



2015

Insurrections: Indigenous Sexualities, Genders and Decolonial Resistance

Qwo-Li Driskill
Oregon State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jgi>

Recommended Citation

Driskill, Qwo-Li, *Insurrections: Indigenous Sexualities, Genders and Decolonial Resistance*, *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, 1(1), 2015.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jgi/vol1/iss1/2>

Insurrections: Indigenous Sexualities, Genders and Decolonial Resistance

Abstract

Indigenous genders and sexualities are key locations for colonial control. Through gender and sexuality, state power enacts gendered and sexualized violence in order to regulate Indigenous communities and seek control of Indigenous bodies and land. Indigenous Queer, Trans, and feminist movements resist colonial control through asserting gender and sexuality as pivotal locations for decolonial resistance. This paper will look to Indigenous movements against gendered and sexualized violence in order to imagine transnational Indigenous Queer, Trans, and feminist resistance to colonial powers.

Shaking History: Cherokee Two-Spirit Oral History Performance

Qwo-Li Driskill

Introduction

The script that follows is an one-person oral history performance drawn from a larger, ongoing oral history performance project called *On the Wings of Wadaduga: Cherokee Two-Spirit Lives*. *On the Wings of Wadaduga*. *Wadaduga* (Dragonfly) is an animal that enters only peripherally in recorded Cherokee stories. Like *Wadaduga*, the histories and stories of Cherokee Two-Spirits are too often ignored within contexts of colonialism, homo/transphobia, misogyny and other systems of oppression. *On the Wings of Wadaduga*, as well as this script, includes oral histories from self-identified Two-Spirit/LGBTQ people of Cherokee descent. Participant's identities are kept confidential, and identifying details of their oral histories changed, unless they specifically requested to waive their confidentiality and use their real names for this project. *On the Wings of Wadaduga* aims to bring our experiences to the center for both our present and future generations. This one-person script, like the larger project, is a work in progress.

At the *Queering Culture/Cultured Queer: Indigenous Perspectives on Queerness Symposium*, at the University of Wollongong in 2015, my presentation included a bricolage of theory, poetry and performance as a way of intentionally disrupting the artificial—and often colonial—categories between what is considered “scholarship” and what is considered “creative” work. This stance is rooted within my own practice as a poet, performer, and scholar as well as what Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (2015) call a “theory in the flesh” in which “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Anzaldúa & Moraga 2015, p. 19). As an unenrolled, multiracial, light-skinned Cherokee in the diaspora; as a gender non-conforming and non-binary Trans person; as a Queer person; as a person with several disabilities, both physical and psychological; and as a former sex worker, busker, and minimum wage worker now employed in academia, my body, lived experience, and politics reject any easy reliance on categories. Instead, I embrace Anzaldúa’s formulation of *los atravesados*, “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead: in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” as having radical disruptive and transformational potential in my politics, art, and scholarship (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 25).

Rooted in these stances, *Shaking History* echoes critiques by women of color feminists who question notions of discreet categories between “theory” and “creative” work. Barbara Christian’s critiques in her 1988 essay *The Race for Theory* remain germane to academic culture. She writes, “Activities such as teaching or writing one’s response to specific works of literature have...become subordinated to one primary thrust—that moment when one creates a theory, thus fixing a constellation of ideas for a time at least, a fixing which no doubt will be replaced in another month or so by somebody else’s competing theory as the race accelerates” (Christain 1988, p.68). She resists this race by pointing out:

...[P]eople of color have always theorized.... And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative

forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (1988, p.68).

Similarly, Malea Powell (2002) argues that academic taxonomies are a colonial project, reminding us that “the only difference between a history, a theory, a poem, an essay, is the one that we have ourselves imposed. We have cut the wholeness of knowledge into little bits, scattered them to the four winds and now begin to reorganize them into categories to enable empire by bringing order to chaos and civilization to the savage” (Powell 2002, p. 15). Drawing from these arguments, this work hopes to unsettle academic taxonomies through rejecting the binary between “academic” and “creative” work.

Oral history performance is a means of disrupting these binaries, as well as the divide between what Diana Taylor (2003) calls “the archive and the repertoire”. She writes, “The rift, I submit, 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)” (2003, p.19). Through oral history performance, oral histories become embodied and re-imagined in what Della Pollock (2005) calls “a process of *making history in dialogue*” through “investing the present and future with the past, re-marking history with previously excluded subjectivities, and challenging the conventional frameworks of historical knowledge with other ways of knowing” (Pollock 2005, p. 2).

Oral history performance, as well as other performance-based methodologies, already have a precedent in academia, community activism, and theater. Perhaps the most famous of these are Eve Ensler’s (1998) *The Vagina Monologues*, Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Company’s (2000) *The Laramie Project*, and work by Anna Devere Smith including *Fires in the Mirror* (1992). More recently, and within queer of color scholarship, E. Patrick Johnson (2008) has produced a one-man performance, *Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell their Tales* based on his interviews, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Because performance transmits embodied cultural memories, it can be a central means with which to revise and challenge dominant cultural memories that marginalize particular stories and experiences. Rivka Syd Eisner argues:

Performing memory is...about bearing witness. Bearing witness, however, does not just entail carrying memory. Bearing the past is to allow it entry into bodily consciousness and continuing social experience, so that living with memory means giving residence to pieces of the past that in turn, even in their painfulness, sustain and change one's own being (cited in Pollock 2005, p. 124).

Because of oral history’s focus on cultural memory, and my own commitments and interests in memory, *On the Wings of Wadaduga* can be seen as what Joseph Roach calls “echoes in the bone” that are part of performative “politics of communicating with the dead” and “refer not only to a history of forgetting but to a strategy of empowering the living through the performance of memory” (1996, p.34). By re-embodiment memory, performance not only communicates with

the dead, but also communicates with the present and the future. *Shaking History* aims engage with these “echoes in the bone” by consciously looking at embodying the past for the well-being of future generations.

