Dr. Linder: You're listening to Research in Action, episode 178.

Dr. Linder: Welcome to Research in Action, a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder, Research Director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

Dr. Linder: On this episode, I'm joined by Qwo-Li Driskill, a non-citizen Cherokee Two-Spirit and queer writer, activist and performer, also of African, Irish, Lenape, Lumbee and Osage ascent. They're the author of 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. Their book, Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award in 2017.

Dr. Linder: Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Qwo-Li.

Qwo-Li: Thanks for having me.

Dr. Linder: I would love to start by hearing a little bit about your work in indigenous and two-spirit studies. Can you explain what this field looks like and maybe some of the projects that you've worked on?

Qwo-Li: I always hesitate calling it a field because I get a little nervous about field building in this way, but folks who do work in queer indigenous and two-spirits studies are looking at the ways that constructions of gender and sexuality are related to ongoing settler colonialism, both historical and contemporary of indigenous people. My own work, I am the co-editor of two collections. One of them is Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature, and the other is Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature.

Qwo-Li: Then I also am the author of the book Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory. There are a lot of people doing a lot of different kinds of work, but I would say what draws us together is a critique of the constructions of sexuality and gender in the U.S., Canada, Aotearoa, Australia, and other places that are under ongoing settler colonialism as part of a colonial project, and a tool that has been and is used to control indigenous people and nations and land.

Dr. Linder: I would imagine this work is pretty interdisciplinary. I'm wondering if you can share what your approaches have been as you're looking at the specific areas that you're exploring.

Qwo-Li: Well, I use historiography. A lot of my scholarship around this doesn't really see a separation between poetic work and scholarly work, and I tried to push back at that false binary, but I use some historiographic work, rhetorical analysis, and literary analysis as far as what those specific methods are. More broadly, my work uses indigenous and decolonizing methodologies.

Qwo-Li: I'm more interested in how my scholarship is part of indigenous practices and specifically Cherokee practices and being able to bring those epistemologies to the center of the scholarly work that I'm doing.

Dr. Linder: I'm fascinated by this, and I'm sure our listeners are too and wondering what does that look like? Can you maybe give an example of what it looks like to center those kinds of epistemologies or maybe how it would look different from how people might imagine academic research in a more traditional sense?

Qwo-Li: I use the idea of double weave, which is from Cherokee and other southeastern weaving practices. I am a Weaver as well, which is part of where I get that as far as the methodology, but double woven baskets are woven on two sides. That allows me to think about my scholarship is doing more than one thing. In Asegi Stories, I used that to think about what are hidden between those walls of the basket? What are the hidden histories and stories and approaches that Cherokee queer and two-spirit critiques specifically can bring to how we think about what history is, how we go about creating history?

Qwo-Li: Really more broadly, what does it mean to remember and what does memory mean within ongoing reality where the memories of indigenous people are often under attack, and by extension everyone's memory in a settler colonial state? Then how do we do historical work when there isn't always the historical record that we want to be there, and what does it even mean to want there to be evidence of us as two-spirit people in the archive?

Qwo-Li: A lot of the questions I ask in that book really ended up being very methodological. Why do we imagine certain bodies or people being someplace or not being there? I think that the way that history as a discipline often gets approached is that if we find enough evidence in the archive, then it's real, right, capital L are real. What does it mean knowing that the people who often have created archives are trying to contain all knowledge in order to position themselves as the people in power, right?

Qwo-Li: What is in the archive and what isn't, and then how do we then imagine the past in a way that informs our present and futures as indigenous people? That's one of the reasons I find double weave, making it an extended metaphor away from a weaving practice, but thinking about how you do this work, how you can bring multiple strands of things together and build something with it.

Dr. Linder: It sounds like in some ways, you're looking for things that are not there, at least not in the traditional sense or that are maybe under the surface. What are some of the approaches you take to do this kind of work?

Qwo-Li: I think part of it is reading and thinking differently when we're doing archival work. Part of it also is understanding that when we go into archives, we're doing ceremonial work as indigenous people. That idea is from Shawn Wilson who has a really fantastic book called Research Is Ceremony. I think that what's important there is that he says research is ceremony, not research as ceremony.

Qwo-Li: How do we bring our own practices as indigenous people on our own protocols and ways of doing things into our research practices? For me, archives are a really amazing space, also a very trapped space, because we're dealing with objects that are dead have touched, right? We're dealing with these records and histories that for indigenous people are very often about the invasion of our lands, and so how do then we read and act differently when we're looking at these texts.

Qwo-Li: If gender and sexuality are central to colonial projects, which is what we're arguing in indigenous queer and two-spirit and feminist studies, then how can we read these particular documents through that lens? Then part of what that does is actually offer that it's not an absence of who we are. There's a constant presence. Whether or not things correspond with the contemporary identity is a whole different issue.

