

# Digital Photograph:

## “Our Lady of Perpetual Blood Quantum”

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## IMAGE DESCRIPTION

The image depicts a person nearly naked. They are light skinned, with red facial hair and dark body hair. They wear a purple powwow dance shawl over their shoulders and are seated behind a large chemistry flask. They have a serious expression on their face, and their eyes are directed slightly away and beyond the viewer.

The flask sits on the center of a surface covered in a yellow-gold colored fabric, with four tea light candles placed on the surface's four corners. Behind the person are lights that form of a halo. A curling red ribbon appears to be either flowing into or rising out of the flask, connected to the person's left hand, which is extended and open towards the viewer. With two fingers, the person's right hand touches or points to a tattoo at the center of their chest. The tattoo depicts Water Spider, a central creative figure in a Cherokee creation stories.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

This image came about through an assignment I created for undergraduate and graduate students in a course I teach at Oregon State University, "QS/WGSS 477/577: Queer and Trans People of Color Arts and Activism." This was the second time I taught this course, and during its first iteration one of the undergraduate students started to create what they called "performance art selfies" and sharing them with the class.

I expanded this concept into an assignment during the class's second iteration, rooting it in La Pocha Nostra's Photo Performances<sup>1</sup> and a blog post by The Feminist Griote, "The Radical Politics of #selfies."<sup>2</sup> I asked students to think about the performative aspects of the image they created, its political purpose, and how we can use our bodies to create intentionally political images.

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1 Gómez-Peña, Guillermo and RJ Muna. *La Pocha Nostra's Four Portfolios in Progress*. La Pocha Nostra, <http://www.pochanostra.com/photoperformances/>. Accessed 25 May 2017.

2 The Feminist Griote. "The Radical Politics of #selfies." *The Feminist Griote*. Nov 22, 2013. <http://thefeministgriote.com/the-radical-politics-of-selfies/>. Accessed 25 May 2017.

Because this project feels vulnerable for many students, and because I don't think teachers should ever ask students to do something we haven't done, or wouldn't do, ourselves, I decided to participate in this assignment by creating my own image.

While I envisioned the image, it isn't a "selfie" in a pure sense. My partner Michael Floyd, who has a much better eye for photography than I do, helped set up the lighting and composition of the image, and took the digital photograph after it was clear that—without a selfie stick—I wouldn't be able to create the image I wanted.

Beyond the title of this piece, I don't wish to direct its interpretation too much. Instead, I want to allow for meanings to be made reciprocally with the audience. In a discussion board in class, for instance, one of the students, Charles Sasaki-Skopp, pointed out a fact that I wasn't aware of when I created the image: the flask is "a Florence flask, a piece of laboratory apparatus used to heat, boil, and distill chemical solutions. ... The round bottom provides even space for heat to spread into the solution, gently raising its temperature until boiling away."<sup>3</sup> This may not have been intentional on my part, but the additional meanings provided through this reading contribute to my own understandings of this image's visual rhetorics.

The image feels both confrontational and vulnerable to me as a mixed-race and unenrolled Cherokee, as a Two-Spirit and non-binary Trans person, and as a person with disabilities and chronic illnesses because my body is often scrutinized and measured for makers of "authenticity" in both covert and overt ways, and my body in this image is exposed. In *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*, Ellen Samuels argues:

At the core of the fantasy of identification lies the assumption that embodied social identities such as race, gender, and disability are fixed, legible, and categorizable. ... (O)ur modern practices of identification are not simply mapped onto given

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3 Driskill, Qwo-Li. *QS/WGSS 477/577: Queer and Trans People of Color Arts and Activism*. Charles Sasaki-Skopp, "Online Workshop Space: Performance Art Selfie Drafts." Oregon State U, Oct 27, 2016. [https://oregonstate.instructure.com/courses/1610886/discussion\\_topics/7826820](https://oregonstate.instructure.com/courses/1610886/discussion_topics/7826820). Accessed 25 May 2017.

bodily characteristics. Rather medical, legal, and political authorities have anxiously scanned our bodies in search of such characteristics—without which the increasingly unwieldy social apparatus of normalization and difference would collapse—and then made strident retrospective claims as to their obvious and natural existence (11).

This image, then, intentionally uses embodied, performative, and visual rhetorics to challenge the scanning of my body—and the bodies of other Indigenous, Trans, Two-Spirit, mixed-race, and Disabled people—through inviting viewers to confront their desire to scan bodies for markers of authenticity and/or identify with the experience of being scanned, monitored, and categorized.

## WORKS CITED

- Driskill, Qwo-Li. *QS/WGSS 477/577: Queer and Trans People of Color Arts and Activism*. Charles Sasaki-Skopp, "Online Workshop Space: Performance Art Selfie Drafts." Oregon State U, Oct 27, 2016. [https://oregonstate.instructure.com/courses/1610886/discussion\\_topics/7826820](https://oregonstate.instructure.com/courses/1610886/discussion_topics/7826820). Accessed 25 May 2017.
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- Samuels, Ellen. *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*. New York: New York U, 2014.

**Qwo-Li Driskill** is a non-citizen Cherokee Two-Spirit writer, performer, and activist also of African, Irish, Lenape, Lumbee, and Osage ascent. S/he is the author of *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory* and *Walking with Ghosts: Poems* and the co-editor of *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* and *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*. S/he holds a PhD in Rhetoric & Writing from Michigan State University and is an Associate Professor of Queer Studies and Director of Graduate Studies in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Oregon State University.

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