Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy

Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics

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In university course descriptions one finds classes about American Indian literature in varying degrees, depending on the institution, faculty, and location. To find a course on American Indian women's writing is truly difficult, and to find one on Native women's poetry even more extraordinary (unless you teach it yourself, as I do). Still, you would think that given the interdisciplinary trend current in academia, one would run across Native women writers in other courses and departments. And so, when I enrolled in “Women’s Love Poetry and Erotics,” at the University of Washington in 1997, I had reason to hope that some Native women writers would be included in the course readings and/or discussions. After all, this was Seattle, a ferry-ride away from one of the most prolific, and both infamous and famous writers of erotica, Chrystos!1

Unfortunately, the syllabus did not include any women of color at all. My instructor had never heard of Chrystos or Joy Harjo, another excellent writer of sensuous love poetry, and suggested that I bring in some samples of Native women's love poetry and erotics.2 I accepted eagerly. “Real, ripe, ripping erotica” was my instructor’s criteria, and I had volumes of the stuff at home. Another obstacle arose: I was then told that the difficulty was not that this material did not exist, but that critical treatments of this work were nonexistent. This was a serious problem, but why did it mean that we, as a class, could not discuss Chrystos or Harjo? Why, without “proper documentation,” did these two poets drop off the love poetry map?

Three subsequent years of searching revealed the extent of this invisibility. Native women's love poetry or erotics is absent from many well-written texts. For instance, Alicia Ostriker’s Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America contains absolutely no reference to any American Indian woman writer.3 Published in 1986, Ostriker’s otherwise adequate and sometimes insightful text includes critical work about white, black, Chicana, and Asian American women writers, as well as works from the lesbian
community. Ostriker includes a brief examination of early (1650–1960) poetics, and sections on nature writing, anger, revisionist mythology, and women's erotics. But even in the “nature” section—where lost Indian writers are usually relegated—there are no references to any nature-loving Indians. More recent analyses of American women’s poetry exist, but they are no better. I note Ostriker especially in part because of the influential nature of the anthology’s publication and because it has become a template of exclusion that subsequent analyses have perpetuated.4


It cannot be said, then, that Ostriker had no materials from which to draw examples of American Indian poetry. In fact, many of these writings were readily available due to the “green Indian” or “Pocahontas” effects of the 1970s and 1980s, that is, the perception of Indians as the first ecologists or romanticized Indian princesses. The amount of energy that a serious scholar of American poetry would have to invest in missing these Native authors and books must be tremendous. In my use of Ostriker’s text as an example of how American Indian women’s poetry has been ignored or made invisible in American poetry discourse, I am not creating a straw critique but rather examining a truly
representative piece of American literary criticism that has contributed to a great silencing. Marilyn Frye uses a brilliant metaphor to make this same point. She writes:

Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires . . . you could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. . . . It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere . . . [Then] it is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.  

Being excluded or ignored in one or two collections of critical discourse about women's poetry functions like one or two slender bars of steel—in and of themselves the exclusions do not construct a constraining cage around Native women's poetry. But the systematic, consistent, tacitly approved practice of exclusion in the field of literary criticism works to weld those individual bars into the shape of a barrier that severely restricts what we can learn about Native women's poetry. While this loss is immeasurable for Native writers seeking audience, feedback, professional acknowledgment, and respect, I believe the larger women's community suffers an even greater loss in talent, opportunity for connection, and access to a rich body of work that is virtually unknown.

It is important to note that Native women have been marginalized within our own writing communities as well. Publishers of Native literature are like most other publishers: They choose to publish men because this is a proven and profitable pattern. N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Duane Niatum, James Welch, and other male American Indians gleaned what few token publication opportunities there were for many, many years. These same men—with the notable addition of Sherman Alexie—still claim the lion's share of publication, particularly by larger publishers, while Native women poets continue to be published mostly by small and/or feminist presses. Bird and Harjo talk about this in their anthology *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, where the two poets also discuss the countless difficulties encountered in their ten-year effort to compile and publish an all-woman Native anthology. Aside from perks like mass marketing, royalties, and prestige-enhanced employment, large presses often insure that a writer's works remain in press longer, are more readily available, and can be reprinted in the future. Small presses often close up shop, remainder an author's books, or—as is the situation currently faced by Chrystos with Press Gang—simply stop publishing. This makes regaining copyrights
very difficult and essentially leaves a writer suddenly out of print with no recourse. Endrezze was “luckier.” When Making Waves (her British publisher) folded, the press allowed her to purchase all remaining copies of her book. The careers of authors published by small presses are precarious.

