
Nelson, Joshua B. *Progressive Traditions: Identity in Cherokee Literature and Culture*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2014. 278 pp.

<http://www.oupres.com/ECommerce/Book/Detail/1908/progressive%20traditions>

Equal parts literary, cultural, social, and political analysis, *Progressive Traditions* is a full frontal assault on intellectual and political paradigms still problematically structured on a binary that pits tradition against modernity, resistance against acquiescence, conservatism against progressivism, nationalism against assimilation, and authenticity against rote performance. Locating the study in debates between literary nationalists and cosmopolitanists that have defined Native literary studies for over two decades, Nelson claims that both schools fail to rigorously theorize the central terms of their analyses, and remain troublingly committed to centralized political/state authority (12-25). “If we look at traditionalism and assimilation [i.e. progressivism] as they play out within tribal groups,” Nelson writes, “we can see that tradition is not an unadulterated force of unalterable conservatism nor is assimilation one of unrestrained avant-garde progress, but that both are oriented toward the support of community cohesion, collective values, and basically making people’s lives better” (26). Placing discussions of Cherokee cultural practices and beliefs in conversation with the cultural theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Nelson identifies in writings by Catherine Brown, Elias Boudinot, John Ross, and Sequoyah Guess, flexible “dispositions,” “principled practices,” and shared values that regulate change while also maintaining and innovating tradition (26, 32). These include deep commitments to local, distributed authority; consensus decision-making, open deliberation, and a respect for dissent; values of diversity, multiplicity, and pluralism; and ethics of hospitality and inclusivity, to name a few. Taken together, they suggest for Nelson a larger Cherokee disposition toward what he terms “indigenous anarchism,” or “a pluralist, community-centered political philosophy that looks to practices that preceded and surpass the nation-state as ways of helping Cherokee people prosper” (4). With this anarchic frame as its foundation, *Progressive Traditions* is interested less in defining or identifying what counts as “progress” or “tradition” than in exploring the “surprising range of strategies ... principles and practices”—some recognizable, some anomalous—through which Cherokees “[combine] old and new ways of doing things as they employ traditional adaptive strategies to resolve cultural and historical problems” (xiii).

In six chapters, divided into two sections, Nelson puts this approach to work, exploring everything from religious practices and community ethics of cooperation and hospitality to philosophical debates over political authority and conflicting measures by which Cherokees have reckoned identity, community, and belonging across history. “Part I: We Worship” historicizes Cherokee spiritual traditions and the multiple affiliations and associations that have characterized religious and political life in the Nation. With this history as context, Nelson turns to Brown’s and Guess’s work, identifying in both what he terms “Cherokee sacred humanism” (40) and a “religiously minded pluralist pragmatism” (112) rooted in practices of worship, prayer, education, and community edification, and in principles of cooperation, hospitality, and respect geared toward establishing and maintaining “right relations” between Cherokee and non-Cherokee peoples. “Part II: We Argue” highlights the movement from clan based social relations and town politics toward increasing nationalization in order to reframe conflicts between John Ross and Elias Boudinot (and Cherokee history more broadly) from narratives inevitable factional conflict to an ongoing philosophical debate about centralized social and political

authority in the Cherokee state, and its increasingly coercive restrictions on local governance, consensus decision making, and modes and mechanisms for open dissent. Highlighting the very real stakes involved in the historical encounter—the massive loss of life attending removal, reprisal killings attending relocation, and factional strife continuing into the present—Nelson turns in the conclusion to practices of hospitality, adoption, and political naturalization as “anarchic” dispositions better equipped to address the often toxic and seemingly intractable politics of race, identity, community, and nation evident in Cherokee country today.

