

## SHAKING OUR SHELLS: CHEROKEE TWO-SPIRITS REBALANCING THE WORLD

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### QWO-LI DRISKILL

*“This story—in the form of a Stomp Dance—emerges from conversations and experiences with other Cherokee Two-Spirits, as well as from other Native Two-Spirit people. Over the years, my Cherokee Two-Spirit friends and I have been imagining who we are through conversations with each other and through a commitment to decolonial projects. Cherokee Two-Spirit people are currently involved in a complex process of asserting our identities through strengthening memories of our past, committing to who we in our present, and imagining who we want to be in the future.”*

### Sagwu / One: A Call to Assemble

*On the White Path home*

*dark soil gifts our dances back.*

*Songs rise up like corn,*

*turtle shell shackles shake history.*

*White and purple beads weave us to remember*

*strength that gifts our dances back.*

*From our ancestors' bodies*

*we rise up like corn.*

*The White Path home*

*gifts back our dances.*

*Hope, rise up*

*like corn.*

*Come on all you Two-Spirit people. Hurry!*

In Oklahoma, Stomp Dance is a central ceremonial practice for Cherokees and other Native people from the Southeastern "United States." The Stomp Dance is performed to maintain *duynktv*—balance, truth, justice—a central idea to traditional Cherokee worldviews. Wilma Mankiller tells us, "There is an old Cherokee prophecy which instructs us that as long as the Cherokees continue traditional dances, the world will remain as it is, but when the dances stop, the world will come to an end" (29, 1993). This essay is modeled on a Stomp Dance, based on descriptions by Cherokee ethnomusicologist Charlotte Heth. Stomp Dances begin with a call to assemble, and so I would like to call us together, as Cherokee Two-Spirit people, to reflect on and imagine what it means to be who we are. Specifically, because of the nature of this collection, I want to call together male-embodied Cherokee Two-Spirits to think about the very important obligations we have to rebalance gender systems through working to end sexism, transphobia, and queerphobia in our communities.

As we assemble, I know that there are non-Cherokees and non-Two-Spirit people who are also with us, listening to this story. I would like to ask our guests to sit and just listen from a distance, understanding that because I'm speaking to other Cherokee Two-Spirits/GLBTQ folks, that there are many questions, issues, and terms that I won't be explaining here. And since I brought up terminology, I would like to say to other Cherokee Two-Spirit people that we need to remember that gender systems before invasion and colonization were not the same as they are now. While we subsume same-sex relationships and gender "non-conformity" under the umbrella of "Two-Spirit," it is difficult to say if these identities were linked together in the past.

There are numerous experiences and identities that we shove under terms like "Two-Spirit" or "Queer" or "GLBT." I've heard several different terms to talk about these identities in Cherokee, but I am going to use "Two-Spirit" as my umbrella term here, knowing that not all of us use this term for ourselves any more than all of us use any of the other terms available to us in English. All of these terms and ideas are slippery and complicated, but "Two-Spirit" carries with it a particular commitment to decolonization and Indigenous histories and identities that is at the center of this particular telling.

This story—in the form of a Stomp Dance—emerges from conversations and experiences with other Cherokee Two-Spirits, as well as from other Native Two-Spirit people. Over the years, my Cherokee Two-Spirit friends and I have been imagining who we are through conversations with each other and through a commitment to decolonial projects. Cherokee Two-Spirit people are currently involved in a complex process of asserting our identities through strengthening memories of our past, committing to who we in our present, and imagining who we want to be in the future.

Because I weave wampum records, I find the metaphor of re-weaving a wampum belt a useful way to think about this particular point in the recovery, creation, and maintenance of who we are as Cherokee Two-Spirits. While many Cherokees have forgotten the importance of wampum records, at one time they were central to Cherokee diplomatic relationships, legal agreements, and record-keeping. There are seven wampum belts that remain important to Cherokee Stomp Dance communities, and they are used to remember and transmit central religious teachings. One of these belts depicts a white path against a field of purple beads, symbolizing the importance of walking *duyuktv*, of moving through life on a path of peace, justice, and balance.

