LOVE, FOOD AND SOVEREIGNTY: INDIGENOUS ROMANCE AND RELATIONALITY IN TASHIA HART'S *NATIVE LOVE JAMS*[*]

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Abstract

This article analyzes Red Lake Nation of Anishinaabe author Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams* as a relevant intervention in both Indigenous literature and the popular romance genre. The article argues that Hart reclaims the genre as a space of representational sovereignty. The novel departs from damage-centered narratives grounded in trauma and loss, and foregrounds joy, sensuality and erotic pleasure as central Indigenous experiences in the present. It thus redefines love as not merely individual but inherently relational, expanding it to encompass self-love, community care, and sustaining connection to the natural world. Food plays a central role in the novel, for it organizes desire and relation to place, thus aligning affective sovereignty with food sovereignty. By conversing with and responding to the romance conventions, the novel challenges its foundations as it vindicates Indigenous relational epistemologies to assert and promote survivance and belonging.

Keywords: Indigenous Romance, Sovereignty, Food Sovereignty, Decolonial Erotics, Relationality.

AMOR, COMIDA Y SOBERANÍA: FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA INDÍGENA Y RELACIONALIDAD EN *NATIVE LOVE JAMS* DE TASHIA HART

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la novela *Native Love Jams* de la autora anishinaabe Tashia Hart (Red Lake Nation), por su relevancia en la literatura indígena contemporánea y en la narrativa romántica popular, argumentando que Hart reclama el género como espacio de soberanía representacional. La novela se aleja de narrativas centradas en el daño para destacar en su lugar el disfrute, la sensualidad y el placer erótico como experiencias centrales para las personas indígenas. Define de este modo el amor como experiencia no solo individual sino intrínsecamente relacional, que incluye también el amor por uno/a mismo/a, la relación con la comunidad y la conexión sostenible con el mundo natural. La comida ocupa un lugar central en la novela, organizando el deseo y la conexión con el lugar, y así el texto integra soberanía afectiva y soberanía alimentaria. Estableciendo un diálogo con las convenciones del romance, la novela subvierte sus fundamentos a la par que reivindica las epistemologías relacionales indígenas con el fin de afirmar y promover la supervivencia/resistencia y la pertenencia.

Palabras clave: Ficción romántica indígena, soberanía, soberanía alimentaria, erótica decolonial, relacionalidad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Native Americans have traditionally been –and continue to be– the objects of settler colonial desire and appropriation, both materially and symbolically. The subsequent cannibalism has affected Indigenous bodies –murdered, raped, eroticized, exoticized, lands – stolen, extracted, polluted, and foodways –destroyed, consumed, commodified. In the face of this history of consumption, Indigenous sovereignty becomes a nourishing practice of survivance which restores agency and renews connection. This article explores Tashia Hart's romance novel *Native Love Jams* as one such form of reclamation on different levels: representative sovereignty through the re-appropriation of the romance genre; affective sovereignty through the affirmation of Indigenous desire; and food sovereignty through the reestablishment of reciprocal relations between people, plants, and place.

Hart is a member of the Red Lake Nation of Anishinaabe in northern Minnesota. She is a culinary ethnobotanist, artist, photographer, and cook, as well as writer. *Native Love Jams* was a 2024 Minnesota Book Awards Finalist in Genre Fiction, and the novel will soon be made into a romantic comedy movie (Colvin 2024). The second installment of Hart's "Real Native Romance" collection, entitled *Reservation Red Top*, and which she defines as "Native American Paranormal Romantic Comedy" on her website, is forthcoming in 2026. Hart is also the author of *Girl Unreserved* (2015), a fictionalized retelling of her own coming of age in Northern Minnesota, with references to mental health, sexual assault, poverty and the ripples of trauma; *Gidjie and the Wolves* (2020), a middle-grade illustrated book which won the Moonbeam Children's Book Award Gold Medal; and *The Good Berry Cookbook: Harvesting and Cooking Wild Rice and Other Wild Foods* (2021), which includes 75 recipes –some by other Indigenous cooks from various nations, as well as images and stories. She has recently co-produced, acted and helped develop the story for a forthcoming film by Jonathan Thunder –a Duluth artist and member of the Red Lake Nation– titled *Ish Meets a Mermaid* (Colvin 2025).

Native Love Jams is an example of the third wave of Indigenous writing, a term first used by Louise Erdrich to refer to the current "powerful time" in which many Native writers of diverse backgrounds, sensibilities, and languages are expanding Indigenous literature (in Orange 2020), and which I take to characterize a trend of recent Native American texts that engage traditional Indigenous forms and values– often associated with specific tribes and cultures –with Western genres such as romance, crime fiction, children's literature, YA fiction, comic, or fantasy. My main argument is that authors of this third wave assert representative sovereignty through a reworking of literary forms which we may not directly associate with

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Indigenous creativity, and in doing so, they resist settler colonial expectations about Native American identity and expression. This is not only a very interesting literary development but also an overtly decolonial act.

