

Call Me Brother

Two-Spiritness, the Erotic, and Mixedblood Identity as Sites of Sovereignty and Resistance in

Gregory Scofield's Poetry

Qwo-Li Driskill

Gregory Scofield (Métis Cree) is a poet whose words we need. He is a writer who gives us back our tongues, who dislodges our silences and turns them into sites of resistance. Scofield's work is forcefully political. It asserts a Two-Spirit and Indian aesthetic and disrupts the hegemony of dominant culture's discourses on Native identities and lives. His poetry claims sovereignty and challenges the racism and homophobia of colonialism. Sovereignty is an issue of vital importance to Native people, not only as a right we have as independent nations within the borders of colonial governments, but also as a struggle to define ourselves outside of Eurocentric and racist notions of our lives as First Nations people. Scofield's work demands that Two-Spiritness, the erotic, and mixedblood identity be seen as sovereign. He writes us weapons and shields, weaves us blankets. Scofield's erotic is intensely political, and his politic intensely erotic. His work, ultimately, is one that heals.

My own reading of Scofield's work comes from my experiences as a mixedblood Cherokee, a Two-Spirit, and a poet who believes that poetry is a tool for social change and healing. Poetry is one of the many ways we tell our stories and encourage others to loosen their tongues—our stories are transformative. As a good Cherokee, I believe that words have an intense power to shape reality. And, because Two-Spirits are supposed to be silent or dead, our stories are necessarily political. Scofield's poetry helps me come home. There are few out Two-Spirit male poets publishing full volumes of poetry. There are few out Two-Spirit male writers

being published at all. This makes Scofield's work all the more precious and necessary for a movement of decolonization and mending. Haunani-Kay Trask (Native Hawaiian) defines decolonization as "collective resistance to colonialism, including cultural assertions, efforts toward self-determination, and armed struggle."¹

Scofield's poetry is resistance. His use of Cree is life-giving to Native people, as it honors his Native language as beautiful and valuable. The use of Cree (and other indigenous tongues) asserts a Native identity that is sovereign from both colonial governments and from other Native people. Too often, dominant culture sees Native people as a monolithic culture. The use of our languages is a radical act, especially considering the violent history that means many of our languages are endangered or not spoken at all. By using Cree in his work, Scofield encourages other Native poets to use our Native languages in our writings and lives.

The poetry of Native (and other marginalized) people is always political and always necessary. In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" Audre Lorde writes that poetry "is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before."² The idea that poetry should abstain from politics does nothing for struggles toward liberation. Because our work is often overtly political, it is also an idea that conveniently erases and devalues work from marginalized communities. Contemporary Native poetry is distinct from the mainstream (white, male, straight) canon because it comes from political and cultural histories often denied by a racist/colonial culture. Chrystos (Menominee) writes, "I assert that poetry without politics is narcissistic & not useful to us. I also believe that everything is political—there is no neutral, safe place we can hide out in waiting for the brutality to go away."³

Scofield's poetry cannot simply be seen as "Native," "Queer," "urban," "Canadian," or any of the other words one might want to use to describe it. His work must be understood within the complexities of overlapping identities.

Two-Spirit Country

Scofield's work speaks from a Two-Spirit identity that demands to be seen as separate from white Queer identities. The term "Two-Spirit"⁴ was started as an act of resistance to anthropologists using the word *berdache* to

describe traditional Native alternative gender roles. It is also employed to describe contemporary Queer Native people and give Native people a word to communicate traditional gender diversity in English.