SHAKING HISTORY: STORIES FROM "ON THE "WINGS OF WADADUGA: CHEROKEE TWO-SPIRIT LIVES

Characters, In Order of Appearance:

QWO-LI

CAT

LESLEA

COREY TABER

DANIEL HEATH JUSTICE

(QWO-LI enters from upstage singing a queer stomp dance song. They stomp dance around a stool sitting upstage center dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots, a cowboy hat and a ribbon shirt).

QWO-LI

He o a, he o a. Wi!

He. Ahe. Ahe. Ehe. Hihi. Hihi.

Heiye Heiye Heiye Heiye

O o, o, oo, oo.

Heya Heya Heya Heya

Wo Wo

My baby went to New Orleans Heya

Far away from Tahlequah Heya

He was born near Giduwa Heya

He left me for a Choctaw Heya

Ani asegi heya

Ani asegi heya

tisdela tisdela heya

tisdela tisdela heya

Taliquo didantvn heya

Taliquo didantvn heya

tisdela tisdela heya

tisdela tisdela heya
Asgayusd udanti heya
Ashayusd udanti heya
hisdela hisdela heya
hisdela hisdela heya
Ageyusd udanti heya
Ageyusd udanti heya
hisdela hisdela heya
hisdela hisdela heya
a he ahe ahe ahe
Wi!

CAT

I was really little, I was probably about four or five, it was right before my grandma died. And, we went down to the creek in the morning. And I think we were either looking for crawdads, or we were gonna go get pawpaws from under the trees down there. And, we were watching the water spiders on the surface of the creek, and the dragonflies. And I was talking about how pretty the dragonflies were, and I always loved the water spiders. So my grandma started telling me the story about how we got fire, and how the water spider brought fire in a little bubble on her back. But her story was a little different from what I've heard since, because what she said was along with all the other animals who went and tried and failed and came back different, Water Spider tried and didn't make it because it was just too far. So, Dragonfly offered up her back. And Water Spider got up on the dragonfly's back and flew to get the fire, and Water Spider got the fire, got back up on the dragonfly's back, and when the dragonfly got tired she sat down on the surface of the water and the water spider got the rest of the way. So, the story's a little different from how I've heard it told since. And it's very different from what I've read. And I don't know if my grandmother was doing that because she wanted me to appreciate the dragonflies for what they were, or simply because that was the way she'd heard it. But the other thing she said about the dragonflies after she told the story was we were watching them and I was admiring their color, how beautiful they were and she said that I always had to appreciate them because no matter how frail and delicate they looked, that they were very strong. And that they were very fierce hunters and fighters and lovers. And I was a very little girl when she told me that story, and ever since I've never forgotten that, and I've always admired the dragonflies because of that story. And I've always thought of myself that way sometimes. When I get a little afraid or a little...you know...about the way the world is around me, I think back to that time that was a little more innocent and the power of that moment. And I think of that dragonfly and I think I need to be like that. Because that was my grandmother's lesson for me, was to tell me that that's what I needed to understand, that no matter how fragile things seem, that they're stronger than we think. So I think that was about it of the story, that I can really tell you. I mean, I could go through the whole story about the different animals who went to the tree to get the fire, but somehow that doesn't seem right to tell you that right now. But that's my story.

LESLEA

My childhood and growing up is really the story, in a lot of ways, of the growth of the Gay community in San Francisco. First of all, there was never a very big Lesbian community right here in the Castro. It was always sort of a little farther down the hill, closer to the Mission. But, in that community as in the Gay male community, I think folk of color basically serve a purpose, which is decorative more than anything else. And so, you'd occasionally run into Gay Native people, but *very* rarely. Particularly 'cause it's a large community for an urban setting, I think it's the largest, most varied, Native community off a reservation anywhere. San Francisco Bay Area. But, having said which, it's still such a small community, that if anybody's out everyone knows it. That's sort of been interesting over the years to watch how that goes. I mean, I remember the first time I wore a ribbon shirt to a dance and everybody kind of going, "Whoa", recoiling. (*Laughs*). "AAAAAH!" Yeah, get over it. And I didn't do it until I was in charge of the student organization putting the dance together. (*Laughs*). It's my party, if you don't like it, go.

I think people back home have, like here, sort of been telling me that I've liked girls since I was about seven. Which is really wrong, is the other funny part about it. I've been identified as a Lesbian in the community for years. And I'm not. So, I think I'm a confusing creature for a lot of folks. Which doesn't necessarily disturb me, but it does make communication a little difficult sometimes.

I don't know. There were old men who would teach me rivercane flute songs. Not a blink. I don't think I realized it was a guys' thing until I think I was about fifteen and I pulled my head out of...from under my arm, let us say...and looked around and went, "I seem to be the only woman doing this". (*Laughs*). You know? "I wonder what that's about". Nobody had an issue with it. I was also deeply a weaver, nobody had an issue with that either. I think I'm just like...I've always sort of been an exception to a lot of rules, so on the very micro-scale, my dad's hometown, bothered no-one. Bothered *no-one*. And a lot of sort of accommodations were made for things for me over the years that I didn't even really notice, 'cause it *so* didn't bother anybody. There were a lot of accommodations, like I was always really athletic, and really good at it, and apparently the heightened testosterone helps with that. Big, serious, fast twitch response and all of that. And they just let me play with the guys, because if was in a girls' group, and I was on a girls' team, then that team won because I was stronger and faster than a lot of the girls my age, and so they just accommodated for it without even discussing it. It wasn't an issue, it was just to even the playing field a little bit. So, on the very micro-scale back home it didn't bother anybody.

