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Cherokee Gender Decolonization: Reweaving Two-Spirit Memory

Qwo-Li Driskill (2016): *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press (approx. € 28,00, 224 pp.)

In *Asegi Stories* Cherokee author Qwo-Li Driskill uses the traditional craft of basketweaving as a guiding metaphor for theorizing about Cherokee Two-Spirit¹ and queer people. Driskill's interest lies in a peculiar kind of basketry: the double-woven, double-wall basket. Driskill explains how, weaving such basket themselves, a double-woven basket allows the craftsperson to simultaneously weave two differently designed baskets at a time, creating a hidden space between the two basket walls. A double-woven basket allows the craftsperson to put sweetgrass between the basket walls without anybody but themselves noticing it. This hidden, third space between the basket walls symbolizes the spaces and the stories Cherokee Two-Spirit and queer people in (post)colonial America inhabit – a hidden space, a zone trapped between the walls of heteropatriarchal gender binaries and colonized sexualities. It is a space established through relentless colonization of the lands, bodies and sexualities of Two-Spirit and Indigenous queer people for centuries. With *Asegi Stories* (“asegi” translating as “strange,” used as a synonym for “queer” in Cherokee) it is Driskill's aim to recognize these *asegi*/queer spaces again, to reimagine Cherokee Two-Spirit and queer stories hidden between the walls, and to revive traditional, pre-colonial memories of sexuality and gender diversity. With this agenda, Driskill's work employs a radical decolonial agenda, countering ongoing settler-colonial heteropatriarchal hierarchies of the U.S.

In the introductory chapter Driskill addresses the reader personally, asking: “Whose land are you on, dear reader? What are the specific names of the Native nation(s) who have historical claim to the territory on which you currently read this book?” (23). It is with this charged tone that the author calls modern queer studies to account for a troubled academic alliance of the discipline with Native American and Indigenous studies. Driskill expresses severe disappointment that Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people's concerns and scholarly works are still largely absent from the established field of queer scholarship. Driskill acknowledges queer studies to possess a radical political agenda with many tools to untangle nationalist-imperial strategies and counter heteropatriarchy. It is, nonetheless, queer studies' missing analysis of ongoing colonialism and the only marginal recognition of Native people's concerns that continue to render Two-Spirit critiques invisible.

With the second and third chapter, Driskill undertakes extensive archival work to undo the invisibility of queer bodies from Cherokee history writing. Examining heteropatriarchal violence in colonial discourse, Driskill outlines seven routes of first Spanish and then British conquerors, cutting into Cherokee territory, colonizing Cherokee bodies and violently oppressing Indigenous cul-

tures and their traditional societal structures. The colonial expeditions created “literal and figurative maps across the Southeast” (43), as each route did not merely provide geographical guidance for the next expedition, but also “mapped gendered colonial violence” (ibid.) onto Cherokee bodies. Most written archival accounts, composed by the British and Spanish emperors, early anthropologists and missionaries, render Indigenous people’s ways of living savage and primitive in comparison to the European framework, as well as in desperate need for rule and order offered by the colonizers. With this, all Cherokee bodies are recorded either as rebellious, hence a threat to colonial power, or as “desiring colonizations and subservient to male colonial power” (44). Additionally, the matrilineal and matrifocal structures of the Cherokee portrayed many individuals queer to the heteronormative Eurocentric framework of the colonizer. Indigenous men got characterized as being feminine and weak, whereas women were depicted as masculinely powerful, but thereby not feminine in accordance to continental norms.

The 1540 expedition of the Spaniard Hernando De Soto outlines the first colonial contact on Cherokee territory with the Cofitachequi nation and their female leader, referred to as the “Lady of Cofitachequi.” The story provides a well-documented account of heteropatriarchal colonial control over Indigenous bodies, as De Soto’s crew takes the Lady of Cofitachequi hostage for safe guidance through neighboring territories. Driskill’s analysis of the archival sources uncovers great distinctions between the different chronicles, arguing that these ruptures allow us to explore a *asegi*/queer reading of the story. The Lady of Cofitachequi is rendered queer in the colonial gaze as her behavior, resisting De Soto’s imperialism, and social status, occupying a leadership position, does not fit the accustomed frameworks of the Spaniards. Described as a submissive loyal servant in support of De Soto’s colonial agenda, other narratives denounce her as savage and heathen as soon as she manages to flee the colonizers’ hold. Driskill’s analysis of the De Soto expedition is a powerful account of how central gender and sexual violence were to the imperial project. Indigenous resistance irritated colonizers and enabled Indigenous communities to rebalance themselves. With the story of the Lady of Cofitachequi, Driskill portrays the confusion and the incapability of colonizers to deal with individuals not coherent with Eurocentric binary gender categories.

Further expeditions through Cherokee territory continued to outline the systematic colonization of Indigenous genders and bodies. Driskill borrows the term *gendercide* to describe the brutal intolerance of colonizing forces. Through the colonizers’ performative demonstrations of violence towards groups and individuals with “deviating” gender, Indigenous communities understood that obedience to such brutality were central for the survival of the rest of the community. Whereas some accounts describe the invasions in a distinct scientific tone, classifying Indigenous people “alongside the flora and fauna” (91), other ones are characterized by their overly erotic depiction of Indigenous bodies. Here stories idolize Cherokee lands as a “sexual playground for European men” (80). Descriptions of “young, innocent Cherokee virgins” and lustful depictions of scenes in which “strawberries stain their lips and cheeks as they wantonly tantalize each

other” (91) occur repeatedly and emphasize the Cherokee female bodies’ sexual availability to the white, male colonizer. The accounts of romanticized sexual violence leave Driskill searching for (and finding) queer spaces which “disrupt[s] colonial gendered and sexualized deployments of power” (99).

