

Reclaiming Indigenous Sexual Being: Sovereignty and Decolonization Through Sexuality

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Abstract

This paper illustrates Indigenous sexual being on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́ilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, through a narrative of resurgence and sovereignty. Discussions regarding Indigenous sexual being in Vancouver within scholarship and media tend to share a single story which focuses narrowly on a theme of violence. This paper utilizes the Indigenous concept of a Sovereign Erotic (Driskill, 2004) to illustrate how sexuality can be used as a sovereignty practice. I exemplify this concept as an active practice of decolonization through erotics by exploring the works of Virago Nation, an all-Indigenous burlesque group. This paper works to expose narratives of colonization and gendered violence in Vancouver, in order to share a competing narrative of sovereignty through sexuality. This narrative of sovereignty provides a broader scope of Indigenous sexuality in Vancouver by including those who reflect resurgence, reclamation, and hope.

Keywords: Sovereign Erotic; Indigenous; sexuality; resurgence; Vancouver

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to exemplify practices of decolonization and sovereignty through sexuality, in order to provide a narrative of resurgence on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́ilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, known as Vancouver, British Columbia. I use the word “Vancouver” in this paper to refer to the city which resides on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́ilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) people, while recognizing that this city and the use of this title has been molded out of colonization. The concept of a Sovereign Erotic exemplifies the ways in which Indigenous peoples can reclaim their sexual being from colonial sexual values and abuse (Driskill, 2004). In this article, I utilize this concept as a basis to illustrate how reclaiming sexuality is a decolonial and sovereign practice. Furthermore, I outline my self-location and interest in this topic of reclaiming Indigenous sexual being as a Métis woman, and provide a context of colonial narratives regarding sexuality and sexual violence, in order to demonstrate how Indigenous women in the area known as Vancouver are reclaiming their sexual being from those narratives as a practice of sovereignty and decolonization.

*I would like to acknowledge waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy for their teachings regarding resurgence and Indigenous sexuality. Sy’s shared knowledge has helped shape my understandings of how Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous sexuality can be understood as two sides of the same coin.

In this context, “decolonization” is understood and utilized throughout this paper as an active practice which is “inherently connected to the lands, lives, histories, and futures of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 157). In this sense, decolonization is understood as a part of everyday relations, feelings, interactions, and practices that are ongoing (Hunt & Holmes, 2015). Therefore, I illustrate the reclaiming of sexual being as an ongoing practice of decolonization, inspired by the concept of a Sovereign Erotic (Driskill, 2004), by presenting the works of *Virago Nation*, an all-Indigenous burlesque group.

A Sovereign Erotic

“Sovereign Erotic” is a term coined by Qwo-Li Driskill (2004), a Cherokee Two-Spirit author. Driskill’s (2004) concept of a Sovereign Erotic describes and demonstrates Two-Spirit and Queer peoples reclaiming sexuality from the dominant ideas and violence colonialism has enforced. According to Driskill (2004), “Two-Spirit” is

a word that resists colonial definitions of who we are. It is an expression of our sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements. The coinage of the word was never meant to create a monolithic understanding of the array of Native traditions regarding what dominant European and Euroamerican traditions call “alternative” genders and sexualities. (p. 52)

