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Arts-Based Research as a Cultural Therapeutic: Facilitating Sexual Empowerment for Desi Women Across the Diaspora Through South Asian Erotic Folk Art

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Abstract

This case study describes a liberatory arts-based research project that was disseminated to the public as a culturally therapeutic intervention to facilitate sexual empowerment among South Asian (Desi) women across the diaspora. DESI EROS is an arts-based phenomenological research project that explored the question: “What is the lived experience of reclaiming erotic power among women from the South Asian diaspora, in light of our cultural contexts?” Six Desi artist-collaborators participated in this project by contributing poetry and prose about their lived experiences of reclaiming erotic power. I created phenomenological paintings that expressed the essence of their erotic power through surrealist folk art in the style of Frida Kahlo, with cultural symbols imbedded in each painting. The South Asian erotic folk art is available as public scholarship on www.desieros.com. The arts-based research findings were also disseminated to South Asian community members in North America and India through workshops I facilitated in collaboration with non-profit South Asian organizations for the duration of several years—including facilitating “erotic art therapy” workshops for dozens of Desi women and gender non-

conforming South Asians. This case study recounts the caring relationships and intimate community-building that unfolded when presenting South Asian erotic folk art as a springboard for cultural healing. It also discusses the transformative force of *creative collaboration* for projects of liberation psychology and feminist care ethics, which became the guiding value that allowed the emancipatory and loving potential of DESI EROS to be actualized.

Introduction

When I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (Audre Lorde 2016, 207)

During my final year of clinical training as a psychotherapist, I worked at a university counseling center doing therapy with many South Asian (Desi) college women. I was surprised that sexuality was a frequent topic of our therapy sessions, often in a painful way. I sat beside a courageous Bangladeshi American woman healing from the impact of childhood sexual abuse. I sat beside a brave Pakistani graduate student committed to overcoming sexual shame to enjoy intimacy with her boyfriend. I sat beside a brilliant Indian international student who aspired towards an academic career, but who was being arranged into marriage at the expense of her dreams. And I sat beside an endearing Indian American freshman who was discovering attraction towards women, but who believed that having a girlfriend could never be a reality.

The sexual and gender oppression emanating in the room was palpable. However, I noticed that in my sessions with these clients, the flipside of oppression is power. These young Desi women sitting beside me each week were clearly quite powerful. They were coming to therapy to break silences and liberate themselves from wounds of oppression which have been carried among South Asian women for generations. They were courageous in their resistance and commitment to mental and sexual health, and to breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma. These women were an inspiration to me. A clinical supervisor once told me that the clients who find us in therapy often mirror the same psychological themes that we ourselves are working through. In that sense, therapists and clients are fellow travelers through the existential rhythms of life (Yalom, 1990). This insight resonated with my experience during that clinical internship year. As an Indian American queer woman in her 30s, I was liberating myself from similar wounds of oppression as my clients at the intersection of our ethnicities, genders, and sexualities. Accordingly, in each therapy session I held with my clients, I was

simultaneously guiding and being guided by my fellow Desi sisters' journeys of erotic empowerment.

The following year, I left clinical work to launch an academic career as a psychology professor. While my work shifted towards research rather than psychotherapy, deep in my bones I knew I needed to honor the transformative experience I had doing therapy with those South Asian women that year. With this knowledge in mind, I launched the arts-based phenomenological research project DESI EROS as a vehicle through which to celebrate the erotic empowerment of Desi women.

Liberation Psychology and Arts-based Phenomenological Research

My academic work as a psychologist involves an explicit social advocacy agenda at the intersections of liberation psychology and arts-based phenomenological research. Liberation psychology is an approach to psychology that illuminates the political etiology of people's mental health distress, particularly marginalized community members who exist in systems of societal oppression (Martin-Baró, 1990). Liberation psychologists operate under the assumption that all oppression is inherently traumatizing, so transforming oppressive cultural norms is essential to healing from trauma (Johnson, 2015). Thus, we devote our healing efforts towards social advocacy projects which strive to change the macro-level sociopolitical norms that harm so many people (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Liberation psychology also seamlessly aligns with *feminist care ethics*, which seeks to facilitate sociopolitical transformation through promoting a "relational paradigm that honors interdependence in caring relationships" (Visse et al., 2015, p. 3). Scholars of care ethics define *care* politically as a "collective and political practice that builds up society" and promotes more ethical and democratic ways of co-existing in loving, responsible community with one another (Visse et al., 2015, p. 3).

My chosen vehicle to facilitate sociopolitical transformation and caring community relations is *arts-based phenomenological research*. Arts-based phenomenological researchers is a form of qualitative inquiry that collect participants' intimate stories of lived experience as data, and then interpret these narratives to identify themes which illuminate essential meanings of a particular human phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). Arts-based phenomenological research integrates artistic practice into any stage of this research process – such as data collection, data interpretation, or research dissemination – to evoke deeper, felt understandings of the phenomenon of inquiry (Gupta & Zieske, 2023). My own work entails conducting arts-based phenomenological research projects about marginalized people's lived experiences of sociopolitical oppression and empowerment. Then, I disseminate the research findings to the public in artistic formats such as digital stories, short films, and paintings for consciousness-raising, community healing, and social change (Gupta, 2018; Gupta, 2019; Gupta, 2020a;

Gupta, 2020b).

I launched DESI EROS as an arts-based phenomenological research project to explore the question: What is the lived experience of reclaiming erotic power among women from the South Asian diaspora, in light of our cultural contexts? By disseminating this research as a form of public scholarship, I sought to use my arts-based research findings, in the form of poetry and paintings, as a vehicle for building critical consciousness across society about sexual oppression and empowerment among South Asian women. Consciousness-building among the public through arts-based research could reverse cultures of silence that suppress Desi women's truths around our gendered and sexual realities. The research could also dismantle stereotypical narratives about South Asian women that deny us of our power, perpetuate subservient victimhood, or fetishize us. Disseminating DESI EROS to the public could foster celebration of the erotic power of Desi women, from the point of view of South Asian women ourselves.

In researching South Asian women's reclamation of erotic power, this project embraces Audre Lorde's (1984) definition of the erotic as the creative life force of all women:

The word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (Lorde et al., 1984, p. 55).

Lorde (1984) writes that while navigating systems of oppression, reclaiming erotic power as women not only fuels our sexuality but also our activism. It infuses our lives with the creative energy necessary to change the world. Since women's erotic power is perceived as a threat to the oppressor, then reclaiming erotic power means reclaiming "that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, anti-erotic society" (p. 59) Accordingly, through DESI EROS I aspired to produce evocative, aesthetic research that would spread across society to facilitate consciousness-raising about South Asian women's erotic power, therefore inspiring us to reclaim our life force.