During the chaos of the past 460 years since De Soto invaded our lands, Cherokee Two-Spirits have been largely erased and hidden. It's as if the story of who we are and our place in the world was woven into a beautiful wampum belt. And then

*hate's long knives  
tore through  
deerskin, sinew*

*Purple and*

*white beads flew*

*through air*

*thick with*

*smoke*

*from burning*

*townhouses*

*Beads scattered into*

*undergrowth*

*pushed deep*

*into feet-bloodied paths*

*Beads hidden*

*high in caves*

*by the escaped*

*Everything*

*sliced*

*into pieces.*

We've internalized unbalanced power relationships between men and women, between Two-Spirit people and others. Our work as Two-Spirit Cherokees is to mend these relationships and aid our communities in healing. We must weave the pieces of our story back together.

Given the brutal history of the past several hundred years, it should come as no surprise that many Cherokees have tried to suppress Two-Spirit people and histories, or that many Cherokee Two-Spirits struggle with

making sense of who we are within our tribal traditions. Sometimes all we have left are fragments.

*But sit still.*

*Listen close.*

*Look: four white beads there in your right hand,  
three purple beads here in mine.*

*We can travel back over*

*removal routes*

*gathering beads.*

*Some of us have large pieces of the belt.*

*Some of us only have scraps of singed deerskin.*

*But we begin*

*to remember*

*the pattern.*

*Come on all you Cherokee Two-Spirits!*

*We are assembled here to continue*

*our story.*

*Each of us*

*has a piece.*

## **Tal' / Two: Daksi, Daksi, Daksi Alegwui / Come on All You Shell Shakers**

*Crickets hum a heartbeat rhythm under a hot Oklahoma night. Women wearing turtle shell or milk can leg shackles are called to dance. The figures of women are silhouetted against the light of the sacred fire, answering the call.*

At the Stomp Dance, we are called to the fire to sing, to dance, to honor Creation. It is part of men's responsibilities to sing songs, and women's responsibilities to shake shells. Stomp Dances cannot take place without shell shakers: our lifeways are dependent on them. Brian Joseph Gilley's book *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* mentions the fact that some male-embodied Two-Spirit Cherokees are shaking shells as a reflection of their place within ceremonial communities and traditions (141-143, 2006). At this particular time in our history Cherokee Two-Spirit people of all genders are calling each other out of hiding, out of the confines of white notions of who we are. We are being called to take our place within our communities, to "shell shake" our traditions in order to restore *duyuktv*. The responsibilities we have as male-embodied Two-Spirit Cherokees—to sustain our lifeways and cultures—is like shell shaking. We have the responsibility to restore and maintain *duyuktv* through practicing Cherokee lifeways and ending gender oppressions.

Two-Spirit liberation is part of a larger process of decolonization. Many of the current conversations and activism in both radical Queer and Trans communities as well as mainstream GLBT movements tend to ignore the colonial realities and contexts that are the center of struggles for Two-Spirit people. As Native feminists such as Beth Brant, Chrystos, and Andrea Smith have pointed out, current systems of gender oppression and homophobia in the Americas are part of ongoing colonization and genocide against Native people. Non-Native Queer movements often place sexuality and gender as oppositional to heteronormative practices, and with good

reason. While similar politics certainly come into play in Two-Spirit movements, the more central argument that we are making is that our lives and identities—including, but not limited to issues of sexuality and gender—are integral to Indigenous struggles for decolonization, self-determination, and cultural continuance. Taking this stance isn't a "mainstreaming" tactic, but instead is a radical act against colonial mindsets and empires that surround us, trying to dissolve our claim on these continents. Two-Spirit people are not asking our tribal communities to accept us as "just like" straight gendered people. We are asking our communities to remember who we, as nations, are. And, just as importantly, we are asking our communities to imagine who we want to be. Two-Spirit people can change patterns in our communities that are damaging. We are looking to our core values to imagine the places we should have in our communities. Two-Spirit Cherokees are calling each other out of shadows to participate in the rebalancing of the world. And it is through living up to our responsibilities as Cherokees, particularly as Two-Spirits, that we "shell shake." We are insisting that we have a place in the circle and that our lives and work in the world is absolutely and uncompromisingly necessary to the continuance of Cherokee traditions.