On the slightly more macro-scale back home, a lot of people had a lot of crap to say, but there was a way in which once you got out of the town and went to a bigger event someplace else, it was, "Yeah, okay fine, she's a freak, but she's our freak so sit down and shut up". And so people would really, you know, stand up for me. But on the other hand, I also bleed into the background a lot, in terms of loud mouthy Cherokee chick, and there are a lot of loud mouthy Cherokee chicks. (*Laughs*). *All* across the spectrum. So, it just sort of depended on who I happened to be with at any given moment. It was all situational. Or like one time, one of my cousins, I could not believe this, literally said—in a bar after this guy had been hitting on me for a couple of hours—he literally said—in a small town bar—not in our small town, "Don't you get it, she's a Lesbian". And I was like, "I would so rather not be sunk in a mine cave in Welsh", you know? (*Laughs*).

“It would be great not to be found floating in the Grand Lake. What the hell is wrong with you?” (*Laughs*). Not to try to be secretive, but not to try to be, like...I’m not trying to challenge his notion of the world, we’re just playing pool here. Not having a feminist debate, or any old thing. And you’re also wrong, Cuz, but you know, that aside...it’s a funny thing. It was a weird thing.

And I mean, it’s hard to tease out the crap you get in the big cities, it’s hard to tease out what it is, ‘cause...I mean in San Francisco, I don’t really ruffle people’s radar for being Native. In Oklahoma, in Tulsa, people look at me and go, “That’s a ‘breed right there’”. And you get hassled in different ways. There’s the racist hassle, there’s the...it’s really hard for me to tease out in Tulsa what’s the...(*Laughs*) what’s the “AHH, the butch chick”, and what’s the “AHH, the mixed-race chick”, and what’s the...you know...whatever. And I don’t actually know what assumptions people are making on any given day. But, they’re usually making some, and it generally has some kind of effect.

[LESLEA begins weaving a basket]

I don’t know. I mean, there’s so much that got repressed by all of the...The first sort of religious wave of colonization for us was really the Moravians, were the ones that nailed us first on. And what with all of the Scottish Catholicism really...because most of the Scots who married into our families I think were Catholic more than anything else. It’s so funny, because there are so few Scottish Catholics left in Scotland, but they did ship them over here. In large numbers. To make space for sheep. So much of the stuff, the traditional stuff, acceptance, has been repressed, just like our own real stories have been repressed.

These kinds of things, but also just a judgment about family structure sort of crept in. I mean, one thing you never see, and this was fairly common at one time, was that Cherokee men would have two or three families. And the women didn’t have two or three families, ‘cause they were location specific. They’d have two or three men, but not two or three families. But then suddenly the stories all change because of the Christianity. And I’m always dead curious, and hope at some point that more jars turn up with these stories in them, because we get them, a few a year, you know? Here’s a prayer. In a jar. Here’s a story. In a jar. Written on ledger paper. And I’m hoping to have more stories without that filter that would address the issue of what we’d have to call “Two-Spirit”. Because the stories did exist, and the roles existed. If there wasn’t such a great openness, then the older people I knew when I was a kid wouldn’t have been quite so ready to let me be gender amorphous. Traditionally gender amorphous. And there are certainly songs.

Most of the people I knew as a kid had been born in the 1800s. We weren’t citizens of the United States when these people were born. My great-grandmother was an adult before we were citizens of the United States. And *her* family was not particularly Christian. So she knew a lot of stuff. And the Walkers, who were very mixed, who were a lot Scottish and a lot Cherokee, were some of the guys who taught me things. These were the guys who taught me a lot of my “guy” stuff. They used to take me fishing. I used to get taken fishing, you know? (*Laughs*). I remember looking around one day and going, “Not a lot of girls out fishing”. I’m being taught where they fish. They were giving me information about *their* fishing spots.

But really, at some point it has to stop being sharing about what we don’t love about how we’re treated and start *being* the people we are. Taking on those roles. And so for me, that was learning

how to play rivercane flute, it was fishing, it was helping Earl fix his ultra-light plane, it was being out with the guys doing the cars. That sort of stuff. And just *being* who we are. And at *that* point we'll start...I feel *certain* that our mythology will start re-emerging. Because *none* of this stuff is ever lost.

I'm in a position that a lot of people aren't in. I exist in a moment in time when, and in a place and time where, on the one hand there were a lot of very old elders around me who had no issue. And on the other end of it, where I live with the European side of my family, it was ground zero for cool gender and sexual preference politics. And so, in a way that insight probably is given to me because I was put in a position of less damage. I was not found beaten to death hanging from barbed wire.

And one of the reasons I think I really don't identify with *Two-Spirit*, is that that identity is so reactionary right now. What I miss is people who are just comfortable being who they are, and who are also Cherokee. You know what I mean? And then, if *that* existed, then I could say the things that I feel like I have to offer. But, trying to come to a more mature place and holding that space. Where it really just doesn't need to be so overt. I mean, people are always like, "Well, why do you object to *Two-Spirit*?" I'm *not* Two-Spirit. I'm just *me*. I happen to have an array of roles, you know?

'Cause ultimately, for our communities, it came down to how you were going to fulfill your role to the community. It was very different, the perspective. And there's actually zero issue with two men or two women living together. It's just like, what are you going to do that provides for the community? If you're not gonna raise your kids, are you gonna help raise other people's kids? Are there going to be people taking care of your part of the fields, or is that gonna fall to other people in your family. How does it work out? And so, now that we're in this completely different context, I think we end up falling rather dramatically into sort of European-derived things. But there's so much kind of returning now, don't you find? We're in an exciting moment.

