

Two Spirit and Queer Indigenous Resurgence through Sci-Fi Futurisms, Doubleweaving, and Historical Re-Imagings: A Review Essay

Qwo-Li Driskill. *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*. Arizona: The U of Arizona P, 2016. 210 pages. ISBN: 9780816533640

Hope Nicholson, ed. *Love Beyond Body Space and Time: An LGBTQ Sci-Fi Anthology*. Canada: Bedside Press, 2016. 120 Pages. ISBN: 9780993997075

Kisukyukyt, my name is Smokii Sumac and I am a member of the Ktunaxa nation.¹ I am two-spirit, which means I carry certain responsibilities within the many communities I am a part of. This term, in my understanding, does not define my sexuality, but is perhaps more closely connected to my gender. While some define this term based on a simplified narrative of both male/female spirits existing in the same body, I believe that we could ask a thousand folks who claim two-spiritedness to define it and we would end up with a thousand different responses. So I can only speak for my own experience. In my life, two-spirit has come to have a spiritual meaning, one that calls on me to be in two places (sometimes at once) while also existing in the “in between.” On that note, there are a great many other terms I identify with as well, which are also important to my positionality. I am queer, nonbinary, transmasculine, and a poet. I am a writer, a PhD Candidate, and an instructor of Indigenous literatures and creative writing. I am cat-dad, an auntie, an uncle, a sibling, and a child. I am hyper-aware that even as I write this, my experience of gender is shifting, changing, and growing. I open this way to give you a sense of the person examining the texts at hand, locating myself as two-spirit, queer, and Indigenous as I discuss these two books which hold two-spirit/queer Indigenous stories. I also do this to follow protocols of introducing myself, to you, as we enter the relationship of reviewer/reader.

In my introductory Indigenous Literatures class this year, I opened with *Love Beyond Body Space and Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-fi Anthology* edited by Hope Nicholson, and including short stories from Richard Van Camp, Gwen Benaway, Cleo Keahna, and recent Governor General Award Winner, Cherie Dimaline. In the discussion following the assigned readings, a self-identified queer and Indigenous student spoke in a somewhat awestruck manner about this anthology, saying “*I can see myself in these stories.*” I share this because it resonates deeply with why I choose to teach Indigenous literatures. Representation matters. This is argued by many scholars, including Adrienne Keene in her blog on cultural appropriation, [Native Appropriations](#), and Daniel Heath Justice in his forthcoming book [Why Indigenous Literatures Matter](#). It also becomes clear in thousands of tiny moments, like my own experience teaching *Love Beyond Body Space and Time*, where we can see how and why works that re-imagine two-spirit histories – and perhaps more importantly, futures – allow our students a new space to understand themselves, to see themselves within the texts we are teaching, many for the first time. When my student acknowledged their self-recognition, I nodded and held space for that moment in my classroom, remembering the tears in my own eyes as I finished Richard Van Camp’s story from this anthology, “Aliens.” With a simple and sweet queer love story, Van Camp opened up a world for me. In this world where so often queer, trans, two-spirit bodies are told we are wrong, disgusting, and worse, Van Camp’s story tells us we are beautiful and deserving of love. This alone would be reason for me to recommend the text, though I have to admit it is far from perfect. As one example of this, I find Dimaline’s statement that “if you see a White Buffalo in a

dream then you are truly Two-Spirited” (37) (in her story “Legends are Made, Not Born”) troubling in its essentialism, and therefore I choose not to assign this text: However, I believe the anthology remains a worthy way to introduce students to new and exciting ideas that take us away from the stereotypical John Wayne “only good Indian” days (and let’s face it, a majority of my students don’t actually know who John Wayne is anymore), and into re-defining Indigeneity.

Love Beyond Body Space and Time imagines Indigenous people into futures where blood quantum troubles are explored in a universe of transgender robots and virtual realities (“Imposter Syndrome” by Mari Kurisato), where a transwoman is invited into ceremony by her Elders (“Transitions” by Gwen Benaway) and where queer boys who face violence in their communities continue to stand up and help transform the world into something beautiful (Daniel Heath Justice’s “The Boys Who Became Hummingbirds”). Nicholson has done a good job of including important authors of the Indigenous literary canon, like Justice and Van Camp, alongside lesser-known writers, like Kurisato and Cleo Keahna, whose haunting story-poem “Parallax” closes out the collection. It is perhaps due to this inclusion of emerging writers, mixed with Nicholson’s own experience as a crowd-funded publisher, that cause the weaknesses I see in the text; I can imagine someone more familiar with Indigenous literatures, or an Indigenous editor would have pushed the stories further than their sometimes draft-like current states. That being said, a quick look at Nicholson’s publishing website for Bedside Press shows us that this endeavor was not about being part of the Indigenous literary world so much as achieving her goal of, as clearly explained in her “Letter from the Editor”, sharing “the stories that need to be told” (8). In this way, I admire Nicholson’s ability to see a project that deserved publication and get it created and into the hands, especially, of young queer Indigenous folks.