Because *berdache* is still frequently employed as a term to describe Two-Spirit people, it is important to briefly address its history and its inaccuracy when discussing the sexualities and/or genders of First Nations people. In their introduction to the book *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas (Navajo), and Sabine Lang give us a brief history of *berdache*, explaining its non-Native (Persian) origins and later European definitions as “kept boy,” “male prostitute,” and “catamite.”⁵ None of these words, or *berdache*, speaks accurately of our genders and sexualities as Native folks. Besides the derogatory connotations (and denotations) of *berdache*, it is a word that erases female and female-embodied Two-Spirits and suggests sexual abuse of children. While many Native people have asked academics and anthropologists to refrain from using *berdache*, non-Native writers such as Will Roscoe have defended its use: “As a Persian term, its origins are Eastern not Western. Nor is it a derogatory term, except to the extent that all terms for nonmarital sexuality in European societies carried some measure of condemnation. It was rarely used with the force of ‘faggot,’ but more often as a euphemism with the sense of ‘lover’ or ‘boyfriend.’ Its history, in this regard, is akin to that of ‘gay,’ ‘black,’ and ‘Chicano’—terms that also lost negative connotations over time.”⁶ Yet Roscoe does not address the fact that *berdache*, regardless of its origins as “Eastern not Western,” is nevertheless a colonial word brought to the Americas by “Western” invaders and enforced (like all non-Native languages) on our people. Two-Spirits have stated that the term *is* offensive to us, which negates his assertion that the term is not derogatory. Furthermore, *berdache* is not a word being readily reclaimed by our communities as a tool to build identity, community, and resistance, which is markedly different from words such as *gay*, *black*, and *Chicana*. *Berdache* continues to be an enforced word, and Roscoe’s “Berdache Studies” maintains colonial attitudes about Native people.⁷

Using *Two-Spirit*, or *Two-Spiritd*, rather than, or in addition to, labels such as *Trans*, *Intersexed*, *Bi*, *Queer*, *Lesbian*, and *Gay* creates a sovereign label for Native people to discuss our traditional and contemporary gender and sexual identities.⁸ It helps us decolonize our bodies and minds from the homophobic, sexist, transphobic, and racist ide-

ologies that are entrenched in European occupation of Turtle Island. Though in some ways calling ourselves *Two-Spirit* is overtly political, in the sense that any act of decolonization is political, Anguksuar/Richard LaFortune (Yup’ik) notes that

the sudden appearance of Native people claiming two-spirit identity should not be interpreted as a strategy for acquiring political power. . . . Likewise, it would be a mistake to think this a recently developed fiction used to resituate individuals into tribal communities that sometimes reject them. . . . What is happening, actually, is that we are remembering again who we are and that our identities can no longer be used as a weapon against us. It is once again a source for healing.⁹

Scofield’s poetry resists a racist white Gay culture that sexualizes Native men and male-embodied people and sees us, like our homelands, as things to be used and discarded. In his poem “Promises,” Scofield connects the reality of genocide and colonization with the ways in which Two-Spirit men are often used by white Gay men for sexual gratification and the internalized racism that often leads men of color to seek white men for acceptance and validation:

beneath the buffalo robe
 smuggle into him temporary
 the famine his doeskin fingers snail
 across my lips of strawberry pleasure

 spread my arms, my legs
 I offer moose tongue and berries
 generations he devours in seconds

The images of famine and devoured generations speak from a history of loss that Native people continue to endure under colonialism. The Two-Spirit body becomes colonized. Scofield continues,

the taste his foreign tongue snakes
 through ravines, over valleys

 each kiss
 history
 lolls on the tip of my tongue¹⁰

Two-Spiritness is understood within Native contexts and traditions. Our experiences are always entwined with histories of genocide and racism. Scofield's poetry helps us remember our traditional understanding of gender and sexuality. His Cree heritage provides him with a map to understand his Two-Spiritness. "*Ayahkewêw's Lodge*"¹¹ can be understood only within a Two-Spirit context.

*êkwa êkosi, nikipêhatañan ôhi mistaimmak*¹²

and gave them to our women
who in turn

gave them to our men.

That night a baby was born in camp,
eyes clenched shut,
fist in his mouth.

.
In the blood
a twinning spirit was seen.

