

Aboriginal Women, Sexuality, and The Spiritual
Author: Brittany Johnson
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Roxanne Harde
University of Alberta, Augustana

Spirituality and sexuality are not always seen as being connected; the body and the spirit are generally viewed as two separate entities. In Aboriginal cultures, the physical and the spiritual bodies are intertwined like a braid of sweetgrass, and their women are integral to this braiding of bodies. Aboriginal women are the “conduit[s] between spirit life and life on earth” for their people (Anderson, 43). Women are viewed as being not only the bringers of life and the means of survivance of the people through physically birthing; they are seen as the perpetuators of culture and of spiritual practice for the people as a whole, as they are the “conduit[s]” between the physical and spiritual realms. There is great spiritual power in blood and breastmilk, as discussed in the works of Paula Gunn Allen, and in the entrance and exit points between the physical world and the spirit world; the two worlds are separate and yet they communicate with one another. Emerance Baker says in her essay about loving Indianness, “we need to address the ways our bodies have been silenced and made a cultural taboo for ourselves and other Native women” (8). By speaking and writing about sexual desires and actions of Aboriginal women, power is regained for those Aboriginal women whose power was taken or lost; the spiritual and the emotional are (re)birthed in the reclamation of this subjugated space. One must recognize the interconnectedness of the spiritual and the sexual, how by denying one you in turn destroy the other. The physical body acts as the vehicle used to gain, reclaim, or maintain spiritual power for Aboriginal women at each stage in a woman’s life, often through ceremony, as discussed in Kim Anderson’s *Life Stages and Native Women*; this essay explains how this spiritual power is tied to the physical by blood and breastmilk, sexual intercourse, birth, and death. For this paper, I have chosen to highlight the spirit/body connections of Anaquot and her two daughters in Erdrich’s novels *Tracks* and *The Painted Drum*. I will first discuss what it is that I mean by spirituality, provide insight on Aboriginal ways of knowing, and then delve into the texts.

In discussing spirituality, it is important that I first relate what it is that I mean by the term ‘spirituality.’ In Aboriginal traditions, everything is inherently part of the spiritual world; every plant has a spirit, the very air is spiritual, and all spirits are able to communicate with one another. In her book *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen says that to Aboriginal people, the concept of God is known as the “All Spirit, and other beings are also spirit – more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind” (59). Everything is inherently spirit and the physicality of human and non-human bodies is connected to the spiritual; however, spirit is more at the forefront. Kim Anderson discusses the idea that traditionally, “all life was understood as being imbued with ‘spirit,’ and individuals had the responsibility of demonstrating care for the life forms around them. In keeping with these principles, new life was celebrated because it meant the continuation of the people” (39). The spiritual then includes care and connection to all life forms in order to perpetuate the people; without the spirit the world cannot go on. In another book entitled *Grandmothers of the Light*, Paula Gunn Allen says “spiritual [is not] meant in the same sense as religious, for the plane of spirit may or may not be touched by religious activity” (22). Spirituality can then be understood to be more than the result of specific religious activities; the spiritual is in a part everything from living creatures to the unseen realms and it does not always require specific ceremony or activity in order to communicate with it, although ceremonies and actions such as singing, drumming, and dancing are indeed important. The spiritual is more than just a relationship and experiences with God through religious observance; spirituality includes the interconnections of all life, both human and non-human, in relation to the unseen spiritual realm. Within these connections the “continuation of the people” is able to occur

in both physical and spiritual forms, and women are the ones who give birth to the physical and spiritual life of the community.

