



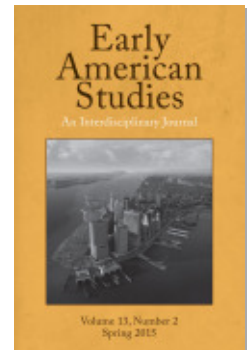
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Cherokee “Two Spirits”

Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South

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ABSTRACT Since the sixteenth century, European and Euroamerican observers have puzzled over the identity, roles, and sexuality of the berdache, or what scholars now refer to as two-spirit people, in Native American societies in the Southeast. Over the past generation gender theorists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) scholars have produced fine studies that aim to demystify two spirits, formerly the domain of anthropological research, and decouple them from the racialized and heteronormative modes of thinking associated with settler colonialism in North America. As this activist scholarship continues to grow, historians of early America have at best played a marginal role in scholarly debates about two-spirit people. This essay represents a historical intervention in the current scholarly discussions about two-spirit people. Focusing particularly on the Cherokees in early America, the following analysis considers the methodological challenges associated with historical studies of two spirits and presents insights into how historians might effectively craft more sophisticated and nuanced analyses of people variously referred to as hermaphrodites, sodomites, berdaches, and two-spirit people in Native American societies of the Southeast.

Around 1825 a lone white traveler crossing through Cherokee country encountered a group of Cherokees. After stopping and engaging them in conversation, the traveler learned that “There were among them formerly, men who assumed the dress and performed all the duties of women and

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who lived their whole life in this manner."¹ This report no doubt confused and confounded that traveler. During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, travel writers, traders, soldiers, and missionaries puzzled over the meaning of indigenous social conventions and cultural practices. Historians have spent considerable time analyzing and debating the significance of this vast cache of ethnographic observations.² Less attention has been paid to berdaches, or what scholars now refer to as two-spirit people. For historians a dearth of written historical evidence hampers such inquiries. Indeed, that lone traveler's 1825 recollection constitutes a rare piece of written evidence pertaining to the existence of two spirits among the Cherokees in early America. How, then, can we as historians make sense of that solitary 1825 document? Indeed, can a single written document have broader implications for understanding Cherokee history in early America?

No evidence survives to give us a clearer sense of who that 1825 traveler was and what he made of the information described. The traveler's recollections were preserved in an undated manuscript written by Charles C. Trowbridge. Born in Albany, New York, in 1800, Trowbridge traveled with Lewis Cass's expedition into the Northwest Territory in 1820 and later

1. C. C. Trowbridge, unpublished manuscript, Cherokee 7/6/1852, Series 3, John Gilmary Shea Papers, Georgetown University Library. The anthropologist Raymond Fogleson calculates that the Trowbridge manuscript dates to about 1825. See Raymond D. Fogleson, "Who Were the Ani-Kutani? An Excursion into Cherokee Historical Thought," *Ethnohistory* 31, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 260. See also Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (1986; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 3.

2. Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 62; Christopher B. Rodning and Jane M. Eastman, "Gender and the Archaeology of the Southeast," in Eastman and Rodning, eds., *Archeological Studies of Gender in the Southeastern United States* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 7; Susan M. Abram, "'Souls in the Treetops': Cherokee War, Masculinity, and Community, 1760–1820" (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 2009), 18. Polyandry, the practice of women possessing multiple marital partners, appears to have been less common among the Cherokees but has nonetheless been identified by historians of Cherokees living in diaspora during the early nineteenth century. See Mark M. Carroll, *Homesteads Ungovernable: Families, Sex, Race, and the Law in Frontier Texas, 1823–1860* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 25–26. In the Woodland South historians discount the existence of polyandry among the Cherokees, although some Cherokee women did have multiple sexual partners. See Julieanna Frost, "Folklore and Female Gender: A Comparative Study of the Cherokee and Creek Nations" (master's thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2000), 18.

became a prominent member of Detroit's business community. Trowbridge is best remembered, however, for his ethnological writings and his interest in understanding the languages and cultures of Native Americans.³ How Trowbridge acquired his information about Cherokee "men who assumed the dress and performed all the duties of women and who lived their whole life in this manner" remains unclear from the surviving archival documents. No records survive to suggest Trowbridge ever traveled through Cherokee country, although it was not uncommon for explorers, missionaries, and amateur ethnographers to share their insights about Native American language and culture through their correspondence.⁴ Still, Trowbridge's undated and unpublished manuscript provides no clue to how he acquired this information.⁵

With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can hypothesize that that small party of Cherokees described what Europeans and Euroamericans once labeled as berdaches, or what gender and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) scholars now refer to as two-spirit people. For example, Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) has led renewed scholarly efforts to understand the place of two spirits in Cherokee society. Driskill's scholarship relies extensively on oral testimonies and draws superficially on historical scholarship. Indeed, Driskill's work is motivated by his political activism as much as it is a product of scholarly inquiry. For instance, he writes that his objective in writing about Cherokee two spirits is to show how "Native Two-Spirits/GLBTQ [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer] people insist that we . . . have a place within traditional religious and spiritual life."⁶

Owing to the dearth of written evidence, historians of the eighteenth-

3. C. C. Trowbridge, *Delaware Indian Language of 1824*, ed. James A. Rementer (Merchantville, N.J.: Evolution Publishing, 2011); *Shawnese Traditions: C. C. Trowbridge's Account*, ed. Vernon Kinietz and Erminie W. Voegelin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939).

4. Barry A. Joyce, *The Shaping of American Ethnography: The Wilkes Exploring Expedition, 1838–1842* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 21, 86; Robert S. Grumet, "Zeisberger's *Diaries* as a Source for Studying Delaware Sociopolitical Organization," in A. G. Roeber, ed., *Ethnographies and Exchanges: Native Americans, Moravians, and Catholics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 50.

5. Jack F. Kilfoil, *C. C. Trowbridge, Detroit Banker and Michigan Land Speculator, 1820–1845* (New York: Arno Press, 1979).

6. Qwo-Li Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies," *GLQ* 16, nos. 1–2 (2010): 86.

and early nineteenth-century Woodland Indians have shied away from studies of two-spirit people.⁷ This has meant that gender theorists and LGBT scholars—comprising social scientists, literary theorists, and cultural studies experts—have shaped recent scholarly understandings of two-spirit people. Gender and LGBT scholars like Driskill do not rely on the types of evidence, or labor under the same interpretive boundaries, as historians. Indeed, much of their work on two spirits falls into the category of activist scholarship. For example, LGBT scholars might take the anecdote that I began this essay with and use it as evidence to prove the existence of two-spirit people in early nineteenth-century America. LGBT scholars might then link that history to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century gender and sexual politics in the United States.⁸

For historians of early America, approaching the study of two-spirit people in this way is problematic. For instance, one historian laments the ahistorical ways in which two-spirit people are imagined as part of an idealized “native” past in which sexual freedom among “traditional” Woodland Indians is portrayed as the norm. Questions can also be asked about the tendency of LGBT scholarship to routinely associate two spirits with homosexuality, or sodomites, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ethnologists would have articulated this relatively modern sociolegal category. Thus, while gender theorists and LGBT scholars use historical representations to buttress indigenous “revitalization movements,” historians view such reimaginings with suspicion.⁹

7. On the challenges presented by a dearth of archival evidence in relation to Native American history, see Gregory Evans Dowd, “The Panic of 1751: The Significance of Rumors on the South Carolina–Cherokee Frontier,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (July 1996): 556.

8. Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 12.

9. Richard C. Trexler, “Making the American Berdache: Choice or Constraint?” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 614, 623. For “revitalization movements” see Qwo-Li Driskill, “Yelesalehe Hiwayona Dikanohogida Naiwodusv/God Taught Me This Song, It Is Beautiful: Cherokee Performance Rhetorics as Decolonization, Healing, and Continuance” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2008), 124. Waziwatawin Angela Wilson raises questions about the romantic imagery of sexually liberated indigenous communities by pointing to the reservations that some Native American communities have had about accepting homosexuals and “gender benders” among them. Wilson, “Taku Toktokca Iwohdakapi (A Discussion of Different Things),” in *Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives*, trans. Wahpetunwin Carolyn Schommer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 230.

This essay constitutes a historical intervention in the current scholarly debate about Native American two spirits in the Woodland South. Focusing on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, I begin with an overview of the current state of the scholarship pertaining to two-spirit people. I then move to a brief analysis of the documents that twenty-first-century scholars of gender and sexuality interpret as proof of the existence of two-spirit people among Cherokees and other Native American societies in the Southeast, sources that date back to the sixteenth century. Though the scarcity of written sources is problematic, the material that has survived nonetheless provides important clues for understanding the trajectory of a historically constructed identity like two spirits.¹⁰ I then shift the focus of the essay back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, giving special attention to the most transformative period in post-contact Cherokee history—1770 to 1840—and the potential significance of that 1825 document in this era.

The surviving written documentation from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries forces us to ask some serious (and no doubt uncomfortable) questions about Cherokee two spirits. For example, was the 1825 quotation that I opened this essay with really proof, as the historian Walter L. Williams thinks, of two-spirit people in Cherokee society during the early republic? If so, why did contemporary observers not pay more attention to the cultural and ceremonial significance of two spirits? Alternatively, is it more accurate to recognize Cherokee two spirits in the early republic not as products of “traditional” or “ancient” cultural conventions, but as exemplars of social changes made amid the pressures of settler colonialism and exposure to foreign cultures? Or is the evidence of two spirits so sparse that it precludes historical conclusions of any value? These are not easy questions for historians to answer, but they are worth exploring if we hope to gain a more nuanced understanding of Cherokee conventions of gender, ritual, and spirituality in arguably the most dramatic epoch in post-contact Cherokee history.



The word *berdache* does not appear in the written sources pertaining to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Woodland South. So where does this word come from? *Berdache* has its etymological origins in Arabic-speaking regions of the world. The ancient Arabic terms *bardaj* or *barah* defined a “kept boy,” “male prostitute,” or “catamite.” By the early modern period in Europe, these terms continued to be associated with sodomy and

10. Trexler, “Making the American Berdache,” 623.

pederasty. The English term *berdache*, the French *bardache*, the Italian *berdasia*, and the Spanish *bardaxa* or *bardaje* referred variously to a slave or “kept boy,” and by the eighteenth century to men engaged in sodomy with boys or other adult males. As these definitions operated in European culture, and as various forms of colonialism extended into virtually every corner of the Americas by the end of the eighteenth century, *berdache* became in the European (and ultimately Euroamerican) imagination a way to both designate and denigrate Native American cross-dressers (or what modern readers might recognize as “gender benders”), “transvestites,” “hermaphrodites,” “androgynes,” and homosexual behavior.¹¹

When scholarship on the Native American berdache began taking shape in the early twentieth century, scholars were divided over the prevalence of such people among indigenous Americans. This early literature was dominated by anthropologists such as Alfred Kroeber, who argued that the berdache existed among all Native societies in colonial America.¹² In contrast, his fellow anthropologist John Swanton urged greater attention to geographical context, arguing, “Berdaches are not referred to by writers on Virginia and eastern Carolina, but in most other parts of the Southeast they seem to have formed an important factor in the social institution, particularly, it would seem, in Florida.”¹³

Over the course of the twentieth century, anthropologists and historians drew from a small but relatively detailed sampling of written documents to speculate that the berdache may have lived among the Five Tribes of the

11. H. Angelino and C. L. Shedd, “A Note on the Berdache,” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 1 (February 1955): 121–26; Sue-Ellen Jacobs, “Berdache: A Brief Review of the Literature,” *Colorado Anthropologist* 1, no. 1 (1968): 25; D. L. Davis and R. G. Whitten, “The Cross-Cultural Study of Human Sexuality,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16 (1987): 84; Jodi O’Brien, ed., *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2009), 63; Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 6–7; Roger M. Carpenter, “Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-Spirit as Warrior,” in Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough, eds., *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400–1850* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 147; William Benemann, *Men in Eden: William Drummond Stewart and Same-Sex Desire in the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 106.

12. Alfred L. Kroeber, “Handbook of the Indians of California,” *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 78 (1925): 46.

13. John R. Swanton, “Aboriginal Culture of the Southeast,” in *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1924–1925), 700.

Southeast—the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and Cherokees—though the social standing of such people remained unclear.¹⁴ Among the Choctaws, for example, the berdache was allegedly held “in great contempt.”¹⁵ Walter Williams counters such claims by taking a more positive view of the berdache in Woodland Indian societies. Williams contends that the 1825 testimony of the above-mentioned Cherokees offered rare proof of the existence of two-spirit people. Moreover, Williams suggests that such a source constitutes a clue about the special social status that two spirits enjoyed among Woodland Indians.¹⁶ Still, written evidence is thin and disagreements persist among historians about the existence of two-spirit people in eighteenth-century Cherokee society and the Native South more generally. For example, the historian Roger Carpenter maintains that the paucity of written sources related to two-spirit people in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Southeast makes historical analysis on this topic both difficult and controversial.¹⁷

If this historiography established anything, it was that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europeans and Euroamericans associated Native American berdaches with transgressive gender behavior and nonreproductive sexual activity. Historians generally agreed that these perceptions remained relatively constant in the racial imaginations of nineteenth-century Euroamericans—especially as they encountered the trans-Mississippi tribes of the Great Plains and Southwest. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, scholarly attempts to clarify the meaning of berdache among Native Americans did little more than reinforce the term’s offensive connotations and sociological imprecision, and heighten skepticism among historians of early America about the term’s utility. This has been particularly true for studies of the Woodland South since the 1960s.¹⁸ Over the past fifty years,

14. C. Callender and L. Kochems, “The North American Berdache,” *Current Anthropology* 24 (1983): 451. David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 40–56.