.
At dawn, the time of prayer
they brought the child
to our lodge to be named—
and so we named him twice,

Mistatin-amâsis / ¹³

—He Who Calls *Piyeshmak-isenzem*.¹⁴

Poems such as this help us heal from colonialism. By speaking from a Cree Two-Spirit context, Scofield resists Two-Spirit invisibility that lumps us together with white Gay identities and he honors traditions that are often silenced and/or hidden. The sovereignty of Two-Spirit people is illustrated, as well, through poems dealing specifically with our stories, people(s), and issues. "Owls in the City" mourns the loss of urban Two-Spirits to AIDS. He writes,

our *iyimimak*¹⁵ are dropping
like rotten chokecherries

.
Even owls have migrated to the city,
perched on rooftops or clotheslines
hooting their miserable death chant.

Tonight at the darkened window
tapping softly my drum, I think
how fortunate I am—
saved to pull up these *Ayahkewêw* songs
from my still beating heart.¹⁶

The owl images evoke many Native traditions in which owls signify death and/or severe illness. AIDS is a pandemic that severely affects Native communities, particularly because our communities are so small. AIDS mirrors a history in which Native communities have been devastated by disease. Profound loss is an important element in much of Scofield's work. "Another Street Kid Just Died" mourns the death of a young Two-Spirit to murder or suicide.¹⁷ "Queenie" mourns the death of a former lover.¹⁸ Several poems (especially in *Love Medicine and One Song*) celebrate and mourn the life of Dean, who often becomes a ghost lover in Scofield's work. These expressions of mourning are often expressed by Queer people of color, a response to the many ways in which those we love are lost. José Esteban Muñoz writes that melancholia "is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names."¹⁹

Scofield's Two-Spirit poetry does not leave us stranded in "melancholia" with only the dead to take into battle, but also offers us images of Two-Spirit people filled with life, sexuality, and rebellion against homophobia and racism.

Snag Poem

a dark lover so clever
.
want to be my nichimoose²⁰
say would you be satisfied just snuggling close
would suit me fine to blow this beer joint
so just keep lookin' sweetie²¹

He offers us sexy, fierce words like these from "Unhinged":

Sure
I've slipped the curve
of your backside, slipped between
your thighs,

my seasoned lips mouting
 the peach song
 beneath your scrotum.
 So, sing my breather, play me
 the whole black night.²²

Poems such as this illustrate a political and powerful erotic that refuses to illustrate Queerness as shameful, tragic, or disgusting. He gives us poems such as "I Used To Be Sacred (on Turtle Island)" that incite mutiny against white Gay men who exploit Two-Spirit men.

Pissed off, he tottered along
 snorting his hooked nose.
 So much for brotherly turtleship
 I thought
 that one would make a good soup
 at a Two-Spirited gathering.²³

He gives us poems such as "Night Train" celebrating his love for both men and women, writing,
 if you added
 his perfect lips, her perfect arms
 multiplied my heart, counted
 all the sensations
 I subtract and divide and
 put together like so many railcars
 my skeleton would stretch
 a love song from here
 to eternity.²⁴

Scofield helps tell our stories as Two-Spirit people, celebrating the intricacies of who we are both within and outside of Native communities. His poetry is full of the humor, rage, erotic power, and sovereign identity that is needed for us to survive as colonized people living with layered forms of oppression.

The Sovereign Erotic

Sexuality is one of the many areas in which Native people are colonized. Dominant culture often asserts ideas of the erotic that are fiercely damag-

ing to marginalized people. As Native people, especially as Two-Spirits, the act of creating and understanding the erotic as an aspect of our sovereignty is of vital importance. In *Love Medicine and One Song: Sâkhitowin-Maskithey Êkwa Peyak-Nikamowin*, Scofield creates an erotic poetic that is distinctly Native in which dominant culture's fragmented understandings of sexuality are shed. Scofield roots the erotic in Cree traditions and language. His love poems become a tool for healing and erotic celebration. Beth Brant (Bay of Quinte Mohawk) writes:

The love that was natural in our world, has become unnatural as we become more consumed by the white world and the values therein. Our sexuality has been colonized, sterilized, whitewashed. Our sense of spirit has been sterilized, colonized, made over to pander to a growing consumer need for quick and easy redemption. What the dominant culture has never been able to comprehend is that spirit/sex/prayer/flesh/religion/natural is who I am as a Two-Spirit.²⁵

Perhaps decolonizing sexuality is one of the many tasks of contemporary Two-Spirits.

