

Âyahkwêw Songs: AIDS and Mourning in Gregory Scofield's "Urban Rez" Poems

by Sara Jamieson

In his 1999 memoir *Thunder Through My Veins*, poet Gregory Scofield documents his long struggle to accept himself as Métis and gay in the face of racial and homophobic prejudice. In the process, he describes a brief and ambivalent friendship he once shared in high school with a boy named Sean, who was singled out as gay by classmates and accordingly harassed. Scofield angrily recalls the shame and loneliness that caused him to deny his own sexuality and that led Sean to endure his harassment. Years later, after reading a notice of Sean's death from an AIDS-related illness, Scofield "wanted to cry but [he] couldn't. I felt [Sean] didn't need my tears, but something more constructive—like my own self-acceptance—something that would take me another ten years to find" (75). Testifying to a persistent belief that grief is depoliticising, Scofield's worry that the tears he wants to shed are somehow inappropriate and not "constructive" is indicative of the complex relationship between mourning and activism in the wake of the AIDS crisis. As an activist himself, working with street youth in Vancouver in the 1990s, Scofield was struck by the disproportionate number of Native people living and working on the streets and dying of drug addiction, suicide, and HIV infection (*Thunder* 191). This experience provides the material for several poems in his 1996 collection, *Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez*, poems that address the politics of mourning within the context of one of Canada's most troubled urban environments.

Writing poems on the deaths of Native persons from AIDS brings Scofield into contact not only with a cultural stereotype of gay men as inherently moribund, but also with the stereotype of Natives who, beholden to out-of-date traditions, are likewise doomed. In that AIDS has become so central to contemporary gay consciousness, Melissa Zeiger argues that "almost any poem written now by a gay man, no matter what its topic, is likely to include elegiac elements" (109). But

Scotfield's body of work complicates this claim, insofar as his celebratory homoerotic love poems (similar to the ones that dominate his 1997 collection, *Love Medicine* [page 52] and *One Song*) are far more numerous than the elegiac poems concentrated in two sections of *Native Canadiana*. That Scotfield's AIDS poems are relatively few in number attests, perhaps, to the intensely painful nature of the subject matter, though this can fairly be attributed to the poet's wariness of a cultural propensity to link sex, particularly sex between men, with death.

Compounding his stance as a poet writing of the impact of HIV/AIDS on Native communities, Scotfield is burdened by a pervasive tendency to conflate not only gay identity but also Native identity with death-driven narratives. Gerald Vizenor, for example, identifies the "notion of the 'vanishing tribes'" as one of the "hypotragedies" that the dominant culture has imposed upon Native culture and cultural productions (9-10). I want to argue that Scotfield confronts the inter-related spectres of the doomed homosexual and the "vanishing" Native by deploying them strategically in ways that protest the mismanagement of the AIDS crisis among Native peoples on the streets of Vancouver, as well as in the communities from which many of them come. His poems of mourning for those who have died articulate a sustained critique of the political and economic contexts that contributed to their deaths: these poems characterise AIDS as the continuance of a colonial history that saw Native populations devastated by disease; they register the elision of Native peoples from the discourses of AIDS activism; and they identify homophobia within Native communities as a form of collusion with the dominant culture that puts Native people themselves at risk.

These elegiac poems thus constitute a departure from the feeling articulated in Scotfield's memoir that mourning is essentially passive and politically disengaged. Far from being isolating and depoliticising, loss, as Judith Butler argues, makes us painfully aware of the importance of our social ties, and that mourning in fact "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order" by foregrounding the relational nature of identity itself (22). For a gay Métis poet like Scotfield, however, finding a sense of community appears particularly complex, indeed, fraught with contradictions. His worry, for example, that being open about his sexuality would "destroy [his] place in the Native community" (*Thunder* 189) conveys an ambivalence that also characterises his relationship to what he calls "the gay community" (*Thunder* 188), and indicates a painful awareness of how communities can exclude and divide as well as support and nurture.