*Daksi, daksi, daksi alegwui!*  
*Come on all you shell shakers! Hurry!*

## Tso / Three: Friendship Dance

*Shell shakers begin shuffling out a rhythm as men in cowboy hats and baseball caps sing. Some of us are elders, some of us are young, some of us use canes. We are all part of the circle.*

Now that shell shakers and song leaders are assembled, we can begin a Friendship Dance. The Friendship Dance, like all performances during the Stomp Dance, reflects a balance between genders, and I think that it is a useful way to think about traditional Cherokee relationships with gender.

Before European invasions and concerted efforts by missionaries to disrupt our culture, Cherokee gender systems reflected *duyuktv*. Two-Spirit people in the Southeast have been a target of colonial violence since the Spanish invasion. Patriarchal Spain—perpetuating an Inquisition in Europe and continuing the Inquisition in the Americas—customarily murdered gender non-conforming people. Women's central place within Cherokee life was looked at with fascination and derision by European invaders, who mockingly labeled our nation a "petticoat government" and misinterpreted Cherokee female warriors as "amazons."

When European invaders and missionaries began toppling Cherokee gender roles, all of *duyuktv* was disrupted. Before this, women had jurisdiction over their children, homes, and community agriculture. They had authority over our homelands. Colonial powers, in an effort to gain control of our landbases, toppled Cherokee women's traditional roles as leaders and diplomats and almost destroyed our matrifocal clan system. Through violent enforcement of patriarchy, gender relationships made a dramatic shift. Rather than seeing the roles of men and women as always in *duyuktv*, Christian European patriarchy enforced ideas of male supremacy, rigid gender categories, and sexuality as something to be suppressed and controlled.

I was recently talking with a Cherokee Two-Spirit friend of mine about how Two-Spirit people embody *duyuktv*. Two-Spirit people have an intimate relationship with, and obligation to, *duyuktv* because of our specific relationships with gender. Healing from our history entails recognizing how damaging colonial gender is to lives. We must claim gender as a Friendship Dance that places us all within the circle of our communities, rather than allowing gender to be site of violence and tool of oppression. While masculine-identified straight males may gain societal privilege because of their genders and sexualities, we know that their gender experiences are often filled with abuse and violence from childhood in order to inscribe patriarchal values—and a fear of stepping outside of them—onto their psyches. Those of us socialized as male know the very real physical, emotional, and psychological dangers of that process. The internalization and manifestations of patriarchy move Cherokees further away from *duyuktv*, undermine struggles for decolonization, and buoy the power of colonial regimes. Remembering who we are as Cherokees entails unlearning colonial gender systems.

As a male-embodied Two-Spirit, part of my work is to move back and forth between different gendered spaces, taking information about those experiences with me and sharing them with others. People see me as countless genders including a Queer man, as Gay guy who wears skirts, a Queer woman, a straight woman, a drag queen, a Trans woman, a Trans man, a transvestite, a cross-dresser, an androgynous person, and a straight man. Moving through these spaces has taught me that most of them are deadly dangerous. One of the gifts of experiencing gender from multiple angles is gaining knowledge to work against sexism and gender regimes in all of our communities. Transforming this knowledge into radical, non-violent action against sexism and transphobia is a Friendship Dance that helps restore *duyuktv* to gender systems. As male-socialized people, we are just as responsible for ending sexist oppression as straight men. Seeing gender as a Friendship Dance involves constant examination of the ways we are both injured and privileged because of being born male in a patriarchal country.

Native women have long called Native men to work in solidarity with them against sexist oppression. Male-embodied Two-Spirit people must answer that call and aid in dismantling gender and sexual oppression. This is part of our responsibility in restoring *duyuktv*. We must shell shake and sing a Friendship Dance to mend the damage done to Cherokee gender through invasion, genocide, and removal.

### Nvgi / Four: Stomp Dance

*Our songs weave with Cricket's, with Turtle's, with the songs of our grandmothers and grandfathers. They sing of loss and love, of our stubborn and gorgeous survival, of our determination to continue.*

Stomp dancing is central to the continuance of our traditions, and remembering who we are as Two-Spirit people is a part of that continuance. When I meet other Cherokee Two-Spirits it isn't long before we are piecing together bits of information that each of us carry about what it means to be who we are. Through sharing our stories, what we've taught ourselves, what we've learned from traditionalists and elders, and what we have pieced together from books and dreams, we create the living archives of our history. We are stomp dancing our story back to us.