Driskill (2004) shares poems and works by Two-Spirit and Queer peoples that reflect Sovereign Erotic literatures, as these works showcase the complexities of Indigenous sexuality and gender that homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and therefore abuse, attempt to erase. I employ this concept as a foundation in order to showcase the reclaiming of sexuality as an example of sovereignty. I utilize this theory to be able to explore the self-determination of Indigenous bodies and sexualities through the breakdown and disruption of dominant colonial ideas as a healing practice by focusing on the collective works of the burlesque group *Virago Nation*. Shane Sable, a Gitksan Two-Spirit artist and a convening member of *Virago Nation*, says, “many of our group members identify along the queer spectrum and so not only are we able to bring conversations of sexuality, but with the added intersections of racialized, queer sexual identity” (as cited in Piper, 2018, para. 13). My focus on Indigenous women’s sexualities and representations, some who are Two-Spirit and Queer and some who are not within *Virago Nation*, is not to glaze over the specifics of Two-Spirit teachings and critiques that this concept of a Sovereign Erotic bears; rather it is to illustrate these teachings as practices of decolonization. Therefore, a Sovereign Erotic is a concept which inspired me to showcase how Indigenous women in Vancouver are actively cutting ties with dominant colonial ideas regarding Indigenous sexual being in order to hold self-determination over sexualities, desires, and sexual representations, wholly as a sovereign practice.

According to Driskill (2004), through the invasion of colonialism, Indigenous peoples are removed from their erotic self repeatedly through sexual assault and internalized colonial sexual values. Driskill describes how “a colonized sexuality is one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture” (p. 54). Driskill (2004) proposes that by exposing these intruders who have worked to violate one’s spirit and values, and by demanding they evacuate, one works to decolonize one’s own sexuality to practice a Sovereign Erotic. Driskill articulates, “when I speak of a Sovereign Erotic I’m speaking of 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” (p. 51). Therefore, Driskill describes this as a healing process of reclaiming sexuality through the journey of reclaiming one’s “first homelands: the body” (p. 53).

Through the lens of Sovereign Erotics, it becomes evident how land and sexuality are tied together. This lens demonstrates a narrative and practice which recognizes how violence on lands and violence

on bodies have been linked under colonization. However, it works to take back the connection between body and land, through that healing journey of reclaiming sexuality. At the centre of this concept is the resurgence against colonial sexual values and violence, by claiming one's sexuality and self through decolonization. Consequently, the act of reclaiming sexuality can be understood as an act of reclaiming one's sovereignty.

I approach Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination as an expansive concept that bears the collective and individual responsibility to community, clan, territory, nation, and self (Monture-Angus, 1999), including the self-determination of identity and representation (including sexuality and gender), culture, and practices. My understanding of sovereignty has been influenced by Patricia Monture-Angus' (1999) book *Journeying Forward: Dreaming First Nations' Independence*, shared with me by Dr. waaseyaa'sin Christine Sy. Monture-Angus shares an Indigenous-based understanding of sovereignty, describing Kane and Maracle's definition of the Mohawk word "tewatatha:wi," meaning "we carry ourselves," as a description of sovereignty (p. 36). This effectively illustrates how sovereignty and self-determination are "the responsibility to carry ourselves," rather than an idea of "individual ownership" (p. 36). In turn, sovereignty can be recognized as the accountability to relations, community, nation, lands, self, and the collective wellbeing and healing of each of these bodies, as a responsibility to future generations as well. Furthermore, Onondowa'ga (Seneca) Haudenosaunee land defender from the Turtle Clan, Iako'tsira:reh Amanda Lickers, shares, "self-determination and sovereignty is not about being on the terms of your colonizer and your occupier" (as cited in VLVB, 2016, p. 39). Thus, self-determination and sovereignty are linked to the ongoing practice of decolonization by being and acting on Indigenous terms.

Self-Location

Self-location is significant when entering spaces in real life and in knowledge production because it grounds the perspective the writer or speaker is sharing from. I believe this practice is essential when writing, researching, and sharing, as, according to prominent Indigenous scholars, "neutrality and objectivity do not exist in research, since all research is conducted and observed through human epistemological lenses" (Absolon & Willet, 2005, p. 97). Identifying positionality is an important part of Indigenous methodologies since it is a form of researcher accountability and responsibility for their perspective, and for the ways the researcher is adding to knowledge production (Absolon & Willet, 2005). As a result, I will outline my positionality, identifying the significance of Vancouver in my life, my Indigeneity in this place, and how I locate myself structurally in terms of the ways I experience privilege and oppression, both of which have been shaped by colonialism.