The speakers of Scotfield's Urban Rez poems struggle to fashion

selves that mediate amongst these competing communal allegiances in ways that both contribute to and critique the formation of distinctly Native queer [page 53] identities. It is an insistence on identity as stable, coherent, and recoverable that, as Tara Prince-Hughes contends, sets queer Native writers and theorists apart from their European-American counterparts (9), and Scofield's poems to some extent exemplify this distinction. At a time when many theorists of loss and mourning are concerned with the political uses of melancholia, inconsolability, and "unresolved grief" (Brophy 20), Scofield's poems do not altogether reject the value of completed mourning as a means of survival and self-fashioning. These poems may insist on the differences that separate queer Native identities from other manifestations of gay culture, but they do not celebrate these differences uncritically, maintaining instead an awareness of how such identities, while valuable, do not guarantee protection from an especially hostile urban environment.

Because I am reading Scofield's Urban Rez poems as AIDS texts, I should point out that AIDS is in fact never called by name in any of them. In the few poems where Scofield directly identifies the syndrome he calls it "the plague," practising a "semiotics of indirection" that James Jones finds to be characteristic of much recent writing on AIDS (228). Jones interprets this absence as an attempt to avoid the "cultural biases and stigmas" that the word AIDS can convey (311). Far from being a neutral term, however, "plague" is also a politically charged concept, and Scofield deploys it in such a way as to make biases and stigmas against Native persons with AIDS all the more visible.¹ In the context of the poems in *Native Canadiana*, poems populated by sex trade workers, drug addicts, and homeless people, the plague metaphor draws attention to these particular Native peoples' profoundly abject position in Canadian society, emphasising the boundaries still erected between the so-called "general population" (straight, white, male, middle-class) and supposed "risk groups" categorised as both deserving (of infection) and dangerous.

This process is made especially visible in a poem called "Queenie." Though there is no mention of plague here, AIDS is suggested by the speaker's worry, on hearing of another man's illness, that he himself could be infected:

When first
I heard Queenie was sick
I went out of my head
thinking
I too would be a goner
in couple of years, [sic]

Already the funeral was planned;
I would be wrapped
in a starblanket,
my smudge feather
held between icy hands,
the red woven sash
binding my bony hips—
and the fiddlers playing
my spirit up & beyond
the Milky Way.

(68)

At first, Scofield's poem seems to comply with Jeff Nunokawa's reading of how the AIDS elegy reinforces a cultural stereotype of the moribund homosexual: with the possibility that he might be HIV positive, the speaker imagines himself as having surrendered all control of his life and becomes the passive victim of external forces that have already planned his funeral (317).

However, the speaker's initial acquiescence to death forms the basis for a series of contrasts that the poem goes on to develop. In contrast to his passivity, for example, Queenie actively "wanted to be / six feet deep before thirty" (69). Reinforcing this difference between the two men, the poem separates them spatially, placing their respective "deaths" on different pages despite their history of intimacy. Queenie's desire to be six feet deep notwithstanding, the attention the poet gives to his actual death seems rather terse and unceremonious in comparison with the elaborate funerary rituals he imagines for himself, and recalls Butler's observation of "how few deaths from AIDS [are] publicly grievable losses" (35). The vertical distance between the depth of Queenie's grave and the speaker's apotheosis "beyond / the Milky Way" suggests the speaker's complicity in perpetuating a hierarchy of grief which estimates certain deaths more grievable than others: despite his fear that he himself may be infected, he can still see death from AIDS as happening to people who "want" it. Working against the stereotype of the doomed gay/Native man, the speaker of Scofield's poem inhabits this role as a way of figuring his reluctance to accept responsibility for his own actions, and to draw attention to his participation in a cultural tendency to view people with AIDS according to degrees of guilt and innocence.

The poet's insistence on his difference from Queenie is perhaps linked to Scofield's own conflicted relationship to "the gay

community” (*Thunder* 188). He describes his coming out as “liberating,” but also “disheartening,” [page 55] since it seemed to require that he affiliate himself with aspects of gay culture that he finds personally alienating: “the drinking and drugs, the concentration on sex, youth, and beauty, and above all, [the seeming impossibility] of ever finding a deep, loving, and committed relationship” (188). The desire for just such a relationship is articulated toward the end of “Queenie,” when the speaker retroactively characterises his bond with Queenie as a kind of marriage:

The carved silver ring
he gave me at sixteen
with his clan design
was like a wedding ring.
All throughout my teens
I kept it stashed away
for safe keeping.
Finally
I pawned it when I went straight—
[...]
In another life
I sure loved him.

