty standards to promote self-acceptance of one’s body outside of colonial constructs, a considerable and multi-faceted task.

For many women, healthy and positive body-image remains a lifelong struggle. Timothy reveals that battling these ideas of “ideal” body type have stayed with her since Junior High School. She created *One of These Girls is Not Like the Others* (Figure 4 below) upon remembering what it meant to attend school where the predominant student population was white.

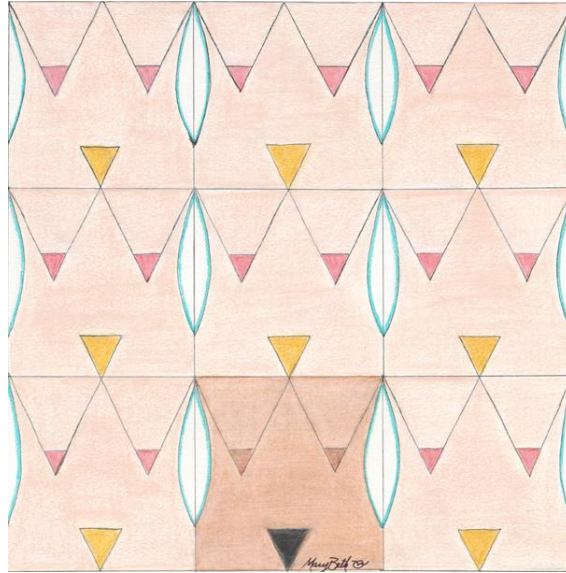


Figure 4. *One of These Girls is Not Like the Others*

As a basketball player, she recalls after the first practice when all the girls went to shower. It was at this moment that Timothy recognized she had the only non-white body in the locker room, causing her to feel embarrassed and different. She ended up waiting for the other girls to finish before taking her shower and felt like she did not fit in for many years after this experience.

Timothy states:

If our society could just realize, body image isn't about what they see on tv, in magazines, on the internet or even in the locker room. It's about loving yourself, inside and out, flaws and all. We should each embrace our uniqueness! Let it empower us! I finally learned, that although we may not always look like those around us, we are all human, we all have flaws, we all have fears. And that is part of what makes us who we are. Love who you are and don't be afraid to be *Not Like the Others* (2018).

Timothy makes an important contribution to Native women's representation by not only noting the differences in bodies but offering the difference as something to be loved and worthy

of representation. Timothy allows her imagination and artwork to generate creative space for a potential reality, not yet experienced by reclaiming the insecurities of her youth in *One of These Girls is Not Like the Others*. Timothy reimagines the art world by creating a Native female nude image who possesses cultural depth and familial ties in *Ancient Soul: Shedding Her Skin*. Both pieces allow for Native women to see parts of themselves within artistic representation. Indigenous artwork that promotes Native women’s visibility, especially in an embodied way with cultural reference, allows for normalization of Native women’s bodies and challenges the primacy of “ideal” body types, which contribute to Indigenous decolonial sexualities. These images may include heavier bodies, C-section scars, and nude brown bodies, which allows many Native women to see themselves and share an understanding of how these differences are strengths and make the familiar publicly visible.

Representation of the Native female nude is an important gesture within the imaginative space of the artworld but can also impact the present-day Native women who find themselves relating to aspects of these images. The images can also evoke conversations between Indigenous women about sexuality, birth, weight, body image, and culture. These conversations promote open discussions about sex, self-perception and experiences that all contribute to Indigenous decolonial sexualities. It is important to note the different ways the artists in the exhibit approach the exhibit, as well as the differing ways women relate to their bodies, the art, and each other. There is not one single way to promote Indigenous decolonial sexualities and the art reflects this.

In conclusion, under US colonialism and white supremacy, Indigenous peoples must re-define sexuality on their own cultural terms and one way of doing this is by creating Indigenous erotic art. A small, yet significant, effort to create Indigenous erotic art exists and with conscious decolonial efforts, can produce the representations of the Indigenous erotic imaginary. The *erotic* acts as a weapon against sexual assault and violence against Indigenous women, while also

promoting key Indigenous feminist ideologies that re-make how Native women are understood in society and how they see themselves.

Despite these challenges, Indigenous communities can resist further sexual violence and colonial control over sexuality by supporting Indigenous and Africana erotic art, as well as see the crucial imaginings of sexual alternatives through poetry and other forms of creative expression. People can support Indigenous erotic art by simply viewing it, making it, and engaging the imaginaries the artists present in a way that considers how the imaginary can become reality. Indigenous erotic art offers a way to redefine sexuality as a political statement that is necessary for community change and understanding Indigenous erotic art as an extension of the erotic as power, which challenges sexual violence.

Notes

¹ I use the term “Africana” throughout this article instead of the more colloquial terms Black or African American, given the intellectual history and representation of this term. Africana, as an intellectual concept, allows for people of African descent to draw across nationalities, disciplinary boundaries, and to unite people of continental and diasporan African descent; Reiland Rabaka, *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century: An Essay of Africana Critical Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 6.

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