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## **Reading *Split Tooth* – Lessons of the Sovereign Erotic I take away and still grapple with**

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### **Résumé**

*Ce texte vise à partager certaines expériences de lecture de Split Tooth de Tanya Tagaq. Il se penche en particulier sur la souveraineté des sentiments érotiques et sur la manière dont ils influencent notre être dans et avec le monde. Cette question est particulièrement intéressante, mais aussi très stimulante, pour le domaine en pleine expansion de la philosophie interculturelle. La philosophie reste un concept très occidental, reposant principalement sur des principes rationnels. L'engagement avec les philosophies autochtones nous confronte à une compréhension différente de l'« autonomie » qui se présente de manière particulièrement claire dans ce que les écrivains autochtones appellent « l'érotisme souverain ».*

*Le personnage principal du livre de Tagaq est une adolescente qui grandit au Nunavut dans les années 1970 et qui connaît des journées d'hiver rigoureuses, des rencontres intensives, voire sexuelles, avec la nature et des engagements violents et abusifs avec les humains. En s'intéressant principalement à une anecdote que Tagaq partage avec ses lecteurs, le texte s'appuie sur trois notions initiales. Premièrement, la tension déconcertante entre l'impuissance et le pouvoir dans les moments érotiques ; deuxièmement, la perte de contrôle et le désir de le regagner par l'abus sexuel ; et troisièmement, l'expérience de l'« éco-érotisme » dans la rencontre érotique avec la nature, y compris la nature en moi.*

### **Abstract**

*The text seeks to share some experiences reading Tanya Tagaq's Split Tooth. It particularly looks at the sovereignty of erotic feelings and how they impact our being in and with the world. This is particularly interesting, and also very challenging, for the growing field of intercultural philosophy. Philosophy is still a very Western concept, mainly resting on rational principles. The engagement with Indigenous philosophies confronts us with a different understanding of 'autonomy' that presents itself particularly clearly in what Indigenous writers refer to as 'sovereign erotic'.*

*The main character of Tagaq's book is a teenage girl growing up in Nunavut in the 1970s, experiencing harsh winter days, intensive, also sexual encounters with nature and violent as well as abusive engagements with humans. By looking mostly at one incidence Tagaq shares with her readers, the text draws out three initial insights. Firstly, the*

*daunting tension between powerlessness and power being drawn into erotic moments; secondly the loss of control and the longing to gain it back through sexual abuse; and thirdly, the experience of “eco-eroticism” in the erotic encounter with nature, including nature within myself.*

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## Introduction

Reading Tanya Tagaq’s *Split Tooth* affected me on a very profound level. I used to live in Canada for several years and spent time in Indigenous communities, especially in the Arctic. As a social worker and researcher working with juvenile sex offenders, I witnessed the heavy burden of abuse and alcohol as well as suicidal thoughts in midst of a spiritual reality sparked by a natural environment that does not allow for compromise.

With this paper, I would like to share some of my experiences reading *Split Tooth*. Moreover, I want to convey some thoughts I took away with regards to the powerful concept that a number of Indigenous authors call *sovereign erotic* (Driskill et al. 2011; Nelson 2017; Bear 2016).<sup>1</sup> Although I am referring to an incredible book written by an Inuk artist, the starting point for my reflections is what happened with *me* reading it. This is a reflection of a white, cis woman coming from a very different place feeling a deep connection and at the same time a strong sense of alienation. Therefore, the genre of my text seems unusual for a Western academic tradition. It is personal and ‘subjective,’ it is not *about* Tagaq’s book nor is it about me ‘going Native’ – I am who I am and I stay who I am. Yet, I write about the learnings I take away mentally, bodily, emotionally and spiritually – learnings that transform my thinking, feeling, and being. “[W]e are the individuals we are,” Dennis McPherson and Douglas Rabb (2011) write in a book on *Native American Philosophy*, “because our voices resonate with those of others in our wider community” (152). My writing reflects that resonance. It is very close to what Shawn Wilson denotes as a “relational” (2008, 8) approach to academic writing.

