The Gender Battle Ground:
Contesting Gender in Indigenous Contemporary Art

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Colonialism brought conflicting epistemologies, world views, and knowledge frameworks into contact, and later, hierarchy with one another. Under processes of assimilation and "civilization", the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island had their diverse conceptions of the world around them, and themselves attacked. For Indigenous people, the body is politicized. The gendered Indigenous body is a contact zone of colonialism. I will argue that Indigenous contemporary artists are addressing the battle ground of gender in their art. Through analyzing the works of artists like Lori Blondeau, Adrian Stimson and Annie Pootoogook, I hope to demonstrate that artists are critiquing the "colonized gender roles" set before them. Western gender "propriety", gender-binaries, and the restrictive identity expressions they offer are being disputed by contemporary Indigenous artists. Through their critique, Indigenous artists are reinserting marginalized conceptions of the body, self, and gender into the cultural frameworks of this colonial nation state "Canada".

I would first like to mention that a work of this nature stems from a deep interest in the erasure of Two-Spirit histories and identities from colonial imposition. Groundbreaking artist Kent Monkman, is actively rewriting Two-Spirit histories back into a narrative that is inherently patriarchial, gender-sex binary and heteronromative (Monkman). The wide range of alternative gender practices, and consequent sexual identities were erased from history and attacked from social and religious homo and transphobia (Brown 5-22). For Monkman and his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, they are personally invested in the arenas of sexuality and gender, however other Indigenous artists are rejecting the gender expectations and stereotypes expected of them.

One of the main questions I had in conducting a work of this nature, included how do Indigenous female artists challenge expectations of white/western/settler femininity and colonial stereotypes of sexuality. Lori Blondeau, is a Cree/Saulteaux/Métis performance artist, who utilizes a number of personas to critique colonial gender expectations and stereotypes. Drawing off of historic notions and contemporary stereotypes like the "Indian Princess" and "squaw", she uses her alter egos of Belle Sauvage, Surfer Squaw, and Cosmosquaw to "(explore) the impact of colonization on traditional and contemporary roles and lifestyles of (Indigenous) women" (Blondeau).[1] She continues, "my work explores the influence of popular media and culture… on (Indigenous) self-identity, self-image and self-definition" (Blondeau). I wish to emphasis the role of self-determination in her work, since self-identification in the face of the settler state, has been theorized as a "critical feature of self-government and figures prominently in the politics of decolonization" (Maximilian 4). Notably, Blondeau's work also confronts settler viewers by drawing attention to their "complicity in the construction and preservation of stereotypical images" (Varga qtd by Blondeau 3).

Many of Blondeau's personas are directly interested in political struggles. *Cosmosquaw* (fig. 1) challenges aesthetics, sexuality, representation and language "as a form of reclamation, reaffirming Indigenous women's rights to fashion as much as sovereignty" (Rice 15). *Cosmossquaw*, the "red diva-in-the making in metropolitan Montreal" is an "urban-rez" juxtaposition, who plays up the absurdity of white/settler, and urban feminine expectations (Rice 15). The character satires idealized feminine beauty of the "alluring/submissive" variety. The

[1] Here, I have consciously changed Blondeau's quote away from using the terminology "Aboriginal", instead inserting "Indigenous" in its place. The term "Aboriginal" is contested as being another western imposed identity erasing diversity like its predecessor "Indian" before it.

intersection of race and sex here encourage viewers to confront racial and sexual stereotypes and "empathize with the ambiguities of (Indigenous) women passing in white society and also with all women who have to pass in patriarchial societies" (Finlay qtr by Blondeau 20). *Cosmosquaw* is one of the most politicalized personas, as she made an appearance at the *Hochelaga Revisited* exhibition reception in 2008 directly linking the character to contemporary sovereignty struggles and decolonizing politics.

Blondeau is conscious of her gendered body and the settler gaze and uses this to her advantage. In her work *Lonely Surfer Squaw* (fig. 2), her gaze is returned to the viewer where "the surfer squaw transforms girlish vacuity—or at least vapidity—into trenchant (Indigenous) feminist, decolonizing critique" (Finlay qtd by Blondeau 21). In the medium of performance art, Blondeau expertly uses her body—with all its identification signifiers—and uses it as "a site of social inscription and projection and re-marks it" (Finlay qtd by Blondeau 24). Blondeau uses her performative body to challenge gender stereotypes, confront settler prejudices, and contribute to contemporary Indigenous struggles through her art practice.

Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook, is known for her intimate snapshots of northern life. They are described as having "an exhibitionist, Reality-TV approach" on account of the personal and everyday within her captured scenes (Allen 10). In the context of Inuit art, Gerald McMaster sees the the colonial imposition as geographically polarized. Pootoogook's art portrays the "complete overlay of the South on the North" in a cultural clash (McMaster qtr by Allen 12). Inuit art specialist, and Inuk scholar Heather Igloliorte comments how Inuit contemporary art acts as "a tool for cultural resilience" (Igoliorte qtr by Allen 15). Pootoogook's intimate snapshots do not hold back from private moments. Work's like *Watching Erotic Film* (fig. 3), show that the Inuit

are not oblivious to western/southern pornography. On the contrary they are absorbing commodified and sexualized representations of femininity. Although the female sleeper in the image, can be assumed to be Pootoogook—given the autobiographical nature of her work—I would argue her disinterestedness in the image works to heighten the artists created interestedness. The represented character Pootoogook, is oblivious to the busty woman masturbating on the screen in front of her, on account of either her state of sleep or disinterest. However, the artist Pootoogook is attentive to the scene as she memorializes the scene on her paper. This effectively works to heighten Pootoogooks awareness and attentiveness to the gendered and sexualized western media like pornography.

Many of Pootoogook's work portray explicitly "modern" feminine subject matter such as bras, make up, and bikinis. Another work showing western sexualized subject matter is *Woman at Her Mirror (Playboy Pose)* (fig. 4). The work displays a woman in the posed throws of passion, similar to the artificial, staged eroticism of pornographic publications like the one referenced in the title. Pootoogook is referencing the symbolically feminine sexuality of pornography, fetishized with high heels and other signifiers like make up. Again Pootoogook, is referencing the encroaching western media and cultural ideas into the north. But, how do works and subject matter of this nature link to "colonial" gender expectations? On the surface, Pootoogook is absorbing and replicating the overtly sexualized western media that has infiltrated the remote north. However, we should complicate this notion that Pootoogook is "selling out" or "assimilating" to western notions of feminine sexuality. Instead, we should consider that sexuality, eroticism and femininity have always existed—and like every aspect of culture, whether Indigenous or not—was in a process of flux even before colonial contact. Igloliorte

notes art in Inuit communities acts to "inscribing the lived presence of the culture, animating its integrity and fostering awareness of the relationship between contemporary experience and the land-based lifestyles of earlier generations" (Igoliorte qtr by Allen 15). As Inuit contemporary art forms a crucial link between generations, how then can we reconcile such a modern scene? Whereas Indigenous women are stereotypical sexualized, Pootoogook here seems to reference that sexuality, passion and lust have always existed in the icy north, even in pre-colonial, pre-pornographic times. If art's purpose is to connect experiences, through the understanding of Igoliorte we can theorize that Pootoogook is both displaying contemporary, western influenced Inuk femininity and referencing back to—I use the word here cautiously—traditional Inuit gender, and sexual values. Sexuality and eroticism pre-existed colonial contact and government art programs. Pootoogook demonstrates that although the mediums of gendered and sexualized passion have changed, they have always existed for the Inuit, contrary to what we may have thought among the tundra and ice.

Another key question I had for a work of this nature included how the Indigenous man, faces gendered stereotypes like the warrior, chief or noble savage for example. How do male identified Indigenous artists also deviate from the Euro-centric norms that have been imposed on them? On the topic of Indigenous masculinity, Anishinaabe writer Kateri Aiwenzie-Damm notes how masculinity can be learned and inherited from broken circumstances like residential schools, jail or troubled family situations (Aiwenzie-Damm qtd by McKegney 181). While this is not the case for all Indigenous men, or families, it is a reality we should consider. Indigenous conceptions of gender are at odds with western "macho" notions of masculinity. Thomas Highway, Cree playwright explains how both "sexes", or spirits operate in the body and the

trouble of “trying to prove (you) are 100% male” in the western binary sense of gender (Highway qtr by McKegney 27). Cree poet, Louise Bernice Halfe notes how colonial processes have taken and limited Indigenous masculinity. Land dispossession, settlement, reservations, and laws impact mens ability to hunt, especially for non-Status “Indians”, thus the “rage” of inter-generational and collective cultural trauma has no healthy output (Halfe qtd by McKegney 53). lastly, Kanien’kehaka author, Taiaikaw Alfred, continues this thread explaining how the Native male draws context from familial responsibilities, this is “opposed to just serving the one with responsibility, which is the foil of the white conquest of North America” (Alfred qtr by McKegney 79). Many of the conceptions of the embodiment and expectations of Indigenous men stands in contrast to western patriarchal norms.