15. Greenberg, *Construction of Homosexuality*, 50. See also Will Roscoe, “North American Tribes with Berdache and Alternative Gender Roles,” in Roscoe, ed., *Living Spirits: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 217–19; D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 133.

16. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 3.

17. Carpenter, “Womanish Men and Manlike Women,” 147.

18. Angelino and Shedd, “A Note on the Berdache,” 125; Omer C. Stewart, “Homosexuality among the American Indians and Other Native Peoples of the World,” *Mattachine Review* 6, no. 2 (1960): 13.

social scientists have made a concerted effort to demystify the berdache and correct what many scholars view as the inaccuracies of previous ethnographic observations and anthropological analysis. As a result, a vast scholarship has emerged that focuses particularly on the berdache among the indigenous peoples of the Plains and emphasizes the spiritual and religious importance of the berdache in “traditional” indigenous cultures.¹⁹ While well intentioned, such scholarship did little to convince Native Americans that the word *berdache* was anything other than offensive. As a result, Native American gender theorists and LGBT scholars went on the offensive in the 1990s, labeling the word *berdache* a by-product of settler colonial “heteronormativity” and “heteropatriarchy.”²⁰

It was during the early 1990s that the term *two-spirit people* began replacing *berdache* in scholarly discourse.²¹ The term *two spirits*, in its simplest form, defines a person with “both a male and female spirit,” whose sexual behavior is—with occasional exceptions—predominantly homosexual.²² The anthropologist Sabine Lang added a cautionary note to this definition, arguing that “two-spirit partners” may not be of the same biological sex, or that a two spirit may have a partner of a mixed-gender status.²³ Fiona

19. Donald G. Forgey, “The Institution of Berdache among the North American Plains Indians,” *Journal of Sex Research* 11, no. 1 (1975): 1–15; Donald J. Blakeslee, “Who Were the Plains Indian Berdaches?” *Lambda Alpha Journal of Man* 11, no. 1 (1979): 41–65; James S. Thayer, “The Berdache of the Northern Plains: A Socioreligious Perspective,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 287–93; Jay Miller, “People, Berdaches, and Left-Handed Bears: Human Variation in Native America,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 274–87.

20. Andrea Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism” in Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, eds., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 43; Qwo-Li Driskill, “D4Y DǫC (Asegi Ayetl): Cherokee Two-Spirit People Reimagining Nation,” in Driskill et al., *Queer Indigenous Studies*, 99.

21. Michael J. Horswell, *Decolonizing the Sodomite: Queer Tropes of Sexuality in Colonial Andean Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 283n36.

22. Brian Joseph Gilley, *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 53, 89; Jeffrey S. Jacobi, “Two Spirits, Two Eras: For a Traditionalist Perspective on Native American Tribal Same-Sex Marriage Policy,” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 39 (Summer 2006): 6; Lee Irwin, “Cherokee Healing: Myth, Dreams, and Medicine,” *American Indian Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 254n17.

23. Sabine Lang, “Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People: Gender Variance and Homosexuality in Native American Communities,” in Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley

Meyer-Cook, a Native American policy analyst, elaborated on Lang's analysis by underscoring the spiritual significance of two-spirit people in indigenous communities. According to Meyer-Cook, "Two-spirit people are part of a historical tradition that was seen in many Aboriginal communities prior to colonization, whereby individuals with diverse gender identities were valued for the unique contributions they made to community life. Those who were seen to have both male and female spirits acting within them were sometimes asked to fulfill key ceremonial roles."²⁴

As gender and LGBT scholars engaged with and redefined the study of two spirits, historians turned their attention to other social, cultural, and political aspects of Native American life during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This period has proven to be particularly fruitful to historians of Cherokee history, especially those with an interest in gender, sexual, and racial conventions. For example, historians such as Theda Perdue, Sarah Hill, Carolyn Johnson, and Fay Yarbrough have produced fine studies that illuminate changes in Cherokee sexual and gender roles and explore the significance of interracial sex and marriage in Cherokee communities during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁵

How, then, might the study of two-spirit people deepen our understanding of the histories of gender and sexuality among the Cherokees in early America? Were two-spirit people a constant thread in the fabric of Cherokee society, or were two spirits examples of adaptive and innovative identities and the products of the settler colonial milieu of the eighteenth and

Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 104.

24. Fiona Meyer-Cook, "Two-Spirit People: Traditional Pluralism and Human Rights," in Shari Brotman and Joseph J. Levy, eds., *Intersections: Cultures, Sexualités et Genres* (Quebec: University of Quebec Press, 2008), 246.

25. Perdue, *Cherokee Women*; Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Carolyn R. Johnson, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838–1907* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); Fay Yarbrough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation: Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Fay Yarbrough, "Legislating Women's Sexuality: Cherokee Marriage Laws in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 385–416; Tyler Boulware, "We Are Men': Native American and Euroamerican Projections of Masculinity during the Seven Years' War," in Thomas A. Foster, ed., *New Men: Manliness in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 51–70.

early nineteenth centuries? Scholars of this period have little, if any, evidence to work with in trying to answer these questions.

Historians of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cherokee society endeavor to interpret archival documentation and understand written sources in relation to Cherokee epistemologies. For eighteenth-century Cherokees, the principles of *tobi* and *osi* were central to their worldview and to the ethic of balance and harmony that shaped Cherokee life. *Tobi* required Cherokee town and clan members to live in good health, balance, and peace with one another. *Osi* required Cherokees to live with the land in a state of neutrality, balancing the needs of the town with the ability of the local environment to provide for those needs.²⁶ The ethos underpinning *tobi* and *osi* also extended to ritual, diplomatic, and military contexts where Cherokee men and women could occupy the same historical stage. For example, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the Cherokee *ghigha* (or “beloved woman”) Nancy Ward played an active diplomatic role in attempting to preserve balance and harmony between Cherokees and white settlers. Though Cherokee gender identities and social roles came with a degree of malleability, there exists no documentary evidence to support insinuations that Cherokees like Ward assumed a two-spirit identity.²⁷ Such people may have been *asegi*, or “extraordinary,” but historians reject the connection that some gender theorists and LGBT scholars make when they posit that extraordinary Cherokees like Ward were two spirits.²⁸

Historians have good reasons for rejecting such assertions. The disciplinary boundaries of historical analysis demand that the historian present a body of evidence in which patterns can be discerned and conclusions made (tentative and contested as they usually are). Given this, historians generally agree that Ward’s diplomacy was in keeping with her role as a Beloved Woman and was not evidence of her two-spirit identity. Though there

26. Heidi M. Altman and Thomas N. Belt, “Reading History: Cherokee History through a Cherokee Lens,” *Native South* 1 (2008): 91.

27. William L. Anderson, Jane L. Brown, and Anne F. Rogers, eds., *The Payne-Buttrick Papers*, vols. 1–3 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 14–15; Clara Sue Kidwell, “Indian Women as Cultural Mediators,” *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 97–107, esp. 102; Norma Tucker, “Nancy Ward, Ghighau of the Cherokees,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (June 1969): 192–200; Tiya Miles, “‘Circular Reasoning’: Recentring Cherokee Women in the Antiremoval Campaigns,” *American Indian Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2009): 221–43.