Hart's novel was self-published in 2023. When interviewed, the author recounts how she created (Not) Too Far Removed Press in 2020, after one of her books met with rejection and criticism from publishers because its protagonist was, in their view, "too far removed" from what mainstream readers would identify with ("Tashia Hart" 2023). As she sets out to write and publish about real Indigenous people in the twenty-first century, Hart's motivation is thus decolonial –for, as Driskill argues, "[d]ecolonization is an act of imagining" that reclaims Indigenous lives, languages, and bodies (2016, 169), and creating an independent press to tell Indigenous stories on Indigenous terms is precisely such an act. Further vindicating Indigenous creative freedom, the novel incorporates words in Anishinaabemowin without translation, and it negotiates Indigenous and non-Indigenous themes and symbols. It focuses on cooking and foraging for wild foods, positing a balanced relation to the natural world. The text also aligns with body positivity and its naturalization –including but not limited to sexual desire– as it points to the affirmation of identity through the senses, and to the inseparable connection between mind, body, and environment. By challenging taboos and stereotypes, and making Indigenous desire and relationships visible, it offers a solid response to the male colonial gaze and the objectification of women and Indigenous peoples.

2. A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE FOR THE INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT

Native Love Jams integrates two of Hart's main motivations: food and love, both of which are central to her activism and her fiction. As she says, "I wanted to write a contemporary romance with the food sovereignty movement of Native America at its heart" (Friends 2024). For this purpose, Hart refers to her own experience: she is a food activist, she was mentored by Chef Sean Sherman (Oglala), who runs a well-known restaurant in Minneapolis, and she has compiled the "Indigenous Food Producers and Suppliers List." She has spoken of how food is related to empathy, self-love and acceptance, and she claims that wild foods provide emotional sustenance: "My identity is inseparable from the food I eat. Chokecherry syrup and mashkiigobagwaaboo (swamp tea) feel like home. They are markers of place, space, and time. ... Food and healing go hand in hand" (in Krishna 2019). Her stated inspiration for the novel came "from her own experiences traveling as an Indigenous Chef for food sovereignty summits and events" (in Colvin 2024). Taken together, these experiences position Hart within the Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement, and they illuminate the ethical and political stakes of her representation of food and relationality in the novel.

The Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement is grounded on the idea that Native communities have the right to control their own food systems, including seeds, land, farming, hunting, fishing, and foodways. As Winona LaDuke defines

it, "[f]ood sovereignty is an affirmation of who we are as Indigenous peoples, and a way, one of the most sure-footed ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us" (2019, xvi). These contemporary revitalization efforts are relevant insofar as they respond to and try to revert the consequences of food colonialism, or the systemic policies and material interventions that severed Indigenous peoples from their subsistence practices in order to undermine Indigenous self-determination (Mihesuah & Hoover 2019, 4). These include, but are not limited to, the disruption of traditional food systems, the deliberate use of food as a tool of cultural conversion and population control, the substitution of ancestral diets with government commodity foods such as flour, sugar, and lard, and the suppression of ceremonial and seasonal foodways. The effects of food trauma are structural and ongoing, which is why activists make a point of addressing them from a holistic perspective, focusing on responsibility and relationship. In Devon Mihesuah and Elizabeth Hoover's words,

> The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty is not focused only on *rights to* land, food, and the ability to control a production system, but also *responsibilities to* and culturally, ecologically, and spiritually appropriate *relationships with* elements of those systems. (2019, 11; italics in original)

As Mihesuah argues in *Recovering Our Ancestors' Gardens* (2020), revitalizing Indigenous foodways requires restoring the connections among land, ancestors, community, and health, all of which were fractured by colonial interventions. In her view, food is never merely sustenance but a means of cultural and political sovereignty which she exemplifies through renewed practices of gardening, harvesting, and education. The relational understanding of food is also underscored by Amelia Katanski, who demonstrates how Anishinaabe manoomin (wild rice) stories are a form of Indigenous knowledge, governance, and food sovereignty (2017, 77). If, as she states, "Anishinaabe storytellers and food activists are often one and the same" (86), then "[s]tory and action intertwine, and ricing becomes decolonized and decolonizing knowledge and process, which can never be separated from story" (86). In this way, telling stories that nourish becomes an act of survivance (87). Nieves Pascual reinforces this point by examining Indigenous foodways as decolonial acts of resilience; in her words, "culinary resilience emerges from standing up to the foods of the colonizer, and eliminating unhealthy ingredients that were introduced by Europeans" (2026). Through food –which can be recovered in imagination if not in pure form– Indigenous populations "actively refashion and revive their original cultures" (2026).

It is within the context of Indigenous food sovereignty that Hart writes *Native Love Jams*, and her choice of genre is also deliberate and political. To start with, romance novels by BIPOC authors in general, and by Native Americans in particular,

are significantly hard to find.[1] Apart from obstacles presented by the mainstream publishing industry, there has been logical resistance on the part of Indigenous authors to associating with American Indian romances, which are produced by and for white women and usually set in the past (Martínez-Falquina 2024). These texts insistently include exotic Native American characters who perpetuate colonial stereotypes and reinforce appropriation and misunderstandings of Indigenous cultures. Moreover, nonwhite characters tend to remain underrepresented or stereotyped in romance due to the fact that romantic love has been naturalized as a white experience, which derives –as authors like Erin Young (2020), Hsu-Ming Teo (2020) or Jayashree Kamblé (2023) have noted– in the historical whiteness of romance. As a consequence, "[p]opular romance ... has a race problem" (Young 2020, 742). This is precisely the colonial structure that works like *Native Love Jams* are set to counter by centering Indigenous desire.