Women, as the physical bearers of life into the world, are also the spiritual bearers; they birth culture, tradition, and people alike. It is important to understand that “in the past, men had the responsibility to protect and provide for their communities and ... women held the responsibilities of creating and nurturing life,” however, “it is important to avoid interpreting these teachings from a Western patriarchal framework” (Anderson, 98). When discussing Aboriginal women’s bodies and sexualities, it is imperative to view their experiences from Aboriginal ways of knowing and not from a “Western patriarchal framework.” Aboriginal ways of knowing include the spiritual and the ways it is connected to the physical; the political, social, and cultural is understood in cyclical and reciprocal ways. Julia Emberley says that in traditional cultures, there was “matrilineal descent ... and metonymic associations between body parts and functions and attributes of healing (breast-feeding), and life-giving (the womb)” (185). That is to say that all aspects of culture were brought about by women, either by physical birthing or spiritual passing on of teachings to the next generation much like the flow of breast milk into the mouth of an infant. Women impart their knowledge of the spiritual and cultural ways of their people through their words and physical interactions with those around them. The physical act of nourishing a baby through the flow of breast milk can be both physical and spiritual, as when Anaquot nurses her baby in *The Painted Drum*.

Anaquot understands that her baby daughter has had bad medicine put upon her and must find a way to heal her baby and save herself. She fears that the bad medicine used on the baby will transfer to her as well. After placing a little oil in the baby’s mouth, she becomes alert again and is fiercely hungry. When Anaquot first put her daughter to her breast “she knew the pleasure of solving its desperation. Next, with a deep sigh, they melted together as one. She closed her eyes and saw the two of them together as a dot of light and then they grew and grew until they had no edges at all and were the radiant center of an infinite wheel” (132). Through the act of breastfeeding, Anaquot and her daughter join together in a physical and a spiritual way; the act of breastfeeding nourishes her daughter and brings them both together to the “center of an infinite wheel,” or the Medicine Wheel, in which they both find healing. The Medicine Wheel is an integral part in physical and cultural healing. It includes people, elements, seasons, spiritual elements, teachings, and so much more. In a film about the Wheel, Kathleen McGuire, a counselor for the Indian Homemaker’s Association in British Columbia describes how “physical, emotional, mental, and the spiritual abuses” are healed in “a holistic way” through the Wheel. It is described in the film as being near “the heart of Native spirituality.” It makes sense then that when healing is sought for both herself and her baby, the two join together within the Wheel; the Wheel is near “the heart of Native spirituality,” and the heart or womb of Aboriginal culture is women.

Allen says in *The Sacred Hoop* that women are the heart or womb of their culture; “the power of woman is the center of the universe and is both heart (womb) and thought (creativity)” (22). The heart or womb is how the people are perpetuated through spiritual and physical means, and the creativity or thoughts of women are what set the perpetuation of the people in motion. According to Marlyn Kane and Sylvia Maracle as cited in Emberley, “in [Aboriginal communities], the woman was defined as nourisher, and the man, protector, and as protector, he had the role of helper. He only reacted; she acted. She was responsible for the establishment of all of the norms – whether they were political, economic, social, or spiritual” (185). The women

were and are the perpetuators of both spiritual and physical life as well as the political and economic; it is through women that cultural survivance occurs. Allen discusses medicinal and spiritual practices in *Grandmothers of the Light*, saying that “woman, magic, tribes, and earth” have always been joined together and will forever continue on in an interconnected relationship (24). Women give birth to every aspect of culture, and will always be the means by which culture and the spiritual are able to continue.

The physical body of the Aboriginal woman is important to her sexuality or physicality and her ability to birth culture. Allen says:

a mother is bonded to her offspring through her womb. *Heart* often means ‘womb,’ except when it means ‘vulva.’ In its aspect of vulva it signifies sexual connection or bonding. But this cannot be understood to mean sex as sex; rather, sexual connection with woman means connection with the womb, which is the container of power that women carry within their bodies...[and] the seeds of her power are good – that is, they are alive, bearing, nourishing, and cooperative with the well-being of the people. (24)

Women physically and spiritually perpetuate culture as the heart or womb of their societies, and physical and other connections with women are necessary for “the well-being of the people.” Her body is both sexual and intimate in physical relationships with others and in spiritual connections.

