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DANCING BACK STRONG OUR NATIONS

Performance as Continuance in Maurice Kenny's Poetry

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Maurice Kenny is an elder to me as a Native, Queer, Two-Spirit, mixed-blood poet. I first read Kenny's work in the 1988 collection *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* edited by Joan Larkin and Carl Morse.¹ In the early and mid-1990s I was living in a small university town in conservative Colorado, and this collection was a lifeline to me in many ways, not the least was the inclusion of a handful of Native writers including Beth Brant, Chrystos, the late Vickie Sears, and Kenny. Kenny's poem "Winkte" helped give me hope and strength that regardless of the kinds of homophobic attacks that I faced on almost a daily basis, that many Native traditions hold precedents for people who fall outside of white supremacist gender and sexual roles. Kenny, and other Two-Spirit writers, helped me remember that "We had power with the people."² So it is with honor and respect for what poetry does, and for what Kenny has done for us as Native people—particularly Two-Spirit people—that this essay emerges.³

In her introduction to Maurice Kenny's *Dancing Back Strong the Nation*, Paula Gunn Allen writes that Kenny's poetry reminds us "that it is quite possible for each of us to join in Dancing Back Strong the Nation."⁴ Kenny's poetry does important rhetorical, theoretical, and political work. His poetry argues for Native people to engage with our lifeways as a means not only to resist colonialism, but also to ensure the continuance of our communities and traditions. I am particularly interested in Kenny's use of traditional performance in his poetry because of my commitment to relearning my own performance traditions and lifeways and because, as Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor argues, "By taking performance seriously as a system

of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by 'knowledge.' This move, for starters, might prepare us to challenge the preponderance of writing in Western epistemologies."⁵ Taylor's work and Michel de Certeau's notion of *practice* are both useful here in my analysis, as they encourage an examination of the importance of what bodies *do*. de Certeau's theory of practice provides an understanding the ways in which performance can be used to subvert power structures:

Dwelling, moving about, speaking, reading, shopping, and cooking are activities that seem to correspond to the characteristics of tactical ruses and surprises: clever tricks of the "weak" within the established order of the "strong," and art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries.⁶

Performance as a means to interpret Native literatures aids us in disrupting oral / literate binaries that simplify and erase the complexities of Native peoples' rhetorical / artistic traditions and elucidate the ways in which performance as a *practice* disrupts colonial projects.⁷

Dance is a central mechanism for cultural maintenance in many of our communities. Cherokee scholar Charlotte Heth writes, "Indian music and dance pervade all aspects of life, from creation stories to death and remembrance of death. The importance of American Indian dance is found in both in its impact on modern society and in the traditions and values it expresses to and for the Indian peoples."⁸ As is the case with many Native performance traditions, Mohawk performance traditions help to maintain community relationships, identities, memories, and responsibilities. By using performance as a rhetorical device in his poetry, Kenny compels Native people to dance (back) strong nations injured through colonial violence, restoring and continuing community memory and identity.

PERFORMANCE AS CONTINUANCE

The concept of continuance has been a major concern for Native people throughout our histories, particularly since the invasion and colonization of our homelands. Continuance as a central poetic theme of Native women was placed at the center of Paula Gunn Allen's essay "Answering the Deer: Genocide and Continuance in the Poetry of American Indian Women" in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*.⁹ I think that Allen's preface to that book holds a clear articulation of what *continuance* means and entails for Native people:

[I]t is of the utmost importance to our continuing recovery that we recognize our astonishing survival against all odds; that we congratulate ourselves . . . for our amazing ability to endure, recover, restore our ancient values and life ways, and then blossom. . . . There is surely cause to weep, to grieve; but greater than ugliness, the endurance of tribal beauty is our reason to sing, to greet the coming day and the restored life and hope it brings.¹⁰

The conclusion of Robert Warrior's *Tribal Secrets* likewise expresses the need for continuance: "Our struggle at the moment is to continue to survive and work toward a time when we can replace the need for being preoccupied with survival with a more responsible and peaceful way of living within communities and with the ever-changing landscape that will ever be our only home."¹¹ Continuance celebrates our survival and ensures the future of our communities.