28. Jacobi, “Two Spirits, Two Eras,” 838–39; Driskill, “D4Y D&C (Asegi Ayeti),” 98.

exists no debate among historians over whether Cherokees like Ward were two spirits, however, scholarly debate does go on in other humanities and social science disciplines. For example, gender theorists and LGBT scholars, not bound by the same evidentiary burdens as historians, remain open to speculation that prominent Cherokees like Ward were two spirits.²⁹

For historians, though, the written sources used to reconstruct Cherokee life during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are virtually silent on the existence of two-spirit people. Indeed, specific references to berdaches or two spirits are absent from the settler colonial archive of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Woodland South. To historians, then, the assertion that Ward was a two spirit remains unsupported by evidence and is generally dismissed as speculation. Similarly, that 1825 document that I opened this essay with might reasonably be labeled as anomalous. Without other forms of documentary evidence, few substantive conclusions can be made about the historical significance of such documents. Further historical inquiry is warranted, however. Such investigations should proceed with a heightened awareness that the archives of settler societies such as the United States are, to borrow from the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, sites not simply of “knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production.”³⁰ Put another way, decisions about which written documents to preserve, the manner in which archival sources are cataloged, and how to use such documents in historical narration, often tell us more about the social, legal, and political structures and power dynamics of a society than they do about the represented “facts” of the past.³¹ In pressing forward with historical analyses of two-spirit people, I am not proposing that we eschew written archives, but that we recognize their inherent biases and limitations and more vigorously incorporate Native ways of interpreting the past.

A number of recent gender and LGBT scholars have provided historians with a rough outline of how we might proceed with this task. These scholars do not feel as hamstrung by archival silences; instead, they incorporate

29. Driskill, “D4Y D&C (Asegi Ayetl),” 104–7.

30. Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 87.

31. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 13–14; Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 67; H. G. Jones, ed., *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791–1861* (Chapel Hill: North Carolinian Society, 1995).

archival fragments and place them in the broader context of critical theorizing on colonial travel writings, diplomatic records, and missionary ethnographies. Critical theorists are cognizant of the fact that these non-Cherokee observers did not travel among the indigenous people of the Woodland South expecting to chronicle the existence of two-spirit people. When the authors of these sources had their curiosity piqued by perceived anomalies in sexual or gendered behavior, they most surely lacked the cultural awareness, theoretical frameworks, and appropriate language to comprehend and adequately describe what they saw.³² The twenty-first-century scholar of two-spirit people in early America must therefore engage in that most precarious of historical endeavors: upstreaming, or inferring meaning in the past on the basis of contemporary social and cultural knowledge.³³

Understanding and presenting history in this way requires methodological agility. Indeed, gender theorists and LGBT scholars (like all students of Native American history) are quick to note that the written records that shape most historical narratives are often absent or inadequate in relation to American Indians. Borrowing from gender theorists and postmodernist scholars, historians of indigenous societies have attempted to overcome evidentiary shortfalls by using sociological and anthropological insights and working backward to make sense of the past. When critical theorists and historians of indigenous Americans employ “upstreaming” in their histories of Native America, the disciplinary boundaries separating them become much more permeable. We see this in the way the current generation of historians also employs the strategy of “side-streaming,” or the use of general (often regional) models, to conceptualize histories of a specific Native society and apply that model to the available written evidence from other geographical and historical contexts. Such a nimble approach to the writing of Native American history has not only given voice to the voiceless, but

32. I am here building on the insights of Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), chap. 1; Bernard W. Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1–3; Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 76–77; Alan Galloway, “Indian Slavery in Historical Context,” in Galloway, ed., *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 27.

33. Raymond Fogelson and Amelia Bell, “Cherokee Booger Mask Tradition,” in N. Ross Crumrine and Marjorie M. Halpin, eds., *The Power of Symbols: Masks and Masquerade in the Americas* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), 52.

enabled historians to flesh out the possible meanings hidden away in scant written evidence on the sexual life and gender identities of Native peoples from New England, the Woodland South, and the Spanish-American borderlands in the Southwest.³⁴

For historians, though, the absence of written historical evidence means that the study of two-spirit people remains, at best, a marginal facet of this newer historiography. The key to unlocking the mystery surrounding two spirits in early America rests in large part on recognizing the language used to describe such people. This recognition, in conjunction with a judicious use of “upstreaming” and “side-streaming” and acknowledgment of the importance of oral traditions in indigenous cultures, has the potential to yield two significant rewards to the historian. First, such an interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to gain glimpses of the physical appearance, behavior, and social status of two-spirit people in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cherokee society, albeit from the perspective of European and Euroamerican observers. Second, the historian will probably gain these insights in ways that further highlight the cultural filters through which Europeans and Euroamericans observed, described, and very often misunderstood indigenous communities.

Over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, Europeans and Euroamericans never uttered the phrase “two-spirit people.” Instead, they used words such as *hermaphrodite* and *sodomite* to describe what gender theorists and LGBT scholars now refer to as two spirits. For the vast majority of Europeans and Euroamericans who made these observations in the centuries before the American Revolution, this language was loaded with often negative moral and medical connotations. Among the earliest Europeans to write about the existence of so-called hermaphrodites among the indigenous people of North America’s Southeast was the French Huguenot explorer and founder of Fort Caroline (modern-day Jacksonville,

34. Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 168, 179; Ann Marie Plane, *Colonial Intimacies: Indian Marriage in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 24, 36; Theda Perdue, *“Mixed Blood” Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 15; Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Richard Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Florida), René Goulaine de Laudonnière. Laudonnière wrote of witnessing a “grande quantité d’hermaphrodites” during his expeditions to Florida in the early 1560s.³⁵

Laudonnière’s claim about a large population of hermaphrodites in Florida was supported by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues. In 1564 Le Moyne wrote that while a member of a French exploring expedition to Florida, he identified Indians “partaking of each sex.” Though he claimed that hermaphrodites were “quite common,” Le Moyne insisted that they were “considered odious by the Indians themselves.” Whether this value judgment was a reflection of Le Moyne’s own prejudices, or a product of his social intercourse with the local indigenous people, is not clear; what is evident from his descriptions is that these Native hermaphrodites were “quite strong,” were allegedly employed as “beasts of burden,” and carried provisions for warriors during times of war.³⁶

Le Moyne’s assessment of the social standing of hermaphrodites in the Native societies of Florida suggests that they occupied a servile status. Given the allegedly servile station of the people he witnessed, however, Le Moyne could just as plausibly have witnessed kinless war captives and not two-spirit people.³⁷ Alternatively, the physical strength displayed by the so-called Florida hermaphrodites, and their use in war, suggests that the people Le Moyne claimed he saw may have occupied special positions of spiritual and ritual importance. According to Le Moyne, when a warrior fell in battle, it was the job of the hermaphrodites to attach the deceased body to two “stout poles,” to which was affixed a “mat woven of reeds” (figure 1). Le Moyne confessed to not knowing the ritual significance of this practice, but, as in other southeastern Indian societies, the task of tending to the needs of the recently deceased was most certainly not a job for the kinless.³⁸ Thus, the people Le Moyne labeled hermaphrodites appeared to possess the physical strength of men, undertook the labor associated with women, and performed the ritual and spiritual roles of priests. These were far from the

35. René Goulaine de Laudonnière, *L’histoire notable de la Floride: Située es Indes Occidentales* (Paris: Chez P. Jannet, 1853), 9. An English translation was published in 1964 as *A Notable History Containing Four Voyages Made by Certain French Captains unto Florida* (Larchmont, N.Y.: H. Stevens, 1964).

36. Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, *Narrative of Le Moyne, an Artist Who Accompanied the French Expedition to Florida under Laudonnière, 1564*, trans. Theodor de Bry (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1875), 7.

37. On captivity and its changing meanings in early America, see Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

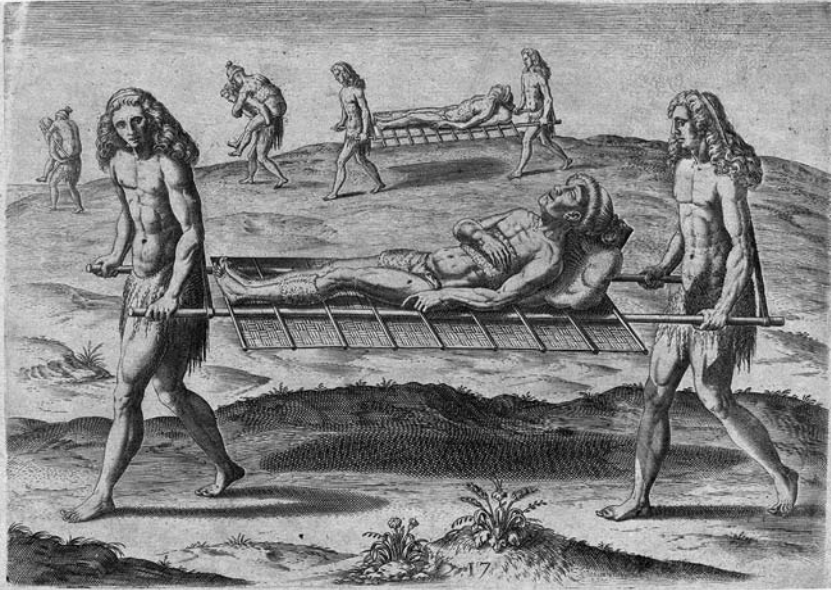


Figure 1. Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues's watercolor, *Employments of the Hermaphrodites*. Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida (image no. DG00977).

“odious” people Le Moyne imagined; rather, these were individuals with ritual roles of such importance that they were probably viewed by their peers as people possessing extraordinary spiritual powers.

Over the ensuing three centuries, reports containing the type of detail that Le Moyne committed to the printed page were rare. This can be explained in large part by the visceral feelings of disgust and contempt that European and Euroamerican men expressed for people they assumed to be either hermaphrodites or sodomites. For instance, one of the few reports of two spirits during the first half of the nineteenth century came from the artist George Catlin. While visiting the Sac and Fox Indians, Catlin observed a ceremony that he later painted as *Dance to the Berdache*. Reflecting on what he had witnessed, Catlin wrote bluntly, “This is one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have ever met in Indian country.” Catlin revealed more than he realized about the heteronormative colonizing lens through which he and other white Americans viewed indigenous people—be it in the Midwest or the Woodland South—when he

38. Le Moyne, *Narrative*, 8.

added, “I should wish that it [the berdache] might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded.”³⁹

To appreciate the depth of such sentiments, it is important to recognize that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Judeo-Christian sexual ethics and developments in medical knowledge often portrayed hermaphrodites and sodomites as anomalous, even freakish, members of the human race.⁴⁰ For example, eighteenth-century midwifery manuals and medical primers puzzled over the significance of excessively large male and female genitalia, and anatomists struggled to understand the place of “hermaphrodites” in the natural world.⁴¹ By 1800 exploration, colonization, the spread of different forms of Christianity, and the use of Africans as a slave labor force on New World plantations meant that increasingly sophisticated discourses of race gave observations of gender and sexual “abnormalities” new layers of cultural meaning.⁴²

Medical and popular descriptions of human genital monstrosities and “freaks,” such as Native American hermaphrodites, conveyed what the women’s studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson refers to as the “semantic distinctions” between the “normal” human body and the “abnormal.”⁴³ As the language of race became increasingly sophisticated and “scientific” during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the

39. Catlin is quoted in Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 199–200.

40. Analysis of human hermaphrodites can extend back further, to the study of the folklore and fables of the ancient world. See Johann G. Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (1800; repr., New York: Bergman, 1966), 99; Thomas Denman, *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery* (London: T. Bensley, 1788), 71; Alexander Hamilton, *A Treatise of Midwifery*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Charles Elliot, 1785), 37; Laura A. Lewis, “From Sodomy to Superstition: The Active Pathic and Bodily Transgressions in New Spain,” *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 129–58.

41. Denman, *Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, 71; see, similarly, Hamilton, *A Treatise of Midwifery*, 37.

42. Everard Home, “An Account of the Dissection of an Hermaphrodite Dog: To Which Are Prefixed, Some Observations on Hermaphrodites in General,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 89 (1799): 163; Sean Teuton, “‘Put Out of Her Course’: Images of the Monstrous in de Bry’s Illustrations of *Atlanta Fugiens* and the *America*,” in Kathleen P. Long, ed., *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010), 92; Elizabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 7.

43. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” in Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural*

distinction between normal and abnormal bodies in North America became grafted onto settler colonial narratives about Native American and African American “otherness.”⁴⁴ Whether in reported cases of genital deformities among African Americans, or in instances of Native American hermaphrodites, such medical and ethnographic anecdotes added to a growing archive of rationales designed to exclude people of African and Native American descent from the Anglo-American body politic.⁴⁵ Thus, when Catlin articulated his desire for the Native American berdache to be “extinguished before it be more fully recorded,” he was giving voice not to a quest for ethnographic similarities between Europeans and Euroamericans, as Stephen Greenblatt and Karen Kupperman identified in early Spanish and English contacts with Native Americans, but to a logic of categorization, exclusion, and ultimately dispossession.⁴⁶



Cherokee people recognized all this and actively sought out new cultural and political strategies to successfully address the myriad challenges confronting them in the early republic. As Cherokee chiefs agreed to treaties with the leaders of the new American republic, signing over thousands of acres of tribal lands to the United States in the process, ordinary Cherokees tried to focus on rebuilding communities destroyed during the Revolutionary War. They did this by dispersing to communal farmsteads throughout Cherokee country and by beginning to forge a centralized system of laws and governance. Cherokees embarked on these endeavors with a pretty clear picture of what they hoped to rebuild. For eighteenth-century Cherokees,

Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3. See also Teuton, “Put Out of Her Course,” 109.