In the context of Native American literature, romance novels by Indigenous authors are still rare, but something is changing, albeit slowly. An interesting example is Evangeline Parsons Yazzie's *Her Land, Her Love* series (2014-2019), a romantic historical tetralogy set during the Navajo Long Walk. Yazzie, informed by Navajo elders' stories, seeks to provide the Indigenous perspective on the traumatic episode and its effects, underscoring Navajo values and celebrating resilience. She admits that the love story provides an unusual viewpoint of a painful history, thus showing an awareness of the inherent complications of the narrative form that she has chosen.[2] In turn, Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams*, set in the 2020s, provides an example of what romance critics have identified as the diversification of romance narratives in recent years (Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2020), led by authors who "incorporate racial and cultural diversity to decentre hegemonic visions of love and to vindicate the 'happily ever after' for individuals, collectives or communities who have historically been excluded from the dominant romantic imperative" (Fresno-Calleja 2023, 3). Apart from the current moderate progress towards diversity in the genre at large, third-wave romance criticism, as defined by Teo (2018), emphasizes the political complexity of romance and the conversations it facilitates about themes like race, sexuality, gender, and power.[3] As Teo (2020) notes, romance is a contested cultural space in which questions of race, gender, and power are negotiated rather than merely

[1] I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer who brought to my attention the work of Chamorro writer Paula Quinene, the author of popular romances like *Conquered* and *Stormed*, whose fiction also engages with questions of food sovereignty and Indigenous survival. For an illuminating study of Chamorro romance fiction, see Carolina Fernández Rodríguez's "Chamorro WWII Romances: Combating Erasure with Tales of Survival and Vitality," which examines how writers such as Quinene reconfigure the romance genre through anti-colonial and culturally revitalizing strategies. As Fernández Rodríguez notes, Chamorro literature has often remained critically overlooked, since "US Literary Studies rarely devote any attention to the literature produced in the US Pacific territories, while Post-colonial Studies often fail to focus on countries that are yet to be decolonized" (2019: 1).

[2] For an analysis of Yazzie's work, see Hoorenman 2021 and Martínez-Falquina 2024.

[3] See Roach 2016; Teo 2018; Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2020; Teo 2020; Roach 2020; Young 2020; Fresno-Calleja 2023; and Kamblé 2023.

reflected. Besides, marginalized romances can transform the genre epistemologically (Kamblé 2023). Thus, I argue that romance is a meaningful site for decolonial and Indigenous intervention.

In this sense, *Native Love Jams* contributes to expanding the "range" of romance novels, to use Pamela Regis' term (2020), and thus counters the accusations that romance novels are formulaic and all the same. Yet, the novel does not merely work towards diversifying the genre's representational field, but it also revises its underlying assumptions about love and desire. In fact, it is an example of Catherine Roach's conception of "counter-narratives" (2020, 63), stories that do not reject romance but expand it, offering alternative ways of loving, desiring, and belonging, and in this way challenging the genre's historically exclusionary structures. The decolonial motivation of *Native Love Jams* is made manifest in its dialogue with romance conventions as it redefines them through Indigenous epistemologies which recenter land and community, and counter settler colonial logics. The novel also reframes love as relational rather than individualistic, confirming Teo's claim that although romance is founded on the separation of mind from body, this is not a universal split (2020, 660-662). In Hart's text, erotic desire is defined in relation to nature and the world, and it is never disconnected from spirituality.

Drawing on the genre's promise of an emotionally satisfying resolution, or Happily-Ever-After (HEA), Hart also reclaims what Roach identifies as the "equalising power" of the romance ending (2016, 176), and redeploys romance's "strong belief in the transformative and redemptive power of love" (176-77) in order to affirm Indigenous desire, based on a relational understanding of identity. Hart's stated intention with *Native Love Jams* –which she defines as a lighthearted sweet romance centered on the relation of humans to nature and food– was to bring some happy vibes to people's lives and help them feel good ("Tashia Hart" 2023). This focus on joy and well-being is one way in which she challenges extended expectations about Native Americans, and she is very aware of this motivation. In her words,

> I just wanted to write a story where we got to see ourselves have a happy ending like that is so important. Seeing yourself in the characters in this community, seeing your community in the community of Rainy Bay, and just feeling good. And feeling like, "Yeah, we're doing this, and we can have a happy ending too, because that's what that romance genre is all about." (qtd Colvin 2024)

This happy ending is directly connected to sovereignty: "Having joy, that's one of our greatest sovereignties. We're used to struggling, but like, we are also used to creating and telling our stories. And we need that" (qtd Colvin 2025). Thus, *Native Love Jams* mobilizes the reparative, future-generating possibilities of the romance to assert Indigenous presence and continuity.