Continuance is the survival of cultural memories and practices as a mode of resistance to settler-colonialism. Taylor takes the position that "performance transmits memories, makes political claims, and manifests a group's sense of identity."¹² Performance—including powwow, ceremonial dance, contemporary theater, song, and storytelling—is central to the continuance of our traditions and nations. W. Richard West, Jr. (Southern Cheyenne) affirms this idea:

Dance is the very embodiment of Indigenous values and represents the response of Native Americans to complex and sometimes difficult historical experiences. Music and dance combine with material culture, language, spirituality, and artistic expression in compelling and complex ways, and are definitive elements of native identity. Dance reflects the vast capacity of native peoples to endure culturally and to continue as a vital coteremporary cultural phenomenon, notwithstanding historical oppression and a way of being that stands in stark contrast, if not rebuttal, to much that drives the current technological age. The dance of native peoples is thus both a vital means of surviving culturally and a powerful expression of that survival.¹³

Much of Kenny's poetry is concerned with continuance, and this often is demonstrated through his attention to performance, particularly dance traditions. Kenny is such a prolific writer that it isn't possible within one essay to examine all of the ways in which he uses performance in his poetry to the extent that I would like, so I will focus on *Dancing Back Strong the Nation* as well as the poems "The Hands of Annie-Mae" and "New Song"

because they exemplify relationships between performance and continuance in Kenny's work.¹⁴

Themes of resistance and continuance through performance are central to much of Kenny's poetry. Nowhere is this more evident than in his 1979 collection *Dancing Back Strong the Nation*. In the poem "I Went North," Kenny makes the central argument of the collection, that it is through participation with our traditional lifeways that Native people can help ensure our continuance:

I went north in winter
 they were dancing in the Longhouse
 women danced
 old men danced
 children danced
 We ate cornbread.¹⁵

The poem roots itself firmly within Haudenosaunee Longhouse traditions, creating a picture of a community that sustains itself through dancing. Linley B. Logan (Seneca) discusses the importance of Longhouse dance traditions to Haudenosaunee continuance:

The future of the Confederacy's social, political, and religious existence for the "seventh generation.: . . . depends on nurturing the children of today. . . . The present generation of Native American youth is the seed to an integral cycle of cultural renewal and growth. In increasing numbers, young Iroquois women and men are embracing the responsibility to learn, and participate in, their ceremonies and dances.¹⁶

"I Went North," like Haudenosaunee dance traditions, continues by acknowledging humans as part of a community and the more-than-human world: "I . . . / heard wolf / heard a child cry / heard the drum."¹⁷ Relationships among humans, the larger universe, and ceremonial performance meet in the Longhouse of Kenny's poem. And, it is through performance that the Haudenosaunee continue: "I knew they would dance back strong the Nation."¹⁸

Because in many of Kenny's poems "north" is the direction of the Mohawk Nation, the dancing in the Longhouse is also part of the speaker's return home to Mohawk traditions and landbases. Poems such as this are a tool to heal from manifestations of colonialism in which many Native people are estranged from their communities and traditions. In "Going Home," the voice of the poem mourns this disconnection from Mohawk performance

traditions: "home from Brooklyn to the reservation / that was not home / to songs I could not sing / to dances I could not dance."¹⁹ The images of the Longhouse community "dancing back strong the Nation," then, help return the speaker to a continuing tradition.

Poems interspersed throughout *Dancing Back Strong the Nation* create a drum-and-rattle rhythm that pulls the reader through the collection, mirroring the call and response pattern of Haudenosaunee stomp dance traditions. The poems "Drums," "Dance," and "Moccasin" ask the reader to "listen" to songs and dances in order to ensure community continuance. "Drums" begins:

listen . . .
drums drum
 dance dance
rattles rattle
 sing sing

And concludes "listen . . . / thunder thunder / shakes / thunder shakes the floor."²⁰ A call to "listen" also opens the poems "Dance" and "Moccasin."²¹ Asking readers to "listen" is a call for them to pay close attention to the importance of dance to community survival, to embody the reciprocal relationships among people and between people and the world around them, and to respond to the call through community participation. Ron LaFrance (Mohawk) explains that in Haudenosaunee social dance traditions that the speaker at the dance event "will announce, 'People, listen, we are again lucky, the singers are in abundance and are ready to sing for the enjoyment this evening.' Then he will introduce the dance, the name or names of the singers and the leaders, and invite all to participate."²² The voice in the dance-specific poems in *Dancing Back Strong the Nation* functions similarly as the speaker in Haudenosaunee social dance, calling the people to participate in community and reminding them why they are present. In "Dance" Kenny writes, "We come to greet and thank / the strawberry plants . . . mice in the grass / chicory in the fields / owl on a branch / . . . We come to greet and thank / We come / to dance."²³

Dancing Back Strong the Nation has at its heart images of renewal and thanksgiving and healing from the devastation of colonialism through using Mohawk dance images and rhythms as poetic devices that make a specific rhetorical claim: Through engagement with our communities' performance traditions, Native people and nations continue.