Joey Gray and I speak Tsalagi together, and the first time that ever happened was the first time I spoke to any non-family member in California. And it happened in my office at work, and I burst into tears. Because it was the language I was cuddled in as a child. And it hits me really deep. And he was so cute, he said—we weren't saying anything terribly important—he goes, "God, you're reacting so much. I wish I could say something deeper".

And I'll tell you what happened when I went back to North Carolina. Grandma's dialect was an *old* dialect. And she learned it from somebody who had come on the walk. She learned to speak from somebody who had come on the walk. So, when I went back to North Carolina, and I was kind of talking, it was very emotional. I was the first person in the family to go back since removal. I had never seen the flower I'm named for in its natural habitat, and I really wanted to, and it was the wrong time of year. And there were all these old ladies who cried when they found that out. And I was like, "Yeah, but it's not illegal for me to be here now! So I can come back. It's okay, I'm mobile. I can fly back. You tell me when it blooms, and I can come see it". You know, I've seen it in pictures, I know what it looks like, but I've never seen one for real. And I found that I had words for trees that I had never seen in person before as I was driving from the airport to the hotel. And I found that I had a word for the kind of rain we had the night that we

got there. And I never had to use it in California, because you don't get blood warm straight down rain in California.

So when I gave my speech...I was scheduled at eight o'clock, and you know from doing conferences that nobody shows up at the eight o'clock presentation. It was standing room only. There were all of these people who found out that this Bird Clan woman was coming out. And I have *no* problem saying I'm Bird Clan, because you know what? I always danced at stomp dances and stuff, and so people saw me sitting in my family group. And this new bullshit about keeping your clan secret, is like, you want to *encourage* witchcraft? You want to *encourage* sorcery? Do that. *Give* them that much power. Screw that, you know? Bring it. You think you have more personal power than me? (*Clap*). Let's dance. Do what you're gonna do.

So, they found out a Bird Clan woman was coming out there whose family was from Saligugiyi. And I have kin who know they're kin out there. We haven't been connected in any meaningful way for two hundred years, but they know that we're kin. And so I showed up. There's a woman standing at the back of the room, who could've been my twin. And I'm looking at her. And there are all these people waiting for me.

When I got up I said, and I looked at two of the old ladies who were at the back of the room, and I said, "Whoever arranged for that rain last night, thank you. That was great". And everybody laughed, you know? I'm like, "I'm just calling it the way I'm seeing it". And one of them was like, "Say something! Say something!" And so I said, "Hi, how are you?" And I introduced myself formally as Western Cherokee, Bird Clan, Nancy Poplar's granddaughter. And one of the old ladies came up to me afterwards. She was this really cute, twisted up old Cherokee chick, and she goes, "You talk like an old person". 'Cause that's how my grandma talked. Slowly. And for a very long time. (*Laughs*). Kind of quietly. And the more important things got more quiet. I used to do that to my students. People were like, "If I'm at the back of the room, I can't hear you".

"Well, maybe you need to shut up". (*Laughs*). "Lean forward, lean forward". You need to accommodate it, because it's absolutely a part of the lesson is that trick. Grandma used to do that. She did that. That, and make the best buttermilk biscuits you ever had.

Release your panic. It's really easy to feel panicked about all of this. It's like I feel about the definition. I only really end up getting uptight about being defined as queer when people tell me I'm not. I squirm away from it when people tell me I am. Release your panic. Be who you are. If you need a label, then take the label, if you don't need a label, then reject it, because really.... We have to grow a new really good word for it in Cherokee, because a lot of stuff has sort of slipped out of our fingers. But it will happen. And you have to both not be panicked and not be fearful. And everybody's struggling at some level, so the people who come in the future will be struggling with something else.

Some of the things that fall under the responsibilities that we would have had are some of the things going desperately wrong right now, and I have to say, I doubt if my generation and yours is going to correct it. There's work to do. So you need to gather your tools. There will be time for the work. There's always time for the work. You need to take the moment to gather your tools,

make sure you are emotionally stable enough to manage them, and do the work. And know when to stop and take a break. And do what you need to do.

Ninety percent of the artwork I do is doctor work. It's that kind of work now. I didn't ask to do that. I, frankly, kept waiting for somebody else to do some of it. And they weren't. And I knew how it should be. So, let it come. Don't push yourself. Don't panic. Don't take the first stuff that appears to you to do, just like you wouldn't take the first partner that makes themselves available. Be selective. Be good to yourself and care for your own health, too.

We tend to make ourselves crazy. How many people in the Two-Spirit community have made themselves sick? People die of weird things in the Two-Spirit community. I watched them do it. Folks have cancer, they have diabetes, they have AIDS, they have bizarre degenerative bone problems, they have these really deep and earnest issues. And I'm not saying that it's people's fault. I'm saying the opposite. I'm saying when you find yourself faced with something, deal with it then. Do not put it off to do this other stuff. There is time for the work. Be good to yourself. This stuff will be so much better if we make sure as individuals that we're building on strength. And not building on panic. There's a lot going on. I mean, we're still finding our children hanging from barbed wire beat to death. Which is unacceptable. You making yourself ill won't help. That's my big message this year. Take care of yourself. It was a hard-learned lesson for me. Please take it.

COREY

My brother Chad and I were born and raised in Tulsa. Our parents were also born and raised in Tulsa. And our grandparents come from a few different places. Our dad's mom is Cherokee and Creek and she comes from down by Muskogee, and his dad was white and also came from that same area. Our mom's mom is Cherokee and Wazashe, she's a mixed-race individual, and she comes from Arkansas, Western Arkansas, and her dad was white and came from Tulsa, so we've got family from a few different places, but all within maybe a two-hour drive from Tulsa. Regionally I guess you could say it's all about the same.