The colonial contact with Spanish and British forces mark a decisive breach in the history of the Cherokee Nation, as colonial concepts of gender and sexuality influenced Cherokee communities’ development substantially. Cherokee culture, traditionally based upon a matrifocal and matrilineal clan system, rapidly shifted in attempts to respond to “civilizing projects” initiated by colonial, often missionary, forces. With the adoption of Euro-American laws and cultural practices, the Cherokee turned from hunting to space-saving farming practices and got accustomed to employ chattel slavery. Especially slavery provided a stepping stone for the imperial powers to spread anti-black racism, combatting fears of Red-Black alliances. The convergence towards European systems of governance do not present attempts of voluntary assimilation, but prove the Cherokee people’s wish to remain sovereign and escape colonial control by portraying “proper” sovereignty. At the edge of removal, Cherokee values around gender and sexuality quickly converted into European Christian values and the governance practices embraced patriarchy and colonial hierarchies between women and men, people of European, Indigenous, and African origin. Even though most missionaries were largely concerned with regulating family structures through Christian marriage rites, Driskill presumes *asegi*/queer spaces to have nonetheless resisted the encapsulating binary gender system. Though there are barely any written documents of queer Indigenous people’s activities, customs and ways of surviving, Driskill’s in-depth reflection on missionaries’ accounts open up distinct ceremonies that enables us to reimagine queer spaces vividly. The John Howard Payne papers, for example, offer interesting stories in which a Cherokee ceremony of “perpetual friendship” is described. Driskill states:

In an attempt to erase or minimize same-gendered love by explaining it as friendship, his [John Payne’s] writing consistently points to an *asegi* presence. I speculate that [...] Payne [was not] sure how to frame such information within a nineteenth-century white Christian male worldview. (142)

Payne’s writings are a striking example for a strictly Eurocentric gender binary perspective, hiding queer presences in the colonial narrative as “perpetual friendship”. Such accounts point at Cherokee history and uncover how “the past is not ‘straight’” (146) and individuals which might nowadays be referred to as Two-Spirit or queer resisted colonial suppression.

Towards the final chapters, Qwo-Li Driskill’s focus shifts from historical archival analysis to a contemporary theorizing of queer and Two-Spirit activism. Chapter four, “Beautiful as the Red Rainbow: Cherokee Two-Spirits Rebeautifying Erotic Memory,” conceptualizes sexuality and erotics as a powerful tool of decolonization. Quoting Daniel Heath Justice, Driskill argues that ignoring sexual pleasure would “ignore one of our greatest resources” and “[e]very orgasm can be an act of decolonization” (138-139). The imposition of

colonial gender system has turned Indigenous bodies and sexualities against themselves. The regulation of behaviors and bodies can be powerfully combatted and deregulated through the revival of gender diversity and sexual liberation, forwarding a sovereign erotic for *every* body. With this radical agenda of decolonization Driskill invites the reader to reimagine Cherokee erotic history and gender diversity in a contemporary setting. Ultimately, Driskill concludes, “we must dismantle the entire construction of ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ as a part of a larger work to dismantle all forms of colonial heteropatriarchy” (167-168). Herewith, a remaking and a rebeautification is possible, disrupting stories of ongoing colonial violence.

Driskill’s *Asegi Stories* builds upon recent publications of Native American/Indigenous Two-Spirit scholarly works. They continue the work Driskill and their colleagues Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, Scott Lauria Morgensen, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonettti started with their 2011 publications of *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature* and *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. Collaborating in research their works have been forwarding a radical Two-Spirit critique towards ongoing settler-colonialism, reimagining new alliances of Two-Spirit activism and academic work, always forwarding issues of social justice and decolonization. In *Asegi Stories* Driskill presents a close investigation of tribal-specific analysis of his autobiographical Cherokee roots. Thus it is surprising that the discussion of contemporary Cherokee queer and Two-Spirit cultures appears to be one of the few weak spots of the book. Although briefly mentioning events such as the ban on same-sex marriage of the Cherokee nation in 2004, Driskill lets the reader wish for a more detailed discussion of contemporary Cherokee Two-Spirit activism. The gap between academic scholarship and grassroots activism leave the reader with questions on the applicability of Driskill’s decolonial agenda. Nonetheless, *Asegi Stories* is a powerful manifesto, which gains authenticity with Driskill’s sharing of personal memories in beautiful, often prose-like sections, enriching the book. Interweaving theory, history, and creative work along the metaphor of basket weaving, *Asegi Stories* offers a powerful rereading of European colonialism and encourages a reimagination of traditional Cherokee gender and sexuality.

Remarks

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| <p>1 Since the third Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg in 1990, the umbrella term “Two-Spirit” stands for gender constructions and roles occurring outside</p> | <p>the colonial gender binary. “Two-Spirit” refers to historically native gender systems and was intentionally chosen to create distance from non-Native queer people.</p> |
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