Dance takes a central place in a very different poem, "The Hands of Annie-Mae Aquash." This poem disturbs the reader through the use of violent and dismembered imagery that reminds us of the brutality of

Pictou-Aquash's murder and the dismemberment of Pictou-Aquash's body after her murder. Kenny's poem here grapples with the continuing violence against Native people in general and Native women specifically and also argues for performance and ceremony as an antidote to this kind of violence.

The two opening sections of the poem, "I. 1976" and "II. 1989" evoke the horror of Annie Mae's death and connects her murder and dismemberment to a history of dominant Christian European / Euro-American patriarchal violence. These sections remind us that her murder, far from an isolated incident, is woven into a history of colonialism on this continent and elsewhere. In "I. 1976," the poem argues that it is the mercenaries of this power structure, "masters of medieval torture who school the world in / depravity" that "strive to keep breath / in Salem and the ax hot from human pain" that are responsible for the crime.²⁴ This section's reference to Salem, and earlier references to medieval torture, reminds the reader of the violence that has emerged from Christian vehemence and patriarchal violence. In "II. 1989," Kenny continues to look at the relationships between other instances of violence, colonialism, and genocide with Pictou-Aquash's assassination: "Students, heads bowed in shame / in the horror, too startled by your murder to protest. They have seen Sand Creek, My Lai / and now the massacre of you. . . ."²⁵

Juxtaposed with images of colonial and patriarchal violence are references to dance and ceremony that shift the poem from a place of defeat and fear to acts of witness, continuance, and action. Section "III" of the poem asks the audience to remember the goals of Pictou-Aquash's decolonial activism. The tenderness of this section is almost jarring after the violence of the earlier stanzas and with the knowledge of Pictou-Aquash's murder firmly within the psyches of most of Kenny's readers. Images of Native performances and spiritualities are used rhetorically here to make a very specific argument regarding Native people's responsibility in struggles for continuance and resistance:

All you ever wanted was milk in your breasts
 for the children; corn and rabbit
 for the generations; cleanliness
 for the earth for naked feet to touch
 while dancing on the belly of their mother;
 freedom from want . . . is that so much to ask;
 respect for a grave, respect for a prayer,
 respect for the first moon and the first sun
 rising slowly over turtle's back.
 Rage is not sufficient.²⁶

Cultural continuance is clearly articulated through images of the cycles of death and renewal. Images of milk, children, past and future generations are joined together with respect for the dead, prayer, and the universe through the lines "cleanliness / for the earth for naked feet to touch / while dancing on the belly of their mother."²⁷ The image "dancing on the belly of their mother" is the visual central line of the stanza, creating a link between desires for continuance expressed in the beginning and the means to attain continuance through engaged respect and reciprocity with the world around us outlined in the end of the stanza before the section's closing argument, "Rage is not sufficient."²⁸ Dance, and by extension other embodied cultural traditions, becomes the vehicle with which we can join the need for continuance with the need for respectful interactions with our communities and the larger world around us.

Although Part III of this poem directly addresses Pictou-Aquash, as do the II and IV sections, this section also specifically addresses a Native readership. These desires were and are the driving force behind Pictou-Aquash's passionate activism and many Native activists. Kenny's specific reference to dance here reminds his readers of the reciprocal relationship between dance and community responsibility. "Rage is not sufficient" as a reaction to the specific atrocities surrounding Annie Mae Pictou-Aquash, nor as a means for cultural continuance. Instead, the poem suggests, we must react to colonial violence through engaged and embodied action and intentional engagement with our traditions. The repetition of the word "respect" reminds us of what is necessary if we are to hope for a future.

Dance is again used in the last section of the poem, which braids together the themes, images, and concerns introduced in the earlier sections. Pictou-Aquash's murdered and dismembered body is reclaimed in hopes that continued resistance can emerge in the wake of such heinous crimes. Kenny complexly brings together images of dismemberment and murder with continuance and hope:

I kiss those severed fingers one by one
 hoping to suck out your courage
 and defiance, your strength as seed
 to replant, harvest, to nourish
 the very young of the people, all people.
 Finger by fingertip I kiss the flesh
 and suck your blood which spurts
 from your life . . . as long as drums bang
 and songs remain the essence of human-kind.
 I lay the eagle prayer feather

on your figurative grave,
 knowing well, rage is not enough
 nor revenge satisfactory.²⁹

The disturbing and almost vampiristic images in this section remind readers of their responsibility to remember the legacy of Pictou-Aquash and everyone's culpability in systems of violence and oppression. Our struggles are able to continue only because of those who have fought and suffered before us. We literally fight and survive on lands holding our ancestors' blood. Yet, it is through the constant reclaiming of our ancestors' bodies and histories—however brutal—that we are able to continue as Native people and as human beings. Pictou-Aquash's memory and resistance is kept alive through our practices: "as long as drums bang / and songs remain the essence of human-kind."