Vancouver is significant to me because I grew up in the area. It is where I learned to navigate the world and my position in it. However, I am an uninvited guest on these lands of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́lilwətaʔɫ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I enter these territories and this paper on reclaiming Indigenous sexual being as a Métis person from The Red River Settlement, born on the stolen lands of Coast Salish peoples, and due to this I consider myself an outsider-insider to the Indigeneity-gender-land of this place. I often consider myself at risk when I am in Vancouver because of my positionality as a Métis woman; I am repeatedly reminded of the potential dangers due to my gender presentation, my attraction to peoples across gender identities, and the narratives that illustrate Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and LGBTQIA+ peoples as facing a genocide in Vancouver. This being said, since my appearance is white, I always hold the innate security that comes with white privilege. Holding a white appearance is like having a security blanket that I always carry with me, shaping the way the world reacts to me and my place in it, granting me space and benefits that go unchallenged and unquestioned. In this way, I approach the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́lilwətaʔɫ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations and knowledge production from a lived experience of being urban Métis, a woman, identifying along the queer spectrum, and holding

privilege due to colonialism's endorsement of my whiteness, my class, and my being cisgender. Growing up, I very clearly remember my first experiences with the Downtown Eastside (DTES) area of Vancouver. It is an area that is "one of the most marginalized and stigmatized neighbourhoods in Canada" (Longstaffe, 2017, p. 231). It is unfortunately labelled Canada's "poorest postal code" and is continually associated with "high incidences of mental illness, substance use, communicable diseases, and crime" (Linden et al., 2012, p. 559). An area often known for the patterns of violence against Indigenous bodies, the DTES is described as "an epicentre in the colonial gendered violence of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls" (Leo, Starr, & August, 2018, p. 4).

Around the impressionable age of five (and annually for years following), a non-Indigenous relative drove me through the Downtown Eastside as a "learning opportunity" for me. As though we were tourists, he slowed down the car, rolled down the windows, and told me to look outside, explaining to me what the people residing here in poverty, using drugs, or engaging in street-based sex work must have done to "end up here" and how I should live my life so that I did not "end up the same way." How unproductive, a white man full of privilege, from the comfort of his own car (another representation of his automatically assumed agency and mobility), dismissing the systems of oppression, capitalism, and colonization at play that work against people, analysing these systems through a lens of individual fault, and, ultimately, shaming lives and practices as though they were worth any less than others. Reflecting on this experience always reminds me of how ideas about women's bodies, violence, and who is deemed valuable when viewed through a lens of colonialism in Vancouver, are passed on and perpetuated if they are not disrupted. This has influenced how I approach colonial narratives and my own positionality. Specifically, it has made me want to contribute to disrupting these same narratives that were placed on me as an urban Métis woman, in an effort to highlight resilient Indigenous narratives for myself and the next seven generations to come.

In turn, my identity and these experiences have shaped my university studies to focus on the overlaps between Political Science and Gender Studies, with a concentration on Indigenous issues and teachings. Therefore, when a university project required that I share gendered Indigenous relations in an area I call home, I was disappointed with the narratives I found and even the ones that initially came to my mind surrounding the Indigeneity of the area known as Vancouver, narratives which I will explore in the following sections. Consequently, I searched for an alternative narrative that held a vision of Indigenous relations, sexuality, and sovereignty I wanted to reclaim internally for myself as well, and as a result I came across Virago Nation.