Our parents had us when they were pretty young, and so they worked, you know? And we spent all of our time with these old ladies. And it was kind of by default and kind of by tradition. That's pretty standard. That's an old tradition. It's how it used to be. The whole rest of the family would take care of these kids, that would be the elders, and other community members. And that's just a natural way for us to live. Our family is not extremely traditional, like most Cherokee families, especially those living in cities by relocation or choice or force or whatever.

And so, while we did not grow up speaking Cherokee as a first language, or did not necessarily grow up spending every weekend at the stomp dance, we grew up with a lot of traditional understandings and traditional knowledge and lifeways that I think maybe other people don't, especially when they're not close to their elders like that. And so most of our waking hours until we were seven or eight was spent around all of these old Indian ladies. And so that's how we came to identify as Cherokee people.

That was our primary identification, we grew up knowing we were Cherokee. We didn't grow up being told, "Well, you're Cherokee and you're white", or "You're white, but you've got a little

Cherokee in you". It was, "You're a Cherokee person. And that's who you are". And I think that maybe in most traditional communities that's how people still identify: they are because they *are*. You're not just "part Cherokee". You either are or you're not. And I think that that's a pretty common perspective here in Oklahoma.

In traditional communities that have limited exposure to Gay people or Two-Spirited people, you can still get ostracized by your own people. And that's unfortunate and we have experienced that. To a lesser degree than in society in general, but it's still there due to varying degrees of assimilation into non-Indian culture by our own people. And so, even in those traditional communities there are times and places where you'll still be exposed to that sort of dis-harmony, that distrust, or that exclusivity as if there's no reason for you to be there because you're Gay, or there's no reason for you to be there because you're mixed. That invalidation. I think that those personal experiences provide you with the desire to make those changes. And so I can definitely say in my case the personal experiences were so frustrating that I wanted to subvert it somehow. And so I do that just by being here and exemplifying the ideas that I was taught to exemplify as best as I can.

Fixing some of those old hurts, those old wounds, and those old rifts that still exist, for whatever reason, especially in smaller communities people tend to perpetuate. It just happens, you know? And sometimes it happens for no reason at all. People are just doing it and they don't even know why. It's 'cause they didn't stop to think, or because So-and-So told them that's how it is. I've seen that happen so many times in so many different ways that it's frustrating, and...I don't know, for whatever reason I feel compelled to take it upon myself to be like, "*No! That's enough. It stops here*". And I think it starts as a personal journey and I think it ends with as sense of obligation, or continues with that. It becomes bigger than yourself. And certainly you have to feel it deeply to begin there.

I haven't experienced a great difference between Cherokee and Creek communities, and what I've learned from my experiences with all of those people is that there wasn't necessarily a place of reverence for Two-Spirited people—*necessarily*. And there could have been, you know, I mean all of our people teach different things, but it was told to us that that's not how you're characterized. What's important is how you help out your family and how you take care of your people, whether it be your community, your family, your tribe—whatever circumstance. How you treat the people around you and what you do to give back. That essentially defines you as a person, and not who you choose for a partner.

And also, I've heard our medicine people say that everybody deserves a place at the fire. There's room for everybody at the fire. And the fire is how we pray and how we commune. And we don't waste people. And *that's* not a good enough reason to throw somebody away. So that's kind of been my experience. It's more of a non-issue than a point of reverence. Just a non-issue altogether.

I think that we're here primarily to...for one thing, to honor those who came before us. To show them that their words and their lives are not for naught. That we remember them and we honor them. And I think that anytime you honor yourself you *are* honoring the Old Ones. And if you're being true to yourself by following whatever path your heart leads you to follow, as long as it's a

good path. As long as you're following that path and you're doing it in a legitimate and genuine type of way, then it's a means by which to honor people. And it's a means by which to honor the Creator. The Creator put us here to honor the Creator, and also to honor our own selves and to enrich ourselves somehow. And I feel like you can't do that if you're stifling yourself. It's a part of a bigger healing that has to occur.

I want future generations to know that regardless what they hear from outsiders of any kind, that we tried. (*Laughs*). We tried and tried as best as we could to preserve what's left and regain what was lost for them. Because, it's theirs. It's their legacy. And we want them to have that, because we find solace in that. And we find ourselves in that. And they won't find themselves in something else. *That's* where they will find who they are.

Because if you *are* Cherokee, you already *are* that. There's not something you do that's gonna make you that. You can't become more Cherokee. You're born as much Cherokee as you're ever gonna be. No matter what you do, you're not gonna change. Either you are or you're not, like we said earlier. And if you are, then that's not just something to be taken lightly, you know? If you are then you should respect that, and you should do what we're doing. (*Laughs*). You know, you should do whatever you can do—whatever that may be to preserve whatever's left and regain whatever is lost for those that come behind you. Because it's important to us, and it was important to those that came before us. And for that reason we're *here*. And for that reason people will follow. And that's continuity right there.

I don't know how you can tell somebody to do this and actually expect them to, because it has to be something that you can feel. But the most important thing is to connect with your culture. And if you're not in a Cherokee community, it's hard as hell. And if you don't have a connection to a Cherokee community, it's sometimes harder. 'Cause if *the* Cherokee people, quote unquote, don't know you or your family, it's hard to connect to a culture without a community. And so, when that's the case it's very frustrating and, I think the thing is—if you really care about it—you can't lose sight of that. And you have to persist, and you have to keep going and keep trying.