This change of focus is relevant not only thematically but also epistemologically, for it contributes to replacing what Eve Tuck calls the "damage-centered approach" to Native American experiences and cultures, which is pathologizing insofar as it focuses on defining Indigenous communities by means of oppression and its consequences (2009, 413). Describing them as "only broken" reinforces stereotypes of depletion

and dispossession and this may benefit outsiders, but it does not ultimately benefit Indigenous peoples, who need a change of perspective to work for a better future for themselves. Tuck proposes as "an antidote to damage-centered research" (416) a desire-based framework which is "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (416). Desire, derived from the body but not confined to it (417), is a fundamental reorientation of how knowledge is and should be produced. This is not a simple reversal of damage and it certainly does not ignore suffering, for it accounts for "the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities" (417). Desire as an "epistemological shift" (419) recognizes Indigenous complexity and sovereignty as central, thus resisting stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as damaged and insisting instead on narratives of presence and survivance. Hence, as a contemporary romance for the Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement, *Native Love Jams* responds to the need to turn Indigenous fiction toward articulating joy, desire, and relationality beyond damage-centered narratives. As this article is set to argue, Hart's intervention consists of her deliberate reworking of the conventions of popular romance to affirm Indigenous sovereignty.

3. CONVERSING WITH POPULAR ROMANCE

Native Love Jams alternates the perspectives of Winnow and Niigaanii, two Indigenous cooks in their thirties. Winnow has just broken her engagement with Chris, a self-absorbed, unfaithful and ill-willed Native man. We learn that Winnow is also frustrated by her failed attempt at starting a jam-making business when someone vandalized her kitchen a year before. She is headed towards Rainy Bay, a rural community in northern Minnesota, where she has been hired to work at Indigenous Food Days, a food festival. Niigaanii is a fellow employee of the event who has just been abandoned by her girlfriend Cindy. In the past, Niigaanii was framed for vandalism by Winnow's ex-fiancé, which landed him in jail, and he does not appreciate having to work with Winnow. Niigaanii is resentful because he thinks Winnow is still engaged to Chris. However, when they meet in person, they are attracted to each other straight away and, even more importantly, they soon become aware that they share a love of food and nature that makes them very compatible indeed.

Winnow is portrayed as a chef who is deeply connected to nature. She spends much of her time in the wilderness, "hiking through rough terrain and swarms of insects to find, converse with, and harvest plants" for both food and medicine (Hart 2023, 1). She is austere and pragmatic, as well as resourceful, and she learned "to get the most use out of a thing before repurposing, donating, or finally throwing it out" (2). She does not care too much about achieving a conventionally feminine appearance, and her personality is laced with a touch of humor and self-doubt, as she questions whether anyone would appreciate her "unkempt eyebrows, undusted cheeks, and mink-free eyelashes" (3). After her painful relationship with Chris, which left her feeling anxious and robbed her of laughter (14), she resorts to nature for solace

and empowerment, from her rituals with asemaa (tobacco) (56) to her emotional connection to water, which "makes her feel protected, calm, and loved" (59).

As for Niigaanii, he is a dedicated and community-oriented figure who manages the Rainy Bay Community Center and Hotel kitchen (Hart 2023, 4). He embraces his cultural heritage by championing food sovereignty through an innovative "Food Sovereignty in Action Vehicle," which he affectionately calls "The Harvester" (4). A man with a deep respect for the land, he engages in mindful acts like placing asemaa near plants and feeling their "delicate, floral aroma," which evokes cherished memories (20). He is humorous and playful, but he is also suffering as a consequence of the end of his previous relationship (12). This heartbreak has left him cautious but hopeful, as he is drawn to Winnow's groundedness and joy for life. Niigaanii's gentle nature is evident as he carefully helps a spider out of a window, an act of respect of nature that both moves and attracts Winnow (66).

In order to examine how the novel converses with and challenges the popular romance conventions, it is worth referring to the different elements through which Pamela Regis defined the genre in her influential *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003). These events shape the structure of the romance novel and reinforce the genre's focus on transformative love and personal growth. Regis starts with *society defined,* for, according to her, romance novels include an account of "the society that the heroine and the hero will confront in their courtship" (2003, 31). The novel represents a community that shares strong bonds with one another and with nature, especially through their relation to food and the environment. Thus, society does not symbolize restrictive norms or oppression, and the lovers do not need to confront it. The transformation of this narrative element points to the communal focus of Indigenous identity. As for *the meeting*, in Regis' account, the heroine and hero typically meet near the beginning of the narrative, and this encounter often hints at the upcoming conflict, setting the story's tension (2003, 32). In Hart's novel, the protagonists are immediately attracted to each other but the key difficulty comes from Winnow's ex Chris Brown, who does not accept that their relationship is over, and who, a year before the story time, vandalized his girlfriend's new business in order to prevent her from connecting with a chef they had both met. This chef is Niigaanii and he knows that Chris framed him, which makes him reluctant to approach Winnow, whom he believes is still Chris' fiancée. This is the next element, *the barrier*, which prevents the heroine and hero from uniting. Regis explains that "the romance novel's conflict often consists entirely of this barrier," which may be external (e.g., societal expectations, economic issues) or internal (e.g., personal beliefs or character flaws) (2003, 32). This barrier, crucial to the romance genre, serves to explore deeper themes within the heroine's life or psychology. In the novel, the barrier is used to explore both characters' thoughts and stance, not just the woman's, and it mostly consists of having their past experience determine their decisions about relationships.