44. Joyce Chaplin offers a carefully thought-out cautionary note on the use of the concept of “otherness” in her *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 81–82.

45. Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 26; John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 2–4.

46. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). On the logic of settler colonial exclusion and dispossession, see Patrick Wolfe, “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 866–905.

town life defined one’s identity and sense of community, and it was this nourishing sense of community that Cherokees hoped to recapture on late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century farmsteads.⁴⁷ Thus, if two-spirit people existed among the Cherokees, evidence for their playing a prominent role in social, political, and ceremonial life would surely have surfaced at the local level and in town and clan life before the American Revolution or on farmsteads in the decades following the Revolutionary War.⁴⁸

That such archival evidence is absent—with the exception of C. C. Trowbridge’s unpublished manuscript that I began this essay with—tends to support historical conjecture about the absence of two-spirit Cherokees in early America. Alternatively, the dearth of written evidence also tells us a story about the interpretative inadequacies of those individuals contributing to the ethnographic archive of settler colonialism in North America.⁴⁹ Archival evidence suggests that when English colonists in Virginia and the Carolinas began conducting regular trade and diplomatic relations with the Cherokees during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their focus was on the nature of the lands occupied by Cherokee towns and their suitability for the solidification and extension of colonial society and trade networks.⁵⁰ Indeed, the English colonists recognized the potential value of the mountainous landscapes occupied by the Cherokees. They imagined Cherokee country as an Edenic sanctuary of purity and untapped natural resources. As South Carolina’s Royal Governor James Glen wrote in 1749, Cherokee country was “Hilly, and Mountainous, but said to be interspersed with pleasant and

47. “Reflections on the Institutions of the Cherokee Indians,” *Analectic Magazine* 36 (1818): 40; Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 57; William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 11–12; Andrew Denson, *Demanding the Cherokee Nation: Indian Autonomy and American Culture, 1830–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 16.

48. Tyler Boulware, *Deconstructing the Cherokee Nation: Town, Region, and Nation among Eighteenth-Century Cherokees* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 2–3, 10; see also Christopher B. Rodning, “Reconstructing the Coalescence of Cherokee Communities in Southern Appalachia,” in Robbie Ethridge and Charles Hudson, eds., *Transformation of the Southeastern Indians, 1540–1760* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 172.

49. For an example of these inadequacies see “Reflections on the Institutions of the Cherokee Indians,” 38.

50. Paul Demere to William Lyttelton, August 28, 1759, box 11, William Henry Lyttelton Papers, 1730–1806, Manuscripts Division, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (hereafter CL); Edith Mays, ed., *Amberst Papers, 1756–1763: The Southern Sector: Dispatches from South Carolina, Virginia and His Majesty’s Superintendent of Indian Affairs* (Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1999), 106, 176–77.

Fruitful Vallies and water'd by many Limpid and wholesome Brooks and Rivulets that run among their Hills and give those real Pleasures that we in the Lower Settlements have only in Imagination.”⁵¹

Life in these “Fruitful Vallies” changed quite dramatically for the Cherokees in the half century after Glen wrote those impressions. During these decades, disease and depopulation, trade, land speculation, sexual and social mixture, and increasing incidences of frontier violence and warfare led to what Wilma Dunaway describes as “ethnic reorganizations” among the Cherokees.⁵² Amid the cacophony of colonial forces that altered town life and led Cherokees to reconstitute kinship bonds on communal farmsteads after the American Revolution, written evidence that details the presence of two-spirit people remained rare. For example, William Adair, the best of the eighteenth-century’s chroniclers of life among the Woodland Indians, inadvertently provided evidence of hermaphrodites in the course of describing a violent incident between upper town “Muskohge” warriors and “Chikkasah” traders in 1746. The catalyst for this incident was the ill treatment meted out to Muskogee women by Chickasaw men,

51. James Glen, South Carolina, Answer to Queries, September 30, 1749, vol. 45, Shelburne Papers, CL.

52. Wilma Dunaway, “Incorporation as an Interactive Process: Cherokee Resistance to Expansion of the Capitalist World-System, 1560–1763,” *Sociological Inquiry* 66, no. 4 (November 1996): 457. See also E. Lane to Lt. Smith, September 25, 1786, Josiah Harmar Papers, 1681–1937, CL; James Staats Morris to Lewis Morris, December 16, 1793, box 1, Native American History Collection, 1689–1921, CL; John Lawson, *History of North Carolina* (Charlotte: Observer Printing House, 1903), 169; John Entick, *The General History of the Late War* (London: Edward Dilly, 1764), 14–15; Richard B. Davis, “Forgotten Scientists in Georgia and South Carolina,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (September 1943): 271–84; Tom Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13, 82; Thomas Nuttall, *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory, during the Year 1819* (Philadelphia: Thos. M. Palmer, 1821), 124; Jeffrey Amherst to Col. Montgomery, New York, February 24, 1760, WO34/48, RH 2/4/561, Documents Relating to Royal Scots, 1684–1855, National Archives of Scotland; Mays, *Amberst Papers*, 288; John Ridge to President James Monroe, March 8, 1821, John Ridge, ca. 1821–1835, Ayer MS 761, Newberry Library, Chicago (hereafter NL); *A Vindication of the Cherokee Claims, Addressed to the Town Meeting in Philadelphia, on the 11th of January, 1830* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1830), 3; S. C. Stambaugh, Amos Kendall, George W. Paschal, and M. St. Clair Clarke, *A Faithful History of the Cherokee Tribe of Indians, from the Period of Our First Intercourse with Them, Down to the Present Time* (Washington, D.C.: Jesse E. Dow, 1846), 3.

who “forcibly viewed the nakedness of one of their women, (who was reputed to be an hermaphrodite).”⁵³

That Adair’s record of Muskogean hermaphrodites was incidental to his larger narrative of intertribal violence reveals much about how white men saw gender, transgender, and sexuality as peripheral to the recording of indigenous techniques of war, frontier violence, and colonial trade. Gender and LGBT scholars identify these “reputed” hermaphrodites as evidence for the existence of two-spirit people. As Driskell contends, Cherokee two spirits passed down to each new generation a connection to “spiritual traditions” because they were imbued with the qualities of both man and woman.⁵⁴ The spiritual qualities of Cherokee two spirits, however, were poorly understood during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Cultural chauvinism was not the only reason for the poor understanding that Europeans and Euroamericans had of Cherokee spiritual beliefs and ceremonial practices. According to John Howard Payne, the early nineteenth-century performer and avid chronicler of Cherokee culture and history, the most sacred spiritual traditions were closely guarded, knowledge of them being reserved to the “initiated.”⁵⁵ As gender theorists and LGBT scholars read this history of secretiveness about ritual and ceremonial knowledge, the guarding of such knowledge helps explain the gaps in colonial archives in relation to two-spirit people.⁵⁶