x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Territories

The city known as Vancouver has been molded out of colonization, as the encroachment of the city on x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) territories has been rapid and has deeply impacted Indigenous spaces. For over 10,000 years, Coast Salish peoples have lived on and maintained the land upon which the city of Vancouver has been fabricated (Culhane, 2003). As stated by the late Musqueam Chief Delbert Guerin, "In the short space of a hundred years, the City of Vancouver has grown to a huge monster which has almost swallowed our whole land" (as cited in Wilson, 2016, p. 470). However, despite this colonial agenda to encroach and remove Indigenous peoples from these lands, "Coast Salish peoples have kept a continuous presence in the city" (Longstaffe, 2017, p. 235). Due to the socioeconomic hierarchy imposed through colonization, though, Indigenous peoples "are disproportionately located in the poorest neighborhoods of Canadian cities" (Culhane, 2003, p. 596). This can be confirmed as one-seventh of the population in the DTES consists of Indigenous peoples, which is vastly disproportionate because Indigenous peoples make up about four percent of Canada's population overall (Bourgeois, 2018). Consequently, the DTES has been called Canada's "largest urban reserve" (Roe, as cited in Bourgeois, 2018, p. 392).

The Indigeneity-gender-land relations in the area currently called Vancouver are largely seen within many urban Indigenous communities, Two-Spirit and LGBTQQIA+ spaces, and Indigenous women's movements. Indigenous peoples have created visible, safe, and culturally celebratory spaces on their lands, such as drop-in centres, the mobilization of the February 14th Annual Women's Memorial March, and the building of totem poles (Culhane, 2003). This is significant because women's activism and engagement in urban Indigenous populations is critical to forming community, largely "through their particular roles around the organization of family, social life, sustenance, shelter, and the maintenance of culture" (Krouse & Howard-Bobiwash, 2003, p. 489). Yet, as discussed next, disheartening narratives regarding the Indigeneity-gender-lands of Vancouver persist. They often focus singularly on a theme of violence and victimhood. This violence should not be overlooked; there are extremely alarming accounts of murdered and disappeared Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and LGBTQQIA+ peoples in the area, accurate rates of which cannot be found. However, accounts of violence have further damaging effects when they are told through colonial narratives as the sole representation of Indigeneity and Indigenous sexual being in the area.

Colonial Narratives in Relation to Sexual and Gendered Violence

Many narratives that have explored and exposed violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit and LGBTQQIA+ peoples in Vancouver, specifically regarding the DTES, have also perpetuated and normalized that violence, resulting in devastating outcomes (Longstaffe, 2017). These narratives can be seen within journalism and articles concerning x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓w̓7mesh (Squamish), and sə̓lilwətaʔɫ (Tsleil-Waututh) territories. According to Longstaffe (2017), when gendered and sexual violence against Indigenous bodies in Vancouver finally gained attention, the language continually used by journalists held colonial and misogynistic stereotypes of Indigenous women, thereby contributing to the very issue of violence being discussed. As tropes such as the "Skid Road Girl"—a trope "which combined postwar discourses about "skid road" [or skid row] with stereotypes about Indigenous women" (Longstaffe, 2017, p. 239)—gained traction, infantilizing and generalizing narratives of Indigenous women in the area were sensationalized (Longstaffe, 2017). Though some narratives were intended to evoke sympathy, Longstaffe (2017) notes, they constructed an image of Indigenous women solely as vulnerable "victims devoid of agency" (p. 241), thereby perpetuating dehumanizing discourses regarding Indigenous bodies and sexualities by spreading an idea of sexual and gendered violence against Indigenous bodies as inevitable, and thus essentially reproducing and maintaining colonial violence.

Furthermore, dehumanizing colonial narratives surrounding Indigenous women's sexual being are also exemplified in the discourse of the "squaw." This discourse generalizes Indigenous women as naturally "sexually available," carrying the notion that Indigenous women are "inherently sexually violable" (Bourgeois, 2018, p. 69). This is a colonial notion that removes individual agency, choice, and self-determination with regard to sex and one's sexual representation, marking all Indigenous women as objects to be violated. Moreover, as described by Métis scholar Emma LaRocque, this discourse perpetuates gendered and sexual violence because it depicts Indigenous women as "dehumanized sex objects" (as cited in Bourgeois, 2018, p. 69). Consequences of the discourse of the "squaw" are also described by Kim Anderson (2016). Anderson (2016) suggests that this stereotype maintains and enables cycles of violence and abuse further by deeming Indigenous women insignificant within the systems that are established to protect those facing said violence (i.e., courtrooms, police, and health care services).