Qwo-Li: If we understand things through a indigenous, queer and feminist lens, then we can start to see that everything that is happening within colonial records of those first waves of invasion are actually always already, as we might say, in postmodern scholarship, gendered and sexualized projects, that colonialism isn't separate from the construction of gender normativities, or gender identities or heterosexuality as a form of power, right?

Qwo-Li: That those things were already being pushed, even if we use different names for them from the very first waves of invasion. It was already a gendered and sexualized project on the part of European invasion. Then that helps us listen differently and read differently when we're dealing with archival work. I think it also means we have a different responsibility to hear and listen differently and to listen to the stories that have been left out.

Qwo-Li: Part of what I argue in Asegi Stories, and asegi is a word that means strange or queer in Cherokee, is listening very intentionally for the strange stories that had been left out of the dominant narrative about indigenous people, specifically in this case Cherokee people and other Southeastern indigenous people, because we're always the the story that gets left out. We can see that there are ways that the issues of gender and sexuality often are... and our resistance to colonial gender and sexuality are hidden in very particular ways.

Qwo-Li: It is approaching them maybe saying like, "What if these aren't as hidden as we'd been told that are hiding behind things that we don't necessarily always see as a gender or sexual?

Dr. Linder: Qwo-Li, this is such deep work.

Qwo-Li: Thank you.

Dr. Linder: I'm excited to discuss it. I know we are just scratching the surface. We're going to take a brief break. When we come back, we're going to hear a little bit more from Qwo-Li about the overlap of research and writing poetry. Back in a moment.

Dr. Linder: The Research In Action podcast discusses research in higher education that has a direct and immediate impact on faculty, staff, and students across the world, including topics that directly benefit student success. Here at my own institution, student success is a top priority, and we all work toward that common goal. Oregon State University Ecampus student success counselors recently developed the dynamic Ecampus Learning Community, where all online students can receive robust support, the student success coaching throughout their academic journey, establish an academic support network, and build lasting connections with their peers around the world.

Dr. Linder: More than 90% of students accepted the invitation when it launched, and it's been a resounding success. Tour the community yourself at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/ELC.

Dr. Linder: Qwo-Li, in the first segment, you mentioned the relationship in your research between your research and your poetry and being a poet. I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about your first poetry collection and your writing as a poet and how this has been interwoven into the research work that you do.

Qwo-Li: Sure. My first book of poetry is called Walking With Ghosts. It was published in a series of indigenous poets called Earthworks, which is published by Salt Publishing in the UK. The editor for that series is Janet McAdams, who is an Alabama Creek poet. That book, I really deal with historical and contemporary trauma and grappling with loss in the face of colonialism and homophobia and transphobia. It's a lot about death really, and loss, and trying to figure out how to come out on the other side of that as resilience people.

Qwo-Li: As far as the research, I mean, I mentioned a bit earlier that I don't necessarily think of research and poetry or creative work as separate things. I think that there is a creative process in scholarship and that there's a scholarly process in writing poetry. I really feel like it's through my work as a poet that I learned to be a scholar, and not the other way around. I think the poetry, there is always some kind of research that needs to take place, whether that's about a particular topic you're writing about or about if you're writing a particular form.

Qwo-Li: I do like writing in forms, but I think that it helps us see that the stories that people tell through research are another kind of story. There's a really great quotation from Aaliyah Powell who's a Miami scholar and one of my mentors. She says that the only difference between a poetry of theory, a song, and a story are the differences that we ourselves impose. I take that really seriously.

Qwo-Li: I think that that we live in a contemporary world that wants to put poetry over in one corner and scholarship over in another corner. To me, they're multiple ways of telling stories, and so it's the telling of those stories that becomes important to me.

Dr. Linder: I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about the forms that you mentioned. You mentioned liking to write in forms. What does that mean to you, and how does it impact your work?

Qwo-Li: Well, I mean I do have published poetry in forms, but a lot of my work is free verse. I think that writing in forms is really interesting. I think that it helps us hone our language in particular ways. I'll abandon a form if I feel like the poem doesn't want to be in that form, but I think that often, it helps me focus my work in a particular way and be able to be really more economical with my language, because if you're having to write for instance in a particular rhythmic pattern, then you're restrained by the form in a way that I think is actually really useful.

Qwo-Li: I like all kinds of forms from all over, and I like to teach them too when I can. I think that hustles are really interesting form. I like writing sonnets and sestinas. Tang poetry is a lovely form of poetry from the Tang dynasty in China. I like writing that. There's all kinds of forms that I think really help us crystallize our language, because through that restraint of what we can do, we have to be able to be very precise with our words, which I think is central to poetry.