Research Process as Collaborative Art Exchange

Methodologically, the arts-based phenomenological research procedures for DESI EROS were as follows. I invited five Desi artists to contribute written narratives (poetry and prose) describing personal experiences in their lives in which they reclaimed erotic power. I included my own narrative as the sixth participant for DESI EROS. I perceive my participant-

collaborators as powerful, visionary, community leaders with whom I am lucky to be in solidarity. Shafina Ahmed is a Bengali American Muslim spoken word poet who daringly speaks truth about being a Bengali woman in her poetry stage productions across New York City. For this project about reclaiming erotic power, she wrote descriptive prose about her experience of breaking the cultural silence regarding being a survivor of sexual abuse from childhood onwards. Roo Zine is an Indian American Muslim singer-songwriter whose songs fuse electronic beats with the spiritual longings of Persian and Classical Hindi rhythms. For DESI EROS, she wrote descriptive prose about an experience of feeling closer to her spirituality during a postcoital embrace in her lover's arms, even though her Muslim upbringing would view premarital sex as sinful. Seema Reza is a Bangladeshi American Muslim writer and author of a collection of poems *A Constellation of Half-Lives* and her memoir *When the World Breaks Open*, which describes with raw vulnerability her experience of leaving her abusive marriage. For this project, she contributed her poem "Belemnite" about untangling from her husband and learning to self-nurture after her divorce. Mary Anne Mohanraj is a Sri Lankan American author who has published a collection of erotic short stories *Bodies in Motion*, and who founded and moderated the *Internet Erotica Writers' Workshop*. For DESI EROS, she contributed her essay "Silence and the Word," which describes her experience of practicing erotic self-expression and freeing herself from constraints by writing erotic fiction. Samra Habib is a Pakistani Canadian Muslim author who wrote *We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir*, which chronicles their journey of coming out as queer and their activism to create visibility for Queer Muslim people. For this project, they gave consent for a chapter from their book to be included which described their experience of coming out to their mother and expecting rejection, only to be accepted with unconditional love (Samra went by she/her pronouns at the time of project inception and has since switched to they/them pronouns). Finally, I included myself and my own story as the sixth participant/artist-collaborator for this project. As an Indian American Hindu who identifies as a woman politically but experiences myself as androgynous psychologically (she/they), I wrote descriptive prose for DESI EROS about liberating myself from an internalized oppressor's slut-shaming voice in order to delight in erotic joy with my lover.

As a qualitative researcher, I engaged in a process of hermeneutic phenomenological data interpretation of these narratives, to identify core themes of reclaiming erotic power imbedded in each artist-collaborator's description of lived experience. The data interpretation process followed Van Manen's (1990) approach of highlighting and coding meaning units, clustering codes into categories, and transforming categories into themes. Then, as a visual artist, I created six large-scale acrylic paintings as visual interpretations of each participant's description about erotic power, incorporating the themes identified in the research process as symbolic imagery for each painting. Much of the imagery in the DESI EROS paintings ended up becoming culturally-specific, as I found myself incorporating symbols into the paintings

that are commonly illustrated in South Asian folk art and mythologies from history to present day. Thus, the DESI EROS artwork can be considered as surrealist folk paintings in the style of Frida Kahlo, with cultural significance evoked by each artwork. Each painting also strives to stay faithful to the personal story of reclaiming erotic power described by each participant, creating a beautiful blend of the subjective with the collective in the movement to reclaim South Asian erotic power for Desi people across the diaspora.

Once I completed each painting, I sent it to participants as a loving art exchange of sorts, such that my visual art was positioned as a dialogical response to their written art about reclaiming erotic power as Desi women/people. The participants expressed words of delight, feeling touched, seen, and grateful by my visual interpretation of their written narratives of reclaiming erotic power. For instance, Shafina said:

Thank you thank you thank you. I am moved beyond words and you have my blessings and permission to do as you please with her. I trust you. I am grateful for such a gift.

Seema said:

This is gorgeous, and I love how you've recorded your process as well. And I love the glasses on in the tub and the texture of the wall. Somehow those details are so profoundly important to me—and the rest of it too, but those are the ones that feel so immediately compelling. I am so incredibly honored to be included in this powerful collection.

Roo said:

The painting is so beautiful. The wings and the sky are the best part. I feel like this is cracking the universal code of art and human connection. I feel a deep connection, this is such an honor and so exciting.

Upon receiving the participants' blessings of my visual art as faithful expressions of their lived experience, the final arts-based phenomenological research findings were published on www.desieros.com for public viewership. The website features the paintings, poetry, and prose created in collaboration between myself and participants, as well as essays I wrote that explain the symbolic meanings of each painting as an expression of South Asian erotic power.

Research findings as South Asian Erotic Folk Art



Figure 1. South Asian erotic folk art.

While the final arts-based research findings for DESI EROS can be viewed on the website www.desieros.com as a form of public scholarship, they are also displayed in this section in abridged version. The following paintings, poetry and prose all express the lived experiences of reclaiming erotic power as Desi women/people, as described by the six participant-collaborators of this arts-based research study. Each painting also includes an explanation of its symbolic cultural significance regarding the erotic power of South Asian culture, collectively and historically. In doing so, the findings from this research study seek to raise critical consciousness of the indigenous wisdom of the erotic and of the feminine that is deeply imbedded in our South Asian cultures from history to present day, a wisdom which Desi women and gender non-conforming people can reclaim amidst our personal journeys of erotic empowerment.