Furthermore, it is integral to understand the colonial tool of sexual and gendered violence itself. Driskill (2004) explains, "sexual abuse must be seen with an understanding of the history of colonization, which uses sexuality as a tool to gain power over others and to control women's bodies" (p. 53). As illustrated by Robyn Bourgeois (2018) in the chapter "Generations of Genocide" within *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters*, violence against Indigenous gendered bodies (specifi-

cally women and girls) is ongoing because settler colonial hierarchy relies on it: the hierarchy requires this gendered violence to continually re-establish its power, in order to ensure dominance over Indigenous peoples and lands. Moreover, this theft of Indigenous lands is enabled by sexual violence against Indigenous bodies, as this violence “establishes the ideology that Native bodies are inherently violable—and by extension, that Native lands are also inherently violable” (Smith, as cited in Bourgeois, 2018, p. 69). The other side of this thinking is also illustrated by Vanessa Gray in her teaching that “the land is our Mother, so when we lose value for the land ... people lose value for the women” (as cited in VLVB report, 2016, p. 4).

Additionally, normative and therefore oppressive ideas regarding sexuality and gender have been imposed by colonization and genocide through transphobia, homophobia, sexism, and, therefore, sexual assault (Driskill, 2004). Enforcing normative ideas of shame around sex and the conviction of sexualities and genders that exist outside of binaries and dominant ideologies as sinful and inherently wrong is to attempt to deteriorate queerness and positive spiritual relations with sex, gender, and sexuality (Driskill, 2004). Colonial impositions, according to Driskill (2004), are at work to erase and hide these expansive realities and ways of being in relation to gender and sexuality. Consequently, Driskill (2004) states, “as Native people, our erotic lives and identities have been colonized along with our homelands” (p. 52). Therefore, colonial values, stereotypes, and sexual and gendered violence against Indigenous bodies must be understood as tools of colonization that are all in relation to one another, actively feeding each other in order to maintain a cycle of colonization that is ongoing.

Through these teachings, we can comprehend how colonialism’s encroachment on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Nations, is linked to how Indigenous bodies are seen there. Therefore, due to this colonizing link between violence on bodies and violence on lands, decolonization must work to reclaim these gendered relations beyond a violent narrative. Since violence against Indigenous gendered bodies is a sovereignty issue, and since this violence is fundamental to settler colonial superiority, “only decolonization and the regeneration of Indigenous sovereignty” can work to terminate settler colonial domination and, therefore, gender violence (Bourgeois, 2018, p. 80). And further, as Leanne Simpson (2018) argues, “It’s in all of our best interests to take on gender violence as a core resurgence project [and] a core decolonization project” (p. 219). Thus, Indigenous women are actively reclaiming sexuality from colonial ideas and violence in Vancouver as a decolonization project and practice of sovereignty. One way they are doing this is through burlesque and performance art.

Virago Nation

This model of sovereignty and decolonization is exemplified by Virago Nation, which is an all-Indigenous burlesque group whose mission is to reclaim Indigenous sexuality “through humor, seduction, pop culture and politics” (Virago Nation, n.d., para. 2). The group showcases Indigenous sexuality as expansive and multidimensional in order to dismantle the lethal “colonial virgin-whore dichotomy” and demonstrate the effects of colonization by exercising the ability to design and claim their “sexuality identity rooted in their own desires” (Virago Nation, n.d., para. 2). Shane Sable, a Gitksan Two-Spirit artist and convening member of Virago Nation, describes how her ideas of Indigenous sexuality were

characterised by the worst, most racist stereotypes that this settler-colonial culture has given us and that is exactly why we started the group, because those weren’t enough options for us. We didn’t want to be squaws [...] and we didn’t want to be women who didn’t have a sexual identity. (as cited in Lytwyn, 2019, 1:25)