(*Native Canadiana* 69)

The passing of the ring from one man to another works against the reduction of gay relationships to the transmission of disease, and thus honours Queenie’s memory. At the same time, however, the speaker’s characterisation of this exchange as a marriage can also be read as a continuation of the process of othering Queenie that the poem has already established. The speaker may interpret the ring as being “like a wedding ring,” but there is nothing to suggest that the man who gave it to him intended it as such, since, by this point in the poem we are no longer being told what Queenie “wanted.” By retroactively marrying himself to Queenie, the speaker normalises his relationship with the dead man and distances himself from the self-destructive world of sex and drinking and drugs that Queenie inhabited.

The elision of Queenie’s desire would seem to characterise this marriage as one of those “act[s] of normalizing closure” that, for Sarah Brophy, constitute an example of “how *not* to mourn” for the lives that AIDS has claimed (21). Indeed, the last lines of Scofield’s poem describe the speaker’s love for Queenie as a completed action in the past, and thus would seem to enact a Freudian ideal of completed mourning that, for Brophy and other critics, seems inadequate for theorising the experience of [page 56] loss as it is articulated in AIDS

texts. In his highly influential 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud describes the process of healthy mourning as the gradual withdrawal of libidinal investment from the lost object and the formation of new affective ties. Because this theorisation of mourning demands the severance of erotic attachments that are, for gay writers, already subject to repression, the maintenance of some kind of ongoing connection to the dead is of central importance to the literature of AIDS, and critics such as Brophy and Butler, Zeiger and Michael Moon have posited various models of irresolution and inconsolability as constituting a more ethical response to loss than Freud’s compensatory model.

Moon, for example, has argued for the fetishistic attachment to material objects as a means for gay poets to prolong object relations with the dead and so resist acquiescence with their deaths and with the forces that would silence same-sex desire. In “Queenie,” the ring undeniably functions as a material sign of the speaker’s continued attachment to the dead man. His agonised decision to relinquish the ring, pawning it in order to “go straight,” however, suggests something more complex than a repudiation of same-sex desire in compliance with the norms of a heterosexist society. “Going straight,” aside from any meaning it has as an indicator of sexual orientation, can also be read as a sign of the poet’s determination to remove himself from the world of heavy drinking and unprotected sex that Queenie—in this and other poems—inhabits. By stressing the ring’s economic value as well as its erotic value, Scofield’s poem brings to light a class bias implicit in Moon’s argument, suggesting the extent to which the forms of mourning can be shaped by economic necessity. Selling the ring that is the material sign of his attachment to Queenie is something that assists the speaker in removing himself from economic conditions that could literally jeopardise his survival.

I would like to caution, here, that Scofield’s poem does not simply comply unhesitatingly with a Freudian model of mourning, nor does it question the value of inconsolability as a means of resisting that model. As I have shown, the questions about Queenie that resonate beyond the speaker’s attempts to silence him and consign him to the past draw attention to how the poem’s compensatory closure assists the speaker in maintaining the boundaries of selfhood through the erasure and exclusion of abjected others. I do, however, want to point out the degree to which the poem asks us to consider how the psychic process of mourning is shaped not just by sexuality but by the exigencies of class and place: Scofield’s Urban Rez appears as a material context in which the kind of prolonged attachment, mediated by objects, that Moon envisions is a luxury the [page 57] speaker

cannot afford. To have kept the ring and remained where he was would have been to increase his risk of sharing Queenie's fate, and it is finally through his own decision to survive that he rejects the cultural script of the moribund gay/Native man that seemed so attractive to him before.