Almost all of the Two-Spirit people I know are deeply committed to carrying on our lifeways, reviving traditions that have gone dormant if necessary. I think that this is a logical path for Two-Spirit people to follow. For example, I've had to search for what my gender-sexuality has meant in the past so that I can understand what it means in the present and future. Through this journey I've become deeply invested in also relearning our language, songs, dances, and arts. This process of cultural revitalization, for all of us, is like a stomp dance. It is through this work that we rebalance the world.

Each Cherokee Two-Spirit must listen closely to ourselves and remember what work we are meant to do in this world. Some of us are deeply committed to the Cherokee language. Others of us are invested in learning and teaching particular arts. There are Two-Spirit Cherokees dedicated to ceremonial communities, and those who are uncovering our histories through research and scholarship. Many of us work for the well-being of our environment or fight against the numerous forms of oppression that face us daily. Through this stomp dance we ensure our survival. And, like a stomp dance song, our actions call out to other Cherokees who respond through their own singing and shell shaking, spiraling around the center of who we are.

### Hisgi / Five: Old Folks' Dance

*Dawn is arriving. Shell shakers and singers have danced all night long, ensuring the continuance of the world. At dawn we will end our cycle of dances with the Old Folks Dance.*

I want to think about the Old Folks Dance as a way of looking to our elders and ancestors to mend our story and understand who we are in the present. Even though traditions that we are now calling "Two-Spirit" are not as well documented for Cherokees as they are in other tribes, we do have a past and a history, and it is important to remember that there are as many different ways of being Cherokee and Two-Spirit as there are Cherokee Two-Spirits.

Like so many Two-Spirit people I know, as I have come to understand my sexuality and genders, I have hungered to understand who people like us may have been to our communities in the past in order to help imagine who we are now. Cherokees don't have the luxury of some Two-Spirit people to have both very clear documentation and voluminous living memory of who we have been within our tribal traditions. Certainly all Two-Spirit people are

currently in a process of uncovering this history, but I think that for some Native people—including Cherokees—that this process is more challenging than it is for others. I've encountered very little reference to Cherokee Two-Spirit people in historical accounts, though such references do exist. As part of this Old Folks Dance, I want to share some of the references I have come across to Two-Spirit people in Cherokee tradition, and ask you to listen to what these stories might mean to us now. The purpose of this is simply to provide information to other Cherokee Two-Spirits who are searching for these fragments. I am certainly not the only Cherokee Two-Spirit person involved with uncovering these histories, and I am sure that there is more documentation, published and not, than these brief mentions that I am pointing to here. And, much of this knowledge is held by traditional people and not in written records. Written documentation of our past is often based on European colonists' reactions to Cherokee gender, who thought that *all* of our genders were "variant." Colonists likely saw female warriors or women in positions of leadership as living as men, even though these were acceptable—and important—roles for women in Cherokee gender systems. Trying to glean from colonial accounts which of these female-embodied people might now be called "Two-Spirit" and which were simply acting in accordance with Cherokee traditions for women is very difficult. We must remember these kinds of complexities as we continue to uncover our past and re-weave our present. I would like to spend some time talking about a few references to Cherokee Two-Spirit histories from published texts and from my archival research, offering them as wampum beads to other Cherokees that we can use to weave our story back together.

In Sarah H. Hill's excellent book *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Women and Their Basketry*, I found a brief mention of male-embodied Two-Spirit people that suggests that males who lived as women were as respected members of their communities as other women:

Pardo...saw among those subsequently known as Cherokees a man who "went among the Indian women, wearing an apron like they did." The startled Spaniard summoned his interpreters and "many soldiers" to ask the local chief about him.

The man was his brother, the chief explained, and was not "a man for war." With neither elaboration nor scorn for the scribe to record, the chief said his brother "went about in that manner like a woman," doing "all that is given to a woman to do." It is a slender thread of history suggesting that among Cherokees, as among many native peoples, gender and labor interweave to create identity (66, 1997).