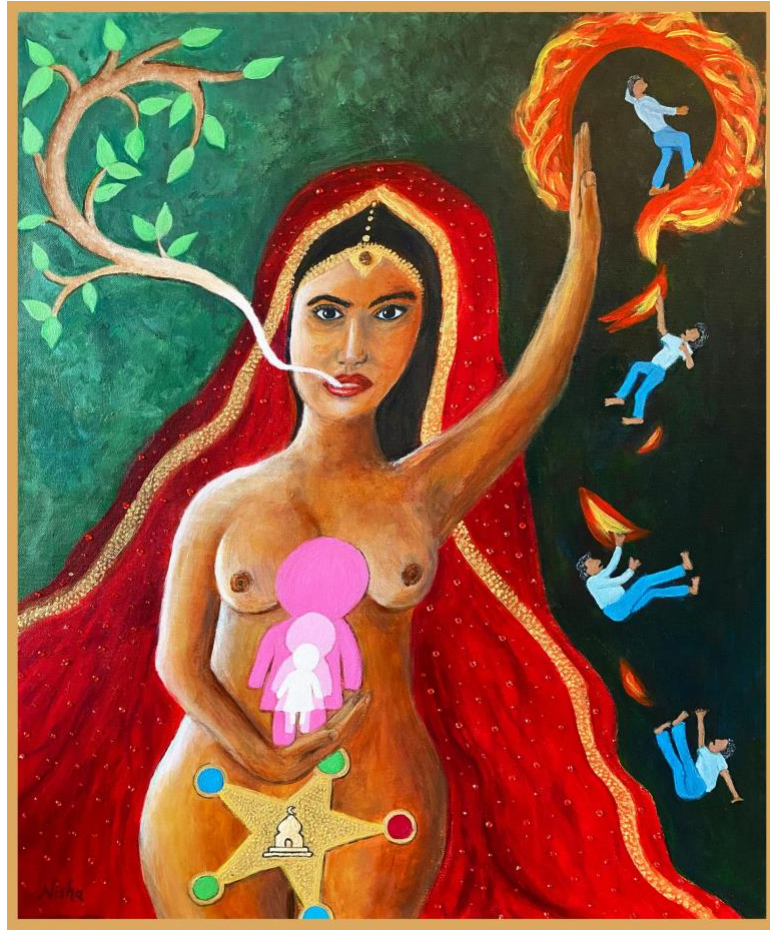


Figure 2. *She*, 26x30 Acrylic Painting by Nisha Gupta.

“She,” Inspired by Poetic Prose of Shafina Ahmed

I tell him this is what we women, little girls, have to do—bear our burdens and sorrows with a silent smile because we’d look prettier if we would just smile like a good voiceless bride. I wonder why I am telling.

A voice inside me speaks up. It’s not about him, or them, it’s about us. The 5-year-old She, the 10-year old She, the 26-year old She; all the Shes. I don’t have to be afraid of being She because I’m not alone, anymore.

Their voices will not be my story; will not be the lining of my womb, my Breast, my sexuality, my god. I don’t choose a Bengali narrative of women must suffer tremendously and not complain; I choose sex to be healing, my body a temple and a playground.

I am not a victim; I'm a survivor now, unconquerable. I break the cycle of violence by telling my story to myself.

“She,” Symbolic Cultural Significance

This artwork describes a Bangladeshi American Muslim woman's experience of breaking the culture of silence to speak truth about her experiences of sexual abuse from childhood onwards. In the painting, her voice is symbolized by a growing tree. In the Qur'an, the tree is a common symbol with many sacred meanings; one beautiful meaning is the “authentic word,” or “true speech.” According to Islam, to speak truthfully is natural, sacred, and righteous. Thus, to break silences about gender violence and speak out in protest is the sacred, righteous thing to do.

This painting honors the reclamation of voice by Desi feminist leaders across history, who have courageously spoken sacred truths to hold society accountable for violence against women. In 1980s Pakistan, the fearless leaders of the Women's Action Forum stood up to dictatorship and state-sponsored patriarchal violence, fighting against the state's control of women's bodies. In 1990s Bangladesh, the radical women's rights organization Naripokkho spotlighted sexual violence against women with their campaign Shorir Amar, Shiddhanto Amar (My Body, My Decision), persisting despite backlash that their campaign was too vulgar. In early 2000s India, the Gulabi Gang was founded as a vigilante army of pink sari-clad rural women who intervene, sometimes violently, to stop any man who is beating his wife. As a new generation of Desi women across the diaspora continues the #metoo battle, we must revere our courageous ancestors who broke silences and championed the revolution to where we stand today.



Figure 3. *Falling*, 30x40 Acrylic Painting by Nisha Gupta.

“Falling,” Inspired by Poetic Prose of Roo Zine

I am deep diving into an ocean cave. Training my lungs, my skin, my body to go deeper. Every time I close my eyes, deeper into my brain, my heart, my soul, my uterus, my music, my, art, my religion, my mission.

I want to fly away from here. But I cannot disappear, or save my village from the flood, or fly away with wings of gold whose jagged edges scrape the sky.

My body is being baptized by oxytocin. I am surrendering in this pond of hormonal comfort hijacking my basal ganglia paralyzing my phantom wings, and I’m falling, falling in sin, falling in sin, sincerely in love.

What do I do with this realization? What do I do with all this love that’s flowing through my veins? I unleash the truth which was treading lightly, to not awaken the beast inside. I learn how to squeeze back, I learn how to speak gently, I learn how to give although I owe nothing. Is this a quest for truth?

I accept that the path of universal love is a lonely path to tread—to return to the never-ending dark-light of the earth’s womb, the place where you can hear light and see sound.

“Falling,” Symbolic Cultural Significance

This artwork describes an Indian American Muslim woman’s experience of surrendering in her lover’s arms in postcoital bliss, feeling guilty about sinning through pre-marital sex while also discovering sex as a pathway to deeper spiritual love. In the painting, sin is symbolized by the image of a snake wrapped around the lover’s bodies. In Sufi (Islamic mysticism) mythology, snakes often signify the spiritual entity *Jinn*. *Jinn* are neither angel nor demon but occupy an ambiguous gray-zone that transcends rigid notions of morality. *Jinn* frequently appear in Islamic stories during sex scenes between lovers. They play a role in Muslim lovers becoming possessed by sexual desire, but their nature is ethically ambiguous, unable to be understood by simplistic notions of good vs evil.

Jinn’s presence during erotic moments in the bedroom aligns with Sufism’s nuanced approach to morality, which transcends rigid guidelines and instead upholds love as its guiding ethic. Sufi mysticism posits that if a human’s actions are oriented towards love, then those actions are sacred and will bring Muslims closer to Allah. Thus, rather than position sexual pleasure as sinful, much of Sufi poetry is infused with sensual language that describes erotic love as a window into mystical union with God. Accordingly, this painting honors the reclamation of faith for Desi people, whose mystical traditions such as Sufism often position erotic love as a pathway to the Divine. It serves as a reminder to Desi people that they do not have to choose between their religion or their sexuality; they can be empowered to express Eros as religious or spiritual beings.



Figure 4. *Dancing with the Gods*, 30x30 Acrylic Painting by Nisha Gupta.

“Dancing with the Gods,” Inspired by Poetic Prose of Nisha Gupta

You mold me into a perpetual tingle from head to toe. Who I knew myself to be ceases to be, and I become nothing but a tingle.

I walk around this city radiating fire, day and night waiting for another hit of you.

Knowing that I need to share this with you, trusting you to take care of me, hungry for more of you. Is this what it’s like to truly fall in love? Is this what I’ve been waiting for my whole life?

I am operating in a state of ecstatic bliss at all times, dancing with the Gods. And my intellect stands no chance of winning against the Gods.

Shame doesn’t matter. Guilt doesn’t matter. Culture doesn’t matter. Expectations don’t matter. Moralism doesn’t matter. Trauma doesn’t matter. Only Pleasure. Only Desire. Only Love. Only You.