Implicit within the poet's claim that he has kept Queenie's ring hidden away "for safekeeping" (69) is his own, and others', failure to safeguard Queenie himself. For Lawrence Lipking, this topic of "frustrated protection" is quintessentially elegiac, and is the point at which a poem like "Lycidas" becomes more than simply a lament for one man's death and articulates very pointed grievances against the political institutions of its time. In "Queenie," however, the additional possibility that the speaker kept the ring hidden all those years more out of shame than any desire to protect it suggests that the poem's indictment of the institutions that have allowed Queenie to die is accompanied by a strong sense of personal guilt. Such a mixture of indignation at a homophobic society and an awareness of complicity with it characterises many of Scofield's Urban Rez poems. "Owls in the City," for example, portrays urban Natives' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS as the result of institutionalised colonialist violence. Tallying up the men he knows who are "sick or dead," the poet remembers "the coyote ones" whose slumped posture fuses dejection and desire as they "[eye] every white guy / who walked by" (71):

That was back in the 80s
before the plague really hit.
What did we know?
Everything about snagging was easy,
no one thought beyond the party.
Today it's worse—
our *iyiniwak* [people] are dropping
like rotten chokecherries
in back alleys or hospitals.

(72)

As Sontag observes, a plague "invariably comes from somewhere else" (46). In the work of a Métis writer like Scofield, the term suggests continuities between HIV/AIDS and the various epidemics visited upon Native populations throughout the history of colonisation of the Americas, and becomes a protest against colonialism's lingering effects.

In her study of HIV/AIDS among Native Americans, Irene Vernon echoes others in calling it "the new smallpox," a virus with the potential to wipe out Native populations vulnerable not because of

their race but [page 58] because of a combination of economic, political, social, and behavioural factors (1). Vernon cites widespread poverty and high rates of alcohol and drug abuse as among the leading factors that put Native people at risk, and stresses a lack of funding and education as contributing to a chronic mismanagement of HIV/AIDS in both urban and reservation communities. In “Queenie,” the grim joke that alcoholism has actually prolonged Queenie’s life rather than cut it short—“the booze preserving his insides”(69)—for seven extra years, recalls Native activist Terry Tafoya’s criticism of social welfare agencies so preoccupied with prevention of alcohol abuse that the use of intravenous drugs, which carries a higher risk, does not receive adequate attention (287).

At the time that *Native Canadiana* was published, in 1996, rates of HIV infection in North America had declined for whites, but had increased for other races. Moreover, rates of infection in Native communities have been difficult to determine, partly because Native persons have often been classified as black, Hispanic, or simply “other” (Vernon 4). In “Owls in the City,” Scofield writes against the invisibility of Natives in the discourses of AIDS activism, indicating that they have been left out of the narrative of improvement produced by the introduction of effective new treatments. “Back in the ‘80s,” they are as surprised and baffled by the disease as anyone else, but “today it’s worse” (*Native Canadiana* 72): by the mid-nineties, AIDS may have become a manageable condition for some, but for many Native people, it remained catastrophic.

Reflecting on how “fortunate” he is to be alive (72), the poet stresses that he did not deserve to survive any more than the others deserved to die, but his survival is not simply a matter of luck alone. Indeed, the poem implies that what may have saved him was his own squeamishness when, as a very young man, he “screamed and hollered” so that other men would “[keep] out of [his] pants,” reducing his exposure to the virus (71). The poet’s own fear may have been what protected him; however, Vernon identifies homophobia as a major contributor to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Native communities, creating a climate of denial and secrecy that prevents people from protecting themselves or seeking out treatment. Despite these discomforts, Will Roscoe argues that if the advent of HIV/AIDS can be said to have had one positive effect on Native communities, it was the “evolution of consciousness” in the 80s and 90s that led lesbian, gay, and bisexual Native people to take a stand against the discrimination they faced (100). In contrast to the tendency of many contemporary Natives to regard homosexuality as “completely ‘other,’” a phenomenon imagined to belong to the urban white man and

categorised with the other catastrophes attributed [page 59] to him” (Roscoe 102), Native activists have focused instead on exposing the extent to which this attitude is itself a legacy of colonialism and on reclaiming a history of same-sex relationships in traditional Native cultures. Scofield’s Urban Rez poems, which he also refers to as his “Âyahkwêw” or “Two-Spirit” songs (*Native Canadiana* 72), participate in this widespread movement to recover a tradition of Native North American gender diversity.