Dr. Linder: Qwo-Li, I would love to hear more about just the process of how you begin working on a poem, and what that looks like for you. I'm sure it differs based on mood and what you're thinking about. Do you have a particular process that you go through that seems to work well for you?

Qwo-Li: It really depends. Sometimes I think that there are poems that I start writing because I feel like I need to write them, that sometimes an image or a phrase will be in my head that I start a poem with. Those are often from particular things that are happening in my life or that I see happening in the world. Other times, it comes through just making myself sit down and start writing, and then figure out where I'm going from there.

Qwo-Li: Different poems emerged in different ways. I don't have a very particular practice as far as how I write a poem. I always feel like poetry has its own life in some ways, and so sometimes when I'm writing a poem, to me, it really is about listening to what the poem wants to be and trying to take that really seriously and getting the language to where it's doing the work that I want it to do in the world. A lot of my poetry comes from really needing to read the poetry.

Qwo-Li: I think that being a queer and trans, indigenous person and mixed race person and disabled and all the experiences that shape who I am, for myself, I often don't get to see or hear those stories. There are often stories or poems that I want to read and often decide, "Okay, then I need to write this poem myself," rather than wait for someone else to write the poem that I want to read. For me, poetry is a very spiritual practice I guess, in some ways.

Qwo-Li: It's a very raw process for me, and so each poem has its own life, but I try to listen to what the poem is really trying to tell me to do, and figure out how I put the stories into the world to do certain work in the world that I would like.

Dr. Linder: I'm wondering, Qwo-Li, if you can share a little bit about your revision process. Some of the poets that I know will take a poem through dozens of drafts. Others that I know don't do much revision. Once it's out, they feel pretty good about it. What is your process like when it comes to revision?

Qwo-Li: I love revision. I do tend to draft most of my poems dozens of times. Sometimes, there's a poem that comes out fairly fully formed to me, but not usually. I really love the revision and being able to spend that much time and rewrite things over and over again to try to get it to where I want. I think that's a really important and valuable process. I often feel like I'm not even at a first draft of a poem until I'm about 10 drafts into it. Then it starts to make itself clearer to me what I'm trying to do with it.

Dr. Linder: I'm curious if you have any favorite resources about writing poetry, either from your early years of being educated, maybe more formally in this practice or over time if you've gathered things that you found to be really helpful for you.

Qwo-Li: I really love June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint, which is edited by Lauren Muller. Robin Behn and Chase Twichell's The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach really excellent. I really love Rhyme's Reason: A Guide English Verse by John Hollander, but I also feel like the most important resource with writing poetry is reading a lot of poetry.

Qwo-Li: I will say that I'm very influenced by one of my poetry teachers, Janice Gould, who passed this summer, but she was a mentor and teacher of mine. I think that the teachers that we have and community that we have of writers is really just as important as any particular texts.

Dr. Linder: We will definitely link to those resources in the show notes for people who want to take a deeper look. We're going to take another brief break. When we come back, we'll hear a little more from Qwo-Li about the process of developing a poetry collection. Back in a moment.

Dr. Linder: We're proud of Research in Action, and I hope you find the episodes interesting, valuable and actionable. If you're enjoying the show, help others discover Research in Action by rating and reviewing it on iTunes.

Dr. Linder: Qwo-Li, after segment two and hearing a little bit about your work as a poet, I am interested in diving into the concept of developing a poetry collection, because I would imagine that this also has its own set of rules and guidelines and things associated with how you put together an effective collection. What are some of the elements that make up a strong poetry collection? Let's start there.

Qwo-Li: Well, to me, really of course, it's strong poetry. I think that there are a lot of different kinds of poetry collections, and there tends to be trends in the way poetry collections, whether they're simply a collection of poetry or whether they're themselves taking people through a particular experience or journey. I also really think that part of what makes a good poetry collection is a good editor who can have a strong eye for those issues.

Qwo-Li: I think that, at least for me, I need someone who has some distance from the manuscript to be able to say, "Why don't we rearrange this, or this poem doesn't really fit in with the larger feeling of the manuscript." I think that having other people be able to look at that is really helpful. I tend to think of poetry manuscripts as having some similar qualities to good poetry, so thinking about how the collection itself is creating a narrative, a larger narrative for people to read, even though people don't always read poetry linearly.

Qwo-Li: I think that that's awesome too, but to think about how your reader will enter into the poetry and what path you want to take them through.

Dr. Linder: How do you go about creating a collection of your work?

Qwo-Li: Well, that is a good question. I'm trying to work on a collection right now. I think part of it that I'm doing right now is just... It's been a while since I've published a book of poetry. I've published quite a bit of poetry but not as a collection. Right now, I'm just trying to look at what I have, and put it together and start to look at it as a whole rather than as a bunch of poems, but right now, it does feel like a bunch of poems.