And I think that even if you do live in a Cherokee community, and even if you do get exposed to traditional ways and non-traditional ways and Christian ways, or *whatever*. I think that if you have it within yourself anyway that you want to reconnect and you want to be more culturally appropriate—that's what *I* call it—if you want to be more culturally connected to your culture, your people, whatever, it's an effort. And it's a painful process sometimes. And it's not easy and it can be very frustrating. But I think it can be very rewarding.

(*Speaking to future generations*). We love you. We love all of those of you that come after us. We're bustin' our asses tryin' to make y'all happy. Aaayyeee... (*Laughter*). No, I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I say it jokingly, but I mean every bit of it. We want this kind of thing to be here long after we're gone.

But that's the thing though, you have to have that kind of foresight. You have to be able to look that far in the future and know. Because if you can see that far into the past, you can see that far into the future. If you look at how our people used to live, you know what was important to them. You can tell. And I mean, that's what we try to keep going. That feeling, that good feeling, you

know? In the age of flat-screen TVs and four-year-olds with cell phones, it's hard to keep it real. You know? It is so hard. But, things like this—places like this—are very convenient and very easy places for you to get a little glimpse of that. You know, and a little taste of that. Just to remind you of who you come from. Because once we leave, like Chad said, we're satellites and we go out into the world and we share all of this with white people, green people, and everybody else. And it's not meant to be divisive. Two-Spirit people and our Two-Spirit movement is not an act of divisiveness. It's an act of faith, and it's an act of love and hope and continuity and preservation. Of nothing *but*, you know?

What you're hearing right now is our grandmas. This is our grandmas talking. We didn't make this shit up. This was taught to us. And this comes from two generations behind us and two generations behind that. And so that's what's so special about it, is that somebody our age can here sit and tell you things that people who have been dead for a hundred and fifty years can tell you. It's the same message.

We want love to be our legacy. I just can't wait till they see my pictures, when we're all dressed up, and I think that's gonna be great, 'cause they'll see all these drag pictures and they'll be like, "OH! That must have been a traditional Chickasaw dress!" No, gurl. We did drag back then. Aaayyeee ...No, but I just think it'll be great.

My one hope for future generations is that our message is received in the feeling and sentiment with which it was intended. I fear that things will be lost in translation. And I just hope that there's little bits and pieces and bigger bits and bigger pieces that *we* have for them to work from and operate from in order to build a life that holds true to our values, regardless of what it looks like. Because *that's* what really makes us who we are, is our values. The way we walk through this world. And I think that if we can do something to make other people—or to *encourage* other people—or inspire them to do that same thing and live that same way then we've done what we were here to do.

Well you know what, I wanna say this too: We have a lot of Gay relatives. There's a lot, a lot, a lot of Gay Cherokees and a lot of Gay Creeks. And there always have been and there always will be. And anybody on the tribal council that tells you different is full of fuckin shit. (*Laughter*). And I want you to *believe* that. I want you to *know* that from us. Just in case you didn't hear it anywhere else, you heard it here. I mean that from the bottom of my heart, because that's what our medicine people have taught us. You guys aren't something new, you aren't some kind of spectacle we never seen. They treat us as if it's a non-issue, like I said, they treat us like it's nothing out of the ordinary. Because it isn't to us. And I wanna make sure that *that* gets in there. Aaayyeee...

DANIEL

Well, I always knew that I was a weird little kid. I was a *total* cross-dresser as a child. Wonder Woman, Teela from He-Man. In Oz, I was Ozma, I loved Ozma. Never much cared for that bitch Glinda. I loved dolls as a little boy. And it never seemed odd to me that I could play a male character one day and a female character the next day. Why not?

What was it about girls that made them so special that they could play these fantastic characters and I couldn't? And all of my main friends were girls. So, that was just...we got each other. We loved beautiful toys and we loved having fun, we loved dress up. And we would also play with He-Man toys, I mean it was not just Barbie. But gender didn't really have...gender was very malleable. And fun. And of course, once I started going to school and realized that not all kids appreciated that, that's where I really started to kind of pull back from some of that. But, from a very early age I was never a conventional boy.

You know, I would go with my dad, and we'd go camping, and I'd go out with my little cowboy outfit and everything, and I'd be all butch. And then dad would be taking pictures and I'd pose in my little cowboy outfit. And I still have some of those pictures, they're really cute. But it's a real indication to me. I loved the dress up of being a boy, too. I loved the boy drag. It was very fluid, as far back as I can remember.

My parents were indulgent, but to a point. I had this Dolly Parton doll. The first doll I ever had. And I couldn't understand why it kept ending up in the trash. And then one day it just disappeared. And I remember my dad was not pleased when one of my little girl friend's parents bought me a doll for my birthday, because I really wanted one. It was one of these little kinda half-size dolls that their daughters had and I really wanted one, and I got one for my birthday. And Dad wasn't happy about it, but he never...I never felt like I was being pushed into a model of a particular masculinity, since my dad was really indulgent, and so was my mom. I was my mom's only, I was my dad's baby, and they always knew I was a very imaginative kid at an early age. And, I think if I had been my dad's first, like my eldest half-brother, I think it would have been a really different situation. But my dad had mellowed out a lot by the time I came along. So I knew that they weren't...overjoyed about my gender play, but they didn't...it was never punished, it was never made a pathology. It was just...I was a little boy so I knew that they wanted me to play little boy things, so I did. And then when I was by myself, I did dress up. And I don't remember feeling at all conflicted about that, like I was doing something wrong. It was only when I went to school and was starting to experience abuse from other kids, that's when it was a different situation. But never at home.