My text also rests on my philosophical stance and practice. I am a philosopher who seeks, studies, and works in places on the fence, places that lie ‘in between’ – between different disciplines, cultures, and methods. I take great interest particularly in these places and pursue to research them from a meta-perspective. However, I preferably do so also from a place ‘in between.’ Thus, I am particularly interested in (doing) ‘intercultural philosophy.’ Together with the Opaskwayak Cree Scholar Stan Wilson I recently published a book practicing and reflecting on our joint journey of learning from each other (Wilson/Schellhammer 2021). Unfortunately, Indigenous traditions are still rarely part of the Western philosophical discourse (Elberfeld 2021). And yet,

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1 Some first, cursory thoughts of this paper were presented at the 42<sup>nd</sup> *American Indian Workshop* (AIW) on “The Sovereign Erotic” (online conference, from July 12-17, 2021).

we as European thinkers would gain so much if we were to engage in *genuine dialogue* with Indigenous philosophies. With the term *genuine dialogue* I refer to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who explains: "In genuine dialogue the turning to the partner takes place in all truth, that is, it is a *turning of the being*" (1998, 75; italics mine). He distinguishes this experience of "living mutual relation" from two other kinds of encounter: first "*technical dialogue*, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding" and second "*monologue disguised as dialogue*" (Buber 2002, 22; italics mine) disregarding the presence of the other, being solely interested in having one's own self-reliance confirmed.

Reading Tanya Tagaq, I experienced some of the unsettling "turning" (1998, 75) that Buber talks about when we openly engage in a *genuine dialogue* allowing it to transform us. It shook up my self-reliance and pushed me beyond understanding on a rational level. I sensed that my experience could be connected to the nexus of sexuality and sovereignty – in particular to the spiritual power of nature (around us *and* within us) as well as to horrific injuries of sexual violence and the feeling of powerlessness it brings. Our Western culture lacks what Bettina Stangneth (2020) recently called a "culture of sex" (Ger. *Sexkultur*). Rather, sex stood in sharp contrast to what we consider as 'culture,' it was (and often still is) seen as an irrational bodily desire that should be resisted and controlled. Thus, it is no surprise that the Indigenous scholar Tracy Lee Bear writes in her dissertation *Power in My Blood: Corporal Sovereignty through the Praxis of an Indigenous Eroticanalysis* that "[a]ny freedoms or diversities of Indigenous sexuality and gender were silenced with colonial language steeped in sexual sin, shame, and perversity" (2016, ii). The term 'sovereign erotic,' or rather the experience that took shape in stories, ideas and movements, goes back to mainly queer/two-spirit Indigenous literature. It reflects and proclaims the creative resistance Indigenous editors and writers find in reclaiming their bodies and their sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Reading Tanya Tagaq not only showed me once again some of the treacherous abuse a lot of Indigenous people, mostly women (Monchalin 2016, 175), had to endure in the colonial sexualization and subjugation of their bodies, but also what my body may hold for me in terms of sovereignty and self-determination.

In the following, I would like to refer in particular to one passage of the book that strongly affected me, especially in terms of a *sovereign erotic*. Although I am still reflecting and working on it (or rather it is working on me), I would like to draw out three initial insights I consider as valuable, also for intercultural discourses with Indigenous thought in philosophy and beyond: Firstly, the daunting tension between powerlessness and power being drawn into erotic moments; secondly, the loss of control and the longing to gain it back through sexual abuse; and thirdly, the experience of "eco-eroticism", of "getting dirty" (Nelson 2017) in the erotic encounter

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2 See for example the works of Brant 1988; Akiwenzie-Damm 2003; Driskill et al. 2011; Rifkin 2012; Roscoe 1988; Morgensen 2011.

with nature – also within myself. Because my text refers to erotic experiences, I would like to add a trigger warning at this point: The following entails sexual content and also mentions sexual abuse.