Nicholson’s “Letter from the Editor” begins with her own clear assertion that “these are not my stories to tell,” (7). which can be very helpful when teaching students about cultural appropriation, a topic we still must spend far too much time on, in my opinion, in the Indigenous literature classroom. Following this assertion of her positionality, it’s an interesting choice, then, to include authors in the collection who are not LGBTQ or two-spirit. I am critical of this choice; just as I question non-Indigenous folks telling Indigenous stories, I question cis and hetero folks telling LGBTQ stories. While I can understand the decision, and to be honest, even appreciate the inclusions from those who I personally know as allies (Nicholson does not make the distinction and neither will I), I do hope to see future collections that solely support Indigenous LGBTQ and two-spirit writers, as these are some of the most marginalized voices within our communities.

Nicholson doesn’t just give lip service to the idea that she shouldn’t take up too much space. Following her brief introduction, she includes two essays by Anishinaabe scholars Grace Dillon and Niigaan Sinclair, centring Indigenous voices to set the tone for the stories that follow. These two essays alone, even in their brevity (just 10 pages together), are worth the minimal cost of this text. Dillon’s “Beyond the Grim Dust of What Once *Was* to a Radiant Possibility of What *Could Be*: Two Spirit-Survivance Stories” gives us insight into the Anishinaabe concept of “Biskaabiiyang: Anishinaabemowin for ‘returning to ourselves,’” (Dillon, 9), and how it can be used in examining two-spirit futurisms. Dillon goes on to give readers a brief bibliography of the Indigenous LGBTQ/Two-spirit writing tradition, nodding to those who have cleared a path for this kind of collection, speaking of them as forming “a tradition worth remembering and

recalling: Beth Brant's *A Gathering of the Spirit: A Collection of Writing and Art by North American Indian Women* (1984); [and] editor Will Roscoe's collaborative offering with the Gay American Indians (GAI) advocacy group, *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indigenous Anthology* (1988)...” (Dillon 10). Dillon goes on to include scholarly sources by leading Queer Indigenous studies scholars like Daniel Heath Justice, Lisa Tatonetti, Mark Rifkin, and Qwo-Li Driskill. I can envision passing this essay to students who want to learn more about Queer Indigenous studies, pointing to this paragraph and saying, “start here.”

Niigaan Sinclair's contribution to the collection, “Returning To Ourselves: Two Spirit Futures and the Now” builds upon Dillon's introduction to the concept of Biskaabying through an essay that I would argue illustrates the concept in action. Sinclair introduces us to Ozawwendib, a historical Anishinaabe two-spirit figure, through the use of ethnographic texts from the early eighteen hundreds. While these texts serve as a sort of “proof” of the existence of genders outside the binary in historical Anishinaabe contexts, Sinclair is careful to point out the flaws of the ethnographic analysis of Ozawwendib, instead calling on us to envision and reimagine the possibilities while acknowledging an important truth: “Defining an Indigenous LGBTQ and two-spirit tradition is as complicated as describing Indigenous people themselves” (14). Sinclair draws upon some of the important scholarship that Dillon has introduced in her chapter, to introduce, affirm, and validate Indigenous LGBTQ/two-spirit knowledges, stories, and futures. If you are looking for a way to introduce Indigenous queerness and two-spirit gender identities to your class, I believe this book (with the few caveats listed here) is a good place to start.

I open my class with *Love Beyond Body Space and Time* because it is about imagining. Imagining two-spirit futures. Moving *beyond* the trauma narratives and statistics that we must teach, and into exciting new ways of thinking, being, and moving in the world. I believe that Indigenous literature is perhaps the most important site of Indigenous queer imaginings at the moment. But I also don't think it should be taught alone. While Queer Indigenous Studies is a rapidly emerging field, there are some incredible scholars who have been doing this work for quite some time now. If you are new to this field, I'd say the top two texts to start with are *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilly and Scott Lauria Morgenson, and *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literatures* edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda and Lisa Tatonetti. You'll notice a name in common there, and while I'm hesitant to make a limiting statement, (I'd prefer you go to Dillon's essay in *Love Beyond Body Space and Time* and read all the texts mentioned there rather than only the three I mention here), I'm willing to say that I believe Qwo-Li Driskill's newest work, *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Two Spirit Memory*, is one of the most important new works of Queer Indigenous Studies scholarship.

