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READING THE WAMPUM

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*An Introduction to the Works of Maurice Kenny*

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In 1929 in Cape Vincent, a small burg near the industrial behemoth of Watertown, New York, Maurice Kenny was born to Anthony Andrew Kenny and Doris Marie Parker Herrick Kenny, a Mohawk/Irish father and Seneca/English mother. His beginning was not particularly noteworthy, although he never lacked for anything as a child, but his birthplace would infinitely determine his future. In their silent (and sometimes noisy) ways, the Adirondacks woods and mountains were leaving their imprint on the young Kenny, as he spent his youth fishing their streams, working their fields, and berrying their clearings. Forty years later in a Brooklyn loft, Kenny would turn to the North Country and his Mohawk roots, taking up the pen to put Native American experience to paper, and this new era of his life would generate an oeuvre of work that represents a generation and captures Indigenous existence like no other writer.

In his poetry and fiction, Maurice Kenny celebrates berries, bears, and bloodroot, all images of the Adirondacks and the Mohawk way of life: these are the sources to which Louise Bogan urged Kenny to turn. "Write what you know," insisted Bogan, and Kenny responded. Kenny portrays Kanien'keha (Mohawk) encounters with early colonialists and renarrates stories untold in print from a Native American perspective. He painfully examines the losses incumbent on the Iroquois, from the slash-and-burn campaign of Sullivan and Clinton to the current contamination of the waters at Akwesasne, the same waters celebrated in the Thanksgiving Address and the living environment of fish, once a staple of the traditional Kanien'keha diet. Kenny excoriates the brutal capitalist processes

that consume Indigenous territories and peoples, and he draws the connections between Turtle Island and the larger global South. The strawberries brought to Kenny in his hospital bed in 1974 after a near fatal heart infection were picked by Mayan and Aztec farm workers in Mexico and shipped from their expropriated hands to Brooklyn. Kenny keenly sees and articulates these cosmopolitan and diasporic connections, as evidenced in his biography of Frida Kahlo (in press) and his collaboration with authors like Lorna Cervantes.

Kenny has contributed tremendously to the growth of multicultural literatures of North America in his work as an editor for Contact II Press and as a mentor to emerging writers of color. The profound impact of this work on writers from Eric Gansworth and Wendy Rose to Lorna Cervantes and Diane Burns profoundly changed the face of U.S. ethnic literatures as we know it. Kenny's circle has included luminaries like Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Jerome Rothenberg, Audre Lorde, and Carolyn Forché. In his years of "Greyhounding" America and giving readings in venues from bookstores and universities to coffeehouses and tribal colleges, Kenny sometimes gave as many as one hundred readings in a year, and in this capacity, his all-encompassing identity as a Mohawk orator is clearest. Abenaki poet and longtime friend Joseph Bruchac has glossed Kenny's performative repertoire as an act of "reading the wampum," and even audience members unfamiliar with Haudenosaunee oratory are struck by Kenny's resonant, booming voice, his careful turn of phrase, and his use of the physical body as a tool in delivery. Kenny's gift to literature of the turn of the century has been both sweeping and universal, detailed and local.

#### BIOGRAPHY

From his early days in Cape Vincent, Maurice Kenny took powerful images of the North Country land, infusing them with scents, colors, and textures of chicory, hawkweed, and pearly everlasting. Few of Kenny's poems escape this signature mark of respect for the land embodied in a storied presence of its seasonal changes and momentary details. The lessons Kenny learned from the elders around him, his Aunt Jenny as well as his father, began his cultural training as Mohawk and encouraged his nascent poet's eye. Kenny's engagement of the North Country as a poetic tapestry that is at once a setting for all the poet explores as well as the same land occupied and guarded by the Kanien'kehaka creates a range of expression and a sense of history that few other writers can match.

These early years also brought tremendous pain, as Kenny reflects in *Angry Rain: A Brief Autobiographical Memoir from Boyhood to College*:

William Faulkner, the Mississippi novelist, once wrote that we must be violated by life. The Lakota Holy Man black Elk once said that we human beings must celebrate the greening of the day. I have celebrated that green spring and flowery summer, that russet autumn and snowy January. I have also been violated, and in turn violated life. The violation and the celebration have produced hundreds of poems and stories and made me acquainted with the night, the day, and more human beings than I can possibly remember.<sup>1</sup>

Taking the excruciating pain of boyhood assaults and attacks, Kenny later reformulates them into a brutal sensuality and foreboding sexuality that pervade *Isaac Jogues*, *Molly Brant*, and *Connotations*. This view into the darker side of human nature adds a depth to Kenny's portrayal of colonialism that leaves the reader without question of its cruelty and lack of humanity.