The main character of *Split Tooth* is a teenage girl growing up in Nunavut in the 1970s – she could be my age now. She takes us through moments of her daily life, intense moments with animals and the brutality of cold winter days. She confronts us with traumatic scenes of violence, alcoholism and dark spirits while at the same time portraying the cheerful life of a teenager. She seems to switch back and forth between experiencing a seductive spiritual world and the harsh reality of her actual life – both mix and mingle constantly so that the spiritual world becomes real and the “real” world becomes utterly spiritual.

The passage I chose describes the sexual encounter with a fox (hence the German title of the book is *Eisfuchs*, which translates to ‘ice fox’):

It was a fox! As he came closer I realized that he was huge, man sized. My fear was overridden by his maleness, by his grace. I could see every hair on him, white and perfect. The wind blew around him and his black eyes spoke to me, “Let me in.” [...] His voice was light; his voice was all the darkness. It was the deepest, smoothest voice I had ever heard. My flesh was softened, my will blinded. [...] He shot me with truth and the burden of our bodies. I saw in an instant the spiritual world we all ignore. [...] I opened the door, and he brushed past me on all fours. His scent hit me, so pungent that it almost stung my nose. It also opened a pathway of urgency within me. [...] His scent penetrated me [...]. My bones seemed to loosen. I couldn’t move. Then he spiralled his limber body onto a chair, sitting like a man. He had a huge black and orange cock, veiny and pulsating. I knew I had to put him in my mouth. I was feeling a mixture of revulsion and an uncontrollable tingle in my mouth, almost an itch. His cock would satisfy it. I put him in my mouth and started to suck on him. [...] Blinded and dazed, I wanted to live in that sublime moment always. It’s the best I have ever felt. (Tagaq 2018, 69f.)

To my first observation: The initial feeling I had reading this passage was the daunting tension between powerlessness and power, a tension I see as inherently embedded in the term *sovereign erotic* – I think the term reflects that tension.

### **1. *Sovereign Erotic* – The Daunting Tension between Powerlessness and Power**

It is what we feel in our body in erotic moments that is sovereign. My rationality is superseded, there is not much left of my cognisant autonomy. “My flesh was softened, my will blinded”, writes Tagaq (2018, 69). What does that tell me as a philosopher coming from a Kantian tradition feeling a sense of powerlessness like she does? It is strange how eroticizing an ice fox can be – for the protagonist in a

world foreign to me and yet for me as well just reading Tagaq's lines. All I can do is to respond to what is happening – I am not the master in my own house (as the 'fox' is entering it). The young girl felt "almost weightless, like a jellyfish in a giant fishbowl" (Tagaq 2018, 72).

But there is also the other side, something else I sensed reading what happened to the young girl: the steadfast and selfish power of the erotic as a source of strength against oppression and assimilation. She takes it in her own hands, she does with the fox as she pleases. "I was his saviour", she writes, because the fox was cursed by a bad spell and she freed him. The story with the fox ends with "The knowing. The healing. The Cleansing" (Tagaq 2018, 72). This sense of sovereignty and transformative power of the erotic seems to be something a number of Indigenous artists draw from.<sup>3</sup> I think for example of the art exhibition *RezErect: Native Erotica*. Co-Curator Kwiaahwah Jones points out, "[a]rtists share a passion for their culture, and strive to transform public opinion on the collective understanding of First Nations' people and cultures;" and goes on to say, "[t]he works will challenge you to look at sexuality. They might make you laugh, blush, cry or even leave you hungry" (Bill Reid Gallery). Another example showing that erotic fiction, especially two-spirit erotic fiction, is not just personally empowering, but also politically so, is the anthology called *Sovereign Erotics* (Driskill et al. 2011). The collection of texts is intentionally unsettling, shaking up the mainstream way of looking at Indigenous people. One of the editors, Daniel Heath Justice, a Cherokee scholar, states that "the two-spirit writers in his anthology try to find beauty and pleasure in bodies that are so often subjected to horrendous violence or have been dismissed, displaced or removed by settler colonial populations" (Nair). Also very powerful is Melissa Nelson's essay "Getting Dirty" (2017). She writes: "After centuries of oppression, expressing the joy and diversity of our native sexualities is truly an anticolonial, liberating act. Questioning the internalized authoritarianism that denies and demonizes our psychospiritual and animal closeness to 'nature' is a decolonial and revolutionary act of survivance" (235).<sup>4</sup> The

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3 Also very insightful and empowering in this context is Audre Lorde's speech *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*. "The erotic is a resource within each of us", the Black writer and activist states, "firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." It is unrecognized because we (particularly women) have been taught to suspect this resource "vilified, abused, and devalued within western society" (2007, 53).