This is a significant narrative Virago Nation is disrupting because, as described previously, discourses and colonial narratives regarding Indigenous women’s sexual being, such as the stereotype of the “squaw,”

perpetuate cycles of violence and abuse (Anderson, 2016). Virago Nation rejects these colonial discourses and binaries by showcasing themselves and their sexualities as complex and therefore non-generalizable, by holding self-determination over their sexual representations through a physical display of Sovereign Erotics. This narrative is further portrayed in Gamage's (2019) interview with Shane Sable in *Mega-phone Magazine*: Sable explains that the group is combatting colonial casts of Indigenous women as dehumanized and exploitable objects, by destabilizing the patriarchal system which is embedded within colonization. They do so by utilizing an art form that is fundamentally erotic whilst exercising and demonstrating Indigenous free-will and self-determination over their own sexuality (as cited in Gamage, 2019). Therefore, this is a form of resurgence: Virago Nation is combatting discourses surrounding Indigenous gendered bodies as "squaws" and "inherently violable."

Sable describes how there were initially concerns about utilizing burlesque as an Indigenous practice: "When your art form is taking your clothes off, the concern is that you are perpetuating that systemic violence against yourself and against your people" (as cited in Gamage, 2019, para. 15). Burlesque itself is a topic of debate in feminist circles; there are disagreements about whether this art form is empowering or further oppressive towards women, with the notion that it fosters the objectification of women, embedded with patriarchal ideas of female sexuality (Siebler, 2015). However, Cree/Métis group member "Sparkle Plenty" resists this notion of oppression by means of burlesque through an Indigenous lens as she describes how burlesque is a medium for her to display and represent her sexuality "on her own terms" (Rieger, 2017, para. 6). She explains,

We wanted to show a strength in Indigenous women, especially creating a new narrative with Indigenous sexuality, because we were used to hearing stories about the Highway of Tears and then the hyper-sexualized costumes like Pocahontas. It's breaking down that stereotype, showing that having a healthy relationship with your body transcends race. Indigenous women can be proud of being sexual, of being sexy, of showing their body on their own terms. (as cited in Rieger, 2017, para. 9)

Furthermore, Sable rejects the debate over the medium altogether, stating, "To me, any discussion of burlesque and feminism ultimately hinges on the fundamental premise that you either respect a woman's agency and body sovereignty or you don't" (as cited in Piper, 2018, para 10). Therefore, although there were initial concerns about being misunderstood, the group quickly recognized that their goal and mission to reclaim their sexual being was being understood as they received support and validation from the Indigenous community (Gamage, 2019; Piper, 2018). Thus, Virago Nation is effectively "re-matriating" their own power and their own bodies in order to disrupt those very narratives that perpetuate violence against Indigenous women (Sable, as cited in Gamage, 2019). Therefore, as Sable suggests, they return their bodies to themselves, and to all of the gendered Indigenous bodies who came before them, by means of burlesque (as cited in Gamage, 2019). As Driskill might propose, they are taking back what was stolen.

Parallel to the description illustrated by Qwo-Li Driskill (2004), this reclaiming of their bodies is articulated and exercised as a healing practice. Virago Nation dedicates an entire workshop to this healing journey, labelled "Decolonial Self Love" (Workshops, n.d.). This workshop is designed through a "de-colonial lens" in order to address the lives of colonized peoples and groups, to inspire their confidence, and to provide a space to practice self-love (Workshops, n.d). To do so, participants engage in a writing workshop and open conversation in order to be able to openly "articulate impacts of colonization on their ability to care for themselves [and] discuss the importance of self-love" (Workshops, n.d). The ongoing purpose is for participants to take these tools of self-care outside of the workshop in order to practice them in all aspects of their personal, professional, and day-to-day lives (Workshops, n.d). This practice of self-love is a healing journey, and can be seen as an act of resurgence within oneself. As suggested previously by Driskill (2004), colonization has extended its reach and become internalized, entrenching ideas of colonial sexual values within Indigenous peoples. By reclaiming sexuality in their own image, in

this self-healing, loving, and internally restorative manner, Virago Nation is practicing a decolonization of sexuality in order to dismantle colonialism's internal invasion, in a pursuit of a Sovereign Erotic.