I will not stop thinking about that kiss for days, for weeks, for months. I still have not forgotten about it. I am still left hanging by it. But if desire is an addiction, I’ll happily succumb to it. If this is what it means to be a slut, I’ll pirouette across my walk of shame. Because you sprung me alive. Because I danced with the Gods. Because lightning bolts electrocute me all the time these days.

“Dancing with the Gods,” Symbolic Cultural Significance

This artwork describes an Indian American Hindu woman’s experience of about destroying the slut-shaming voice of the internalized oppressor in order to delight in erotic joy with her lover, who brings her to states of ecstatic bliss. In the painting, she and her lover are being blessed by the Hindu gods Kali and Shiva while in the throes of sexual desire. In Hindu mythology, the deities were not ashamed of sexuality and celebrated erotic love unabashedly – particularly Kali and Shiva who are often depicted as dancing madly together as an expression of desire. Kali represents the raw, primal nature of all human beings – including our untamed, fiery, sexual passions. Kali’s passions can be expressed benevolently or through destruction; she is often portrayed in Indian folk art holding an axe covered with blood and the severed head of a demon. She kills what needs to be killed so new life can be born.

The eroticism imbedded in Hindu artifacts suggests liberal attitudes towards sexuality in India, including queer sexualities. For instance, the Kamasutra privileges female sexual pleasure and is inclusive of sex outside of heterosexual marriage and between same-sex

lovers. However, when British colonizers arrived in India, they deemed Indians' liberal sexual attitudes "barbaric" and "primitive" and instilled Victorian-era Christian puritanical norms in their place. Thus, Desi people's contemporary conservative attitudes towards sex can be understood as a symptom of the traumatic impact of British colonialism upon our cultural psyche. In the painting, Kali is holding the severed head of a demon, which symbolizes destruction of the impact of British colonialism on Desi people's sexualities. This painting is a reclamation of the passionate, playful, queer, erotic desires of pre-colonial India, which are so revered by our Hindu gods.



Figure 5. *Wrecking Love*, 30x40 Acrylic Painting by Nisha Gupta.

“Wrecking Love,” Inspired by Poem “Belemnite” by Seema Reza

You Disoriented by your smell I can't remember your name
I dip my finger into the depression where
neck & shoulder & clavicle intersect
& ask, *Is it you? Are we here again?*

Never have the borders of my body been so blurred:
your flesh mine, my flesh yours.
The free exchange of fluids, the reckless drawing of blood:
There is no intimacy like a wrecking love.

Some nights I lay in (our) bed awake. These nights stretch.
I stand from the bed, sit on the toilet. Bored of masturbating.
Open & close books. Remove layers of blankets, layers of clothing.
Stand under the shower. Eat ripe fruit over the sink.
Wipe my face with a dishtowel.

These are my most honest nights.

Since the untangling the lovers have been kind & clumsy & graceful.
Hungry & apathetic. I couldn't say how many—it doesn't matter.
They are not enough.

Lately I prefer to find myself curled upright in the bathtub,
chin between the twin flats of my knees. When I am alone,
I am almost enough.

In daylight I face others propped upright, wounds dressed,
wrapped in hard plaster. Underneath the casing I am all hollow.
I think: *You are boring, boring, boring.*
I read many interesting things. I am so smart,
I read things most people wouldn't. While I read,
my mind wanders to fixate on men who think I'm great,
but not good enough. There are plenty of men like that
& they confirm what I recite in my head (in your voice):
not enough, not enough, not enough.
When I meet a man like that, the longing is unbearable.

The last time you were in this bed, it stood in the little house we bought.
We had given up, you were on edge, drinking too much,
pacing late into the night. I'd pack for my impending move,
go to work & come home to find my things unpacked.

It was like that for us:

You showed love through bared teeth. I offered sex as sedative.

That last night you woke me. Stood over me with a flashlight asking,
Are you okay? You were crying out in your sleep.

I lifted the covers, allowed you to lay beside me.

To fuck dangerous men to sleep is not unlike the circus trick
of putting one's head into a lion's gaping mouth. There's a certain
glamour & giddiness to escaping unscathed.

But I never cry out in my sleep.

When dreaming of my own death, I fall silent.

“Wrecking Love,” Symbolic Cultural Significance

This artwork describes a Bangladeshi American Muslim woman's experience of divorcing from her abusive husband and choosing to embrace self-nurturance, solitude, and autonomy as her reclamation of erotic power. In the painting, she is holding a golden egg which is a symbol of resurrection and rebirth in the Abrahamic religious traditions such as Islam. The symbol of a golden egg is also incorporated in Hinduism's story of creation; it signifies the “cosmic womb”¹ from which the universe came to be, and the void of darkness transformed into the light of life. In the aftermath of a divorce or a traumatic relationship, the process of transforming darkness into light often occurs within the protective womb of a woman's solitude – a withdrawal away from the world and a turning inwards to self-nurture and rebirth. This involves resisting traditional South Asian gender norms which endorse the virtues of a woman's self-sacrifice to care for her husband, children, family, and community. For Desi women, empowerment involves flipping the gender script and learning to self-nurture – to prioritize her own needs and direct that care towards herself.

In the context of patriarchal cultures that measure a women's worth by her heterosexual marriage to a man, this painting honors the reclamation of autonomy achieved by many Desi women, who have fought for their right to choose whether or not to marry or stay married to

¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/The-golden-womb-and-the-cosmic-egg/articleshow/5083942.cms>

men, which is intertwined with fighting for women's right to financial autonomy. Asserting the freedom to choose whether to opt into, or remain within, heterosexual marriage is a personal, cultural, and political resurrection and rebirth for Desi women – rebirthing what it means to *be a woman*; rebirthing what it means to have *worth*; and rebirthing what it means to *love oneself fiercely*, at all costs.



Figure 6. *An Entire Being*, 30x40 Acrylic Painting by Nisha Gupta.

“An Entire Being,” Inspired by Excerpted Essay “Silence and the Word” by Mary Anne Mohanraj

The desire to speak, to be naked, to be known. To be honest about desire, to be able to trust someone that much, with something that scary.

It's the same desire that drives me to write erotic stories... and to write this essay to you. I am trapped in my separate, often confused, head. And one of my deepest desires is to first know

myself, and then be known for who I am, to be loved as I am. An entire being, sexuality included.

When I first started writing erotica, when I put those words on the screen and then sent them out over the net, to hundreds or thousands of readers, it was a huge relief, an opening that let me start exploring desires that I had no other access to, desires that had been deeply buried and unspoken. I could say so much more with my fingers than I could with my throat; it gave me a freedom that I had never known — a freedom that at the same time only went as far as I could handle, that I could take in small steps and stages, so it wasn't quite so frightening.