I came out to myself...well, I don't know. I first had a really good inkling when I was about seventeen, and a female friend of mine...her aunt had bought her a *Blue Boy* magazine. And this friend showed it to me. I've never asked her, we've lost touch, but I've been really curious as to why she showed that to me. What was it that... And I made up some lame excuse to borrow it. I have no idea how...because of course I was "straight". And I just remember looking at it. When I was going through school, kids would always call me a fag and stuff and I would think, "Well how could I be Gay? I love women". I was not sexually attracted to them, but I loved being around women. I was just a "nice" guy. I was a nice straight guy, and I had no sexual interest in the guys around me—at all. Well, in retrospect I really understand that, 'cause they were not necessarily...I *still* wouldn't have any interest in them. But when I looked at this magazine I was completely...*jolted*. 'Cause these were *beautiful* men. Who were unashamedly sexual. And they'd look out at the camera with this just smoldering desire. I was like, "Holy Shit! I get it".

But of course, I didn't want to admit it. I didn't want to admit it to myself. I didn't come out to myself until I was twenty-one. Even though I was buying Gay porn pretty regularly, and all of

my fantasies were about men, it wasn't until I lost my virginity to a woman and ended up having dry heaves in the bathroom afterwards, that I realized I was Gay. But then it was a couple of years after that before I was actually with a man. And then immediately after being with him...I was at a conference...came back from the conference, and the day after I got back I was telling people. Also, I had a massive hickey on my neck, so I pretty much had to explain that somehow and lying just seemed...it just was not something to lie about. I wasn't ashamed.

I was born and raised in Colorado, and my dad was born and raised in Colorado. My grandparents moved from Oklahoma. I didn't actually...I never set foot in the Nation until I was probably twenty three. So, our experience was defiantly...we knew we were Indians. I didn't really want to be when I was a kid, because Indians to my mind...you know, they were the savages who ran around and killed nice little kids and white women, and...I remember when I was three years old was when I found out we were Indians. My mom and dad and I and one of my dad's friends from his trucking days were out having breakfast, I think in Deckers or someplace in Colorado. And this friend of Dad's was Lakota, and phenotypically. I mean he had the long hair, he had the dark skin, and the whole meal I just glared at this guy. And like my mom says, she *knew* I was gonna say something, but you can't slap a kid before he says something. So, Mom got up to take me to the bathroom, and I walked over and I poked the guy, and I said, "Hey. My daddy doesn't like Indians". And of course, they all just roared. And my mom said, "But honey, your daddy *is* an Indian". And I threw a wall-eyed fit, screaming and crying, "My daddy is not an Indian! My daddy is not an Indian!" Snot dripping down my face. You know, my dad has a buzz-cut, and he has phenotypically Native features, but you know, he wears flannels and, he's...people know he's not a white man. But for me as a kid.... My mom said, "Yes, he *is* an Indian". She kind of grabbed me a shook me, and she said, "And that makes *you* an Indian too". And I said, "Oh, so I'm a little Indian boy, huh Momma?" And then it was okay, there was no problem. But I've always kind of come back to that moment and thought, "At three years old, why would I have been so terrified of the idea that my daddy was an Indian?" And that really shaped the way I approached our ancestry, I was "part Indian". But it wasn't something I...I wasn't ashamed, particularly, it was just not something I claimed. I wanted to be a British professor. I wanted to teach at Oxford, wear jackets with patches on the sleeves and smoke pipes, and sit in oak paneled drawing rooms and pontificate about the grandeur of the Romantic era of British literature.

(DANIEL puts on a stomp dance skirt over his jeans).

In Cherokee stories there are a lot of figures who are really kind of odd in a very highly stratified society that...a society that places a very high emphasis on purity and separation of certain things from other things and maintaining pretty clear divisions between different categories. And yet they're all of these ways in which those divisions are penetrated. And they're very much embedded within the national consciousness. So, yeah, I think we do have a lot of really fascinating figures in our history. Whether they are Two-Spirit precedent, I don't know. And I don't know that it matters much. I think we can make them ours. *Uktena* is a dangerous, dangerous monster. But it's also a really important monster for medicine. Just like Stone Jacket is a brutal, carnivorous, bloodthirsty beast. But we get our medicine songs from him after we kill him. There are all of these different ways that those binaries are not necessarily arbitrary, but they're conditional. And I think that we're conditional people. I think that's a really powerful and empowering place. It's a *scary* place, especially if you're a mixedblood who wasn't raised in the

geographic boundaries of the Nation. If you don't have the language, if your family experience as an Indian is not necessarily the *tribal* experience. Except in the last ten years. And there's still under two-thirds that I didn't really know *what* I was. I knew what I didn't want to be, and I was trying to fill that void with a lot of pretense and a lot of very class-oriented wannabe desires. So it's a scary thing to be in a conditional state, but I don't think conditional means...I don't think it means expendable. But I think we have important roles to play. And I think we're doing that.

Cherokees were *incredibly* sexual people. At the Peabody Museum there's a pipe bowl from a Cherokee town-site, with a man and a woman fucking, in explicit detail, with their genitalia pointed right at the smoker. So, somebody's getting a little thrill looking at that. Early European accounts were horrified about how sexually free we were, that young Cherokee women had sex, out of wedlock, sometimes extra-wedlock. And young men. And, no mentions are---I haven't seen any mentions at all or hints at all of same-sex intimacies. But, people were very much sexual people. And frankly a lot of the fine upstanding folks who don't want to admit it...I'm sorry, but you can either deny your sexual desires and get in weird circumstances, or you can just admit the fact that we love sex, we're very sexual people, and that doesn't mean that we're crass about it. I think Cherokees would not have been crass, but I think that even very sexual Cherokees today have personal modesty, but it doesn't necessarily transfer always over to sexual prudery. But, it's depending on the context. It's depending on who's around, and I think that's okay. I think that's fair. I mean, walking around flashing your dick at everybody is not a nice thing to do. Not *everybody* wants to see that. So, I think part of it is also just a consideration for one another.