Theda Perdue's *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* also has some discussion of males and females we might now call Two-Spirit, though I disagree about her conclusions about male-embodied Two-Spirits. While she writes that it is "difficult to ascertain" Cherokee responses to gender "anomalies," some of her information can be coupled with the brief mention of male-embodied Two-Spirits made by Hill and perhaps shift Perdue's conclusions (Perdue 37, 1998). While there is very useful information for Two-Spirit people in Perdue's book, she asserts that male-embodied Two-Spirits were not well respected because of a lack blood rites via war or menstruation (Perdue 39, 1998). This does not take into account the possibility of other blood rites existing for male-embodied Two-Spirits via ritual scratching, tattooing, or other kinds of activities. If blood rites defined Cherokee gender roles during this period, it only makes sense that blood rites existed for male-embodied Two-Spirits to ensure they remained part of the community. One must at least consider the possibility that male-embodied Two-Spirit people who lived as women would still have a warrior tradition open to them, just as it was open to other women. Purdue draws conclusions about Cherokee gender constructions based on gender in other tribes, but lacks this sort of analysis when it comes to male-embodied Cherokee Two-Spirit people. While broad generalizations cannot be made, the fact that in some traditions male-embodied Two-Spirits engaged in simulated menstruation could suggest that similar practices may have existed among Cherokees (Gay American Indians & Roscoe 38, 1988). Certainly many contemporary Two-Spirit Cherokees go to great length to ensure their physical bodies reflect their gender identities. Regardless of Perdue's interpretation, her book provides important information about Cherokee Two-Spirits that we can use to understand who we are in the present.

Walter L. Williams' *The Spirit and the Flesh* only marginally speaks about Cherokees, but he cites a manuscript by C.C. Trowbridge that mentions male-embodied Two-Spirits. Williams quotes this excerpt from the Trowbridge manuscript: "There were among them formerly, men who assumed the dress and performed all the duties of women and who lived their whole lives in this manner" (4, 1992). During the roundtable "Indigenous Politics and the Question of Same-Sex Marriage" at *What's Next for Native American and Indigenous Studies?* David Cornsilk mentioned that this particular document goes on to suggest that marriage was practiced by all Cherokees, including Two-Spirit people (Kauanui 2007).

In my own archival research, I stumbled across a reference to Cherokee same-sex union ceremonies in John Howard Payne's manuscript on Cherokee life. John Howard Payne was a EuroAmerican actor and playwright who lived for a period of time with Chief John Ross in order to document Cherokee customs. Payne mentions this union ceremony more than once in his manuscript, which describes a particular performance to formalize "perpetual friendship." I am including a long excerpt from his account in order to offer this information to other Cherokee Two-Spirits uncovering our histories. Seeing the process of looking to our past as an Old Folks Dance not only means looking to our histories and elders, it also means sharing that information with other Two-Spirit people as an act of reciprocity. Payne documents the following same-sex union ceremony:

Taking an opportunity sometime during that feast, when the people were seated in the council house, they arose, walked toward the fire, and then turned and commenced dancing around the fire...each having on his best clothes. While dancing, in the presence of all the people, who looking, they exchanged one garment after another till each had given the other his entire dress, even to leggings, moccasins etc. and thus each of them publicly received the other as himself, & became thus pledged to regard and treat him as himself while he lived. Sometimes two women, and sometimes a man and a woman contracted this friendship. Thus when a young man and woman fell in love with each other but were hindered from marrying, either by relation or by being of the same clan, they bound themselves in perpetual friendship. While dancing round the fire as above stated, the man threw his blanket over the woman, and the woman as soon as convenient threw hers to the man. The man also, having prepared a cane sieve, & hung it by a string over his shoulder, gave her that. He also presented her with a pestle to pound corn with. The mortar he had for her at home (Volume III, 49-50, ca 1835).