When I write about sex, I can control how much I expose myself... I can hide behind the relative anonymity of the pages — and that protection lets me push myself further. My characters can be as exhibitionistic as they desire... and when they are, a part of my own truth steps out into the light.

And when that trust is rewarded — every time a lover, reader, friend responds by accepting who I am (and sometimes sharing some of their own scary desires) — it's the most intoxicating feeling I know. Like riding a rollercoaster up and up, nerves taut, the heart stopping pause at the stop, and then screaming all the way down. Every time it works (doesn't fling me off, doesn't crash and burn) makes me want to try again — and push a little harder, go a little faster and farther this time.

So that maybe, eventually, I can be completely naked and unafraid.

“An Entire Being,” Symbolic Cultural Significance

This artwork describes a Sri Lankan American woman's experience of learning to practice expressing her sexual desires through her craft as an erotic fiction writer, which gives her the courage and freedom to be vulnerable. In the painting, the woman is depicted semi-nude with a gold halo around her head, signifying that she is a deity. In South Asian folk art, she resembles the goddess Tara, who can be considered the female Buddha incarnate and who is venerated as “fully enlightened being” in Sri Lanka and India. Early etchings of Tara's image were found in caves as early as the 5th century A.D. in Western India, when the erotic practice of *Tantra* was also developing. The first Statue of Tara dates back to 7th or 8th century AD in Sri Lanka; she took the form of a giant, gilded bronze figure who is topless and curvaceous, oozing with openness, vulnerability, and sensuality. This statue guided the contemplative practices of Sri Lankan Buddhists, who visited the temple where she stood to meditate on her erotic image.

In Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and art, enlightenment is symbolized by the opening of a

lotus flower. Contemporary Buddhism mainly depicts men in the role of spiritual gurus and there is controversy over whether or not a woman can achieve enlightenment according to Buddhist doctrine. Yet in ancient South Asian practices of Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantra, women were held in high esteem for their supreme wisdom as teachers and for spreading their knowledge to the masses. Thus, this painting honors the reclamation of the wisdom of Desi women, harkening back to an era in which South Asian men were taught by South Asian women gurus, and female Bodhisattvas and their divine feminine wisdom were revered. It empowers Desi women to fully own our deep knowing and wisdom that can benefit the masses—a feminine and erotic kind of wisdom that is directly rooted in our capacity for sensuality and vulnerability.

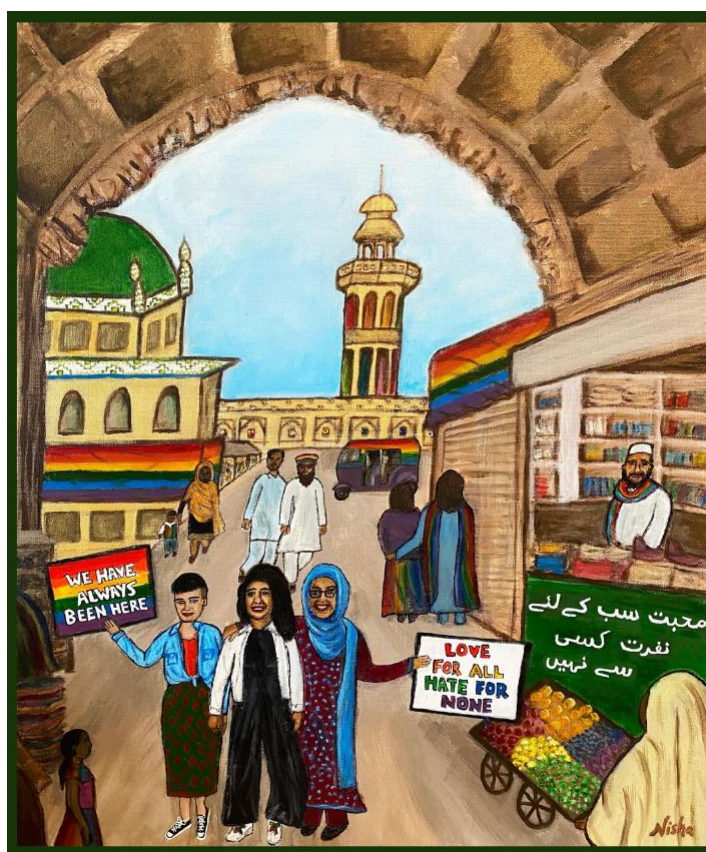


Figure 7. *Coming Home*, 26x30 Acrylic Painting by Nisha Gupta.

“Coming Home” Inspired by Excerpted Chapter from Memoir “We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir” by Samra Habib

Walking arm in arm down Church Street with my mother, who has transitioned from wearing the burka to the hijab, brings me tremendous joy. She doesn’t show any sign of being fazed as we pass rainbow flags and same-sex couples holding hands. It delights me to see how we’ve

both changed over the years. Or could it be that I was only just starting to see her?

One afternoon...my mother asked if I wanted to join her and my brother for lunch. We met at an Indian restaurant downtown—it was deserted after the lunch-hour rush, save for the three of us. When our appetizers arrived, my mother put her hands on mine, adjusted her hijab, and looked me in the eyes.

“Samra, I feel like there is something you are not telling me,” she said...

In that moment, I wondered what made me any different from those who projected their own judgments onto Muslim women who wore the hijab or the burka. I had no evidence that she would disapprove. Never in my life had I caught her saying anything remotely homophobic or transphobic. And she wouldn't have, because to her, being hateful in any way goes against her religious beliefs. This was a woman who would recite the motto of the Ahmadiyya community—Love for all, hatred for none—whenever someone directed an Islamophobic remark at us on the street or in shopping malls or grocery stores.

A few seconds went by as I wrestled with the prospect of finally being honest with her and giving her a chance to accept me. I also understood that if she chose not to accept me, I didn't have that much to lose; by this point in my life, I didn't rely on my parents for anything.

Finally, I just blurted it out. “Mom, I'm queer.” I searched her face for a reaction or signs of an impending heart attack. We looked at each other in silence while my brother looked on anxiously.

“Okay,” she said. “I still love you.” It's what she said next that I wasn't prepared for.

“So... how do you have sex?”

For the next few weeks, my mother sent me regular text messages telling me how much she loved me and how much she appreciated me opening up to her. My worst-case scenario never materialized: she hadn't told me I was going to hell or tried to convince me that my queerness was just a phase, and she wasn't going to cut me out of family gatherings. For the first time in my life, I felt the warmth of unconditional love.