“When you weave a basket, you create the world.” In the closing chapter of *Asegi Stories*, Driskill quotes this phrase from Peggy Sanders Brennan, a Cherokee basket weaver. Driskill is sharing a moment where the two were weaving together, a moment that I believe sums up Driskill's goals within this book; to create the world through the crafting and connecting of many threads; from historical texts, to stories shared in visiting, to re-imaginings and re-envisionings, Driskill creates the world with Cherokee two-spirit memory at the centre. The whole of this text centres on Driskill's creation of what I would call a Cherokee research methodology; that of the double weaved basket, a type of basket that is essentially two baskets, one inside of the other, attached by the rim at the top. Through this theoretical framework, Driskill shows us hir methods

of weaving, illustrating with a beautiful lived metaphor the ways in which we can re-imagine and re-story our lives, as Two-Spirit folks.

I claim this narrative here, as a Two-Spirit identified person, however, there is also much in this story that I do not know/cannot claim. Building on Driskill’s methodology and theory of Cherokee double-weaving, I want to point to the fact that much of this book is created with a clear acknowledgement, or even an assumption of insider knowledge. That is not to critique Driskill, as I believe that hir privileging of Cherokee knowledge within this book is done deliberately and pointedly in order to create a sense of not only Cherokee intellectual sovereignty, but also as a sort of challenge to the reader: if you don’t know the history Driskill is talking about, it is up to you to find it elsewhere. For my own purposes, I was able to glean what I needed from my experience reading and studying Daniel Heath Justice’s *Kynship* texts, which my professor at the time, Deanna Reder (SFU), paired with a lecture on Cherokee history so that we, students at a Canadian university, were introduced to the Cherokee removal. While this is an extremely limited understanding of Cherokee history, I share this limitation to say that I do not think one needs a deep understanding of Cherokee knowledges to find this text beneficial, especially if you are reading it for insights into Queer Indigenous theory.

In this way, I think about the many different lenses that each of us will read this book through, depending on our own positionality, history, and knowledges. It’s as if Driskill is sitting in a public place, weaving hir basket, and I have been invited to say hello, maybe sit and visit for a while. Myself, never having woven a basket, may be intrigued and curious, but I cannot do much more than appreciate the craft, perhaps learn a basic step or two, knowing it would take years and many baskets to get where Driskill is now. On the other hand, another skilled basket weaver would feel right at home here with Driskill, admiring parts of the creation that I would remain blind to. There are parts of this book that as a Ktunaxa person with little knowledge of Cherokee history, I remain blind to, though Driskill has done much work to, if we are continuing with this metaphor, gather the tools and rivercane necessary for me to be able to learn more.

There are parts of this book that as a two-spirit person, feel like home. I am reminded of my students seeing themselves in *Love Beyond Body Space and Time*, as tears come to my eyes when I read about Driskill learning to “press cedar against the inner wall of the basket and weave over [it]...so that the cedar can’t be seen” (5). Driskill’s gift to me, as I recognize that I am the cedar. A recognition that two-spiritness does not have to be a liminal space; does not need to be a movement from *here* to *there*, but instead it is both a presence and an absence. All this gifted to me within the first few pages of the introductory chapter.

I believe this book holds many of these gifts for each one of its readers. Some of the gifts are given in harder ways than others, of course. Driskill calls upon Queer Studies to recognize Indigenous sovereignty and include two-spirit narratives and discussions in every conversation we have, “In short, I am asking all of us engaged in queer studies to remember exactly on whose land it is built” (23), Driskill writes in hir chapter “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques.” This chapter follows up with more gifts, tools I believe that can help us in taking up the challenges Driskill give us; seven “features of two-spirit critiques” serve as sub-headings throughout the chapter:

1. Two-Spirit Critiques see Two-Spirit People and Traditions as Both Integral to and a Challenge to Nationalist and Decolonial Struggles
2. Two-Spirit Critiques are Rooted in Artistic and Activist work and Remain Accountable to Overlapping Communities
3. Two-Spirit Critiques Engage in Both Intertribal and Tribally Specific Concerns
4. Two-Spirit Critiques are Woven into Native Feminisms by Seeing Sexism, Homophobia, and Transphobia as Colonial Tools
5. Two-Spirit Critiques are Informed by and Make Use of Other Native Activisms, Arts, and Scholarships,
6. Two-Spirit Critiques see the Erotic as a Tool in Decolonial Struggles
7. Two-Spirit Critiques see Two-Spirit Identities in Relationship with Spirituality and Medicine (Driskill, 33-7).