But there are other additional reasons why Native women’s love poetry and erotics are so invisible. Stereotypes about Native women, for example, may take up all the available space in the American public’s head, leaving no room for writers who are not either squaw sluts, Pocahontas, or Indian princesses. Like minority women everywhere, Native women carry varying levels of marginalization within our identities: woman, Native, poor, lesbian, disabled, reservation/urban, and so on. However, for Indian women there is the added effect of internalized colonization and of what I call “Intergenerational Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome” (Eduardo Duran, a psychologist specializing in Native mental health, calls it more generically “Post-colonial Trauma”). Five hundred years of colonization and its many painful wounds have resulted in many Native women living basic survival-level emotional lives. We accept being made invisible as a kind of Novocain rather than endure the constant grinding of historical traumas that directly targeted Native women’s bodies and our ability to express ourselves in language and literacy.

Frequently, colonizing Europeans kidnapped Native women purely for the purposes of death by rape. The rape of Native women was also considered an act of sacred duty during the Spanish colonization of Mexico and much of the American West and Southwest; the resulting mixed-blood children could then be baptized as new citizens of a Nueva Espana. Widespread European rape of Native women from First Contact onward often resulted in fatal epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as children whose mixed ancestry contributed to cultural diminishment. Later, Native girls, especially, were kidnapped or coerced into the government’s Indian boarding schools, where they were kept forcibly for five to ten years, and sometimes sexually abused (“If we get the girls, we get the race,” was a typical rationale). As an especially hard blow, separation from parents and extended family resulted in adult survivors of boarding school who had no idea how to parent. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Native women on reservations and in urban Native communities were targeted for massive sterilization campaigns, resulting in generations of Indian women unable to conceive. All of this was legal. The current high level of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the children of Indian women is only the latest stress to damage Indian women’s creative energies at the core.

Insidious, too, is the multicultural shift which currently emphasizes inclusion of work by American Indians into pedagogical curriculums. Is it possible that publication can be damaging? Yes: These high school and college texts use
the same Indian authors, even the same pieces, over and over. Not only are the authors and the work tokenized, but they ultimately harm representations of American Indians through repetitious and noncontextualized use. Often, poetry falls into one of three categories for convenient discussion: a) a generalized grief; b) “nature writing” in which the Indian “connection to the land” is highlighted; and c) “ceremony” or description of a ritual event. Thus, stereotypes about Indians are perpetuated in the education of children and young scholars, who, rather than being enlightened about Indian lives, struggles, or history, are typically left unaware that a much more complex genre of American Indian literature exists, or that Indians engage in passionate, intensely intimate affairs of the heart and body which have been, somewhere, expressed in poetic, published form.

In my search for the invisible American Indian erotic self, I have discovered that there are no collections of American Indian erotica in existence. One poet I know, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, an Anishnawbekwe Indian, has been collecting Native erotica writings for almost ten years but has not been able to sell the idea to any publisher, large or small. In my search, however, I have easily uncovered many anthologies and collections of erotica with various audiences and themes including Latina, Latino, African American, Korean, Asian American, Jewish, and many varieties of sexual fetishes and fantasies.

Many collections contain creative critical essays and articles that reflect on the erotic as it intersects with race, class, gender, culture, AIDS, and/or age. The collections compiled by racial minorities, especially, take time to bear witness that they are the first, or one of the few, erotica anthologies by people outside the dominant culture and attempt to answer that question, why? For my purposes here, I use examples only from anthologies by people of color, in hopes of uncovering influences that may help explicate the invisibility of Native erotics. The editors of Erotique Noire/Black Erotica, for example, conclude early on that:

Black erotica has not been considered an art form and has not been the subject of serious study for a variety of reasons, some historical, some cultural. One of the legacies of slavery was the “genteel tradition,” which shaped Black life and letters. Many nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Afro-American writers and artists felt compelled to prove the moral worth and intellectual integrity of Blacks by avoiding literary representation of physical desire and sexual pleasure.

This fear of appearing primitive or reinscribing stereotypical minority sexuality makes clear that possession of black bodies did not cease with the Emancipation Proclamation but became a concept deeply embedded in American
culture. For American Indians, the constant barrage of literary representations depicting Native men as “buckskin rippers” and Native women as either squaw sluts or Indian princesses left very little room for any kind of acceptable expressions of personal sexuality in the few literary venues open to us. These inhibitions are echoed by other writers of color, as when Ntozake Shange writes:

We are lost in the confusion of myths and fears of race and sex. To be a “good” people, to be “respectable” and “worthy citizens,” we’ve had to combat absurd phantasmagoric stereotypes about our sexuality, our lusts, our lives, to the extent that we disavow our own sensuality to each other. . . . So how do we speak of our desires for each other to each other in a language where our relationships to our bodies and desires lack dignity as well as nuance?  