“Coming Home,” Symbolic Cultural Significance

This artwork describes a Pakistani Canadian Muslim person’s experience of coming out to their Muslim mother as queer and expecting rejection, only to be accepted with unconditional love. In the painting, Samra, their mother, and their partner are all walking down the streets of Lahore, Pakistan, arm-in-arm. They are immersed in a queer re-envisioning of the Delhi Gate in which it is safe to be out and proud on the streets of Lahore as an LGBTQ Muslim. The Walled City of Lahore is also known as the Old City of Pakistan, which dates back to 1000 CE. It once boasted a high fortified wall with 13 majestic gates built for protection against invaders, pillages, and attacks. During the colonial era, the British destroyed almost half of Lahore’s beautiful gates, including the Delhi Gate which is a “symbol of power” and a cherished heritage site in Pakistan because it was a place where royalty traversed. Gates and walls are symbols of protection, meant to ward off dangers from the outside. The Pakistani government has spent considerable effort and resources to rebuild the gates of home that were destroyed by the British.

In efforts to recover from the traumatic impact of British colonialism, it is important to not only rebuild our gates but also our culture, such as the more tolerant attitudes towards sexual and gender fluidity that existed in pre-colonial India, as indicated by homoerotic literature and art across Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist artifacts. Transgender South Asians in particular were treated more respectfully in pre-colonial times, with Hijras occupying some of the highest positions of society as political advisors during the Mughal period. When the British colonized India, they imposed the Section 377 penal code to criminalize homosexuality among Indian people. They also found the existence of Hijras to be “ungovernable,” a danger to “public morals,” and “a threat to colonial political authority,” imposing laws to subjugate them from their previous high status in society and to “reduce their numbers.”² This painting illustrates a rebuilt Delhi Gate as a symbol of rebuilding the greater tolerance for gender and sexual diversity that existed in pre-colonial South Asia. In doing so, it honors the reclamation of love for South Asians—an unconditional love for all people across their intersectional (queer and religious) identities, which invites them to feel complete safety, belonging, and at-homeness in the world—including their own motherland.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48442934>

Disseminating Research to the Public for Intergenerational Community Healing

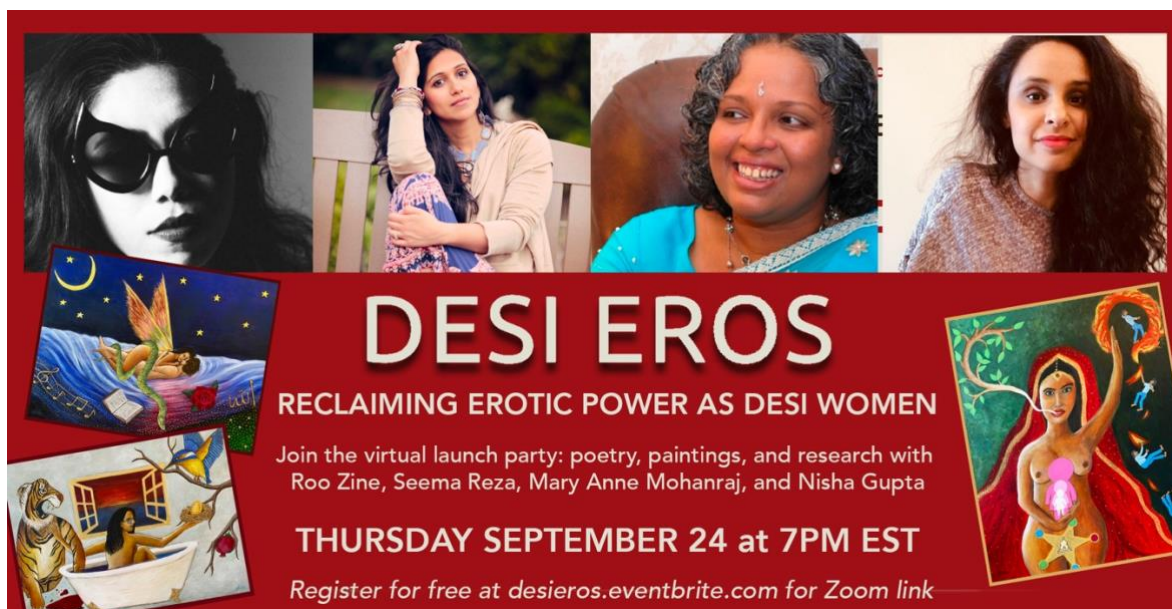


Figure 8. Announcement for DESI EROS Launch Party

Doing this research was transformative for me, and I was excited to share all that I had discovered about South Asian erotic power through public dissemination of the work. As a liberation psychologist, I harbored dreams of widespread dissemination of DESI EROS to the masses for the purpose of social advocacy, consciousness-raising, and community healing. However, at the time I did not know how to do so other than publishing my DESI EROS arts-based research findings on www.desieros.com and sharing this website with my networks. Thankfully, one of my participant-collaborators Seema Reza insisted that we organize a Zoom virtual party to showcase our paintings and poetry to the public. As a professional poet and the CEO of a non-profit art organization, she was accustomed to facilitating public poetry readings and art workshops online. Thus, she possessed expertise to help organize a DESI EROS virtual launch party that could facilitate healing and community-building for Desi people through art. We invited the other artist-collaborators to co-host the event, promoted the virtual party on our social networks, and framed it as a virtual evening of poetry, art, and conversation to celebrate the erotic power of Desi women.

The DESI EROS Virtual Launch Party took place in September 2020 and sixty people attended. The attendees included my siblings, mother, cousins, aunts, uncles, friends, psychology students, faculty colleagues, people from my collaborators' social networks, and South Asian strangers from the US, UK, and India who had learned about the event on social

media. I was amazed and nervous about the intergenerational attendance of the event, as my Desi cousins in their 20s were present alongside my Indian mother, aunts, uncles in their 60s and 70s. I thanked attendees for their courage to join an event so taboo as South Asian women's erotic power. I acknowledged that it may feel uncomfortable and out of bounds with our cultural norms to participate in this event, and I expressed appreciation for their bravery in showing up to learn, listen, dialogue, and transform. I admitted my vulnerability and nervousness about breaking silences to talk openly about sexuality with a large group of Desi people. But I expressed faith that by breaking silences to talk about this topic, something really beautiful and healing can happen for our community across the generations.

For the next hour, Seema, Roo, Mary Anne, and I exhibited each of the six paintings for DESI EROS onscreen and invited attendees to interact with the art in a dialogical, playful manner. For each painting, before explaining anything about it, I asked the audience, "Where do you see erotic power in this painting?" Attendees free associated about the meanings of erotic power expressed in that painting through its symbolic imagery. They offered astute interpretations such as:

Her gaze is assertive and powerful.