4 It is interesting here that Nelson seems to use 'decolonial' and 'anticolonial' synonymously. Some authors (e.g. Mahuika 2008; Liboiron 2021, 26) suggest to distinguish them by pointing out that 'decolonial' is not going far enough since a lot of colonial practices or institutions (e.g. settler rights) are still in place although we talk about decolonizing at the same time. Others are arguing that the term 'colonialism' as such is a Western construct and that "we must be careful not to allow colonialism to be the only story we use to describe Indigenous people's lives" (Monchalin 2016, 72) – even if the term is used as opposition (in anti-colonialism) or with regards to the process of 'undoing' the wrongs of the past and repatriating land (in decolonizing). With Rolf Elberfeld (2021) I would argue that we have to become aware of the far-reaching colonial entanglements that continue to exist (no matter what terms we use) and that we as European/Western

term ‘survivance’ goes back to the Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor (2008). It highlights the crucial link between resisting and surviving, pointing out that many Indigenous people have not only subsisted genocidal practices of colonialism, but have been utterly resourceful to oppose demeaning stereotypes upholding their unique cultural traits and identities.

Although I come from a privileged place not even being close to what Indigenous people had and still have to endure being brutally robbed of their culture, I can relate to some of the authoritarian powers I internalized when it comes to

religious impositions of patriarchy, heteronormativity, internalized oppression, original sin, shame, and guilt (among many other idiosyncratic layers), especially in relation to our bodies and our capacity for intimacy and pleasure. These beliefs are based on a fear of the wild and uncontrollable, both in nature and ourselves. (Nelson 2017, 235)

Indeed, these feelings are “wild and uncontrollable”, but also so very empowering, so full of life and so much part of who I am. “Nothing is more dangerous for the well-ordered society”, Stangneth writes in her quest to liberate people in Western cultures to discover their own sexualities, “than two people who know how to take away each other’s anxiety of their arousal and use the most natural thing in the world to set themselves free” (2020, 207, transl. by the author).

On a more philosophical note, I learned from Tagaq’s story – or rather, from what it does with me – that I prefer the term ‘self-determination’ or ‘self-governance’ to that of ‘autonomy’. The concept of autonomy is strongly attached to the Kantian tradition. It refers to the capacity of an agent to act in accordance with objective morality rather than under the influence of desires. Objective morality indicates that we are our own person, that we are able to rule ourselves, independent from others and from our ‘animal desires’ (‘autonomy’ comes from the ancient Greek words *autos*, meaning ‘self’, and *nomos*, meaning ‘rule’).

The composite term ‘self-determination’ on the other hand has ‘self’ in it – thus we can ask what this ‘self’ entails. When I become conscious of what I (my self) feel(s) in erotic moments, I can say that I am very much with my self – paradoxically exactly in moments when I abandon, devote or surrender myself in a rational sense. I am with the other and with what I am in terms of my body (in German we are able to distinguish between *having* a body using the term *Körper* and *being* a body using the term *Leib*). Therefore, it is probably not surprising that feminist philosophers use the term “relational autonomy” (Mackenzie/Stoljar 2000). They, too, criticize that the “the notion of individual autonomy is fundamentally individualistic and rationalistic” (3)

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researchers have to be accountable for what we do – in our ‘decolonizing’ practices as well as ‘anti-colonial’ projects.

and that we much rather have to see that “persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships” (4).