Next comes *the attraction,* and according to Regis, a series of scenes establishes the reasons why the couple should be together, sustaining their connection long enough to "surmount the barrier" (2003, 33). In the novel, apart from significant sexual attraction on both sides, we bear witness to Winnow and Niigaanii's compatibility through their respective enjoyment of food foraging and preparation,

as well as their similar identification with the natural environment and its resources. Importantly, attraction is not only individual, for it includes –and to a large extent is based on– their connection to the land. *The declaration* is the scene where the hero and heroine declare their love for each other. The fact that this can occur at various points in the novel makes Regis argue that this variable placement "helps create the variety of plots" available within the genre (2003, 34). Declarations near the end, as is the case in this novel, mark the resolution of personal or relational conflicts. As for *the point of ritual death*, according to Regis this is a moment when the hoped-for union between the heroine and hero "seems absolutely impossible," reinforcing the stakes and emotional intensity of the story (2003, 35). In the novel, the most critical point for this relationship comes when Winnow sees Niigaanii get into Raquel's hotel room and thinks he is having sex with her. This is just a misunderstanding, but it makes Winnow question herself and recall the trauma of having Chris cheat on her. *The recognition* refers to "new information that will overcome the barrier" (Regis 2003, 36). It usually signifies a "self-revaluation" and understanding of the protagonist's "own psyche" (37). The recognition scene, therefore, is a turning point that brings the couple closer to their union. In the novel, this consists of Niigaanii finding out that Winnow has distanced herself from Chris, and of Winnow learning from Raquel that Niigaanii never showed any interest in her. They both learn that they can trust their own feelings and desires when assessing their mutual connection as true and safe. *The betrothal* represents the promise of a permanent union, usually through marriage or a comparable commitment. Regis notes that, by the end, "it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together," symbolizing a new, liberated state for the heroine (2003, 38). In this novel, both Winnow and Niigaanii are transformed insofar as they receive much needed positive feedback about their actions and ways of relating by finding a compatible partner in life. The society is not really transformed, although the couple will probably contribute to the community in the future with their plans to work together in the promotion of Indigenous food.

As for the three optional elements in Regis' definition, they include *wedding, dance or fete*, a celebration which "marks the creation of a new, inclusive society" around the couple's union (2003, 38). After some obstacles including a broken pipe that makes it difficult to feed all the visitors, the Indigenous Food Festival takes place successfully. Although we could take this as proof that, as Regis argues, "[s]ociety has reconstituted itself around the couple(s) and the community comes together to celebrate this" (38), the truth is that, in the novel, Indigenous society was never presented as requiring reconstitution. Instead, it is vindicated as fully functional, productive, and creative, countering all stereotypes of Natives who are much more than merely damaged. *Scapegoat exiled* refers to a character representing the "wrongheadedness" of old societal norms who is removed, symbolizing the rejection of values that hindered the romance (39). In the novel, Winnow's ex has to run away after being beaten by a female Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Chris is thus comically punished for his lack of respect for his partner in particular and women in general, and justice is served. Finally, *the ad converted* refers to an opposing character who is "converted to an acceptance" of the heroine and hero's union, emphasizing the power of love and the genre's theme of inclusion (39). In the novel, Raquel plays this

role. She likes Niigaanii and has set up a date with him, but she eventually accepts that he does not feel the same for her. In the end, Raquel befriends Winnow, who helps her reconnect with her mother after a fallout, and finds love somewhere else.

As we can see, Tashia Hart faithfully follows the classical romance novel structure defined by Regis. Yet, there are elements which point to specifically Indigenous vindications, like the equal focus on hero and heroine, or the assertion of the community as healthy and not in need of significant reconstruction. Both elements connect to the Native American emphasis on reciprocity between different elements of life, including men and women, people and nature, which contributes to the redefinition of Indigenous desire in the novel.

4. TALKING BACK: INDIGENIZING LOVE AND DESIRE

Although Hart engages with the popular romance form as described by Pamela Regis, she also responds to it by infusing it with Indigenous relationality and decolonial erotics. It is important to note that *Native Love Jams* does not simply represent Indigenous intimacy within a Western genre; it reappropriates this form to redefine love and desire through Indigenous epistemologies where body, land, and food are parts of an interdependent whole. Thus, the novel affirms what Mandy Suhr-Sytsma calls "the life-affirming power of Indigenous erotics" (2022, 312). She describes the erotic "as a site of power, pleasure, beauty, and creativity" which is "grounded in Indigenous epistemologies," including the relationships with land and water (312).[4] Moreover, similarly to the erotic experiences represented in Cynthia Leitich Smith's YA novel *Hearts Unbroken* –the focus of Suhr-Sytsma's analysis– the erotic experiences described in Hart's novel celebrate Indigenous joy and explore "desire's role in imagining and working towards decolonization" (313). This decolonial emphasis on desire also resonates with Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's reflections on Indigenous erotica as transformative. Akiwenzie-Damm insists that "the erotic is essential to us as human beings" and argues that it must reclaim "its rightful place in our lives and cultures before we could truly decolonize our hearts and minds" (2008, 113). In this view, the erotic is deeply reparative, becoming medicine "that would help to heal those broken and forgotten parts of who we are" (115), as well as antidote to colonial stereotypes and the pervasive violence that structure Indigenous women's lives, including the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women (115). Hence, the erotic is revolutionary, insofar as it reconnects contemporary Indigenous peoples with their bodies, stories, and ancestral knowledges, also pointing to the future. In Akiwenzie-Damm's words,

[4] See Suhr-Sytsma 2022 for an extensive, updated account of the presence of the erotic in a diversity of Indigenous literary texts.