Scofield writes that his poems in *Love Medicine and One Song* "come from a sacred place within. I have made tobacco offerings to ask for the help and guidance of The Grandmothers and Grandfathers, and to honor my Two Spirits as well as my two loves."²⁶ By centering himself in Native ways of knowing, Scofield speaks from a sovereign erotic, one that is outside dominant culture's notions of the erotic, which are often accompanied by the sexism and racism infused into its fiber. He speaks from an erotic wholeness, one in which "spirit/sex/prayer/flesh/religion/natural" is expressed.

Scofield's erotic imagery in these lyric poems often draws upon Native spirituality and traditions. "My Drum, His Hands" links the erotic with Native song, dance, and spirituality. The use of drum imagery reminds us that the erotic is a life-giving, creative force. The body becomes the drum, the erotic becomes ceremony, prayer, and celebration.

over the bones, over the bones
 stretched taut
 my skin, the drum
 softly he pounds
 humming

he carries me to dreams,
his hands wet
and gleaming
my drum aching²⁷

Asserting a sovereign erotic, especially speaking honestly about loving both men and women, is a radical act against the homophobia of both white and Native communities, the racism of the white community and the biphobia, sexism, and racism of mainstream Gay movements. Scofield's poems are not for consumption by a dominant culture. They go against the grain of the concepts that colonized the Americas. The fact that he links sex between two men to his sacred traditions as a Native person certainly rocks the boats of Native people buying into homophobia and Puritanical sexual notions.

Scofield's erotic is based in earth and nature. Images of the more-than-human world are infused into the poems in *Love Medicine and One Song*. Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) writes, "In the traditional belief systems of native people, the terrestrial call is the voice of God, or of gods, the creative power lives on earth, inside earth, in turtle, stone, and tree."²⁸ Scofield listens to this terrestrial voice, understanding that the erotic is a creative power given to us as a part of Creation. "Earth and Textures" is an example of his poetry that puts imagery from nonhuman creation and Native sacred traditions in the center of the erotic. In it he writes

ih, ih²⁹
she is pihhtwawikaniik³⁰
where I come
to cry the dry stone
from my throat.
pehtâw, pehtâw³¹
she is the song
of frogs and crickets
tickling my feet
so always I am rooted.³²

Audre Lorde tells us, "The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is . . . false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic

knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings."³³

The People Who Own Themselves

Throughout his poetry, Scofield deals with the history and complexity of Métis people and lives. He uses his poetry to tell Métis stories and to deal with his own identity as a mixedblood Indian. He writes from what Louis Owens (Choctaw and Cherokee) calls "a straitjacket of history" that we grapple with in our lives and writings.³⁴ In "Divided" he deals with his feelings of exile from both white and Indian communities.

My beigy-pink shade
Unlike you with bronze skin
I'm a Skin without colour; I get the brushoff
Deciding if I am pure enough Red enough
I am not your white whipping-boy³⁵

Issues of wholeness and division are of major importance to mixedblood writers, who are often dismembered by concepts such as racial purity and blood quantum. To be Native and white often means to feel at war with your own identity. The frustration with feeling otherized by Native communities as a Métis person is also a frustration with a racist, colonial, and Indian-hating culture that otherizes him for being Indian.

Growing up in an all-white town
I never forgot my red half It counted big
Especially if you looked not right white
But wrong white To white people that's off-white.