These early years also were characterized by Kenny's strong desire for fame as exemplified by the fortune teller who once told his mother that he would be tremendously famous *and* that she saw him surrounded by books . . . or stones. She claimed he might not see fame in his own lifetime, but that he would surely be famous. This prediction inspired Kenny and determined the direction of much of his early efforts, leading to wild days skipping school and riding the subway into Manhattan to collect signatures from movie stars like Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth.

At eighteen, three years after his parents' separation and one year after an ill-fated trip to the deep South, during which he would be abducted, bound, and sexually assaulted by a stranger in the Mississippi swamp, Kenny began attending Butler University in Indianapolis, where he was mentored by poet Ray Marz and Werner Beyer. Kenny so adored his years at Butler that when his graduation approached and he was faced with returning to upstate New York, he suffered a nervous breakdown, necessitating his sister and brother-in-law driving across the United States to bring him home. In these years, Kenny published his first collections of poetry, *The Hopeless Kill* (1956), *Dead Letters Sent and Other Poems* (1958), *With Love to Lesbia* (1959), and *And Grieve, Lesbia* (1960); these books were impressed by Kenny's traditional training at Butler and did not reflect his burgeoning Mohawk identity in any overt way. During this time he lived in New York City, Mexico, the Virgin Islands, and Chicago alternately until his move to Brooklyn in the late 1960s. Kenny now turned more seriously to his craft, beginning a master's program at the City University with Louise Bogan and rejecting the free tuition his father offered him to attend Columbia. With Bogan's guidance and the American Indian Community House artistic milieu, Kenny's writing turned to Indigenous New York themes. His most

dramatic moment of awakening, however, occurred during the Wounded Knee Occupation of 1973, when Kenny was immobilized on bedrest as a result of a heart condition. Kenny recounts his tremendous sense of frustration at not being able to join Pine Ridge community members and American Indian Movement activists or support them through working with Jerry Campbell and other Mohawks at *Akwesasne Notes*. Kenny says, "I was sick. There's no two ways about it . . . because of the traveling [to give readings] and going to reservations and meeting people. What I had in my mind [when composing *I Am the Sun*] was what I know about my land and my people, I can take out to other lands, and what I have learned from those people [other Native Americans] I can bring back" (Interview 2/8/2003). As a direct response to being confined to bedrest at such a pivotal political juncture, Kenny published *I Am the Sun* (1976), a poetic revision of the Lakota Sundance.

This collection was soon followed by a rapid succession of chapbooks: *North: Poems of Home* (1977), *Dancing Back Strong the Nation* (1979), *Only as Far as Brooklyn* (1981), *Kneading the Blood* (1981), *Boston Tea Party* (1982), *The Smell of Slaughter* (1982), and *Blackrobe* (1982). Both *Blackrobe* and *Between Two Rivers* (1987) were nominated for Pulitzer Prizes, and in 1984, Kenny was awarded the prestigious American Book Award for *The Mama Poems*, a memoir about his mother, who died in a housefire in 1982. The succession of poetry collections continues with *Is Summer This Bear* (1985), *Greyhounding This America* (1988), *Humors And / Or Not So Humorous* (1988), *The Short and the Long of It* (1990), *Last Mornings in Brooklyn* (1991), *Tekonwatonti: Molly Brant* (1992), *On Second Thought* (1995), *Common Days: A Place Record* (1998), *In the Time of the Present* (2000), *Carving Hawk: New and Selected Poems* (2002), and *Connotations* (2008). An ambitious writer, Kenny has never been restricted by genre, publishing two collections of fiction, *Rain and Other Fictions* (1985) and *Tortured Skins* (2000), and two prose collections, *On Second Thought* (1995) and *Backward to Forward* (1997). Beyond this publication list lie nearly one hundred journal publications, numerous edited projects, and several unpublished manuscripts.

Kenny has held numerous residencies at universities, tribal colleges, First Nations centers in Canada and the United States, and the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. Kenny was awarded an honorary doctorate by St. Lawrence University in 1995 and the Elder Achievement Award by the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers in 2000. He served on the board of directors for numerous foundations including the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, and he organized significant gatherings of Native American writers including *Returning the Gift* in Norman, Oklahoma and the Iroquois Arts Festival and Native American Women's Festival in Saranac Lake.