> I have a dream that there is going to be a generation of our people, hopefully the next generation, who grows up with these positive images, these positive portrayals, these positive people who are comfortable in their own bodies, in their own sexuality and in loving other Indigenous people so that the erotic is simply an accepted, normal part of who they are. (123)

In *Native Love Jams*, the two protagonists have suffered from heartache and there are also references to past trauma in their lives. But the obvious focus of the novel falls on desire as joy and vitality with a touch of playfulness and a wink to resilience. Although there is alternating focalization and the two characters feel intense attraction for each other, which is detailed from both perspectives, the woman's desire is expressed more extensively and explicitly. Soon after meeting Niigaanii, Winnow enjoys the occasion to observe him freely before he even realizes she is there:

> She eyeballs the lobby before resuming the trace of the muscles flowing across his shoulders and down his chest. She stuffs the pamphlets into the holder upside down and backward, while her eyes lick him as if he were a flavor of Indigenous popsicle she never tasted the likes of. Her pupils pause to nibble at a softness atop his hips before lapping their way to his stomach, kissing at the soft brown skin that disappears into his red boxers. If only she could get close enough to reflect just her eyes in the silver of his buckle. (45)

Later, Niigaanii again becomes the object of Winnow's desire when he is cooking in the tribal kitchen:

> His apron is pulled snugly at his waist, accentuating the trapezoid of his torso. His t-shirt, although loose-fitting, can't conceal the muscular nature of his back and shoulders from her mind's eye, which stares in an unblinking stupor. There's the sound of rushing water, and he begins moving in a gyrating motion, his pelvis bumping on the steel counter in front of him in quick beats. Her pulse quickens, creating a bright hum in her skull that radiates out her eyes, making blurry her surroundings. (65)

In these and other descriptions, Winnow's sexual desire is presented openly and unapologetically. There is no shame whatsoever in this, or in her moments of solo erotic fantasy, like when she notices the phone vibrating "close to her nether regions" (55), or as she names the dildo her friend Melani has gifted her (76). Far from frivolous, desire is described as necessary as well as transformative, not just for Winnow but also for Niigaanii, who feels that "[e]lectricity surges from their touch and there's a promise of beautiful life in the spark" (136).

Humor plays a crucial role in how desire is articulated in the text. As Akiwenzie-Damm observes, "our erotica tends to be much more playful, humorous and joyful than other erotica," and she identifies humor as "one of the most obvious characteristics of Indigenous literary erotica" (2008, 120). Hart's novel exemplifies this playfulness by allowing erotic longing to coexist with a degree of awkwardness which by no means derives in anxiety. As an example, at a transcendental moment when Winnow feels "[i]t's like she's starting a second life" (57), she stretches and

"[a] boogit slips out" (57), followed by two young men laughing into their fists as Winnow tries to look dignified and innocent. This will derive in later jokes on the part of the young men, but the overall message is that the body is not idealized, and desire is part of ordinary, imperfect embodiment.

Apart from the affirmation of joyful desire in which Native peoples play a leading role, the most relevant cultural difference expressed in this Indigenous romance is the articulation of identity as inherently relational, which undermines both individualistic conceptions of the self and dualistic views of mind and body. Instead, we bear witness to how Indigenous peoples' connection to nature is deeply woven into their sense of identity, and their interactions with the landscape –especially centered on food in the case of *Native Love Jams*– are an expression of who they are. In the words of Akiwenzie-Damm,

> Indigenous erotic literature is often an attempt to reach out, to touch and, for a moment, to hold beauty aloft. Much of it is very firmly based in the natural world—it reflects and affirms our connections with other aspects of the natural world, such as animals, birds, plants, the land, the sky, the water, weather, the elements. In doing so it reminds us who we are and that we are intimately connected to all that surrounds us. (2008, 119)

In the novel, Winnow's life is shaped by her relationship with the wilderness, as she spends her days "hiking through rough terrain and swarms of insects" to gather plants that will nourish and heal her community (Hart 2023, 1). Swimming in the water with the encouragement of an eagle flying overhead (59), lying on a silky patch of moss surrounded by "a plethora of wild foods" (41), or marveling "at the bright-blue drink of space" that is the sky (98) are some of the examples of this transcendental connection to the land. Furthermore, such connection is deeply spiritual, as seen when she leaves a pinch of asemaa in nature, "saying a few words of love and care" for the community (56). For Winnow, nature is also a synonym of exploration similar to erotic desire:

> Winnow drops pins in the map on her phone for where things are growing in case the medicine is needed later. Her map is filled with enough pins that in certain parts of the state, she must zoom in to distinguish one location from another. Rainy Bay, which is north of the Twin Cities and east of Red Lake, however, has no such pins, and the idea of getting to explore the place excites her. (29)

Together, Winnow and Niigaanii encounter and deal with beings like leeches and woodticks naturally, and they are used to all beings that accompany them in their interactions with their surroundings. Observing how gently Niigaanii deals with a spider in the kitchen, explaining, "I take them from their homes, it's the least I can do," Winnow's "heart flutters like a memengwa [butterfly] set free from a jar" (66). Their connection to nature is precisely the main point of compatibility and attraction to each other. They both communicate with the natural world, which is where they can be truly themselves. As Winnow says, smiling, "[p]lants are some

of my favorite people" (83), and she shares with Niigaanii a past experience when she was out foraging:

> I was out picking ode'iminan [heart berries]. I was crouched down with my hands under the leaves. I spaced out for a few minutes until I felt a flow of energy like the kind plants often send out when they want to speak. I looked down and, in each hand, I was holding a strawberry. They were still attached to the plant, and together, the little green stems coming off the fruits formed a heart. I got a download of information, and they told me I would witness two hearts of a bigger love if I let my current relationship go. (102)

Her "self-contained contentedness with being alive in the moment" (81) as she is enjoying the wind on her face while riding his truck is something that Niigaanii finds really attractive, so that "[t]he heat of his loins combined with the warm wind on his face makes his mouth dry" (81). In fact, his own desire also makes him a creature of nature, so that "[h]e can't help but be attracted to the way she moves through the world; if his wood were a tree, it would be growing leaves and budding flowers right about now" (87). In turn, when Winnow smells his wet skin, "he's river stones and green manoomin [wild rice]. Excitement plumps her veins, causing certain parts of her to be aware of the distance to cross in order to reach him" (107). Not surprisingly, when they get closer, their dreams make them transcend their human forms too:

> Within moments of crossing the threshold from wake to dream, [Winnow] grows tall through the years, sees the forest change, feels the sway of the breeze, the hot of many summers' heat, the thrashing of storms, and then time settles on an early spring morning, and Niigaanii is caressing her bark. He produces his tap and gently presses it into her. He holds onto her trunk and laps at her sap, which trickles freely. Sounds of pleasure emanate from him as he quenches his thirst. (108)

In the end, as Winnow ponders, "[t]he best thing she found on the island wasn't physical food at all, but a growing, healthy desire for this man" (112).

As a particular element of nature, food becomes the most relevant extension of this relational identity, functioning not merely as sustenance but as a site of convergence of identity, nature, and community. The protagonists are both cooks who are active in the Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement: Winnow is on a "gig to forage and cook for a wild food festival in northern Minnesota" (2), "[t]he nation's first-ever food festival" (19), where there will be "food demos, a garden market and tour, a canoe build and race, a concert, lacrosse, basketball, and horseshoe games, an art market and then the big dinner on Friday" (69), and which Niigaanii is also helping to organize. He is the Rainy Bay Community Center and Hotel kitchen manager, and he has created the "Food Sovereignty in Action Vehicle," aka "The Harvester," a wild foods processing and delivery vehicle aimed at empowering the community through local, sustainable foods (4). More than mere background detail, these culinary roles position food as an everyday political practice through which sovereignty is enacted. This is reinforced by the text's insistence on naming Indigenous

ingredients like the ones Winnow brings to the kitchen, which include "[n]ettle, dried juneberries, violet, lilac, and apple blossoms, some kind of dried leaves, maybe wild spinach, ramps, pickled purslane, wild bergamot, chaga jelly, hazelnuts, acorn, and manoomin flours" (69). The novel also incorporates many food words without translation, positioning Indigenous readership at the center of the narrative, as in "I do have some leftover ogaa naboob [walleye soup] though. That'll start us both off on the right track" (5), or "[i]t'll be a piece of wiishkobi-bakwezhigan [cake]" (10). The affirmative presentation of local foods culminates in the menu that they prepare for the event, which prompts everyone's "oohs and aahs" (121), and which is composed of land- and water-based foods such as manoomin, walleye, venison, wild berries, and greens, prepared in ways that affirm land-based knowledge and culinary self-determination.

Food also functions as a marker of time and place, connecting the narrative to seasonal rhythms and specific landscapes. The ripening of berries and fruits –juneberries, blueberries, chokecherries– maps the passing of time onto the land itself (Hart 2023, 11). Food further contributes to the articulation of identity as relational, as when Niigaanii tells Winnow that she is "made of wild plum, walleye, and wild dock" (94). Within this framework, food is experienced sensorially –through touch, smell and taste– and connected to pleasure, memory, and desire. Not surprisingly, the main characters' relation to food is explicitly embodied and erotic. This dynamic is evident in Niigaanii's response to mashkigobag (Labrador tea): the plant's "familiar silhouette [...] excites him" (20), and when he handles the leaves after offering asemaa, he presses them against his cheek "to feel the soft caress of their fuzz on his skin" (20), savoring the "delicate, floral aroma of the plant along with decades of good memories associated with the smell" (20). Touch and scent thus connect the human with nature in pleasure and memory. A similar connection qualifies Winnow's sensual engagement with food. When she opens a jar of manoomin she harvested, the act of smelling the wild rice brings her a vision of it growing on water, feeling "the sunshine and sore muscles from the weeks of harvest" as well as "the buttery-nutty scent of parching rice" (67). Food thus blurs temporal distance, bringing past and future experiences into the present moment of the body.