However, what becomes additionally obvious when reading *Split Tooth* is that we are also formed within the context of the many invisible strings that attach us to nature. Our self is part of nature – the kind of nature Kant’s concept of autonomy seeks to overcome and repress (as ‘animal desires’). This deep connection ‘to the land’ I find missing in the feminist concept of ‘relational autonomy’ – again, that is why I opt for the notion of ‘self-determination,’ because ‘self’ includes body, mind, spirit and our relationality with others including “plant-persons” and “animal-persons” (Norton-Smith 2010, 77). Here, we can and should learn from Indigenous traditions. Stan Wilson talks of “Self-as-Relationship” and he, too, argues that the “relationships with all living things extend beyond the self-in-relation [...] described by some feminist developmental theorists” (2001, 91, emphasis added). Our sacred bond with the land is substantial, it is who we are. “We ARE the land, same molecules, and same atoms,” Tagaq writes, and continues to say, “The land is our salvation. Save Our Souls” (2018, 62, original emphasis). And then once more, “The land is our salvation. Breathe. Fuck. Feel” (63). We experience a paradox form of erotic sovereignty if we accept this inextricable relationship we are.

Yet, what was particularly alienating and disturbing for me throughout Tagaq’s book was the sharp contrast between this positive strength of the erotic and the brutality of sexual assault the young girl witnessed and experienced in her family. That brings me to my second point: Sexual abuse massively hurts the sovereignty of a person.

## **2. Hurting, Losing and Longing for Power through Sexual Abuse**

Almost all of the juvenile sex offenders I worked with were victims themselves. The massive feeling of powerlessness as a child frequently leads to extreme forms of gaining that power back. It is a troubling as well as well-known fact that victims frequently turn into offenders, which is referred to as “Victim-Offender Overlap” (Reingle/Maldonado-Molina 2012). They stop feeling, lose the connection with themselves and long for the power and self-control they were robbed of. Their body turns into a machine-like, foreign object following its own rules (in German we use the term *Fremdkörper*). It seems to be dispatched from their inner self, particularly from the place where it hurts, to be able to keep going and stay alive.

The bodily contact that takes place in abusive behaviour has not much to do with relating. Relating seems dangerous as it brought the pain in the first place when victims were innately related to caregivers as dependent children – caregivers who abused their trust and their love. In his book *Indigenous Healing*, Rupert Ross finds his explanation why so many people who were abused as children grow up to abuse children themselves by looking through a ‘relational lens’ – a perspective he gained from his work in Indigenous communities. He states that “they were simply operating within the same kind of relationship they knew from their childhood, the only kind

they knew of, a relationship based on manipulation, fear, lies and using others for self-gratification. The only difference was that, as adults, they now held the position of power in that relationship” (2014, 13).

And yet offenders most often don’t forget the pain of their own victimization, they encapsulate the wounded part which still lives on. That is why they tend to feel intense guilt and self-hatred as they victimize others. “Not knowing how [or daring] to relate in any other way, however, meant that they’d abuse again, and that their guilt and self-loathing would grow exponentially” (Ross 2014, 14). Similarly, the psychoanalyst Arno Gruen talks about the “stranger within us” (2014, 7), describing a sore part of us that we continue to repress because it terribly frightens us. Regaining healthy forms of sovereignty means to learn how to relate to the frozen and locked stress energies in oneself in order to be able to relate to others – and vice versa, healing takes place when people are touched in a way that respects their sovereignty. I once heard that it is so hard for sex-offenders to ‘heal,’ because it is so difficult to love them. However, love is a liberating remedy, maybe *the* remedy to regain sovereignty. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Tagaq portrays several affectionate friendships of her main actor with abusive figures, also with the fox who offended the raven clan which led to the curse affecting several generations of foxes. With her intimate touch the young girl “had cleansed him of Raven’s curse”, Tagaq writes (2018, 72) – and she may also have cleansed herself. Once he got off the chair and gracefully left, he looked back just once – and the girl sees herself through his eyes.

