

# POETRY AND SEXUALITY

## Running Twin Rails

James Thomas Stevens (Akwesasne Mohawk)

*I* sit here at my window, looking out on the train tracks that run along the shore of Lake Erie. I've been considering the intersection, the overlap, and interstice of ethnicity and sexuality. Suddenly the house begins to shake; two trains approach from opposite directions, one heading to Buffalo and points east and one to Chicago and the wide Midwest. The sound is deafening for seemingly endless minutes, blocking out all else. For a time the trains share space side by side. This is the time my poetry occurs, when ethnicity and sexuality share these thunderous moments.

I look back some twenty years now and realize I have always been writing the same warning. I have been writing to warn myself against colonization, sometimes reminding myself not to become a victim of it, but more often reminding myself not to become the colonizer. I speak of colonization in terms of identity and relationships.

From my undergraduate days at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), I have been made to realize the identity that Anglo-America has constructed for Indian peoples. Santa Fe, New Mexico, is ripe with stereotypes; tourism thrives on it. Many times we, the students of IAIA, were asked to read during Indian Market season. We showed up in our T-shirts and jeans, inspired by the assigned writings of Galway Kinnell, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, C. D. Wright, or Michael Palmer, and we read next to local Indian poets, who had learned to appear in buckskin for their readings. One poet, I remember, brought a drum to keep beat as he read. How quickly the audience dispersed when the drum ended, when they ceased to hear mention of Coyote or Raven, of how English was "like a razor slicing the indigenous tongue." We were simply Indians in T-shirts reading about who we are today.

Later that summer, while attending a very liberal poetics program in Colorado, I was asked to perform a blessing ceremony on July 4 at an "Interdepen-

dence Day” celebration. When I declined, explaining that I was not an elder or an appropriate person to lead a blessing ceremony, I was handed a smudge-stick and told, “Just acknowledge the four directions and Mother Earth and Father Sky.” Still, I declined, despite the kind instruction. I did not bother to explain the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen, the Thanksgiving Address, or, literally, *The Words Before All Else*, or that once they found an appropriate speaker, it would be a good half hour of recital. While now I can look at this situation as comical, at the time I was angered by yet another affirmation of this identity that had been constructed for me. I spent the rest of the summer writing German-inspired poetry, missing my then partner, an Austrian national. How they had wanted a genuine Twin-Spirit to lead them in celebration and prayer.

Speaking of constructed identities—enter the Twin-Spirit. Since the mid-1970s, and the founding of GAI (Gay American Indians), those interested in sociosexual and anthropological/cultural research have taken up terms such as *berdache*, *Winkte*, *double-sex*, *Nadle*, *Hwame*, and *Twin-Spirit*. I will not go into the origins of these words, as they are well explored in countless other texts, such as Walter Williams’s *The Spirit and the Flesh* and Will Roscoe’s *Living the Spirit*, among others.<sup>1</sup>

*Twin-Spirit* is too often used as a pan-Indian term for queer-identified Native peoples, even where no such terms existed before. It glosses over the many autonomous views that individual nations held concerning their queer members. The above list of terms, one will find, comes from the nations of the west, where much later contact and missionizing occurred than in the east. There was study and record of the roles of queer peoples being done at that point in history. The nations of the east, having had such early contact with Christian Europeans and missionaries, suffered such great cultural losses that many are lucky to have maintained a record of their languages, let alone an understanding of the complex roles their queer members may have held, *if* such roles did exist among these tribes.

In my research of my own nation, I can find no documentation that this role of Twin-Spirit, for lack of a better term, ever existed as a sacred position. History has been unkind here, in the five hundred years of colonization. Queer Haudenosaunee poets have been identifying with their western counterparts since the 1970s and 1980s, when the poets Maurice Kenny and Beth Brant identified with the Winkte and a lesbian trickster Coyote. When elders are asked about the role of queer people, they speak only of tolerance and silence, not unlike that which I found in existence in small non-Native rural communities of Kansas when I lived in the Midwest.

It is impossible for me, personally, to identify with a role that has been recently constructed and to write as if I had lived that life, even if there did exist such a traditional role among Mohawks. Many Twin-Spirit writers find it necessary to adopt the first-person historical voice of the Winkte, Nadle, Hwame, regardless of tribal affiliation. I aim to honor the past but to write in the present. I have not suffered the oppression that my forefathers and foremothers, or my queer historical brothers and sisters, suffered. I can give voice to history and speak to what has happened, but I cannot speak as though it has happened to me. I must acknowledge that as a gay Indian academic today, I am in a place of privilege. Editors, publishers, and conference organizers seek out Native academics to read on panels, make presentations, and publish. I cannot write about how the White Man stripped my land out from under my feet while Mother Earth wept and screamed. That is not my reality. I will not colonize myself to become the angry, yet romantic, being-of-the-forest that the majority of non-Native readers still prefer, or the sacred queer entity.