In a radio interview on Native American Calling, Tara Gatewood interviewed Shane Sable, who described one of the burlesque acts in which each member of the group dresses up as a stereotype, embodying it and placing those discourses on their bodies (2018). One wears a Pocahontas costume, another pretends to be drunk, the next wields a dream-catcher, and whilst A Tribe Called Red's song "Burn Your Village to the Ground" plays, they proceed to strip these stereotypes off, exposing them for what they are, and going further to destroy them by throwing them in a fire (Gatewood, 2018). Sable explains in the interview that they thought of the most stereotypical and harmful depictions of Indigenous peoples and embodied them to illustrate what is being assigned to their bodies, and then showcased their response and the ability to refuse these labels by utilizing erotics. As Sable suggests, this is "to say no this isn't us [...] we will present ourselves in the way we want you to receive us" (as cited in Gatewood, 2018, 13:08).

Additionally, many group members identify along the queer spectrum. Virago Nation "bring[s] conversations of sexuality, but with the added intersections of racialized, queer sexual identity" (Sable, as cited in Piper, 2018, para. 13). Therefore, through their burlesque acts, such as the one mentioned previously, and their ability to deconstruct and critique normative ideas through an open expression of queerness, their work can also be linked to "a decolonial queer politic" described by Hunt and Holmes (2015, p. 156). Hunt and Holmes (2015) demonstrate a practice of actively unsettling spaces of power relations by challenging normative and therefore colonial dominant ideas. Through these concepts of Sovereign Erotics and a decolonial queer politic, Virago Nation figuratively and literally exposes stereotypes to dismantle the dominant and normative ideas that have been placed on them. These are colonial normative ideas and values which, as mentioned previously, have resulted in the abuse and degradation of women and peoples who do not fit into dominant gender, sexuality, and power structures. Kristi Alexandra (2019) reviewed Virago Nation's performance at the Talking Stick Festival, which is an Indigenous arts festival held in the area known as Vancouver. In this review, Alexandra (2019) suggests that each of the members' personalities shone through: she states, "in less than two hours, I laughed. I cried. I felt turned on" (para. 4). This portrays how Indigenous sexuality within the group was exposed as non-homogenous and non-generalizable. From an audience perspective, it showcases how the group's approach to sexual desirability went beyond colonial notions of heteronormativity, thereby demonstrating Indigenous sexuality as complex and claimed by the individuals themselves. In achieving this, they accomplished what they had set out to do. I would propose that another way they have disrupted normative values is by holding performances for all-women identifying audiences as well as performing at forums such as the Queer Arts Festival. By performing for all-women audiences in areas such as Fort St. James and within the Queer community (Piper, 2018), they work to disrupt colonial systems of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia by reaching out to those who are also affected by these dominant ideas.

"Sparkle Plenty" explains in a BBC News interview that the performers have been actively including their ancestry and land ties within this burlesque narrative (as cited in Lytwyn, 2019). By doing so, they incorporate and showcase their own distinct lineage and cultures within their works (Lytwyn, 2019). For example, group member "Scarlet Delirium," who is of Kwakiutl and Irish/Scottish heritage, "celebrates the orca as her family crest in one number and Sable has an act entitled 'Mother of Bilaa' (the Gitksan word for abalone), inspired by both the language and the shellfish" (Gamage, 2019, para. 20). Thus, members of Virago Nation are reclaiming their gendered body-land relations that colonization has worked so hard to appropriate under a violent lens, as discussed previously. Through erotic performance art, they are reclaiming their histories and cultures in a present context in order to restore and exercise sexual sovereignty over their own bodies and within their connections to kinship and lands.