And frankly, a lot of...there *is* a lot of evidence. A lot of families have this evidence. And they don't necessarily talk about it a lot, but we've all heard stories of very public admissions from very high-level people in the community. But they haven't gotten written down. And there are very important traditionalists who have been very vocal about it, some of whom are Queer. So, yeah, we have the evidence. But we also have a lot of evidence of things folks aren't thrilled about, like, oh, burning people alive at the stake, torturing them to death. I mean, I think having a bunch of Queer folks running around in the Nation is a much nicer thing than burning people alive at the stake. I understand that there was a social role for that, whatever, but it doesn't necessarily fit my ethical protocols today. Kiss him, mustn't kill him. I think that's okay.

(DANIEL begins tying stomp dance cans to his legs).

We are memory-keepers. We're memory keepers for our families, a lot of us are scholars who work in literature and in history and in rhetoric and in anthropology. We know the history better than a lot of other people do. Sometimes because we're looking for ourselves in that, and sometimes just because that's what we're called upon to do. Some people who are raised on home ground, they have a particular experience which is important and very valid, but they don't have to work at it. Some people, that's just what they're raised in. And that's a beautiful thing and I think that's an important thing, but I think that there's also something beautiful and important about working at it and having to confront the absences in our past and being forced to confront the realities of colonization that have effected *us* very explicitly. And to know that we have a lot of family members who didn't...they were just trying to survive and they were trying to get their kids to survive, and I'm very blessed that I'm enrolled, because that enrollment validates that history for me in ways that other people don't have that privilege. But that doesn't

make me Cherokee, the experiences and the history and the commitment, that's what defines our Cherokeeeness.

But I think we are lorekeepers, we're story-holders, we're history bearers. We are tradition bearers. We're transformers. We shake things up, in necessary ways, hopefully. We're warriors. We're willing to face a lot of hard things to be honest. I mean, one thing we often here is, "Cherokees are honest people". That honesty is important to us. And yet, the Baptist influence has caused a lot of Cherokees to lie, to have to lie about who they are and what they are. Well, if we're honest people....we're called upon to be honest and that's sometimes the hardest thing in the world to do, but that's what we're here to do. So, I don't think what we are called upon to do is necessarily different from what a lot of non-Queer Cherokees are called upon to do. But I've not yet met a Queer Cherokee who hasn't been deeply devoted to the people. And I've met a lot on non-Queer Cherokees who have not been devoted. So that says something to me. That we have to fight to be recognized, but part of that fight is also the hard work we're doing in cultural recovery and maintenance and not just looking back but also looking forward. Positing a more humane and dignified future for the Cherokee people. We have really good examples to draw on, but sometimes a lot of weird ugliness comes up that we have to challenge. And by being ourselves we challenge that.

QWO-LI

(QWO-LI is now dressed in mixed gendered clothing—a stomp dance skirt over their jeans, wearing stomp dance cans on their legs, and wearing a ribbon shirt and cowboy hat. They begin to sing the stomp dance song from the beginning of the performance, spiraling around the stool center stage. As they sing, they begin to also shake cans).

He o a, he o a. Wi!

He. Ahe. Ahe. Ehe. Hihi. Hihi.

Heiye Heiye Heiye Heiye

O o, o, oo, oo.

Heya Heya Heya Heya

Wo Wo

My baby went to New Orleans Heya

Far away from Tahlequah Heya

He was born near Giduwa Heya

He left me for a Choctaw Heya

Ani asegi heya

Ani asegi heya

tisdela tisdela heya

tisdela tisdela heya

Taliquo didantvn heya
Taliquo didantvn heya
tisdela tisdela heya
tisdela tisdela heya
Asgayusd udanti heya
Ashayusd udanti heya
hisdela hisdela heya
hisdela hisdela heya
Ageyusd udanti heya
Ageyusd udanti heya
hisdela hisdela heya
hisdela hisdela heya
a he ahe ahe ahe

Wi!

Egwa!

Wado!

(QWO-Li exits).

END

About the author: Dr. Qwo-Li Driskill is a (non-citizen) Cherokee Two-Spirit/Queer writer, activist, and performer also of African, Irish, Lenape, Lumbee, and Osage *ascent*. They are the author of *Walking with Ghosts: Poems* and the co-editor of *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Directions in Theory, Politics and Literature* and *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. Qwo-Li is an assistant professor of Queer Studies in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Oregon State University. They hold a PhD in Cultural Rhetorics from Michigan State University. Their new book, *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*, is forthcoming.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. 2012, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (Fourth Edition). Aunt Lute Books: San Francisco.
- Christian, B. 1988, 'The Race for Theory', *Feminist Studies*, 14(1), pp. 67-79.
- Enslar, E. 1998, *The Vagina Monologues*. Villard: New York.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. 2008, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill.
- Kaufman, Moisés and the Members of the Tectonic Theatre Project. 2001, *The Laramie Project*. Vintage: New York.
- Moraga, C. & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.) 2015, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, (Fourth Edition). State University of New York: Albany.
- Pollock, D. 2005, Introduction: Remembering. In Pollock, D. (Ed.). *Remembering: Oral History Performance*. Palgrave MacMillan: Hampshire, pp. 1-18.
- Powell, Malea D. 2002, 'Listening to ghosts: an alternative (non)argument', in Schroeder, C., Fox, F. & Bizzell, P. (Eds.), *AltDis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*, Heinemann: Portsmouth, pp, 11-21.
- Roach, J. 1996, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Columbia University Press: New York.
- Smith, A. D. 1998, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, Dramatists Play Service: New York.
- Taylor, D. 2003, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University: Durham.