The poem “I Used to be Sacred (On Turtle Island)” is Scofield’s most sustained meditation on the implementation of Two-Spirited consciousness in contemporary society.² Without denying the distinctiveness of Métis culture, Scofield’s references to Two-Spirits also enable his work to be positioned in relation to much broader theorisations of queer Native identities. While Scofield’s use of the Cree word “Âyahkwêw” situates Two-Spiritedness within a specific tribal framework, it is a concept that has been shown to have been present within a variety of North American Native cultures. Roscoe’s research on accounts of early contact between Native North Americans and European explorers argues that the latter encountered much more fluid and diverse conceptions of gender than they were accustomed to, among them the Two-Spirited individual who was neither male nor female, but combined within him or herself elements of both genders. With variations from tribe to tribe, Two-Spirits (called “berdaches” in the European accounts) carried out activities and social roles opposite to their biological sex, entered into marriages and sexual liaisons with members of the same sex, and were often understood to have visionary or healing powers. In 1990, at the third annual gathering of Lesbian and Gay Native Americans in Winnipeg, participants embraced the term Two-Spirit in order to articulate an identity available to all queer Native peoples regardless of their tribal background. Scofield’s Two-Spirit poems thus situate themselves within the context of a pan-Indian resistance to the interrelated threats of racism and homophobia, and characterise this resistance as essential to stopping the spread of AIDS not only in the urban, Métis, and Cree-speaking communities in which he himself moves, but also in Native communities generally.

“I Used to be Sacred” celebrates the recovery of Two-Spirit traditions as a source of pride, but it does not do so uncritically. Insisting on the sacred position of the Two-Spirited in traditional Native cultures, the poem opposes the religious discourse of abomination with which European explorers sometimes responded in their first encounters with Native same-sex relationships, and which is still so much a part of attempts to deny the legitimacy of same-sex couplings in contemporary society. Arguing that [page 60] “we [the

Two-Spirited] got put on Turtle Island / for a reason,” the poet draws upon a Native creation myth in order to posit an alternative to the Judaeo-Christian myth that envisions the creation of only two genders, and supposedly evidences the “naturalness” of heterosexual relations. The speaker clings to his identity as an “urban turtle” as he makes his way through an environment full of dangers including predatory, cruising men. When a “big tortoise” tries to pick him up, he is flattered and interested, until he notices the “red stripe on his neck” (64) and quickly retreats. Elsewhere, Scofield uses the word “redneck” as a kind of shorthand for violently homophobic views, applying the term to his own younger self in “Owls in the City.” While the word originally refers to white skin that has been reddened by sunburn, in Scofield’s work it also suggests red (Native) skin. The resemblance exposes homophobia as something that Native people may have learned from the dominant culture, something that amounts to a betrayal of their own traditions.

Suspecting that the red-necked tortoise may be more interested in beating him up than picking him up, the speaker manages to shake him off. His rueful evaluation of the whole episode—“So much for brotherly turtleship” —suggests the possibility of solidarity between gay and straight Natives. It calls on Native communities to acknowledge Two-Spirits as “stand[ing] at the forefront of native resistance to white hegemony” (Roscoe 111) and to recognise homophobia as a form of complicity with white culture that endangers their own people. While working in Vancouver, Scofield “heard stories about people dying of AIDS whose families and communities had disowned them, leaving them to die alone in the city” (*Thunder* 192). In “Another Street Kid Just Died,” he addresses the consequences of such ostracism in writing of a male prostitute who “escaped” from a “rez [...] somewhere in Alberta” (103). Knowing that the street kid has “the plague,” the poet and his fellow workers are left to wonder “if he jumped or was pushed” out of a hotel window (103). Behind this equivocation lies the possibility that jumping and being pushed amount to the same thing: even if the kid’s death was self-inflicted, it can also be attributed to the negligence of his own community, as well as the urban environment where he dies.