Internalized racism and sexism often cause people of difference to demand perfection from themselves—to do twice the work for half the credit. As Shange notes, to be “worthy citizens” means denying or erasing a sexuality that has already been completely misrepresented by the dominant culture. Self-hatred or self-fear is often combined with a kind of erotic starvation brought about by histories specific to a community’s experience, such as the frequent separation of African American families by slave owners, or in the case of American Indians, the strict separation of boys and girls during long stints at Indian boarding school (such distances not only changed Native courtship and coming-of-age experiences, but also inscribed a European, Christianized dogma regarding the “dirtiness” of Native bodies and sexuality in general). Russell Leong, in his forward to On a Bed of Rice: An Asian American Erotic Feast, points out that for decades only male Asians were allowed to immigrate to the United States, leading to a cultural, familial schism of silence about anything surrounding love or sex. This includes how to endure or ameliorate desire when one’s wife was in another country, and interracial sex (which was grounds for arrest and/or execution in most states). Leong also writes:

Simply put, throughout this history of Western subjugations and colonization Asians were seen by whites as both threatening and desirable—the men as dangerous and threatening, and the women as sexually available and desirable. Racial and sexual depictions converged, forming a distorted lens which we—Asians and Asian Americans—were viewed by non-Asians.

That distorted lens, Leong concludes, delayed or inhibited Asian American writers’ explorations of sexuality and erotic life in their works until very recently.
Ray Gonzalez, editor of *Under the Pomegranate Tree*, the first major collection of Latino erotica, comments on the effects of Catholicism making eroticism taboo for many writers. He also acknowledges that most Latino and Latina writers are brought up “in patriarchal societies, [with] the suppression of women’s art.” However, more significantly, Gonzalez mentions the one fact that all anthologies of minority erotica cite in common as the major obstacle to writing the erotic: the basic need to ensure bodily survival versus the “nonessential” needs for erotic fulfillment. He writes:

In the U.S., the political struggles of Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban writers focused on social issues such as racism, poverty, and problems in the cities . . . in order to establish a vibrant Chicano culture, the personal had to be given up so that social and political concerns could lead the way.

Gonzalez’s words are reminiscent of Leong’s, who writes, “The sheer energy we expended on survival and the building of our communities did not always find its way into sexuality or experiments with erotic pleasure.”

Each of these reasons for belated erotic acknowledgment—the need to counteract dominant cultural stereotypes about minority passion, traumatic changes in how sexuality can be expressed within one’s own cultural group, and lifetimes spent living on the precarious edge of disappearing—can be applied to the lives of Indian peoples and Native writing. Although the publication of the all-woman anthology *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language* in 1997 was a triumph for American Indian women writers, it is still jarring to realize that even here no section titled, “Love Poems” exists, and that love poetry in general is absent from the collection (I am using the term “love poetry” very loosely, of course; I acknowledge the theory that all poetry is love poetry, but here I am referring to poems which celebrate intimate and/or erotic relationships between lovers and life-partners). Reluctantly, we could conclude that the erotic is a luxury, something which must be earned after, not during, a more primal struggle for physical survival; and which, in many cases, can never be earned at all. But I am reminded of Audre Lorde’s essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in which she exhorts women of color to live, and write, the poetry of their experiences—to not let poverty or oppression silence the poet within. Lorde writes, “If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core—the fountain—of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.” Surely, Lorde is suggesting that poetry and the erotic are not mutually exclusive but, in fact, equal parts of the same struggle toward gaining one’s full life-force.
Yet there is a significant difference between the creation of poetry and the embrace of the erotic, and it may be that a crucial level of physical safety must be reached before erotica can be publicly shared by an oppressed population. Created by people of color or sexual minorities, poetry can be dangerous: Living the erotic (as do women of color who break stereotypes such as gender roles, sexual orientation expectations, or silence) within your poetry can limit your ability to earn a living, or even get you killed. Other minority communities have worked through this, while simultaneously the dominant culture seems to have “given way” enough to allow for publications that celebrate eroticism in many nonmainstream ways. Why not Indians? Are there specifics to American Indian writers circumstances that prevent us from feeling “safe,” or that prevent U.S. culture from feeling safe enough to stop repressing the erotic in Indian literature?

