

*Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. Edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011. 223 pages. \$25.96 paper.

Compact and comprehensive, the introduction to this important collection of stories situates the contribution of Native gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirit (GLBTQ2) writers within the context of decolonizing methodology. The editors, themselves accomplished storytellers who work across genres including poetry, fiction, memoir, nonfiction, and scholarly discourse, assert the presence and persistence of two-spirit voices in terms that echo seminal discussions of decolonization by Indigenous researchers including Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 1999) and Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (*Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, 2008), among others.

Put simply, the Native two-spirit experience can be thought of as a microcosm of global Indigenous experience, which has withstood historical attempts at erasure by the institutions of Euro-Western imperialism to emerge as a widespread activist movement aimed at regaining sovereignty and self-determination. *Sovereign Erotics* asserts “the decolonial potential of Native two-spirit/queer people healing from heteropatriarchal gender regimes” (p. 3). The focus on two-spirit/queer identity formation in the context of resistance against colonial gender binaries and sexual regimes thus mirrors a broader Indigenous experience. While one might argue that “decolonization” underpins individual methodological discourses representing various Indigenous peoples, it is important to remember that decolonizing research grounds itself in the experiences of a particular community. The editors echo this caveat when reminding us that

“queer Native people are far from a monolithic group” (p. 2). By focusing on the diversity of the Native GLBTQ2 community, *Sovereign Erotics* simultaneously gives back to that community while educating audiences who may be interested in learning about Indigenous ways of knowing from fresh perspectives.

The decolonizing impulse is recognizable throughout *Sovereign Erotics* but is nowhere more apparent than instances where the editors assert the primacy of storytelling. “[T]his collection is not an ethnographic project,” they write, “it is, instead, a space in which writers who identify as both ‘Native’ and ‘GLBTQ2’ can share their creative writing as literature, not social science” (p. 4). This rejection of social science as an inadequate discourse of discovery implicitly aligns it with an academic tradition that begins in fifteenth-century first-contact narratives by European explorers and extends throughout anthropological studies and arm-chair ethnographies of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Decolonizing methodology resists this research tradition, which has shaped mainstream conceptions of what it means to be Native, and, more profoundly, has delivered to Native peoples a prescription of how they should think about and represent themselves from the perspectives of their conquerors and colonizers.

Decolonization, then, addresses the deleterious effects of “[t]his collective memory of imperialism,” which, according to Smith, has directed “the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized” (pp. 1-2).

Researchers emphasize terms like “healing” and “spiritual recovery” to cite the primary difference in emphasis between the activism of decolonizing researchers and the descriptive categorizations favored by social scientists. Historically the language of science has asserted its neutrality and objectivity while promoting highly political agendas often aimed at the usurpation

of Indigenous resources and the resulting marginalization of Indigenous peoples. The editors echo both of these perspectives. They assert, “Our hope is that this collection can push on the past while making a contribution toward a healthier and more respectful future” (p. 1).

Elsewhere, they point out the limits of “academic discourse,” which relies on clearly defined taxonomies despite the fact that the “labels and terms communities use to refer to themselves are often much less rigidly defined in community practice than they are within academic theory” (p. 4). An effort to balance their project between the often opposing camps of academic theory and community praxis thus informs the notion of what it means to live a two-spirit nature. Reflecting the editors’ recognition that the Native GLBTQ2 community is not monolithic, the term “two-spirit” receives uneven acceptance within the community itself but is preferred here because “it is being widely used in grassroots movements throughout the United States and Canada” as “both an organizing tool and a particular political orientation that centralizes a decolonial agenda around issues of gender and sexuality” (p. 5).

Arranged into four sections, the stories by Native GLBTQ2 writers succeed in reflecting the diversity of this community of voices. “Dreams/Ancestors” honors the creative resistance of elders who withstood the effects of alienation and othering to become role models for the present generation. “Love/Medicine” transmits the meme of sovereign erotics more directly, illustrating the idea that the erotic, while it certainly engages the experience of sexuality, is also about power and “a return to our bodies” that called to this reader’s mind the Anishinaabemowin word *biskaabiiyang*, “returning to ourselves,” or discovering how one is personally affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world. “Long/Walks” contains moving stories of two-spirit people “coming out” to the world and

reminds us that two-spirit nature is not de facto accepted by mainstream Native or tribal cultural simply because the two-spirit person is a member of that culture. This clarification re-situates the Native experience in the broader context of the struggles faced by GLBTQ2 people across cultures. Finally, “Wild/Flowers” calls out to two-spirit and queer persons in ways that might be characterized as a call-to-action, but does so reflectively, through stories of quiet confidence and strength.

Readers who wish to pursue the path set forth in *Sovereign Erotics* will find the introduction invaluable in identifying precedents, such as Beth Brant’s *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection of by North American Indian Women* (1984), editor Will Roscoe’s collaborative offering with the Gay American Indians (GAI) advocacy group, *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988), and Qwo-Li Driskill’s “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic,” the 2004 *Studies in American Indian Literatures* essay that provided the primary inspiration for *Sovereign Erotics*. Other stories that have contributed to the understanding of two-spirit people include Lester B. Brown, *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men* (1997) and Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (2000).

In particular, the past several years have seen an incredible level of activity in the area of two-spirit research. Notable examples include the 2010 special edition of *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies on Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity* edited by Daniel Heath Justice, Mark Rifkin, Bethany Schneider and Daniel Heath; Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley and Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (2011); Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (2011); Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become*

*Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (2011); and Rifkin's more recent *Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* (2012). A quick glance at contributions to the field suggests the collaborative nature of the scholarly community enjoyed by our *Sovereign Erotics* editors.

*Sovereign Erotics* can be ironically categorized as academic storytelling. It unfolds the story of Native GLBTQ2 experience in the familiar and highly usable format of anthology and would appeal to anyone teaching Native and Indigenous studies, Native literature, American or Canadian studies, or gender, race, and nation studies. The editors' introduction offers an important preamble, situating their own work within an historical current that has mingled "Gay Power" and "Red Power" from coterminous origins in the civil rights movements of the 1960s. As an exemplary affirmation of scholarly activism, their collaboration represents a manifesto for social justice today.

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