In “I Used to be Sacred,” the speaker’s identification of himself as Two-Spirited affords him a sense of dignity and pride in the face of the hatred he encounters, but there are also moments in the poem when Scofield seems to suggest that the nature of the speaker’s investment in this identity comes with its own risks. The speaker’s appreciation of his own sacredness, for example, invests his sexuality with a spiritual significance that he [page 61] finds lacking in the urban gay scene; but

his insistence on his difference from other men also threatens to blind him to dangers that they all face in common:

Despite these beefy walruses,
cruisy sea-lions
and trendy urchins
I'm still for the most part sacred.
I even know
turquoise is a protection stone,
mined from the belly
of Mother Earth.

(65)

The designation of turquoise as a “protection stone” is a reminder of the centrality of the concept of protection to the discourse of AIDS awareness. In the age of HIV/AIDS, protecting oneself and others takes very specific forms, and turquoise on its own is not going to protect anyone from getting the virus or passing it on to others. With no long-term survival strategy, the speaker “just plug[s] along,” living from “month to month” (65). Just as “Queenie” reflects Scofield’s own ambivalent relationship to the gay community, the speaker’s attitude in “I Used to be Sacred” suggests the poet’s equally complex relationship to the Two-Spirit movement in exposing the dangers that can accompany the recovery of Two-Spirit traditions and their implementation in contemporary society. The speaker’s pride in his Two-Spirit identity and his faith in the protection that it offers him at times comes dangerously close to reinforcing a misconception that Vernon argues is prevalent in many Native communities, the belief that AIDS is a “white man’s disease” (32). The poem makes the point that fostering pride and fighting homophobia are important, but must be combined with “appropriate prevention messages” (Vernon 33). Indeed, frustration at the difficulty of getting these messages across within the constraints of the current system is partly what led Scofield to quit his job with street kids (*Thunder* 191-92). He argues that a shortage of Native youth workers and an over-reliance on temporary prevention measures like the distribution of condoms and clean needles ultimately entrench existing problems, but confesses not to know himself how more long-term solutions might be implemented.

Scofield’s frustration as a youth worker, and his conviction that he can accomplish more by writing about that frustration, make his work an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the complex relationships [page 62] among poetry, mourning, activism, and AIDS, one that situates that dialogue within the particular context of urban Native people living in Vancouver at the end of the twentieth century.

While activist criticism is often focused on the tendency of much elegiac art to find consolation in heavenly realms for losses that, in this world, cannot be repaired, James Miller argues that this “transcendental impulse” need not be read as escapist and pacifying, but can function as a vehicle for social criticism (266). I have already suggested how this can work in a poem like “Queenie,” where the poet uses a vision of heaven in order to construct his own relative innocence in contrast to Queenie’s “guilt,” drawing attention to the indifference directed toward those who are seen to have brought the disease upon themselves.

“I Used to be Sacred” offers a more inclusive and promising beatific vision. On Scofield’s Turtle Island, there is no need to “ask / who’s who / and what’s their story” (65). It is a place where sex can be enjoyed without consequences and as such it is an example of the kind of pre-lapsarian orientation that, according to Miller, often characterises the literature of AIDS. Turtle Island manifests not only a longing for a gay Eden before AIDS, but also a nostalgia for a time before the arrival of the white man, when Two-Spirits did not have to hide their sexuality, but were respected members of their communities. If in one sense this is an escapist fantasy on the speaker’s part, one that suppresses the complexities and dangers of his life in the here-and-now, it also asks readers to envision a paradise that does not exclude homoerotic desire. At a time when our political culture seems increasingly infiltrated by discourses of sin and abomination mobilised against the legitimacy of same-sex love, Scofield’s vision is all the more provocative and necessary.

Notes

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1. As Susan Sontag reminds us, the “plague metaphor” reinforces divisions between “us” and “them,” and “allows a disease to be regarded as something incurred by vulnerable ‘others’ and as (potentially) everyone’s disease” (64). [\[back\]](#)
2. Jennifer Andrews has insisted that the depiction of homosexual desire in Scofield’s writing be interpreted within “a distinctly Métis framework” (24) and her readings of his poems trace the articulation of a hybrid subjectivity that challenges a negative cultural association of homosexuality and hybridity as forms of

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