As with Sinclair and Dillon's essays in *Love Beyond Body Space and Time*, this chapter "Double Weaving Two-Spirit Critique" stands as reason enough for this text to be considered an important piece of scholarship in Indigenous Studies and beyond. It occurs to me as I wrote these critiques out that Driskill's text achieves all of the goals set out here. I say goals rather than features because I am reminded of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's "25 Indigenous Projects" in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. While these are identifiable features of two-spirit critiques, they also, I think, serve as a challenge to those in the field to ensure they are meeting all of these expectations—and I don't think this is limited to Queer Indigenous Studies. Instead these seven points should be used as tools to bring the decolonizing concepts that two-spirit critiques gift us with into all of our theory, all of our scholarship, and all of our communities.

Driskill's text is also important because it gives us new ways to imagine ourselves outside of the sometimes-painful shackles of "tradition." In academic circles, it may seem that queer Indigenous studies is thriving; that there are many of us here creating work and having that work published, and our voices heard. I would argue that for every one of us who is making it there are a hundred out there you don't see, who have brilliant things to say but are overwhelmed by homophobia, transphobia, racism and lateral violence. Our communities, while oft painted as open and welcoming, honouring "traditions" of multiple genders, remain, in many cases, violent places for us to be, where we face discrimination even (or perhaps especially) within ceremonial spaces. This is why these stories matter. Driskill's work challenges those heteronormative colonial ideas by drawing upon, and then "queering," historical records. S/he introduces us to the possibilities of two-spirit characters like Dragonfly having a presence in the creation story of fire (12). S/he spends a lengthy chapter ("The Queer Lady of Cofitachequi") examining a story of the De Soto expedition, introducing us to the "Lady of Cofitachequi," rendered "Within colonial accounts...as first within a male/female binary and then, as resistant to colonial patriarchal authority as an Indigenous non-Christian woman" (Driskill 55), and then making an argument for a queer reading of this historical figure—not because there is any historical record that illustrates her two-spritedness, but because "there is also no archival evidence that she was not" (55). In this way, Driskill gives insights into Cherokee stories that may already be well-known to a Cherokee reader and takes the time to identify, imagine, and read them as the eponymous "asegi stories." Asegi is a Cherokee word meaning "strange" and often read as "queer." By doing this, Driskill shakes up heteronormative practices of reading historical accounts through a binaristic lens that seeks to erase the presence of queer and two-spirit folks.

While those of us who are not Cherokee may not gain the same kind of illumination that a Cherokee person would in reading over these re-imagined stories, this work is vital for all two-spirit folks who have often searched far and wide, yearning for some sort of record of ourselves pre-contact. Driskill creates an imagining where any pre-contact text could be a record of ourselves, and this is a radical and necessary balancing of the historical lenses through which we research and read Indigenous stories. This is not to say it's all easy to read. Some of Driskill's work is very hard. Historical accounts, perhaps especially when they do explicitly include us, are often violent depictions of genocide and gendercide (a term Driskill borrows from Deborah Miranda). But, like many Indigenous scholars, artists, writers and activists, s/he refuses to leave us without hope. Indeed, I would argue that any of the traumatic and difficult stories included here are only included in order to create/re-imagine them, and empower not only two-spirit, queer, and/or Cherokee folks, but to empower all readers to challenge violent heteropatriarchal norms. Driskill illustrates ways to do this through hir third chapter, “Unweaving the Basket;” an in depth look at “how colonial concepts of gender and sexuality were internalized by Cherokee communities as Cherokee forms of governance shifted from autonomous, gender-egalitarian townships to a centralized, male-dominated Cherokee nation” (101). Using the metaphor of the basket that runs throughout *Asegi Stories*, this chapter illustrates how the original basket; Cherokee pre-contact society, was unwoven by colonization through chapter sections on Cherokee Law, Missionization, and Slavery. One important aspect to this chapter, which is also evident throughout the rest of the book, is Driskill's commitment to black/Indigenous solidarity throughout hir scholarship. “Unweaving the Basket” contains a section titled “Unweaving Splint Two: Slavery, Black Bodies, and Heteropatriarchy” which examines violence on black bodies in Cherokee society as a ‘civilization’ tactic of colonization, and how this lead to other gender-based violence.