Qwo-Li: I'm trying to work through that at this moment, so part of it right now is not only seeing what I have but looking at how things fit together or speak to each other. Right now, I'm trying to decide whether I want different sections in the manuscript or not or if I want it to be one whole manuscript without sections. I think that it's really... I'm looking at it as a whole thing.

Qwo-Li: I know that there are poets who sit down, and they are writing a poetry manuscript. They're writing a... I'm going to write a book of poems, but that's not really how I do it. I tend to have a lot of poems that I'm putting together

Dr. Linder: As you're putting them together, are you revisiting them and revising them along the way? Are all of these poems things that feel pretty finished to you?

Qwo-Li: Some of them feel pretty finished and some of them don't, but what I think... I mean, what I learned in my first manuscript is that... Well, there are ways that I actually don't ever quite feel done with a poem. I always feel like there are things I could change, but at some point you just have to not touch it anymore. At the same time, I thought that there were some poems that were pretty much done and then ended up making some very small revisions to things before the book went to press on recommendation of the editor, which I think were really good suggestions.

Qwo-Li: I think, again, having other people's eyes on your work or ears on your work to be able to see if it's doing what you want it to do is important. I think that a collection is like that too. I mean, even now with things I published like in the first poetry collection, I sometimes feel like, "Oh, I would change that word or change that liner, or revise that more."

Qwo-Li: I mean right now with the poetry manuscript I am trying to complete, there are some poems that feel pretty done, and there's some that don't feel at all done. I think that there are several more poems that probably need to be written before it feels like a collection.

Dr. Linder: I'm curious how you know a poetry collection is finished. I would imagine it's not just you hit a certain number of poems and you're done. It's probably some other factors. How do you know that it's finished?

Qwo-Li: Well, I don't know if you ever quite know. You just at some point have to let it go, and let other people decide to that. I think that being able to find people that you trust, who will give you honest feedback about it and say, "I feel like this poem was out of place, or this is how I felt after reading it," or things that I'm thinking is really helpful to figure out like, "Well, maybe that's not the overall tone I want, or maybe I need to think about how to have things in a different balance with each other."

Qwo-Li: I think you know this is fine on one level, but the very draft manuscript I have now is pretty grim. It's pretty heavy, and so I'm trying to decide, "Is that just what this needs to be or do I need to shift it, so it doesn't feel so heavy to people?" Again, I think having people tell you, because to me they feel heavy. I wrote them. Some of the subjects are heavy to me that might not be to other people, and they might not experience it that way.

Qwo-Li: I think that being able to find peers and other poets and certainly editors of presses who are looking at things be able to give you feedback is really good.

Dr. Linder: I'm curious about the logistics of pitching a poetry collection. How does that compare to submitting an academic article or a book? Is it similar in some ways or very different?

Qwo-Li: It depends on the press, but it's pretty different, because generally, you don't get a preliminary book contracts for poetry without there being a manuscript. You generally have a full manuscript. Even if the press wants you to make some changes to it, it's already basically complete. For a lot of academic publications, for instance, there are calls for submissions or calls for abstracts. We don't really do an abstract for a poetry collection.

Qwo-Li: You might do something that the press wants you to do as far as the description of the collection, but it's already done. So often with academic work, there might be things that we're working on, and then we're like, "Oh, this particular journal or press would be a good home for this," but it goes through a different process. Often with creative work, the poetry editors are the main folks that are the audience, of course a larger press organization or board if it's an academic press or whatever.

Qwo-Li: For instance with an academic book, you put a proposal together. You maybe have a couple sample chapters. Editors don't necessarily want to read an entire manuscript. They might want to see the manuscript, but you generally just give them a little taste. Some places for poetry only want you to send a few poems, and then they decide if they want to see the whole manuscript too, but you still basically have it completed already.

Qwo-Li: In some ways, that's really different in that way. Still, I think with all writing, you're creating something and putting it out into the world and just waiting to see what happens with it. Sometimes, people want to publish it and sometimes they don't. That's just part of it.

Dr. Linder: Well, Qwo-Li, this has been really interesting. I want to thank you so much for coming on the show and talking about your work in indigenous and two-spirit studies and also your work as a poet. It's been really, really interesting. Thank you.

Qwo-Li: Thank you so much.

Dr. Linder: Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of Research in Action. I'm Katie Linder, and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

Dr. Linder: The Research in Action podcast is a resource funded by Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education that delivers transformative learning experiences to students around the world. Learn more by visiting ecampus.oregonstate.edu. This podcast is produced by the award winning OSU Ecampus multimedia team.