Her voice is a tree, and plants have power.

The snake is symbolic of the desire and pull to let yourself go.

The clock symbolizes having lost all sense of time consumed by passion.

all the rainbows = queer pride!

Through a dynamic game of visual art interpretation, cultural taboos were broken as attendees across age, gender, and ethnicity began to reflect on Desi women's erotic power using the DESI EROS paintings as a springboard for community dialogue. Then, each writer proceeded to do a poetry reading which inspired that painting about their lived experience of reclaiming erotic power as Desi women. Next, I discussed the cultural insights about South Asian erotic power that emerged as my research findings for the painting. For instance, how South Asia was more tolerant and accepting of queer people before being colonized, or how women were worshipped as enlightened spiritual gurus in Sri Lanka and India in previous eras. Finally, we invited attendees to dialogue about their own lived experiences of reclaiming erotic power as a result of the DESI EROS arts-based research. Some attendees reflected on their own struggles with sexuality or feelings of being empowered by the artwork. Other attendees directly asked for help from the community, such as:

I would love to hear from the Desi moms in this space to let us daughters know that sexuality is okay, and to own our erotic power. I have only been told to be shameful and look down. Your words would be therapeutic and validating, since I can never hear those words from my mothers.

In this manner, we prompted healing dialogue among Desi people across the generations through South Asian erotic art as a culturally therapeutic intervention.

After the virtual event ended, I received feedback about the many ways that DESI EROS moved people. My cousins contacted me to say they could talk openly with their mothers about their struggles as South Asian women that they never before broached, opening the door to ancestral healing. South Asian strangers who attended from India and the UK also contacted me to say that the event provided relief for their trauma wounds. Attendees wrote to me that DESI EROS is:

Very deep research which brings out the emotional, the cultural, the strength, and the vulnerability of a woman.

Wonderful, liberating, courageous, playful, activating eros/desire in the richest way.

They also expressed gratitude for our courage to break taboos for collective healing:

Thank you for speaking up and taking the initiative to break the barriers of taboo-ness.

Very brave of you! Kick the social constructs that constrain us harder!

Thank you all for sharing your work with us. Even in our time, it still takes a lot of courage and power!

You were adept and skillful guides in the liminality of sorrow, trauma, healing, beauty, courage and empowerment.

I felt so happy to actualize the purpose of my research agenda in the service of collective healing and liberation for my community. I was especially grateful for Seema's idea to launch the DESI EROS virtual event, which I would have never considered doing without her insistence. Seema herself reflected with awe:

I never knew something like that could happen!

reveling in the open dialogue about sexuality that we just facilitated with so many South Asian people of all generations in one virtual space.

In a conversation with Jonathan White, the author Ursula LeGuin said:

one of the functions of art is to give people the words to know their own experience. There are always areas of vast silence in any culture, and part of an artist's job is to go into those areas and come back from the silence with something to say (White, 2016, pp. 115).

Indeed, this DESI EROS virtual event captured what I had always dreamed of doing with my research, disseminating it to the public to foster widespread dialogue and communal healing regarding cultural taboos of society. Wherein issues of gender/sexuality among South Asian women are often swept under the rug and whispered about behind closed doors, the DESI EROS virtual party allowed us to break the silence and talk about these experiences as an intergenerational community, using our DESI EROS arts-based research findings as a grounding tool.

Partnering with South Asian Non-Profits to Facilitate Erotic Art Therapy

After the DESI EROS launch party, I was fueled by newfound confidence to continue pursuing my vision of widespread research dissemination for consciousness-raising and community healing among the public. I contacted the non-profit organization *South Asian Sexual and Mental Health Alliance* (SASMHA), who share my aspirations to break taboos regarding mental health and sexuality among Desi people. Tanya Chatterjee and Sree Sinha, co-founders of SASMHA, invited me as a guest on their podcast the *Brown Taboo Project*, for which they interviewed me about the DESI EROS project. There was immediate kinship between us, and Tanya and Sree suggested we collaborate further by co-hosting a virtual art therapy workshop on Valentine's Day sponsored by SASMHA. They designed promotional materials and circulated them on social media to reach their nationwide network of Desi people. They marketed the event as follows:

SASMHA presents... Reclaiming Erotic Power through Paint & Sip Night! In this special "paint and sip" event for Valentine's Day, psychologist and artist Dr. Nisha Gupta will invite us to reflect on personal experiences of reclaiming erotic power in our lives. Then, she will guide us to create visual art based on our experiences, and finally to dialogue together about the meanings of erotic power that arise from our art. Supplies needed: writing utensils (pen/pencil), several sheets of paper, and painting/drawing utensils (paints, colored pencils, markers, etc), and something fun to sip on--prosecco, chai, whatever goes!



Figure 9. SASMHA presents... Reclaiming Erotic Power through Paint & Sip Night!

Thirty Desi women and gender-nonconforming people attended this Zoom workshop about reclaiming erotic power for Valentine's Day. First, I introduced the DESI EROS project and showcased the paintings onscreen, inviting attendees to free associate meanings of erotic power discovered in the artwork. Then, I adapted my arts-based phenomenological research method for DESI EROS to become a method of art therapy as follows. I invited Zoom attendees to write a detailed description about any experience in their lives in which they reclaimed erotic power. I taught them how to identify meaning units and interpret their written description for phenomenological insights about their lived experiences of reclaiming erotic power. Next, I invited them to express those phenomenological insights as visual artwork, to use symbolic imagery to visually express what erotic power means to them personally. Finally, I welcomed the attendees to share their artwork with the wider group on Zoom. They took turns showing their artwork on screen and explaining what they discovered about their own erotic power by making the art. This process of transforming DESI EROS into a method of art therapy in this manner was heart-warming. Using erotic art as a therapeutic vehicle for meaning-making and dialogue-building, the attendees shared intimate experiences of reclaiming erotic power of their own lives, such as freeing themselves from harmful relationships, rejoicing in their queer sexualities, claiming their right to sexual pleasure in the bedroom, embracing celibacy as a source of power, and discovering confidence and self-love for their bodies.

What happened next was a domino effect that I could never have anticipated. From 2021-2022 I was invited to facilitate almost a dozen Zoom virtual art therapy workshops for DESI EROS in partnership with Desi non-profit organizations and art collectives in North America and India, such as *South Asian Queer Womxn's Network*, *Gay Gaze Bombay*, *Queer Desi Exchange*, *Sahaara*, and *Keshav Suri Foundation*. These non-profit and art organizers had heard about DESI EROS from the *Brown Taboo Podcast* episode, or else through word of mouth from attendees of previous Zoom events. Many of them were queer Desi activists working tirelessly to transform social norms and facilitate sexual liberation in their own local contexts. While facilitating these erotic art therapy workshops for their networks, my DESI EROS paintings behaved as ice breakers to help Desi queer community members feel comfortable expressing their own eroticism through art. I sometimes wept after facilitating the workshops; it was so moving to co-create beloved community with queer Desis across the globe who devoted their lives towards sexual liberation for our diasporic community.