They have also made connections within less populated Indigenous communities while performing locally (Lytwyn, 2019). "Scarlet Delirium" explains that, when doing these shows, they often also include workshops such as body movement classes and nipple pasty workshops, in order to ensure communities

have fun with their sexualities and bodies safely and openly, “possibly in ways that they [community members] haven’t had access to before” (as cited in Lytwyn, 2019, 2:43). By taking these steps, Virago Nation is presenting fellow Indigenous peoples with the tools to combat colonization and reclaim their sexuality within their community and individual images, pursuing decolonization within all Indigenous spaces, communities, and minds.

Overall, Virago Nation is combatting the violent narratives regarding Indigenous sexuality that are present throughout Vancouver by exercising sovereignty over their own sexualities. By spreading this act of resurgence and sharing these tools with fellow Indigenous peoples, they are exposing a narrative and a space to express and explore Indigenous sexuality internally and externally. Therefore, Virago Nation is a prime example of decolonization through Indigenous sexual being, by exemplifying a pursuit of a Sovereign Erotic. They have based an erotic art and practice around the reclamation of their sexuality in a healing way, reclaiming their relationships between lands and bodies and their sexual identities in their own image, ultimately, taking back their sovereignty.

Conclusion: Strength, Resurgence, and Embodiment of Sovereignty Through Erotics

In this article, I have outlined Indigeneity-gender-land relations on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔɪ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations which Vancouver resides on, by examining Indigenous sexual being. I have exposed settler colonial narratives of violence in relation to Indigenous sexuality by illustrating colonization’s reliance on that violent narrative. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how Indigenous peoples in Vancouver are pursuing resurgence and sovereignty by rejecting that narrative, by means of illustrating the works of Virago Nation in relation to the concept of a Sovereign Erotic.

This journey to explore Indigenous gendered relations that reject colonial narratives of violence and values on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔɪ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples was necessary for me to go through as well. This pursuit of Indigenous sexuality through a lens of sovereignty gave me hope for the future and as a Métis woman, it made me reflect on the ways I can engage in the decolonization of my sexuality, what self-love through Indigeneity means to me, and how claiming my sexuality in my own image is up to me and not restricted to normative colonial sexual values. Moreover, I have come to better understand what it means to act and be on Indigenous terms in relation with sexuality as Virago Nation and Driskill (2004) have presented examples of claiming oneself outside of colonial terms, physically and internally. They have done so despite the dichotomies, stereotypes, and gendered and sexual violence colonialism has enforced, in order to heal from those wounds. Furthermore, since the practice of sovereignty can be understood as a form of collective and individual responsibility (Monture-Angus, 1999), it is consequently a demonstration of responsibility these artists are exhibiting. To heal from the wounds colonialism has enforced by reclaiming sexuality is to uphold responsibility to the collective well-being and futures of Indigenous peoples, cultures, clans, and nations.

As stated by Sable, “we will present ourselves in the way we want you to receive us” (as cited in Gatewood, 2018, 13:08). In turn, Indigenous sexual being is displayed as expansive, and therefore it is not a single idea or label I can name for another. Rather, I have come to understand reclaiming Indigenous sexual being as a practice that exists through an ongoing relationship with decolonization. This is the active practice of naming and imagining oneself by claiming one’s sexual being through what Driskill (2004) describes as “a journey back to [one’s] first homeland: the body” (p. 54). By demonstrating this practice, Virago Nation displays how we, as Indigenous peoples across sexualities and communities, are representing our sexualities in our own image and in relation with our communities, homelands, and cultural images, to decolonize and reclaim, in order to heal through the embodiment of sovereignty.

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