That said, Payne’s papers, and the transcriptions that the missionary Daniel Butrick entrusted to him, provide historians with some rare and important glimpses of life among the Cherokees in the early republic. The Payne-Butrick papers offer insights into Cherokee oral traditions, insights that were filtered through both men’s Christian understanding of the world and the prevailing ethnographic obsession of their time: tracing the Jewish antecedents of Native Americans.⁵⁷ Payne and Butrick were thus eager to

53. James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1775), 23.

54. Driskill, “D4Y DŕC (Asegi Ayetl),” 101.

55. Anderson, Brown, and Rogers, *Payne-Butrick Papers*, 1–3, 128.

56. For further analysis of this point see Terry S. Kogan, “Transsexuals and Critical Gender Theory: The Possibility of a Restroom Labeled ‘Other,’” *Hastings Law Journal* 48 (1997): 1223–55; Carolyn Epple, “Coming to Terms with Navajo ‘nádleehí’: A Critique of *Berdache*, ‘Gay,’ ‘Alternate Gender,’ and ‘Two-Spirit,’” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (May 1998): 267–90.

57. William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*, ed. Walter H. Conser Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 135–38.

learn from their Cherokee informants how the ancient Cherokees understood the origins of the world. Many of these informants were themselves influenced by the Christian teachings brought to the South by missionaries, but they nonetheless told a tale of how their ancient forebears believed the world to be divided into the upper world, this world, and the underworld. The Cherokees believed that these worlds were inhabited by both malevolent and benevolent beings, beings that included “little People,” predatory “Night Walkers,” “great monsters,” and the original humans who were made from the “red clay.”⁵⁸ The narrative of Kana’ti (“Lucky Hunter”) and Selu (“Corn Mother”), and their sons, the two “Thunder Boys,” became widely known during the twentieth century owing to the ethnographic work of James Mooney at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Payne and Butrick’s early nineteenth-century rendering of this narrative contained many of the major plotlines that Mooney later recorded, something that bears testimony to the durability and attention to detail in Cherokee oral traditions. Payne’s narrative recounts the creation of the Cherokee world and focuses on the instructions that Kana’ti gave to his sons after they murdered their mother. These instructions, Payne’s Cherokee informants told him, “are held very sacred among them, and only imparted with great solemnity when initiated into the greater mysteries of their religion; and then under engagements of secrecy.”⁶⁰

Why the secrecy? The Cherokee scholars William Anderson, Jane Brown, and Anne Rogers link the secrecy described by Payne to the quotation that I opened this essay with, and the role that cross-dressing people played in important, secret Cherokee rituals.⁶¹ Though the connection Anderson, Brown, and Rogers make is supported by the slimmest of written evidence, it is nonetheless reflected in the oral histories collected by ethnographic observers such as Payne and Mooney over the course of the nineteenth century. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, gender

58. Thomas E. Mails, *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times* (Tulsa: Council Oaks Books, 1992), 129–31; John Howard Payne, undated letter, fragment of a manuscript about the Cherokees, manuscript 3710, Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives (hereafter NAA); Alan Kilpatrick, *The Night Has a Naked Soul: Witchcraft and Sorcery among the Western Cherokees* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 10.

59. “Original Manuscript of Cherokee Stories Published in the 19th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology,” manuscript 1905, James Mooney Collection, NAA.

60. Anderson, Brown, and Rogers, *Payne-Butrick Papers*, vols. 1–3, 128.

61. See the editors’ annotation of Payne’s narrative in Anderson, Brown, and Rogers, *Payne-Butrick Papers*, vols. 1–3, 341n81.

and LGBT scholars cited similar oral testimonies in an effort to connect to Cherokee traditions and two-spirit people. According to this most recent generation of gender and LGBT scholars, recognizing these connections makes it possible to see how two spirits possessed (and continue to possess) dual male and female spirits that empowered them with spiritual force and authority to play prominent roles in, for example, initiation rituals.⁶²

For most Cherokees, these oral (and aural) archives were critical to spiritual knowledge, ritual practices, and a sense of time and historical consciousness. Unlike Western culture, whose linear histories rely on written documents and are often characterized by the positivistic interpretations of professional historians, traditional Cherokee culture posits time as circular. There existed no linear past, present, or future in traditional Cherokee epistemologies, only a present that understood the events of, for instance, 1761, 1776, or 1839, as affecting Cherokee life as though they had occurred moments before.

Reinforcing this sense of immediacy in the way Cherokees lived with history was how circular formations defined Cherokee ceremonial life in the eighteenth century. The Cherokee lodge, a site of both political and religious importance, was built with seven sides, one for each Cherokee clan. For the Cherokees, like other indigenous people in early America, the circle symbolized creation, family, and clan. The circle, the theological scholar George Tinker (of the Osage Nation) explains, “has no beginning and no end, all in the circle are of equal value.”⁶³ Within these circles, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Native Americans like the Cherokees worshipped not physical forms, but the spirits that lived within the interconnected life forms of creation. As W. Alan Smith explains, “Cherokees, like other Native Americans, worshipped the spirit within animals, not the physical form within which that spirit lived.”⁶⁴

Given these Cherokee epistemologies and how they informed the nature and physical location of spiritual worship, Cherokees may have felt no need

62. See, for example, Driskill, “Yelesalehe Hiwayona Dikanohogida Naiwodusv”; Lang, “Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People,” 100–118; Mary Ann Jacobs and Lester B. Brown, “American Indian Lesbians and Gays: An Exploratory Study,” in Lester B. Brown, ed., *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 37.

63. George Tinker, “The Full Circle of Liberation: An American Indian Theology of Place,” *Sojourners* 12 (October 1992): 16.

64. W. Alan Smith, “A Cherokee Way of Knowing: Can Native American Spirituality Impact Religious Education?” *Religious Education* 90, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 243.

to identify two-spirit people to missionaries, traders, and ethnographers because their physical appearance was incidental to the special spiritual gifts that they possessed and the ritual roles that they served. Moreover, refusing to give non-Cherokees access to, and knowledge of (and thus over), the most sacred details of ceremonial life may have protected Cherokee two spirits from the often disruptive colonial gaze of government agents, missionaries, and ethnographers.

Still, questions remain. Late eighteenth-century European and Euro-american observers paid considerable attention to the form of spiritual rituals and the nature of everyday attire among the Woodland Indians.⁶⁵ In other words, they *saw* the world very differently from the ways in which Cherokees perceived the spiritual value of the world around them—and, we might reasonably speculate, they saw only what Cherokees wanted them to see. The rituals of everyday life that non-Cherokee observers saw included practices that they believed were designed both to designate one's gendered identity in Cherokee society and to establish social standing. An adult Cherokee male, for example, had a daily grooming routine that reportedly included the extraction of eyebrows and facial hair.⁶⁶ William Bartram reported that the everyday attire of Cherokee males was “very simple,” though they occasionally wore a “ruffled shirt of fine linen” and “cloth boots.” Cherokee women wore knee-length petticoats made of “woven cloth.”⁶⁷ In ceremonial contexts, a chief might wear a shirt made from gold-dyed buckskin, leggings, and matching feathered headdress. Beloved Women wore knee-length skirts woven from feathers and seamed with “down plucked from the breast of a white swan.”⁶⁸ If a ceremonial dance was performed in preparation for warriors' going into battle, the dancers wore rattles and masks during the ritual. In yet other contexts,

65. Lawson, *History of North Carolina*, 19.

66. William Gerard De Brahm, *De Brahm's Report of the General Survey in the Southern District of North America*, ed. Louis De Vorse Jr. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 109–10.