Enter Siksika performance artist Adrian Stimson, and his “neo-trickster…part drag performer, part shapeshifter…anti-colonial, gender-blending persona” Buffalo Boy who “camp(s) up colonialism, sexuality and authenticity” (Rice). *Buffalo Boy* (fig. 5) makes an appearance at the annual Burning Man arts festival. The festival environment fosters “difference and hybridity” where Buffalo Boy can “shift in and out of identities, abandoning fixed meaning in favour of play, indeterminacy and ambiguity” (Bell). In this carnavelesque atmosphere, “the multi gendered Buffalo Boy… neither human or beast, boy nor girl” crosses boundaries in a process of “metamorphosis” (Bell). Buffalo Boy, not only performs in the contemporary, but critiques the historical too. In the 2005 show *Buffalo Boy’s Heart On: Buffalo Boys 100 Years of Wearing His Heart on His Sleeve,* as the province of Saskatchewan celebrated its colonial centennial, Stimson created a space for a counter dialogue “that put the dominant provincial histories of white settler culture into crisis” (Bell). Buffalo Boy staged historic scenes,

intervening in scenes like the Residential School as a missionary who "camps it up as the Anglican priest step pig out in fishnet stockings and high heels" (Bell). Stimson, through Buffalo Boy is critiquing the historic narrative of the settled west and the "heterosexual matrix" that is used to perpetuate it (Bell). Stimson reframes sexuality, queering history conscious of the narratives that are "controversially missing from" exhibition and historic memory, by subtly inserting Two-Spirit existence into the contact and conquest of Christianity (Rice). In shows like *Buffalo Boy's Wild West Peep Show*, Buffalo Boy satirizes voyeurism and "sexual tourism". "I create my own world in these peep shows—playing on how sex and conquest go hand-in-hand" notes Stimson (Bell). Here I wish to highlight the thoughts of Oneida "reproductive justice fighter" Jessica Danforth. She ties land to sexual health, stating that to separate the two is a "colonial, imperial way of thinking", noting how environmental justice, land dispossession, sexuality, and gender cannot be differentiated from the kinship ties to land without disrupting order (Danforth qtr by McKegney 121). The implications for Stimson to reject western/settler masculinity and instead play with Indigenous notions of gender and erased sexual histories is an active resistance to gender assimilation. Buffalo Boy as an ongoing project and persona, which makes viewers question the heteronormative, macho histories of settlement and instead Indigenize, and queer these narratives.

Indigenous artists are far from complicit to the colonial gender roles expected of them. Instead they are actively critiquing the gendered "propriety" and resisting assimilating to western gender conceptions. Blondeau actively thwarts contemporary and historical settler sex and racial stereotypes, and her performance personas are engaged with contemporary sovereignty struggles and decolonizing politics. Pootoogook, displays the influence of western femininity and

sexuality, but this should be considered as a continuation of a culture already in the process of change. She is continuing pre-existing sexuality, eroticism, and femininity, referencing the unexpected passions of life in the isolated north. Stimson uses Buffalo Boy to challenge the erasure of Two-Spirit sexualities and histories, thus challenging the heteronoromativity of settler colonialism. Simultaneously, Buffalo Boy refuses to be categorized as male or female, human or animal, playing into Indigenous epistemologies of transformation and the literal "two spiritedness" of the way gender is conceived contrary to a western binary. I hope I have demonstrated how contemporary Indigenous artists are putting up a fight in the battle ground of gender, resisting colonial conceptions of the self body.

Plate List

Fig. 1

Lori Blondeau
Cosmosquaw
1996
Performance Photograph

image sourced from: http://www.mcmichael.com/exhibitions/fashionality/loriblondeau.cfm accessed 30 November 2014

Fig. 2

Lori Blondeau
Lonely Surfer Squaw
1996
Performance Photograph

image sourced from: https://ericreber.wordpress.com/2009/06/29/the-world-upside-down/ accessed 30 November 2014

Fig. 3

Annie Pootoogook
Watching Erotic Film
2004
Drawing

Image sourced from: http://new-low.tumblr.com/post/18842842574/33-watching-erotic-film-2004-annie-pootoogook accessed 30 November 2014

Fig. 4

Annie Pootoogook
Woman at Her Mirror (Playboy Pose)
2003
Drawing

Image sourced from: https://mmaracuja.wordpress.com/2014/11/02/annie-pootoogook/ accessed 30 November 2014

Fig. 5

Adrian Stimson
Buffalo Boy at Burning Man
2007
Performance

Image sourced from: http://canadianart.ca/features/2007/06/01/buffalo_boy/ accessed 30 November 2014

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