It is striking that throughout *Split Tooth*, sexual encounters with humans seem to be harmful. Maybe the teenage girl enters a spiritual world with rousing erotic moments, because she needed to leave her abused and mistreated body. In coarse reflections of her we read, “I only work from the waist up. Psychological epidural. Numb. I was entered too young” (2018, 41). Dissociation is a common coping method among survivors of child abuse. The young girl didn’t feel safe in her own flesh, writes Jacqui Lambert, an Iñupiaq woman from Alaska who experienced similar traumas, “so she took us through her messy mind where we hear about the spiritual realm” (Lambert 2019). It seemed perhaps less dangerous for her to expose herself to strong natural powers, the freezing cold and dangerous animals, than to human beings. “After a few scenes of detailing the moments of her body being invaded, she eventually describes the act of voluntarily leaving her flesh to go into the spirit world which even leads to being impregnated by the northern lights” (Lambert 2019). Although everything the protagonist experiences with the spiritual world, particularly in and with nature, is overpowering – for me often alienating and difficult to bear –, she seems to gain a stronger sense of herself through these encounters.

And yet, I am wondering if the intimate experience with the fox or her sexual engagement with the northern lights has the potential to heal or if it may lead to a mental state of losing touch with reality. Following Bernhard Waldenfels’ responsive phenomenology, it may be the case that a *sovereign erotic* materializes between ‘pathos and response’ (see Waldenfels 2019, 34-55), between what happens to us and



our response to it. Extremes on both ends are harmful. "Pathos without response means that what happens to us takes possession of us, it tears us away or makes us sink into ourselves, numb and silent" (285, transl. by the author). Response without pathos disconnects us from our environment, we withdraw in fixed patterns of conduct to avoid being out of control, we retract in daydreams or parallel worlds. What is disrupted in both cases is what connects both, what keeps the living communication going. In what Waldenfels describes, I see a close connection to the composite term 'sovereign erotic'. The 'erotic' lives from the fact that it hits us unprepared, that it arouses us as and takes us away from ourselves ('pathos'). 'Sovereign' means that we deliberately expose ourselves to these moments and that we are able to respond to them. One without the other leads to problematic consequences. For Waldenfels, healing means to restore the ability to respond, e.g. the 'response-ability' of offenders to feel the pain they inflicted or the ability of victims to respond to their pain, instead of just reacting (which often means fight, flight or freeze). Indigenous psychology refers to the importance of 'healing on the land' It recognizes that Indigenous identity is intrinsically interwoven with and holistically interconnected to the land. Jennifer Redvers (2020) talks about the "land as healer". I sense a lot of that 'healing on the land' in Tagaq's book. This healing often takes place in ceremony. Anne Poonwassie and Ann Charter (2001, 68-69) state that participation in ceremony helps people to stay connected, or perhaps to reconnect to cultural roots, to the land, and to themselves. Very powerful in this regard is Harold Napoleon's *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (1996). As Yup'ik growing up in Alaska, he felt that living on the land was sacred.

It outlined the way of living in harmony with this spirit world and with the spirit beings that inhabited this world. [...] Their [the Yup'ik's] arts, tools, weapons, kayaks and umiaks, songs and dances, customs and traditions, thoughts and actions – all bore the imprint of the spirit world and the spirit beings. (5)

Healing entails going back to ancestral teachings in order to find balance again.<sup>5</sup>

I gather this spiritual as well as ceremonial stance has also to do with what Tracy Bear means when she talks about "rewriting of Indigenous bodies" and re-claiming "corporeal sovereignty" (2016, ii) through erotic poetry. I can imagine that writing helps to reconnect and to become 'response-able' to what happened, to restore 'response-ability' and sovereignty. Books like *Split Tooth* help to restore a *sovereign erotic* – also as a healing process. At the end of her book Tagaq writes:

Protect me. I need help. [...] Kill me. End this. [...] All I have is numb. Love me. There is still a child inside. The shaking rabbit. Cleanse me. Wash the

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5 For the importance of Indigenous notions of healing see Schellhammer 2019.

blood off. I am still working. I survive still. I am stronger now. Worship me. I am boundless. I stood up. I am worthy. Start again. (2018, 189)