67. William Bartram, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws* (1791; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 500–501; Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 117.

68. Henry Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lt. Henry Timberlake: The Story of a Soldier, Adventurer, and Emissary to the Cherokees, 1756–1765*, ed. Duane H. King (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 144; Grace Steele Woodward, *The Cherokees* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 37.

women brewed ceremonial medicine that often included the use of sacred herbs, minerals, and coals from the sacred fire.⁶⁹

By the early nineteenth century observations of a similarly detailed nature continued to be made. For example, when John Howard Payne collected material for his history of the Cherokees, one of his trusted informants, Thomas Nutsawi, explained, “The dress of the Cherokee priests and their wives distinguishes them from other Cherokees.” Male priests identified themselves by leaving “a tuft of hair on their heads and shaved a ring around it about 2 inches wide. They then used a red and yellow dust, made it into a paste, and painted their hair. They wore a 2–3 inch deer horn on the very top of their head. Women ‘anointed’ their hair with bears oil and sprinkled it with red and yellow dust.”⁷⁰

Similarly, warfare continued to carry significant ceremonial and social importance to the Cherokees. Warriors were typically men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty. When a warrior distinguished himself in battle, he returned home and presented the spoils of war to his female kin; he received in return the adoration of his townspeople, which they demonstrated “by giving him a new name & hoeing his corn field.”⁷¹ Cherokee warriors, however, were not strictly men. Evidenced exists to suggest that “women have in certain cases dressed in men’s clothes and [gone] into battle.”⁷²

To LGBT theorists of Native America, this evidence might be interpreted as yet further proof of the existence of two-spirit people among the early nineteenth-century Cherokees. The historian could reasonably counter that the existence of Cherokee women going into battle dressed in men’s clothing is evidence not of two-spirit people, but of female warriors wearing the appropriate battle attire of the day. Should such evidence, then, be interpreted as proof of “gender-bending” behavior and in keeping with one of the

69. Charles M. Hudson, *Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 244; James Adair, *The History of the American Indians: Particularly Those Nations Adjoining to the Mississippi, East and West Florida, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Virginia* (1775; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 124.

70. John Howard Payne Papers, 1794–1841, vol. 4, folder 7, Ayer Ms. 689, NL. See also Swanton, “Aboriginal Culture of the Southeast,” 691, who argued that a number of Cherokee women earned fame “both in war and council.”

71. John Howard Payne Papers, 1794–1841, vol. 3, Indian Antiquities, 65, 124.

72. John Howard Payne Papers, 1794–1841, vol. 3, Indian Antiquities; Cherokee Antiquities, Ayer Ms. 689, NL. For a Creek comparison see Felicity Donohoe, “To Beget a Tame Breed of People: Sex, Marriage, Adultery, and Indigenous North American Women,” *Early American Studies* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 101–31.

theoretically defined characteristics of two-spirit people, or should a more cautious approach be taken to the conclusions we draw from such sources? The historian Theda Perdue's detailed analysis of the Cherokee *ghigha*, Nancy Ward, suggests LGBT scholarship is overreaching when it contends that cross-dressing women in battle constituted tangible evidence of Cherokee two spirits.⁷³ Still, historians should not be too hasty in dismissing the conclusions of LGBT scholars. How, for instance, might the oral traditions that historians, gender theorists, and LGBT scholars analyze be more effectively incorporated into historical analyses of two-spirit Cherokees to clarify our understanding of them in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cherokee life?



Further research is needed if we as historians of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Native Americans hope to answer these questions and understand the historical significance of documents like the one that I opened this essay with. Given the limitations of the written sources available to us, this work needs to embrace an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on the best insights from sociological, anthropological, and historical analysis, in addition to the analyses of literary criticism, gender theorists, and LGBT scholars. Furthermore, it may be that other written sources like that 1825 document do in fact exist in archives in the United States and Europe. Such documents may lie buried among the mass of diplomatic and economic records that dominate the historical study of settler colonialism in Cherokee country and the Native South generally. Alternatively, such documents may be tucked away in archival boxes labeled "Miscellaneous." Whatever the case, finding documents like the one I opened this essay with will require historians to think just as critically about how, where, and why certain written documents pertaining to Native Americans have been preserved in archives, just as we routinely assess what a document reveals about human beings at a particular time and place.

This approach to the archives has the potential to be most fruitful when historians learn from the interdisciplinary methodologies of Native American studies. We as historians can learn much from our colleagues in Native American studies and the ways in which they skillfully use oral traditions.

73. Michael Bronski makes a similar point in his work, arguing that LGBT scholarship tends to make "oversimplified" and "sentimentalized" conclusions about the existence of two-spirit people in early America. See Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 3.

As historians, we can draw insight and inspiration from this work and formulate new, historically grounded questions about indigenous written archives and, in turn, present new insights into the historical significance of oral narratives that relate to the gendered dimensions of Cherokee ritual practices and spiritual beliefs during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is to suggest not that we historians make conclusions about the past in the absence of evidence, but that we think about what constitutes evidence, and how we analyze it, in a more robust manner. This was what the historian Gregory Evans Dowd encouraged when he urged historians of early America to take “rumor” in Native American history more seriously. And it is what his fellow historian Wendy Anne Warren pointed to when she observed that, without “imagination,” histories of subaltern people become simplistic and one-dimensional.⁷⁴ I would go a step further and argue that without taking Native American storytelling seriously, or failing to apply a critical imagination (what we might also call a critical historical consciousness) to archival research and the narration of the past, we as historians run the risk of reifying colonial power dynamics and forever silencing the voiceless.

The approach outlined above may or may not get us closer to understanding the place of two-spirit people in Cherokee society, their role in maintaining *tobi* and *osi*, and the extent to which they were viewed by fellow Cherokees as *asegi*. Studying that 1825 document in the broader context of Native Americans oral histories and employing a critical historical imagination certainly has its methodological risks. As humanists, though, historians owe it to the people who came before them to explore more innovative approaches to historical analysis, especially when the archives of settler colonialism prove inadequate. Indeed, the mere effort will force us to pause before passing historical judgment on, for example, those cross-dressing Cherokees whom that lone white traveler heard about as he journeyed through Cherokee country in 1825.

74. Dowd, “The Panic of 1751,” 556; Wendy Anne Warren, “‘The Cause of Her Grief’: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (March 2007): 1049.