## CRITICISM

Although there exists an extensive record of interviews of Maurice Kenny, only a small body of literary criticism has been published, amounting to four articles in scholarly journals and short reviews of his works. This collection, thus, fills a significant need to examine the work of this preeminent Native poet. Because Kenny has been so influential in other artists' craft, this collection is divided into two sections, one devoted to creative writers' musings on Kenny's influence and a second section devoted to traditional critical essays. In the first section, "Creative Responses," Eric Gansworth recounts his first meeting with Maurice Kenny as a neophyte author in "You, Too, Will Have This Printed Word (World) of Your Own." Gansworth's essay highlights the profound impact of Kenny's mentoring, a kind of relationship that Kenny has recreated many times over with authors from numerous tribal backgrounds and creative writing students at institutions from British Columbia to New York. Mohawk poet James Stevens contributes the second essay in "Creative Responses," entitled "The Breath and Skin of History," a meditation upon artistic process and renarrating histories. Stevens' *A Bridge Dead in the Water* considers many of the same historical figures as Kenny's *Blackrobe*, and Stevens examines the unique position of the Mohawk writer writing back to the *Jesuit Relations*. Qwo-Li Driskill, an emerging Tsalagi poet and Two-Spirit critic, focuses on the demands on Indigenous activist praxis that Kenny's poetry articulates in the essay, "Dancing Strong Our Nations: Performance as Continuance in Maurice Kenny's Poetry." Examining performance as a rhetorical device in Kenny's poetry, Driskill asserts that Kenny's work offers a model from which Native peoples can create art that aids in the continuance and survival of Native communities and nations.

The second section, "Critical Engagements," begins with Susan Ward's repositioning of a question Lance Henson once asked Kenny, "How Can Any Self-Respecting Mohawk Live in a Place Like Brooklyn?" Ward's response depends on the always already Iroquois nature of the five boroughs, which have long been inhabited by week-day commuters from the numerous Mohawk communities in northern New York and southern Ontario and Quebec; she also discusses the nature of the impact of Mohawk steelworkers on this Indigenous flavor of New York City. D/Lakota scholar Nicholle Dragone's essay, "*Tortured Skins*, Bears, and Humankind's Obligations and Responsibilities to the Natural World," provides a deeply culturally situated investigation of Haudenosaunee *ohkwa:ri* or bear images in Kenny's second fiction collection. Dragone establishes ample cultural context for understanding bears in the Kanien'keha worldview and insightfully discusses the seven stories in *Tortured Skins* that imagine bears as a proving ground for the relevance of the Thanksgiving Address to contemporary Native and

non-Native life. In “Teaching Maurice Kenny’s Fiction: Dislocated Characters, Narrators, and Readers,” Karen Gibson and Alan Steinberg consider the challenges of teaching Kenny’s fictional narratives in the non-Native classroom. They read various stories from *Tortured Skins* against the historical backdrop of exploration and contemporary environmental depredations, suggesting Kenny’s formal strategies alienate the reader from the normalizing of the settler culture’s destruction of Native peoples and their lands. In his review essay for *Tekonwatonti*, Craig Womack details the clanmother identity of Molly Brant in Kenny’s work and outlines a psychoanalytic reading of Brant and William Johnson as figures of Kenny’s own parents. In “Painting ‘Word-Pictures’ in Place: Maurice Kenny’s Empathetic Imagination of *Tekonwatonti* / *Molly Brant*,” Abenaki cultural historian Lisa Brooks argues for a reassessment of Kenny’s work as a critical Northeastern woodland response to the colonizing forces of dominant understandings of history and Indian identity. She maintains that in *Tekonwatonti* Kenny creates “word-pictures” or “word-paintings” that communicate in glyphs similarly to wampum, revealing connections between Haudenosaunee materials records, oral tradition, and Kenny’s poetic voice. In the final essay, “‘Dancing Back Strong the Nation’: Two-Spirit Images in the Work of Maurice Kenny,” Lisa Tatonetti excavates and addresses the long pattern of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) themes in Kenny’s opus from its inception to present, laying the groundwork for future investigations of a Two-Spirit sensibility particularly in Kenny’s imitative, yet innovative, early poetry collections.

The goal of this collection is to examine the work of a vital contributor to the American Indian literary scene in the second half of the twentieth century and the first half of the twenty-first century. Although sometimes published in small, independent presses, Kenny’s work has withstood the test of time, and the accolades he has won from corners as far removed as the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers to National Public Radio attest to the breadth and vision of his imaginings of Indian survival in the new millennium. We offer our praise and give the Creator thanks for the opportunity to honor our elder.

#### NOTE

1. Kenny, Maurice. “Angry Rain: A Brief Autobiographical Memoir from Boyhood to College,” *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series 22* (1995): 122.