I can also imagine that it helps reading her book. Jacqui Lambert states that it is a story Inuit can barely say out loud –

not because we're not allowed to and no one will listen, but because it can be so scary to our inner selves. And that's what makes the book so real and so valuable. You experience it all on your own. Tagaq puts into words the fear, the confusion, the love and the beauty that all coexist with each other in the Arctic. (Lambert 2019)

The last observation that stood out for me goes back to the beginning and to the realization of my self-governing body and its wilful nature – a realization that can be intensely fascinating and alienating at the same time. Especially in erotic moments our body tends to have a life of its own. It seems to be deeply embedded in the natural powers that surround us. *Split Tooth* talks about this raw, 'amoral' power of the land and the seductive energy of the animal world – an energy Melissa Nelson calls "eco-eroticism" (2017).

### 3. Eco-Eroticism: Finding Myself Surrendering to the Nature that I Am

The intimate scene with the fox as well as with the northern lights show me that I am not opposite of nature, *I am nature*. Nelson expresses this aptly when she writes:

In the face of such sensuous ecological encounters, both ordinary and spectacular, I step outside the sense of myself as a contained being. I am no longer a solid center but part of an unending field of entwined energies. I am connecting to another, greater life force, embodied in dirt, the material soil and source of matter. [...] these encounters stimulate, arouse, awaken, and excite me in profoundly meaningful ways. They can break my heart open, take my breath away, make me shed tears, or force me to listen with the ears of my ancestors. In these moments I often feel dwarfed, in awe, vulnerable, even shocked. And in the act of sex, I feel these same emotions – these vulnerable feelings combined with a strange sense of authentic, surging power. (2017, 230)

Eros is a form of yawning desire that draws us out of ourselves, we get *ex-cited*. Eco-eroticism allows us to live the nature that we are and thus to feel deeply connected with the natural world around us.

Even from a Western philosophical point of view, this notion is not unfamiliar. Referring to Plato, Waldenfels explains, "Eros is not a mode of behavior that we have at our disposal, that we shape according to certain rules or conventions; rather, by its

very nature, Eros is something that pulls us out of normality" (2019, 317, transl. by the author). At the beginning of Greek philosophy, key terms of the cosmological as well as the physical thinking are driven by erotic connotations – connotations that describe how we are drawn out of ourselves by something we desire. Aristotle for example illustrates 'God' as the "first mover, who moves everything like the beloved" (319). It is a form of a cosmological erotic power that brings life. In the original text, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, we read, "He moves as coveted" (Aristotle 2002, 318; book XII 1072b 2c, transl. by the author). Yet, even though 'Eros' is well known in Western philosophy, we seem to have lost a great deal of it – and from the very beginning with Plato and even more in his later reception, the idealistic concept of it superseded the physical side of it. However, when we look at the Greek mythos of Europe, we learn that Zeus was struck by the beauty of Europe and transformed himself into a tame white bull to seduce or rape her (both is very close in Greek mythology). It was Zeus as a bull, not a man, who captured her interest. While the story frightens me as much as the ambivalent sexual encounter with the northern lights Tagaq describes, I am looking for ways to get some of that back – even into my way of doing philosophy.

I am convinced that this is needed also from an *ethical* point of view, for example when we look at the necessity to gain a different understanding of our relationship with nature. Once we realize that, as Alan Watts states referring to Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism, "We do not come into this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree" (1989, 83), we realize how wrong it is to merely use or even exploit it. I find it symptomatic that the more we worked on 'civilizing' ourselves (also by controlling our bodily desires), the more we lost touch with nature (also with the nature that we are). Particularly 'symptomatic' is the fact that we seek to fill this gap with excessive 'natural' experiences, like wilderness adventures and spiritual retreats. Thus, "Getting Dirty" (Nelson 2017) is a great title for an essay on eco-eroticism setting an obvious counterpoint to 'civilized' cleanliness.<sup>6</sup> Some of her first memories were eating dirt, writes Nelson. "I felt an intimate, sensuous, and, dare I say 'erotic' relationship with the physical earth I consumed" (229). I had a very similar 'erotic' impression reading about the girl's ritual in Tagaq's book when she takes one of the newts out of her fish tank to put it into her mouth. "It sits there on my tongue, the little suction cups on its toes grasping my taste buds. I close my mouth. It crawls around in confusion for a minute, and then finds comfort in the heat and darkness. It squirms its way under my tongue, and usually falls asleep there" (Tagaq 2018, 20). In the story with the fox we are also exposed to an overwhelming 'oral experience' when Tagaq describes how "smooth and delicious" the fox tasted and how it felt like when he exploded in the girl's mouth resulting in a deep satisfaction. "I felt a release in me too, and felt a gushing hot liquid between my legs" (70). Tagaq is able to express the