The process of getting to know each other is described through food as well. When Winnow enters Niigaanii's cabin, she feels close to him through his handling of food in the intimacy of his home:

> the smell of manoomin dust ensconced in the walls like marrow in bones, hanging herbs releasing their essences, and dried things filling jars on shelves winding the room, she feels like an exposed hermit crab stumbling into a shell that's a perfect fit. The front door opens to the kitchen. She sets the water pack on the counter and walks down the hall, following the trail of jars at eye level. The kind of love required here strikes her deep desire to connect with another human being over such a love like a tuning fork. (84)

Her attraction to Niigaanii is thus articulated as a desire for the form of love this space represents, rooted in care and nourishing intentions. As their relationship

deepens, sensory encounters with food merge with erotic experience. Winnow rubs powdered ingredients between the fingers and this produces "a new memory connected to this sensation; the silkiness of Niigaanii's skin," so that "[a] shiver runs down her spine and anchors in her loins" (122). Desire itself is framed through the language of ripeness and harvest, as when Winnow reflects that her "mind, spirit, and flesh are ripe for the picking when Niigaanii approaches her" (132). When Winnow brushes past Niigaanii, his scent, like "boiling manoomin and burning sweet grass" (134) ignites her longing, a hunger that "sears the tinder of her heart" (134) and draws her toward him. Erotic longing thus becomes an extension of nourishment and care, linking bodily desire to practices of sustenance that affirm Indigenous selfhood and interdependence.

Food is evidently nourishing, but in *Native Love Jams* it also becomes a mode of relational being, a material practice through which bodies open themselves up to other bodies, to nature, and to community. As scholars of Indigenous food sovereignty argue, food is never merely about rights but about responsibilities and relationships (Mihesuah & Hoover 2019, 11), and Indigenous food stories are themselves acts of decolonial knowledge-making that promote sovereignty (Katanski 2017). In Hart's hands, food becomes the vehicle through which original Indigenous cultures are imaginatively refashioned and revived (Pascual 2026), indigenizing the romance form and reaffirming epistemologies that refuse the separation between sustenance and desire, and between self and world.

5. CONCLUSION

In "Love and Romance Novels," Hsu-Ming Teo argues that as cultural understandings of love evolve, romance novels reflect these changing ideas in the way they depict falling in love, being in love, and what love should achieve (2020, 660). At the same time, she contends that "the discourses of love represented in romance novels feed back into and influence how particular societies recognize and understand the operation of romantic love in popular culture" (660). Romance is therefore a powerful pedagogical genre insofar as it naturalizes certain emotional norms and marginalizes others. This is particularly relevant in the context of Indigenous literatures, where love has not traditionally been the emotion most commonly represented, for cultural production has often been framed through narratives of trauma and loss. This makes Tashia Hart's decision to focus on love deeply political, turning romance into a decolonial form. Importantly, love in *Native Love Jams* is more than a bond between the romantic couple, for it is explicitly expanded to include self-love, care for the community, and sustaining connection to the natural world. The text redefines love as relational, land-based and communal, foregrounding forms of connection that counter settler colonial fragmentation and appropriation. Hart thus activates the pedagogical force of romance to reimagine Indigenous relationality, and rather than reproducing narratives in which Indigenous life is defined primarily through loss and trauma, she insists on joy and sensuality as legitimate Indigenous experiences in the present.

The reasons why Native Americans have not traditionally chosen the romance form are obvious, for romance has generally excluded or stereotyped Indigenous peoples. Yet, *Native Love Jams* is a sign that something is changing. By replacing damage-centered narratives with desire-based narratives grounded in Indigenous relationality, the novel normalizes the presence of Native characters not merely as survivors of colonial violence but as fully desiring subjects. The HEA ending thus becomes an assertion of survivance and sovereignty. In this sense, the novel affirms Indigenous belonging to cultural, social, and political life while simultaneously making Indigenous values more visible. The most explicit one is the understanding of food, which is central to the romance plot in the novel. Food –part of the relational world of the Indigenous context– organizes intimacy, erotic desire, temporal and spatial location, and it reworks desire as nourishment, care and continuity. Hence, the novel aligns affective sovereignty with food sovereignty, in such a way that intimacy, nourishment and relational caretaking flow together. It is by both working within and transforming the conventions of popular romance to articulate Indigenous representational sovereignty that *Native Love Jams* demonstrates how the genre itself can become a site of decolonial motivation. This Indigenous romance not only challenges whiteness as the genre's default and expands romance theory beyond liberal individualism, but also exemplifies the current third wave of Indigenous writing, which engages with popular genres in ways that powerfully enact sovereignty. We should therefore remain attentive to emerging Indigenous romance texts, for they promise further transformations of the genre as well as of the cultural imaginaries that shape understandings of love and relations.

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