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Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory by
Qwo-Li Driskill (review)

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Review

Qwo-Li Driskill. *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*. University of Arizona Press, 2016. 244 pp. Paper, \$29.95.

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This book does not attempt to argue for cultural “truths,” but, rather, argues for radical disruption of master narratives through the telling and retelling of stories that disrupt dominant formations of Cherokee history and culture that would erase the presence of same-sex desire and nonbinary gender systems. . . . This is a political and activist project.

Qwo-Li Driskill, *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*

As a Native writer myself, I appreciate the work that Qwo-Li Driskill is doing to bring visibility to Indigenous people, their bodies, and their stories, especially when it comes to Cherokee culture. Driskill, a queer/Two-Spirit activist and Cherokee writer, uses *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory* “to place gender and sexuality at the center of radical decolonial work” through a “(re)telling and (re)imagining of these *asegi* stories” (7). The word *asegi* is a Cherokee word that means “strange,” but it acts as a word, for many Cherokees, that is similar to “queer.” Driskill’s book is a combination of personal narrative “interwoven” with history and stories about Cherokee people and what it means to be Two-Spirit, which refers to a Native person who doesn’t fit into society’s traditional gender binary system or, in some cases, identifies as an LGBTQ individual. (In reference to “interweaving,” Cherokee basket weaving is a metaphor to which Driskill returns time and time again throughout the text.) In the introduction to *Asegi Stories*, Driskill recalls her own journey to learn about gender-nonconforming Native peo-

ple and what it means to be a Two-Spirit individual, noting the limited number of texts and scholarship that have been written on the subject. *Asegi Stories* acts as a “political activist project” and uses a decolonial framework to (re)examine, (re)tell, and (re)imagine the history and stories of queer and Two-Spirit Cherokee people (7). Driskill’s book is the first of its kind, as it is “the first full-length work of scholarship to develop a tribally specific Indigenous Queer or Two-Spirit critique” (www.uapress.arizona.edu/Books/bid2605.htm). The book contains five sections, not including the introduction and epilogue, and contains images that beautifully illustrate and enhance Driskill’s narrative.

Driskill’s first chapter, “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques,” uses the metaphor of Cherokee basket weaving to intertwine queer and Native studies. Driskill notes that “doubling is likewise employed as a Cherokee rhetorical strategy, in which two seemingly disparate rhetorical approaches exist concurrently” (23). The chapter goes on to point out how the Native population has largely been left out of conversations about queer people and queer people of color, showing the need for texts such as this one that work to weave queer Indigenous people into discussions about the stories and experiences of people of color, as they are an important part of, if not central to, as Driskill claims, decolonization. In the second chapter, “The Queer Lady of Cofitachequi and Other *Asegi* Routes,” Driskill argues that Cherokee bodies were always already considered to be gender nonconforming by Europeans because Cherokee men and women performed gender and sexuality in ways that the colonizers saw as “nonnormative.” The Europeans didn’t understand the “sexual and social power” of women, and men were typically labeled as “feminized” (41). Later, Driskill tells the story of the “lady of Cofitachequi” and renders her as a queer Indigenous figure through her strength and power as a woman who also used her femininity as a way to trick and deceive (working against heteropatriarchal structure) while also resisting colonization.

“Unweaving the Basket,” the third chapter of *Asegi Stories*, works to (re)imagine a queering of Cherokee people through the lens of “settler-colonial discourse” (101). Driskill writes that, while Cherokee people were traditionally governed by both genders, colonization led to a male-led system of governance. Before European colonization, Cherokee people did not always participate in monogamous relationships, and a woman’s brothers were the main male figure in children’s lives. While

same-sex relationships are not written about in colonial records, Driskill claims that an assumption that these types of relationships and gender-nonconforming individuals didn't exist is wrapped up in heteropatriarchal thinking where people are expected to fit into a strict binary that was established by colonization. Chapter 4, "Beautiful as the Red Rainbow," furthers what Driskill talks about in chapter 3 in that it (re)imagines what recognizing and understanding queer and Two-Spirit stories can contribute to Cherokee history and memory. S/he writes, "*Asegi* stories engage a process of recovering histories of Cherokee erotic memory as a part of ongoing decolonial struggles: a *rebeautification* and *remaking* in which the light of our erotic pasts is 'brilliantly refracted' through contemporary imaginings" (137). This chapter makes the claim that queer and Two-Spirit Indigenous people are needed to recover those parts of Cherokee history that have been ignored, undocumented, or glossed over because of a society immersed in heteropatriarchal ideology; further, Driskill states that, in recognizing queer and Two-Spirit people, stories, and histories, Cherokee erotic memory can be (re)imagined and (re)invigorated.

The final chapter, "*Asegi Ayetl*," begins with a discussion of direction in Cherokee culture. European influence established the use of four distinct directions: north, south, east, and west. However, the Cherokee people see the world as something that is too dynamic and in motion to be narrowed by recognizing only four directions. "Center" is a direction to Cherokee people, and one that changes based on a person's perspective. This aspect of Cherokee culture goes against traditional colonial thought and can be considered a "queered" way of looking at and thinking about the earth. This thinking suggests the earth is something that was always already queered, as it opposes tradition and colonialism, makes room for individual perspective, and moves beyond a simplified definition of the world. This chapter introduction is fitting for the rest of this section, which (re)tells *asegi* stories shared with Driskill by other queer Native people. As Driskill points out, these interviews draw attention to the "slipperiness" of gender and the dangers of labeling people and attempting to place them into rigid binaries (155).

The epilogue of *Asegi Stories* reemphasizes the importance of bringing Two-Spirit people into the conversation to imagine a future where heteropatriarchal norms don't erase memories and/or reinforce binaries. Driskill returns to the metaphor of the doublewoven basket: "Through

the doubleweaving of *asegi* stories we *remake* the world” (167). While this book focuses on Cherokee people and queer/Two-Spirit memory, its implications are far-reaching. Driskill’s text points to the uniqueness of people, the importance of the (hi)stories of people groups, and how limiting identity labels can be, especially for people whose stories and histories have largely been erased due to colonization, heterosexual norms, and patriarchal ideology. This text reminds us of the importance of creating change and remaking the world to make room for those who have been ignored, oppressed, and/or forgotten. This book would serve as an integral tool for teaching decolonial theory/pedagogy or furthering a discussion of cultural rhetorics and queer theory to show the ways that history has always been told by the victors, not the oppressors. Stories deserve to be told, and *Asegi Stories* communicates just that.