“I LIKE A WOMAN WHO PACKS”

Consider the forces specifically emerging from within the poetry and poets themselves. I have chosen two poems by Menominee poet Chrystos that seem to me very fertile ground for this discussion. “I Like a Woman Who Packs,” and “Na’Natska” are both clearly erotica; perhaps not as clearly, they are a Native lesbian’s erotica.

In “I Like a Woman Who Packs,” Chrystos writes:

I Like a Woman Who Packs
not because she wants to be a man because she knows
I want a butch
who can loop my wrist with leather, whisper Stay right here
I have something I need to do to you . . .

The title flaunts the specter of a dildo—unattached to any man, making male participation not only unnecessary but unchosen—in close conjunction with “woman.” Betty Louise Bell, a Cherokee writer and professor, writes, “I am your worst nightmare: an Indian with a pen.” Chrystos takes this even further: She is an Indian woman with a dildo. Not only does she write her truth, but she helps create erotic pleasures in ways that confound the agendas of both heterosexism and colonization. If the pen is mightier than the sword, Chrystos seems to say, the dildo is mightier still in that it does not destroy one’s enemy, but completely ignores him.

The first line of this poem is absolute rejection of the conservative rational for lesbianism: “not because she wants to be a man.” To have that right up
front, so to speak, laughs in the face of patriarchal pride and the foundation of homophobia. After all, penis envy is supposed to be part of every woman's psyche, right? But here, we get the distinct impression that the speaker of this poem does not want a man with a penis, and does not want to be a woman with a penis: The speaker wants a woman with a dildo. The speaker continues, “I want a butch / who can loop my wrist with leather, whisper Stay right here / I have something I need to do to you.” These lines not only pass over male options, but complicate the supposedly-fixed notion of woman. With the word “butch,” the poem makes the first of many assertions that do not challenge so much as simply bypass codes of behavior constructed by the dominant culture. Playing with the enemy's language further, Chrystos piles reversal on reversal, as the butch lover “loops my wrist with leather,” or symbolically binds someone who will not be bound to societal assumptions, and then says not “Stay right here, I have something I need to do,” and walks away, but “Stay right here, I have something I need to do to you” and, we presume, comes closer. Perpetually making unpredictable, sudden turns in her language trail keeps the reader guessing and in a constant state of rebalancing within the already ambiguous liminality of the poem’s eroticism.

A little further along, the speaker continues, “I like a woman who’ll make me beg her for it / Ride me till I forget my name, the date / the president, prime minister & every head of state.” Here again, the seemingly simple replacement of “woman” for man, “her” for him, and the phrase “ride me” all dislocate heterosexual privilege and comfort zones. Further, “ride me till I forget... the date, the president, prime minister & every head of state” indicates a butch woman whose power is such that she can distract her lover from the kind of knowledge typically asked of mentally ill people, or old folks in rest homes, when they are checked to see if they are still in touch with reality (“Ms. Miranda, what year is this?”). In other words, this butch woman literally drives her lover crazy, into an unbalanced state of being, and rather than crazy being bad, it is exceedingly good. I imagine Chrystos laughing as she penned this poem, giving the lover powers to erase even distinguished male political figures. Chrystos simultaneously creates the rhythmic image of “ride me” through strategic alliteration, rhyme, and increased pace of syllabic combinations, carefully crafting multilevels of sensory information and resistance.

Although there may be some element of flaunting lesbian pleasure in the Great White Father’s face, the work of the erotic in this poem is not to punish but to ignore patriarchal presence by allowing the erotic to acknowledge itself. By doing this, the lover makes herself visible and patriarchal culture suddenly invisible. In that instant, as she creates herself, each lover grasps what Lorde
calls the power of the erotic, and what I suggest here to be more specifically the power to create, to become visible, and become the creator of her own visibility—to assert presence in a physical, historical and political sense.\textsuperscript{28}

Turning to Chrystos’s “Na’Natska,” we find a wonderfully carnal and surprisingly complex poem. As mentioned earlier, Indian writing has often been stereotyped as “nature poetry,” leaving Indian poets to wrestle with this problematic imagery. We know that if we use natural landscape as metaphor, we are being predictable, but on the other hand, these are not “just” natural images to us. Often, the natural world contains much religious, culturally specific importance that is impossible to ignore but difficult to negotiate. Chrystos comes up with an intriguing solution to this dilemma. In “Na’Natska” she writes:

