

Book Reviews

Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality edited by Drew Hayden Taylor. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008. ISBN 9781553652762, 186 pages, illustrations.

Reviewed by Andrew Richardson

Drew Hayden Taylor's collection *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality* (a follow-up to *Me Funny*, his anthology of writings on Native humour) affirms a universal truth: that pleasure can be subversive, desire revolutionary. Within that framework, however, the book asserts more specifically that artistic and literary representations of sexuality carry even more political urgency in relation to the historical and daily struggles of Aboriginal peoples. As one contributor, Daniel Heath Justice, writes, "To ignore sex and embodied pleasure in the cause of Indigenous liberation is to ignore one of our greatest resources" (106)—"Every orgasm[,] he adds, "can be an act of decolonization" (106). In a way, Justice's rallying cry could stand as the book's central thesis. His words are certainly a valuable message for students of Native art and literature; indeed, the book has given shape to muddled thoughts I'd been having about the sexual content of Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart* and Alootook Ipellie's *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*. Clearly, such books draw strength partly from the transformative power of sex and sexuality, their ability to provoke and unsettle for the better. But Taylor's collection allows scholar and non-specialist alike to place these works, as well as representations of Native sexuality by non-Natives, in a broader context.

Me Sexy is an eclectic mix of personal essays, academic analysis, and storytelling. With that genre variety come a range of tones, too. Several of the articles (as well as the campy cover, designed by the aptly named Peter Cocking) are lighthearted, but the playfulness is offset by sombre moments, and the humour usually comes with an edge. Joseph Boyden's tongue-in-cheek research into Native pubic hair is still full of anger at white bigotry and sexism. Tomson Highway's explanation of why Cree is the sexiest language becomes a critique of the moral hypocrisy encoded in English. Nancy Cooper's celebration of lesbian Natives—"the aunties" as she calls them—gives way to Marius Tungilik's haunting personal reflections on the

legacy of residential school sexual abuse. And the scholarly organization of Norman Vorano's essay on Inuit sexuality is countered by Marissa Crazytrain's rambling memories of stripping to put herself through college.

Like pan-tribal identities uniting disparate First Nations, recurrent themes cut across this eclecticism. Obviously, the politics of representing Native sex and sexuality is a primary concern for most of the contributors. Several of the essays make the point that Native writers and artists have a chance to resist colonization each and every time they depict Native bodies and sexuality in their work. In his survey of Native love and sexuality in everything from Hollywood Westerns to historical romance novels, for example, Taylor quips that "[t]ender love stories involving Native people are scarcer than priests at a residential school reunion" (23). In a similar vein, Lee Maracle acknowledges that, as a late-middle-aged Native woman, she stands well outside the dominant culture's established notions of sexiness and feminine beauty, at one point lamenting that "First Nations people, particularly 55+ women, are not billed as sexy anywhere by anyone" (170). Clearly, a lot of representational ground still needs to be recovered from the dominant culture. Responding to that need, the articles in *Me Sexy* call on Native writers and artists to replace white clichés and stereotypes with more truthful depictions of Natives, their bodies, and their bedrooms.

The white mainstream is, however, not the only enemy in this war of words and images. Longing for acceptance, the gay and lesbian writers in this collection are, in essence, writing back to their own communities, too. "Homophobia or lesbophobia is an ugly reality in many places in the world," Cooper admits, "and Native communities are no exception" (42). Perhaps not surprisingly, Christianity is often singled out as a primary source of this bigotry, making homophobia an unfortunate by-product of European colonialism, displayed only by those Natives who have lost touch with ancestral traditions, in particular with Native theorizations of gender multiplicity (cf. McGeough 76–77). Obviously, such a criticism might lead to further stereotyping: Christian Natives collectively portrayed as dupes of a foreign God and the various Christian denominations treated as little more than instruments of imperialism—hardly fair assessments. Nonetheless, in response both to elders telling them that homosexuality is an exclusively European perversion and to the pretence that homophobia is a legitimate anti-colonial posture, Cooper, Justice and Gregory Scofield search for the metaphorical traplines of their "Two-Spirited" ancestors, the wisdom and stories of gay and lesbian Natives lost in the wake of white colonization.

Although *Me Sexy* deserves to be widely read, it has weak moments. Taylor's critique of white representations of Native sexuality does not

get beyond the underwhelming discovery that various genres of popular fiction have traded, and continue to trade, in clichés and stereotypes. He could have used his conclusion to point readers to more challenging Native representations of their own sexuality, but stops short. Cooper's celebration of Native lesbianism is at times cloying; at its worst, her writing sounds like wooden dialogue from the lost "Native" episode of the *L-Word*. McGeough's study of Norval Morriseau's erotic artwork is too rigid in its dualism, with western attitudes to the erotic uniformly trapped in narrow Christian morality and Native attitudes to the same invariably sporting a kind of subversive paganism. In any case, McGeough's enthusiasm about Native erotic art is later challenged by Vorano's more careful study of how troubling sexual content in Inuit art is either watered down or suppressed altogether in response to the exigencies of the retail art market. And lastly, Crazytrain's reflections on her life as a stripper end up looking a little aimless. Not every essay needs an explicit thesis, but it is hard to tell whether her intention was just to show backstage life at a run-of-the-mill strip club or to reveal something important about the experience of Natives working in Canada's sex trade.

These weaknesses are far outweighed by the collection's many strengths, however. Above all, the value of *Me Sexy* resides in the courageous self-discovery of its contributors, whether such discovery involves being Out and proud in the Native community, embracing the pre-Christian sexual and gender traditions of ancestors, or reclaiming Native sexiness in the face of a dominant culture trying to suppress it or refusing to acknowledge its existence. In the essay that concludes the collection, Maracle calls on her peers to continue this honest and fearless research. "In this era of Aboriginal Studies," she writes, "there is a tendency to redwash or clean up our past before passing on our traditions, and sometimes it gets cleaned up in accordance with someone else's current morality" (173). For Maracle the most reasonable thing to do instead is learn "a little about who we are before we become someone else's idea of who we should be" (173). Now there's sober sex education—for Natives and non-Natives alike.

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