Anaquot lost a daughter who in death becomes the spirit of the drum in *The Painted Drum*; the young girl sacrificed her own life because she understood the importance of the collective versus the individual. The girl’s mother, Anaquot, leaves her father for the man who is the biological father of her infant daughter, who we later learn is Fleur. As they are travelling to their new home, a pack of wolves attacks and the young girl is killed because “She saw clearly that one person on the wagon had to offer herself, or they would all die. And in that moment of knowledge, don’t you think being who she was, of the old sort of Anishinaabeg who thinks of the good of the people first, she jumped...she lifted her shawl and flew?” (115). She threw herself to the wolves in order to save her mother and baby sister because she understood that her act of sacrifice would save the others that she loved. The young girl communicates with Anaquot after she has passed, warning her that the wife of Fleur’s father plans to kill her and Fleur. It is the young girl who provides the oil for the baby as she had packed some in her medicine bag; she speaks to her mother from beyond her death, warning her of what is to come and then helping her when the baby has been poisoned. She says to her: “My things are inside of your things, my bundle is safe in yours, just like when I was inside of you, mother, when you carried me safely into life” (131). Anaquot had physically birthed her daughter into the world; teaching her how to use medicine and helping her grow spiritually. After she has died, her spirit guides Anaquot to save herself and the baby through telling her where her medicine bundle is located so that Anaquot can administer the oil that will save the baby. Her spirit helps Anaquot and baby Fleur to overcome the bad medicine and to heal.

The young girl also guides her father in the creation of the drum, which serves to heal the people as a whole; he places her bones inside of the drum and “that little girl’s bones gave the drum its voice” (179). In her death the young girl becomes more alive within the drum than she was when she was living, as a drum is “more alive than a set of human bones” (43). The drum encompasses spirit; as the drum pounds, healing begins. A drum

is the universe. The people who take their place at each side represent the spirits who sit at the four directions. A painted drum, especially, is considered a living thing and must be fed as the spirits are fed, with tobacco and a glass of water set nearby, sometimes a plate of food. A drum is never to be placed on the ground, or left alone, and it is always to be covered with a blanket or quilt. (43)

The girl, in death, becomes like the All Spirit. Her spirit guides and joins with the spirits of those who drum, sing, and dance during individual and collective ceremonies. As the drum, her spirit serves to administer healing medicine to the people.

Water is an important component for healing and survivance as an element of the Medicine Wheel. First Woman was intimately connected to water. Allen describes in *The Sacred Hoop* how First Woman is “happy, centered, powerful for she is deeply connected to water as is implied by her birth story;” her birth story involves water in the sense that she transfers power to “the corn and tobacco (her flesh and bones)” and ensures that all life forms are vitalized (25). Because of this, she is connected to birthing life and sustaining it through “energy transfer” ensuring that “all will live.” Fleur Pillager, who was the infant girl of Anaquot, is thought to have a physical and sexual relationship with the water spirit of Matchimanito in Erdrich’s novel *Tracks*. Pauline says, “Some say she married the water man, Mishepesu, or that she lives in shame with white men or windigos, or that she’s killed them all” (31). Mishepesu is thought to be dangerous, so for Fleur to be aligned with him implies a terrifying spirituality. The windigo spirit is described by Nathan Carlson as “a cannibalistic humanoid monster or spirit entity that preys upon people to satisfy a compulsive hunger for human flesh...[it has] large clawed hands, matted hair, a naked emaciated body, and a heart made of solid ice” (359). The windigo spirit was thought to be created by bad medicine, so for Fleur to be thought of as having sexual relations with windigos implies that her spirituality is tainted, or evil; she is understood as being able to easily kill men and it can be assumed that this use of medicine for harm is likened to her having intimacy with the windigo spirit because it too seeks to kill. Fleur is tied to the spiritual realm on a powerful and intimate level because of her connection with Mishepesu, the spirit of the lake Matchimanito.