The last poem I examine is the exquisite piece "New Song" originally printed in *In the Time of the Present*.

NEW SONG

We are turning
 eagles wheeling sky
 We are rounding
 sun moving in the air
 We are listening
 to old stories
 Our spirits to the breeze
 the voices are speaking
 Our hearts touch earth
 and feel dance in our feet
 Our minds in clear thought
 we speak the old words
 We will remember everything
 knowing who we are
 We will touch our children
 and they will dance and sing
 As eagle turns, sun rises, winds blow,
 ancestors be our guides
 Into new bloodless tomorrows.³⁰

This "new song" is about continuance and imagining futures for our communities free from genocide and violence. The poem is not only about survival, but also renewal. The poem's heartbeat rhythm accompanies us as Native readers through the images of dance that are the center of the poem. It is through dance that healing takes place and continuance becomes

possible: "We will remember everything / knowing who we are / We will touch our children / and they will dance and sing." And it is through dance that our relationships with the more-than-human world and our ancestors is affirmed and our futures made possible: "As eagle turns, sun rises, winds blow, / ancestors be our guides / Into new bloodless tomorrows." Kenny does not locate "tradition" within a mythic past, but conceives it as a present practice and imagined future, one in which new songs emerge out of the old.

RAGE IS NOT SUFFICIENT

Like most Indians in academia, my investment in scholarship comes from its possibilities to aid in larger struggles for social justice. During some of the more bizarre, arcane, or disheartening moments within the Ivory Tower, I carry Indiana Miami / Eastern Shawnee scholar-activist Malea Powell's challenge and reminder with me: "That is, after all, why we do this scholarly thing we do—isn't it? To change the world? To learn how to solve contemporary problems in productive and generous ways?"³¹ And, perhaps also like many Indians in academia, I believe that scholarship should not be separated from movements and communities outside of the academy, and that there needs to be continued activism inside and outside of academic circles to ensure that our work is useful to movements for decolonization. Maurice Kenny's work is vital for its implications for artists, activists, and scholars in practice.

As Native artists, we have a specific obligation to aid in the struggles of our communities through our art. At the forefront of our struggles are finding ways to engage responsibly with decolonization, sovereignty, healing, and continuance. Kenny's work, both examined in this essay and more broadly, offers us a model from which to create art that aids in continuance.

Although Kenny uses numerous poetic structures and forms in his work from countless poetic traditions and influences, his use of dance rhythms as the meter of some of the poems opens up interesting poetic possibilities for Native writers. Much has been said about Native poetry being rooted in ceremonial chanting, traditional song, and other oral traditions. As a poet, I get excited about the possibilities of also examining and creating poetry that uses traditional dance and rhythms as metric and tonal structures. Kenny's poems in *Dance Back Strong the Nation* engage these traditional strategies, and this practice offers another source to create, and continue Native formal poetry. Kenny's poetry allows me to imagine poetry that, for instance, follows the rhythmic structures and tonalities of shell shaking and Cherokee stomp dance songs.

Native poetry is activism. Native poets are very aware of this, and it is my hope that other Native activists continue to engage with poetry and other arts as powerful tools for social justice. Native poetry also provides

critiques and theories for Native activist movements. Part of what we have to learn as activists in Native communities is the centrality of our traditions to activist struggles. Kenny's poetry reminds Native activists that part of the core work that must be done is active and intentional engagement with our lifeways. Our languages, our songs, our dances, and our arts are central to our resistance. They require active engagement in order to continue.

As important as organizations such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) have been to Native struggles, like many nationalist struggles they have tended to disregard feminist and Queer / Two-Spirit concerns, among others, often furthering colonial mindsets in the process. "The Hands of Annie-Mae" is rife with implications for activists. Although this poem was published before trials that revealed AIM's responsibility for Pictou-Aquash's murder, it contains a particularly poignant and haunting warning to Native activists. Echoing earlier arguments, the closing phrase of the poem, "rage is not enough / nor revenge satisfactory" opens layered meanings when interpreted with an understanding of AIM's involvement with the murder. Rage and revenge are insufficient to respond; moreover, they are insufficient tools for activism that, left unchecked or engaged with uncritically, can lead to brutality. Because Pictou-Aquash's murder took place within a context of patriarchal organizing, and her story has become a symbol for both the resistance of and violence against Native women, Kenny's closing phrase here becomes a specific warning to male-dominated nationalist movements.