The final three chapters of Driskill's book continue the re-imagining by calling for celebrations of diverse Indigenous bodies. Chapter 4, “Beautiful as the Red Rainbow: Cherokee Two-Spirits Rebeautifyng Erotic Memory,” builds on Driskill's previous works with texts like *Sovereign Erotics* in lifting up the erotic as a site of decolonization. One perhaps more controversial aspect to this is the inclusion of photos of Cherokee pipes, which Driskill reads through an erotic lens. As a person who participates in ceremony, myself, I wonder about the inclusion of photographs of pipe relations, which Driskill has taken himself at the Peabody Museum. This is a fine line, but I often wonder when I see this kind of work whether or not Cherokee ceremonial knowledge holders were consulted; should these pipes be photographed, or perhaps left alone and simply described? On that note, I also believe there is an argument to be made that Driskill's re-imagining could lead to dangerous places. While it seems from this book Driskill has strong ties to the Cherokee community through the folks he has visited with throughout his research travels (like the earlier-quoted weaver Peggy Sanders Brennan), there is a part of me that proceeds with caution, not about the well-researched and thought out discussion included here, but instead about the ways in which it might be read. I would hate to see this idea of re-imagining our historical narratives taken too far out of context. In other words, while I believe that there is a resurgence of two-spirit knowledges happening throughout our communities, I do not think that claiming two-spirit gives us license to simply make up our own stories. Again, I do not mean to say that Driskill does this. S/he is very clear to note that hir hypothetical asegi versions of Cherokee stories are but one telling, a re-imagining that allows for more possibilities. It is more how this text could be read as a justification for less responsible work that worries me. Of

course, perhaps especially in Indigenous Studies, we know that we have little control over what happens to our words once we put them into the world, and I do believe Driskill has been cautious, hirself, about opening up too much space for possible make-believe.

In closing, this is an important book for Indigenous Studies, Queer Studies, settler-colonial studies, for history, anthropology, gender studies, literary studies, and of course, Cherokee studies. I honestly believe it could also be useful in countless other disciplines where I would like to see more conversations on gender happening. The “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critique” Chapter, perhaps especially, can be used to give insights into the woefully misunderstood concept of two-spiritedness. One field I think of especially is Indigenous Environmental Sciences, where binary concepts of “Mother” earth, male/female plant species (even when plants have so many more asegi/queer methods of reproducing) water as the “women’s” medicine and fire as the “men’s” still seem to carry so much weight. This text allows for a queering of historical records, of “tradition,” and of our bodies, one that celebrates, affirms, and brings LGBTQ/two-spirit knowledges to the centre of our futures. The final chapter, “Epilogue: Doubleweave: An *Asegi* Manifesto” explains the importance of this centring, as two-spirit folks “carry memories for our people” (Driskill 170). Driskill calls on us to remember that Asegi space; the third space, the cedar between the walls of the double weaved basket, and I encourage you to answer hir call.

Both *Love Beyond Body Space and Time*, and *Asegi Stories* acknowledge and call upon us to pay attention to what queer and two-spirited Indigenous folks are doing. In my teachings, we have specific responsibilities within our communities as two-spirit people. And, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues [in interview](#) when asked how to stop gender-based violence, our communities have responsibilities to us as well, needing to:

Center Two Spirit, queer, and trans people in our nation building, in our movement building and in our world building. We need to collectively build and embody the alternative. Build communities and nations [where] interpersonal violence is unthinkable.

As I write this it is Trans Day of Remembrance. Later I will go to a candlelight vigil and honour all of the trans folks murdered in the past year. Mourning is a necessary practice. Grief must be felt and honoured. And yet, I call on each of us to do more than mourn and grieve. Let’s celebrate and uphold Indigenous Queer, Trans and Two-Spirit voices. Support us while we are living. Read/watch/listen/see/support our work. As Driskill writes at the close of hir book: “Our stories reweave the world.” (Driskill 170). I call on you to witness and be a part of this reweaving.

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Notes

¹ Kisukyukyit is a greeting in Ktunaxa

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