Fleur regularly submerges in the lake, something that others would fear to do. Allen points out that “among medicine people it is well known that immersing oneself in water will enable one to ward off dissolution” (24). Fleur is a powerful medicine woman, and it can therefore be inferred that she enters into the water not only for connection to the water spirit, but in order to ward off physical, cultural, and spiritual death and ensure the survivance of her people. Eli tells Nanapush about watching as Fleur went out at night and entered the lake. He describes how “Fleur [took a] step from her rough sleeping shift and walk[ed], stripped and limber, hair hanging deep black, through a swath of light into the waters of Matchimanito” (106). He dives in after her, and says that she stayed under the water long after he surfaced and came out onto the land. He does not understand why she enters the water and is in fact fearful of it and tells Nanapush, ““She went there other nights. Sometimes I woke and her hair was a damp braid tossed against me and once, from along her neck, I picked a curl of black weed from the bottom of the lake” (107). Fleur has a spiritual and physical relationship with water as is common with medicine people, and it can be assumed that with the spiritual powers and guidance of Mishepesu she is able to dive into the waters for a long time and come out unharmed, physically and spiritually cleansed and fulfilled, knowing that she is an integral part of ensuring the continuance of her people. Fleur should have drowned in the waters of Matchimanito, but she

is instead able to connect on a physical and spiritual plane to the cleansing waters, therefore giving her the ability to remain under water long after Eli has come to shore. Her time in the water “wards off dissolution” and is an act of cultural survivance.

Years later, in *The Painted Drum*, it is learned that the drum that contains the spirit of Anaquot’s daughter, Fleur’s sister, is brought back to the people and able to be used in order to heal their land; drumming is another act of decolonization and cultural survivance. The girl is alive within the drum, because “The body of a drum is a container for the spirit, just as if it were flesh and bone. And although love between a man and woman can change and fail, overreach itself, fall prey to suspicions, yet the drum lives on. The drum waits with the patience of unliving things and yet it heals with life itself” (172). Through drumming and singing, the girl-drum is able to help to heal her people. When she threw herself to the wolves, it was as if she knew that she had to do this not only for her mother and baby Fleur, but also for the continuance of her people as a whole. The girl as the drum helps to heal to scars caused by the sexual, social, cultural, and political scars of her people.

In *Grandmothers of the Light*, Allen discusses the ways of medicine people and how they serve the people as a whole. She writes that “medicine people are truly citizens of two worlds, and those who continue to walk the path of medicine power learn to keep their balance in both the ordinary and the non-ordinary worlds, giving to each what is necessary and sufficient” (21). It is important that the spiritual realm and the physical realm are equally valued in order to learn what is necessary from the spirit world and pass it on to the next generation; there can be no physical continuation or sexual fulfillment without the acknowledgement and inclusion of the spiritual world. The girl-drum can be seen as walking in two worlds, as her bones are the physical interpretation of her spirit that lives within the beating of and healing powers of the drum. Anaquot communes with her daughter’s spirit and uses medicine in order to heal herself and baby Fleur, coming to the center of the Medicine Wheel with her and emerging whole, just as Fleur emerges whole from the waters of Matchimanito when she dives in later in adulthood.

The physical and the sexual are uniquely and inherently tied to the spiritual. For the women discussed in the texts, there cannot be one without the other. By acknowledging that the spiritual embodies all parts of culture from the political to the social, survivance and decolonization can occur. Kateri Damm says, “Survivance, after all, has been the focus of our energies as Indigenous peoples since contact” (13). There is hope for women to regain and maintain their place as birthers of the physical and the spiritual through the embracing of the interconnections of both realms; evidence for this acceptance and celebration of the ways they are tied together is found in the creative works of the female writers studied. As Kim Anderson puts it: “Rebuilding the circle in whatever context we find ourselves in is a work in progress, and we must be creative to find means of reinstating the position of women, connecting with all our relations and picking up those pieces that were left scattered because of colonial interference. But we have tremendous resources, and we have great reason for hope” (179). Through creative works such as those discussed in this paper, decolonization of the mind will take place, and the survivance of Aboriginal culture and spirituality will only grow stronger.

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