Teasing your eyes flicker like tongues on my lips  
  little roses your nipples become red mountains  
    My tongue climbs into you  
    shaking our legs sweat sliding  
    Your fingers in me are ruby-throated  
    humming birds Your eyes iridescent wings . . .  
    You laugh a gurgle of nectar  
We go shining in the rainy road your palm kneading  
  my thigh mine yours  
I murmur \textit{Am I affecting your driving too much?}  
  Tossing your head smiling you answer  
  I want you to . . . \textsuperscript{29}

Here, we enjoy a deliciously graphic moment between the speaker and her lover, complete with the metaphorical inclusion of ruby-throated hummingbirds feeding on images of opening roses that blossom into mountains, the whole natural-Indian-sex thing (you know it must be about Indians, because the title is some strange Native word you can’t understand—an old Indian trick), when suddenly, bam!—line 12 arrives: “I murmur \textit{Am I affecting your driving too much?}” The juxtaposition of Primordial Indian and car sex is stunningly effective. This rhetorical move tweaks notions about who is civilized, who is modern (as opposed to “traditional” or “vanishing”), and how deeply embedded our expectations are about American Indians. There is an Indian woman in this love poem, but she’s not that Barbie Doll-like character from Disney, and she’s not riding a pony or a canoe, but feeling up her girlfriend in a car. There is no way you can miss seeing that girl, thanks to the ways Chrystos has framed her so perfectly in a car driving through the center of an Edenic love poem.
As readers, this poem does not allow readers to cling to preconceptions about “Indian love songs.” We see an Indian woman who is lustful, happy, who exists in the real world of automobiles and daily life (“I paint / while you study falling asleep after 26 pages of greek”), yet still sees the iridescent wings of humming birds in the eyes of her lover (or, in a classic Chrystos turn, becomes the humming bird that laps the nectar of her lover/rose). The women in this poem love, make love, paint, study, laugh: They create. But are there consequences for a representation such as this, consequences that determine who must not see this picture?

REPATRIATING THE EROTIC

If Native women, who bear the scars from five hundred years of erotic murder in this country, suddenly become visible, there is hell to pay. The crimes against humanity committed in the name of colonization become visible alongside these women, while the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, as well as every treaty ever written and every protest against genocide in “other countries,” suddenly become testimony that strangles American mythology and identity. In other words, we cannot be allowed to see indigenous women in all their erotic glory without also seeing and acknowledging all that has been done to make those women—their bodies and cultures—extinct. We cannot see that criminal effort of genocide without also acknowledging that “our America”—our own democratic and superior nation—has committed crimes on a par with the gender- or ethnic-cleansing campaigns in other countries against which United States politicians ceaselessly rail. The living history of Native women’s bodies reveal that the mythic foundation of the United States is not a bedrock of democracy and freedom, but a shameful nightmare of unstable and treacherous sandstone, crumbling with each true vision of a Native woman’s erotic existence.

In thinking about the erotic as the creative or generative force, it seems to me that American Indian women’s love poetry and erotics do two things. First, they threaten to reveal heinous crimes and equally horrific cover-ups, revelations that attack the most vulnerable point in American identity—the jarring intersection of a democratic “nation” and genocide. Secondly, American Indian women’s erotics make a more “real,” less stereotypical, artificially constructed American Indian woman visible, and this writing allows us to fully experience our creative strengths—something no one now alive on this continent has yet truly seen. As Harjo says, “To be ‘in the erotic’ . . . is to be alive . . . the dominant culture can’t deal with a society of alive people.” 30 People is the key word here: Indian as human is still unthinkable for most Americans.
For Indian women to express the erotic is almost as frightening to America as if the skeletal witnesses in anthropology departments and national museums had suddenly risen from their numbered boxes and begun to testify. The mythology of a nation built on “discovery,” “democracy,” and “manifest destiny” begins to fall apart, and the old foundation, bereft of bones, cannot hold it up.

I once asked Chrystos what she thought about the poor publication record and lack of critical analyses of American Indian women’s erotics and love poetry. She thought for a moment, then replied, “American Indian writing is invisible; American Indian women’s writing is more invisible; American Indian women’s poetry, still more invisible. And Native women’s love poetry and erotics are so invisible, so far back in the closet, that they’re practically in somebody else’s apartment.”