A final climactic moment for DESI EROS occurred in Spring 2023, after the heights of the pandemic ended and people were gathering in person again. I was contacted by a local Indian art non-profit in Atlanta, Georgia called *Shashikala Foundation*, whose mission is to partner with professional artists to facilitate art education for low-income children in India. The founder of the non-profit, Pramod Waingankar, had attended one of my DESI EROS virtual

workshops and invited me to collaborate with his foundation. We decided to host an in-person Women's Empowerment therapeutic art workshop for Indian women in the local Atlanta area to celebrate Women's History Month. It was the first time I facilitated this workshop in person, and I was terrified to talk about the erotic in a room full of 30 Indian strangers. Having been raised with conservative cultural norms around sexuality, I feared that I would be judged by the Indian women for the taboo nature of DESI EROS. However, when I walked into the room that day, I felt the opposite of judgment, only love. With courage I shared my own experience of reclaiming erotic power, alongside the intimate stories of my five DESI EROS artist collaborators. Then I invited the 30 women to reclaim the erotic power that lives inside of them by making vulnerable art as a symbol of that power. They gathered in small groups to create, share, reflect, and laugh together. Then they took turns coming to the front of the room to explain their art to all of us, sharing their intimate stories and describing how their artwork's symbolism expressed their personal power as Desi women. It was magical to witness all of us coming into solidarity with one another through the vehicle of vulnerable, erotic art-making, which affirmed to us that we were all sister-allies in the mission to liberate and celebrate our true selves, untarnished by oppressive gender norms.

In reflecting on the workshop afterwards, participants described their experiences as follows:

It was really transformative—it gave us all a platform to express our deepest emotions in a way that was non-judgmental and very safe, which in itself is a feat.

This is really about women's empowerment and finding your true self—finding the power within you.

When I came here I was a little nervous, I had no clue what to expect. But this was such a liberating experience. I'm leaving with a free mind today.

It's a conversation that we normally don't have in regular circles. So drawing out the eroticism, the erotic aspect of the feminine side, it was beautiful conversation.

Everyone opened up. I think we need more of such community activities. We need to have more of these conversations.

Overall, I experienced these DESI EROS workshops as caring and liberatory “homeplaces,” which Black feminist activist bell hooks defined as sites of resistance and refuge from the tireless assault of oppression upon the lives of marginalized people (hooks, 1990). Indeed, despite the continued oppression against the bodies and sexualities of Desi women and queer people in South Asia and across the diaspora, we formed artistic homeplaces as sites of resistance to declare that our erotic power was alive and proud, stimulating our life force.



Figure 10. Expressions of DESI EROS artist collaborators.

Creative Collaboration as a Vehicle for Liberation and Care

Actualizing the liberatory potential of DESI EROS would not be possible without my decision to center *creative collaboration* as the guiding value of this arts-based research project. The entire methodology of DESI EROS, from collecting intimate poetry and prose as data, to producing research findings as a collaborative art exchange, to disseminating erotic art to community members as a culturally therapeutic intervention, felt like a dynamic, creative process of coming into beloved community with fellow Desi activists towards a collaborative vision of empowerment. As Lilla Watson, a Murri visual artist, activist and academic working in the field of Women's issues and Aboriginal epistemology, said, “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together (Leonen, 2004).”

Collaboration is defined as “a dynamic shared creative process” in which people work together towards mutually beneficial shared aims and vision (Scopa, 2010, 181). Liberation

psychologists advocate for collaborative methods of research to democratize academic knowledge-production, subvert hierarchal power dynamics, and foster community empowerment in the work towards social justice (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Artists with activist agendas also embrace collaboration as a vehicle to heal divides and facilitate interconnectedness amidst turbulent societal conditions, foregoing the egoistic aims of an artist for aspirations of social responsibility and solidarity-building (Scopa, 2010). Key to creative collaboration is its generative abilities, which can produce results that exceed far beyond any one person/field's perspectives or skillsets. Creative collaboration allowed the impact of DESI EROS to expand far beyond my initial research agenda through the interdisciplinary influence of my creative collaborators, who are professional artists and non-profit community leaders. The transformative force of interdisciplinary creative collaboration allowed me to learn from and transpose methods from multiple fields (psychology, art, non-profit) to generate greater possibilities and impact for DESI EROS than relying on methods from one field alone. As liberation psychologists are increasingly embracing collaborative and interdisciplinary methodologies to further their social advocacy agendas, DESI EROS offers a helpful case study which demonstrates the power of creative collaboration to subvert oppressive societal norms and instigate cultural transformation.

This case study also demonstrates the power of creative collaboration to spur loving, caring, interdependent relationships between people in a society, which is a primary focus for scholars of feminist care ethics. Feminist care ethics strives to foster "caring democracies" by instigating care practices which consist of "interdependent human beings who need each other in order to understand and express who they are and what they think should be done in particular situations" (Visse et al., 2015, p. 4). These caring practices can accordingly subvert the "individualization discourse" of patriarchal, Western societies, which expect people to manage their lives through solely individualistic daily practices (Visse et al., 2015, p.4). For instance, individual one-on-one psychotherapy, while immensely beneficial in its own right, can be considered a product of this Western individualization discourse which places the responsibility for healing from trauma, including gender, sexual, and colonial oppression, solely in the hands of the traumatized individual. DESI EROS, as a culturally therapeutic intervention, aligns with feminist care ethics modality of interdependent healing because it demonstrates how "relational webs" of Desi people across the globe joined in creative collaboration to foster trust and solidarity in becoming integral parts of one another's healing processes from gender and sexual oppression.

Engaging in creative collaboration for DESI EROS, with Desi artists, non-profit leaders, and workshop participants alike, seemed to fuel deep love and care that was empowering for all of us as South Asian people across the diaspora. We shared joy, relief, surprise, curiosity, and delight as we bonded, explored, shared, questioned, learned from, and created vulnerably

together. We felt seen by each other in the context of our most intimate stories of erotic power. The process of creating and sharing South Asian erotic artwork alongside one another helped us feel more powerful in our bodies, hearts, minds, and in our activism to change the world. In participating in a collaborative art project about reclaiming erotic power, we were making a statement of solidarity as diverse diasporic South Asians in a context of cultural divisiveness. Our collaborations honored our diversity as Desi people while simultaneously transcending differences to connect us as a global community and bring us “home” to one another and to our motherland.

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