There are numerous implications for academics in engaging with Kenny's work, not the least of which is the importance of teaching Kenny within our classes. Furthermore, Kenny's work reminds us of the centrality of bodies within our work as scholars because Kenny argues for embodied *practice* rather than distanced and unengaged intellectualism. Robert Warrior looks to poetry as a model for resistance and scholarship:

In developing American Indian critical studies, we need to practice the same sort of intellectual sovereignty that many Native poets practice. As many of the poets find their work continuous with, but not circumscribed by, Native traditions of storytelling or ceremonial chanting, we can find the work of criticism continuous with Native traditions of deliberation and decision making.³²

Kenny's call for Native people to dance strong our nations remains an utmost concern for us. I think that we are currently experiencing enormous healing in our communities, even as we continue to face daunting challenges. Our traditions provide the center from which to engage these challenges and are themselves acts of resistance that ensure our continuance. Through them, "We will remember everything."

NOTES

1. Joan Larkin and Carl Morse. Eds. *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time: An Anthology* (New York: St. Martins, 1988).

2. Maurice Kenny, *Carving Hawk: New and Selected Poems* (Buffalo: White Pine, 2002), 84:31.

3. Although this is not an explicitly Queer or Two-Spirit analysis of Kenny's poetry, both the contexts and concerns of this essay are Two-Spirit. Not only is this an analysis of a Two-Spirit writer by another Two-Spirit writer, I think that current Two-Spirit movements have a particular concern with the reclaiming and continuing embodied practices that place us within historical and cultural contexts. Two-Spirit movements are themselves models for what "continuance" means. Furthermore, I think that it is necessary to remember how many Two-Spirit people have helped, and continue to help, build Native scholarly, artistic, and activist communities.

4. Kenny, *Dancing Back Strong the Nation: Poems* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine, 1981), 2.

5. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2003), 16.

6. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 40.

7. Taylor argues that "The rift . . . does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual." Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

8. Charlotte Heth, ed, *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions* (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 17.

9. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 155-164.

10. *Ibid.*, xi.

11. Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995), 126.

12. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, xvii.

13. Heth, *Native American Dance*, ix.

14. Although I am focusing on dance traditions for this chapter, I think that Kenny's historical poems can also be seen as linked intimately to the recitation of wampum records. Kenny's *Blackrobe* and *Tekonwatonti: Molly Brant*, in particular, both document and imagine Mohawk history and, like wampum recitations, use the performative to transmit memory and history. Angela Hass' (Eastern Cherokee) scholarship on wampum records reminds us of their significance as an embodied and performed rhetoric:

Wampum records are maintained by regularly revisiting and re-"reading" them through community memory and performance, as wampum is a living rhetoric that communicates a mutual relationship between two or more

parties, despite the lack of one of those parties to live up to that promise (which we know was the result of most wampum treaties with the colonists). Thus, wampum embodies memory, as it extends human memories of inherited knowledges through interconnected, non-linear designs with associative message storage and retrieval methods.

Angela M. Haas, "Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19, no. 4 (2007): 80–81.

15. Kenny, *Dancing Back*, 62:6.

16. Heth, *Native American Dance*, 27.

17. Kenny, *Dancing Back*, 62:7–10.

18. *Ibid.*, 62:11.

19. Kenny, *Carving Hawk: New and Selected Poems* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 2002), 68:12.

20. *Ibid.*, 63:14–17.

21. *Ibid.*, 65:1, 66:1.

22. Heth, *Native American Dance*, 23.

23. Kenny, *Dancing Back*, 65:13–14 and 21–23.

24. Kenny, *Carving Hawk*, 296:8–12.

25. *Ibid.*, 297:25–28.

26. *Ibid.*, 297:33–42.

27. *Ibid.*, 297:35–37.

28. *Ibid.*, 297:42.

29. *Ibid.*, 297–298:43–55.

30. *Ibid.*, 285:17–19.

31. Malea D. Powell, "Down by the River, or How Susan La Flesche Picotte Can Teach us about Alliance as a Practice of Survivance," *College English* 67 no. 1. (2004): 57.

32. Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*, 118.