While Payne makes sense of this as a friendship ceremony, I doubt very much that it was a ceremony only to cement a "friendship." The fact that Payne mentions opposite-sex couples in love, but not able to have children because of clan laws, suggests that the same-sex couples were likewise in love. Perhaps what was common to both opposite-sex and same-sex couples in this arrangement was the fact that they would not be bearing biological children. The fact that the opposite-sex ceremony is not terribly different than contemporary "traditional" Cherokee marriage ceremonies leads me to think that the same-sex ceremonies were likewise a public ceremony to define a loving, romantic, same-sex relationship.

What does all of this mean to us now? I think we must decide that in our own lives and communities. Should I ever have a public union ceremony, for instance, I certainly would want to incorporate aspects of this older same-sex union. It is my hope that uncovering this bit of information will be useful to Cherokee Two-Spirit people who are part of ceremonial communities in re-weaving our places within our traditions, and for those who are working to document both same-sex relationships and complex gender systems in Cherokee traditions in order to work against the internalization of dominant culture's values around these issues. Putting aspects of our past into practice is part of an ongoing Old Folks Dance that honors our history and rebalances our present and future.

Another way of thinking about our work as an Old Folks Dance is to look at the values contained in our traditional stories. Cherokee stories talk about beings that were the most hated, (like Buzzard), the most mocked, (like Water Spider) and sometimes the most feared (like Uktena and Stonecoat), and how they were the ones that created the world, our lifeways, and formed the landscapes of our homelands. It is important to remember people from our history (like Sequoyah) and present (like Wilma Mankiller), who have had to overcome skepticism, prejudice, and disdain—and how important they are to our survival and identity as a people. These stories are precedent for our identities as Cherokee Two-Spirit people.

Aside from historical accounts of Cherokee Two-Spirit people and traditional stories, we also have artists and writers who have gone before us, like the playwright Rollie Lynn Riggs, whose play *Green Grow the Lilacs* was the basis for the musical Oklahoma, or the late Vickie Sears, a writer / activist / psychotherapist and author of *Simple Songs: Stories*. We are also blessed to have living writers and scholars such as Daniel Heath Justice. Justice's fantasy series *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* creates a central place for Two-Spirit people, and his scholarship honors our intellectual and artistic history. Cherokee Two-Spirits are building places our future by looking to our past, dancing an Old Folks Dance to rebalance the present.

### Sudal' / Six: Prayer

*Unetlanvhi,*

*W'a'do for all the blessings you give us.*

*W'a'do for our food, our water, our homes, our friends, our family.*

*W'a'do for bringing us to this place and time to do this work.*

*Help us not be afraid.*

*Help us walk duyuktv.*

*Help us continue our language and our lifeways.*

*Help us do the work that we need to do to heal ourselves, our communities, and our world.*

*W'a'do*



## Gal'quog' / Seven: Going Home

After the sun rises and we return to our homes, we carry the power of community with us. Cherokee Two-Spirit folks are telling each other stories as we weave ourselves back together. We pull together the strands that our elders have given us, the traditions that have ensured our survival, carefully replace the beads that have become lost or broken, and re-imagine the pattern of our lives. We carry the memory of who we are, the memory of our songs and dances, back to our homelands and throughout the Cherokee diaspora.

Many Cherokee Two-Spirits live away from Cherokee lands, and many of us are not involved with ceremonial communities. Further, Cherokee Two-Spirits (like most Cherokees) are Christians. And, I've talked to many Cherokee Two-Spirit people who—while they love our people and want to remain connected to our communities—have no desire to live in the conservative areas of the country where our homelands are located. Perhaps just as important as being home is to find ways to honor our traditions away from home. Regardless of where we are, we can certainly learn our language, learn our traditional arts, and learn our songs. And we can work to ensure that we walk *duyuketu* in our own lives through intentional and careful work to dismantle sexism, transphobia, and queerphobia from our psyches and lives. We can teach other Two-Spirit people how to come home to themselves and each other, shaking the shells of resistance and healing in order to repair the world. We can bring our story back together. Each of us has a piece.

*Crickets. Heartbeats. Healing. Fire. Turtle shell shackles shake stories.*

*We sing.*

*We dance.*

*We heal.*

*We remember.*

*Wa'do we say as dawn's light touches the tops of trees. Wa'do we say to the shell shakers, to each other, to the fire, to the song leaders, to Creation...*

*Wa'do.*

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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