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6 Very intriguing in this context is Alexis Shotwell's book *Against Purity* (2016), in which she argues for a politics of relationality that resists linear thinking and moral purity while drawing from critical theories of race, gender, and animal ethics to respond to systemic problems without ignoring the messiness or ambiguity of complex times.

innate connection we have with our natural environment when she lets her protagonist say: “I know if I swallowed his cum, it would change the lifeline of my clan for generations, we would have the fox way in our movements.” (72)

In what Tagaq describes, we may be able to sense what the Indigenous concept of “relational accountability” (Wilson/Wilson 1998) could mean. By becoming aware that human beings are related to all living organisms, “there is the added dimension of respect for and taking care of ‘all our relations’” (157). Stan and Peggy Wilson write:

Each individual is therefore responsible for his or her own actions, but not in isolation. Individual responsibility for actions must be in relation to all living organisms. It is this web of relationship with each individual in the center that stretches out in all directions. This is our understanding of how the universe is held together. We believe that the interconnection among all living organisms is essential for all life forms. The connections must be respected and honored. (ibid.)

This strong sense of being accountable for ‘all my relations’ as source of vibrant, sensual, erotic life does not just come out of myself, it is always already there, it moves me (maybe even similar to Aristotle’s ever appealing mover), it hits me and inevitably demands my responsibility.

Here it is again, the call for ‘response-ability’ – eco-eroticism may help us to follow it, if we allow ourselves to respond to the nature that we *are*. Waldenfels introduces an intriguing concept he calls “responsive ethics” (2019, 309, transl. by the author) – a concept which seeks to respond to our physical desires and bodily experiences instead of repressing or fighting them. Responsive ethics does not start at ‘ecological’ notions of moral conduct, it starts from *the Other’s demand* and thus gives room for the kind of *genuine dialogue* I mentioned at the beginning. However, it is quite difficult to be open to alienating encounters without subsuming them into our own logic. That is why reading *Split Tooth* was and still is so appealing and challenging at the same time. If we don’t expose ourselves to being alienated and transformed, egocentrism, logocentrism, and eurocentrism will persist.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

Indigenous expressions of erotic sensuality in stories, poetry, art, ceremonies, and increasingly also academic writing, reveal a source of power and knowledge reclaiming sovereignty of their bodies – bodies that have been battered, abused and silenced by the colonial language of sin, shame, and guilt. This language comes from a worldview that prides itself with moral purity, the rational capacity to rule over one’s natural desires. It is a suppressing and demeaning language which is prone to lead to a deep disconnection with the nature that we are and to a devastating exploitation of the nature around us.

*Split Tooth* holds a valuable lesson for everybody who is willing to follow Tanya Tagaq in her emotional as well as spiritual story. Intercultural philosophy – and the western notion of philosophy in general – would do well to allow for what Maurice Merleau-Ponty once called “erotic understanding” (1966, 188), the sensual understanding of our body, which is of a different kind than the understanding of the mind. The latter understands by capturing an experience under a certain idea or theory, it is egocentric. The understanding of our body, our desire, our ‘Eros’, evolves out of the living connection of a body with another body, it is opening us to a notion of self as being utterly relational. This is the gift I found in *Split Tooth*, I sensed some of this ‘erotic understanding’.

Erotic sovereignty does not allow us to rule over others, quite the contrary is the case, as it makes us aware of our interconnectedness and thus accountability. It obliges us with the difficult task to practice ‘response-ability’, the ability to respond to the nature that we are as well as to ‘all our relations’.

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