I think of a quotation from an interview with Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene author, with whom I disagree as often as I agree. In a 1999 interview in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, he stated, "I want us to write books about the way we live. When I see words like *the Creator, Father Sky, Mother Earth, Four Leggeds*, I almost feel like we are colonizing ourselves. These words, this is how we're supposed to talk — what it means to be Indian according to white America. But it's not who we really are; it's not what it means to be Navajo or Spokane or Coeur d'Alene."<sup>2</sup>

I would add to this that it is not who we really are as queer Native men and women. I cannot subscribe to the separatist notion that we as queer Natives are somehow more valid than other queer peoples because of a once sacred status, whether real or constructed. We are Ongwehonwe (Real People), and that is sacred enough.

The second colonization I mentioned in the opening of this essay is that of the *other* in a relationship. After spending two years at an all-Native arts college and reading and researching mainly Native issues, I went off to graduate school in Providence, Rhode Island. There, I would work for a brief time with the Narragansett tribal community on an after-school antidrug program. It was because of my work with Narragansett people that I began reading Roger Williams's *Key into the Language of America*. This lexicon of Narragansett language and customs became the basis for my first book, *Tokinish*, meaning "Wake them." I had been considering the effects of the English naming what was already named — "Asqútasquash,



lore. I remember going on a field trip to the Niagara Power Project as a child and seeing the Thomas Hart Benton mural of Father Hennepin “discovering” Niagara Falls. There are Iroquois people in the painting (who had obviously led him there), but the teacher told us that Hennepin had discovered it. Small details like this come back years later in my writing. The following is from the section of *The Mutual Life* titled “Burns and Scalds.”

When clothing catches fire in the park or dew  
of nocturnal parking above the falls (I'd  
seen them a thousand times but  
when he saw them, they were discovered).  
Beneath the windshield, his fingers fanned out  
above the bush.  
The burn, superficial  
as far as depth is concerned,  
but his white hand hovering considered  
more serious than a burn, smaller, deeper  
but more complete.<sup>4</sup>

Here, those two trains are running side by side again, ethnicity and sexuality, and the walls of poetic memory begin to tremble.

My partner and I wrote a short manuscript last year. The poems have been published as a collaboration to show the dialogue that naturally happens between the work of two poets sharing a life and a home. The book is titled *Of Kingdoms & Kangaroo* and is published by First Intensity Press. While writing independently of each other, we were surprised at first by how many overlaps there were in our research. My half of the book, subtitled “Stir,” is about the history of fruits and animals and objects from the New World that “caused a stir” when exhibited in the Old World, much like new love causes a stir. My partner was working on a series of poems on taxonomy, the effect of the namer on the namee. The conversation that occurs between the two series is obvious; it is one of Empire and the other. “Kingdoms” was chosen for its taxonomic relevance and “kangaroo” for its exotic otherness. I wrote the following canoe poem after reading about the dugout canoes unearthed in the British Isles. The British were surprised at their simple beauty, as Columbus had been in 1492, forgetting that they, themselves, had constructed these boats before being blinded by their own technology.

**Burn Out**

They came to the ship in small canoes, made out of the  
trunk of tree like  
a long boat, and all of one piece and wonderfully  
worked. — Columbus

Amazed by the built thing  
and the builders we've become.

In awe of our own mathematics,  
we fashion the other  
for smooth  
sailing, safe passage.

Then awed again  
by what we've forgotten, known once, felt once as  
simplicity.

There, in the mire of origin appearing.  
You unearth the one piece, the self-worked  
singular.

A log along the sluice — and natural  
you move,  
regardless of measure and math.

Me, surprised by  
the simplicity  
and solidarity of your craft.

All pithy burn-out, cleared by your own adze.

Chisel, gouge, wedge . . . how you work your way in.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, my self-warning is present. Do not “fashion the other” to suit your own need. Let the simplicity of his/her design awe you. It is not an easy thing to remember, but the history of exploration and colonization on this continent is a constant reminder. I am thankful for the knowledge of my Haudenosaunee ancestors, and I learn from it everyday. History is considered more of a lake than a river by Native peoples. Everything that has happened is there swirling around; it has not flowed past and been forgotten. I am a queer Native writer of today. I will con-

tinue to look to the past for guidance, but not for the anachronistic signifiers of a European constructed identity.

### Notes

1. Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1986); Will Roscoe, ed., *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988).
2. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, "Fancy Dancer: A Profile of Sherman Alexie," *Poets & Writers*, January–February 1999, 54–59.
3. James Thomas Stevens, *Tokinish* (Staten Island, NY: First Intensity/Toronto: Shuffaloff, 1994).
4. James Thomas Stevens, *The Mutual Life* (Alexandria, VA: Plan B, 2006).
5. James Thomas Stevens, "Burn Out," in *Of Kingdoms & Kangaroo*, by James Thomas Stevens and Nicolas A. Destino (Lawrence, KS: First Intensity, 2008).

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