Similarly, "Call Me Brother" deals with the complexity of mixed-blood identity within Native communities. It deals with Scofield's reality as a light-skinned mixedblood, and his feelings of rejection from Native communities.

"You never know when you're talking to an Indian," he says wisely because I am only half which we both know

is not the real issue but the way I look which makes it next to impossible not to spot me sticking out of a powwow . . .³⁶

Muñoz writes that “hybrid” identity practices are “spaces of productivity where identity’s fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated.”³⁷ Scofield creates a space to discuss mixedblood identity on the printed page, not only pushing imposed boundaries of the concept of “race” as a mixed person, but also the ideas of what a “real Indian” is. He continues,

I am a true die-hard
Skin with blue eyes that really screws up the whole
history book image except my roots can’t be traced to
the Bering Straight but nine months after European
contact . . .³⁸

One of the difficulties of mixedblood identity that Scofield mentions here is that of feeling genetically colonized. “European contact” (colonization) becomes a metaphor for his conception. The ending of the poem challenges notions of racial purity, maintaining a sovereign mixedblood identity: “the next time / you see me up dancing call me brother.”³⁹

A specific Métis history and identity is asserted in his work as sovereign. He resists a colonialism that abuses Métis people. By telling his own story and the stories of other Métis people, Scofield helps mend Métis communities and continues Métis traditions of rebellion. “Answer for My Brother” is a perfect example of the ways he declares a sovereign Métis identity. The poem answers the question, “Who Are The Métis?” Scofield gives a brief glimpse at the ways his people have been exploited and ignored.

There is so little written about the Métis because we
are not one or the other but a shaded combination

.
written
right out of history except for

Brief mention of our leaders who were a thorn in the
government’s ass they made it to the N section in the encyclopedia
under the “North West Rebellion”⁴⁰

The entire poem speaks from a specificity of Métis history, but it is the last line of the poem that claims Métis identity as sovereign from both “fullblood” and

white contexts: “If anything, we are Katipamsoochick.”⁴¹ *I Knew Two Metis Women* is Scofield’s tribute song to his late mother and aunt, a praiseful look at the ways they learned to survive and find joy despite the harsh reality of their lives as Métis women. In “Not All Halfbreed Mothers,” Scofield celebrates his mother’s life by honoring her complexities:

Not all halfbreed mothers
speak like a dictionary
or Cree hymn book,
tell stories
about faithful dogs
or bears
that hung around or sniffed
in the wrong place.

Not all halfbreed mothers
know how to saddle
and ride a horse,
how to hot-wire a car
or siphon gas.

Not all halfbreed mothers
drink

red rose, blue ribbon,
Kelowna Red, Labatt’s Blue.

Mine just happened
to like it

Old Style.⁴²

“They Saw” is a similar tribute to his mother, one that deals with the racist and sexist gaze of dominant culture.

One time, she said, a woman
whispered behind her back,
“Just look where our tax
dollars are going.”

And they saw

what all their parents said—
Indian women her age

were walking corpses
scrounging for a drink⁴³

Scofield goes on to subvert this gaze and see his mother as the strong woman she was.

I saw her
my patch-quilt mother
with a hat so beat up
only a miracle
kept it on her head.
Running to meet her,
I saw her eyes charm up a smile.
“Look!” she said,
glowing in her new sweatshirt:
METIS & PROUD OF IT.⁴⁴

The poem ends not only with a transformation of who is interpreting Scofield’s mother, but also with his mother’s assertion of a sovereign Métis identity.

Scofield’s poetry is beautiful, sharp, and complex. It demands to be seen within the intricacies of history and identity. His poetry is a political and spiritual tool to help Native people in struggles for sovereignty, self-definition, and decolonization. By integrating his experiences as a Two-Spirit Métis Cree living under the government of Canada, Scofield brings us to a more complete perspective of the experiences of First Nations people in the Americas. His words heal and bring us home, help us understand who we are as Native peoples alive under continuing colonialism. Scofield’s work demands that we call him brother.