This, I think, is the most astute analysis of the situation to date. It is not that American Indian women have chosen to keep erotic writing closeted; as Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm’s unpublished anthology attests, the willingness to go public is there. But our “closet” has, indeed, been shoved into somebody else’s apartment, and the inhabitants of that rental (or maybe they’re just squatters!) cannot afford to crack the door just yet.

Lorde writes about the erotic as a form of communication between human beings. “The sharing of joy,” she explains, “whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.” Anything with that much power is sharp on both sides! American Indian women’s erotics do, in fact, threaten the status quo of larger American concepts of history, mythology and nation precisely because these erotics are not merely a reinvention of the enemy’s language, but a reinvention that accesses the most powerful kinds of communications human beings can experience. Thus, love poetry and erotics go far beyond the original intent of literacy for American Indians, the U.S. government’s Indian boarding school “education,” which tied Indians to labor-intensive vocations weighed down by issues of race and class. Love poetry and erotics, however, are a kind of “elite” literacy that express truly consequential discourses about power, souls, well-being, and the transformational aspects of relationships based not only on injustice and trauma, but on celebration of pleasure and our humanity. European and Western academics have called this kind of knowledge “philosophy” or “meta-physics”—higher-level cognitive and spiritual practices, indeed. Could it be that more than five hundred years after First Contact, Indians are still thought incapable of bearing these most human of characteristics—desire, imagination, and a facility with language to articulate intangible possibility?
Few substantial avenues of expression currently exist for American Indian women and still fewer for representations of an Indian women’s erosics. The repression of such writing accomplishes nothing less than the shutting down of our best writers based on fears of the transformational potential of their work. To revise an old activist aphorism, we might say that if we want justice, we must work for the erotic—and that is no easy task. But poets like Chrystos imagine the erotic for her readers as a lover kneading your thigh while you attempt to drive the straight and narrow highway. When the erotic asks demurely, “Am I affecting your driving too much?” know that affecting your driving is exactly her intent!

Be brave. Smile back at her and say, “I want you to.”

NOTES

3. Alicia Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
4. For example, see By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry, edited by Molly McQuade (St. Paul MN: Graywolf Press, 2000). McQuade, who writes that she “attempts to redress that exclusion [of women] and uncover a novel and lasting body of knowledge while telling a story of women unheard until now,” (22) includes no articles by or about Native American women poets. No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets, edited by Florence Howe (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), includes poems by three Native women poets out of 105 poets total; these are Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan, and Joy Harjo (I discuss the dangers of repeatedly republishing the same poets and same poems later in this article). Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition, edited by Sharon Bryan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993) has a short essay by Harjo. Diane Middlebrook’s Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985) contains one article by, again, Paula Gunn Allen.
5. The “Native American Renaissance” is the name given to a small group of American Indian authors who became active in the late 1960s and grew in importance during the 1970s. This era is generally agreed to have begun with the publication of Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday’s novel, House Made of Dawn (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1969. The word “renaissance” was


9. See Harjo and Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, 22–23. In light of Os- striker’s large omission of Indian women in *Stealing the Language*, this title seems to count coup with some glee—and also subtly points out the differences between “steal- ing” a language that has been withheld as opposed to the need to “reinvent” a language that has been forcibly, violently imposed.


11. From conversations between the author and Endrezze, 22 May 1999.


14. I am not advocating that raw sexual poems be included in anthologies for children. However, for most high school and all college textbooks, where a discussion of love poetry is the norm, any American Indian literature is typically excluded.

15. Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology, edited by Will Roscoe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), is sometimes mistaken for an anthology of erotica, but it is not. Instead, it is a collection of very useful articles, essays, and poetry about sociological aspects of gay Indian lives and histories.


17. Ntozake Shange, Decosta-Willis et al., Erotique Noire, xix.


20. Gonzalez, Under the Pomegranate Tree, xvi.


22. Harjo and Bird, Reinventing the Enemy’s Language.


24. Perhaps this is due to the power of print, which sets out an author’s lifestyle or life choices in a public setting that includes clear identification of the author by name. Print becomes testimony to the author’s acts, beliefs, or experiences. The publication of erotic writing, for example, often draws fire from conservative or religious fundamentalist groups. It is a small step from letters and demonstrations of protest to the hate crimes that people of color or difference routinely face. However, for a writer in the same position, the very accessibility and publicity that allows success can make him or her more vulnerable to physical violence.

25. Chrystos, In Her I Am, 69–70.


27. Chrystos, In Her I Am, 69–70.


29. Chrystos, In Her I Am, 60.


32. Lorde, Sister Outsider, 56.