Drawing on a wide range of anthropological, sociological, historical, and local archives of knowledge, Nelson provides some of the most nuanced readings of Cherokee identity and culture in literature that I’m familiar with. Part of this novelty is due to his methodological focus on dispositions and practices rather than on definitive political positions, cultural markers of authenticity, racial identities, or theoretical “models” delimiting what does or doesn’t constitute either “tradition” or “progressivism.” For instance, though scholars have broadly understood Catherine Brown’s memoir as an assimilationist text, Nelson argues in chapter two that Brown’s text demonstrates a Cherokee disposition toward “gaining knowledge” in its investigation of Christian theology and practice, and its commitment to community vetting as a potential “solution” to the “problem” of assimilation and removal. Contextualized within a larger history of women finding agency and asserting political influence through educational and religious institutions, as well as a Cherokee communities openly soliciting religious missions as a strategy to establish educational infrastructure, Nelson convincingly argues that Brown’s “improvised” synthesis of Christian theology with Cherokee practices of dreaming, open air worship and prayer, fasting, and purification, evidences an explicitly gendered, distinctly Cherokee practice of Christianity. Combined with the text’s subtle, rhetorical indictments of US hypocrisy, the *Memoir* stands not as a tragic artifact of assimilationist pressures but the record of a young woman committed to the survivance of her immediate and larger relations *as Cherokees and Christians* (107-09). Through close readings of language, plot, character, and imagery, Nelson turns in chapter three to Guess’s 1992 science fiction novel *Kholvn* as a model of dispositions and practices through which contemporary social and political factionalism in the Nation might be more productively mediated. Situated within the context of the revitalization of the Keetoowah Society and stomp dance communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Nelson highlights the “improvisational” innovations the Society worked through to develop a membership policy capable of reckoning stomp and Christian theologies and practices while also maintaining their opposition to allotment and coercive political authority (114). In its valuing of multiple spaces of worship and concepts of faith, commitments to cooperation and hospitality, understanding of knowledge as bounded and contingent, and view of difference and multiplicity as resources rather than liabilities, a related “deliberate,” “moderated pluralism” structures Guess’s novel (120-21). Advancing “an ethic of democratic, populist—that is, indigenist anarchist—cooperative confederation” as long-standing and valued dispositions in Cherokee social and political history, Nelson positions novel as a model to negotiate political conflicts over identity, politics, and community in Cherokee Country today (131-32).

Having laid the groundwork for a more “compassionate,” inclusive, and responsive theoretical and political praxis, Nelson then turns his dispositional approach explicitly to questions of Cherokee governance represented in writings by John Ross and Elias Boudinot. Vehemently resisting understandings of 19th century political conflict as a narrative of Ross patriots versus

Treaty Party traitors or resistant full-blood traditionalists against self-interested, assimilationist, mixed-blood elites, Nelson instead situates the conflict in a growing divide over the course Cherokee governance and the location of social and political authority. Chapter four chronicles the movement away from localized consensus politics in autonomous towns toward the assumption of social *and* political authority vested in an increasingly centralized Cherokee nation-state. Though critical of how such moves subsumed local interests and intimacies into “the national” and circumscribed open deliberation and political dissent, Nelson cautions against reactive condemnations of nationalization altogether, emphasizing the carefully-considered, “volitional” responses to intensifying removal pressures, rooted initially in Cherokee practices of consultative deliberation and caucusing (143, 145), that was (and is) “attended by both successes and failures as it drew from, improved on, and betrayed traditions” (138). From this perspective, it becomes possible to see figures like Ross and Boudinot—and the constituencies, positions, and trajectories they have come to represent—in more complicated (and compassionate?) terms. Chapter five engages in precisely this project, situating both as Cherokee nationalists committed to a qualified program of acculturation and social change who came to hold strongly divergent views on the course of Cherokee governance, and who at times acted unilaterally according to those convictions. Lest the analysis descend into a relativist apologia for both men, Nelson turns again to Cherokee dispositions of consensus, deliberation, persuasion, and dissent to explain the implications of both the Treaty Party’s subversion of popular will and Ross’s—and the state’s—violent suppression of dissent. What emerges through Nelson’s nuanced readings of Boudinot’s and Ross’s work is a complex story of a people attempting to navigate tradition and innovation amid impossible circumstances that often forced them into positions and conflicts in which they might not have otherwise engaged. The stakes of this reorientation from rupture, loss, and victimization to continuity-through-dispositional innovation is clear: “[A]lthough political centralization aspired to defend the nation’s physical and cultural boundaries, its attendant strategies for establishing hegemony ran counter to the irrepressible dispositions of deliberation and dissent ... there is no better way to start bringing Cherokee people together than by learning how to hear them differ” (166).

Attending to and navigating difference is the subject of the book’s concluding chapter and Nelson’s explicit foray into contemporary Cherokee politics (231). Framed by both the political context of the disenfranchisement of Cherokee freedmen and his unsuccessful attempt to navigate the bureaucratic and legal machinery of the Indian Child Welfare Act, “Strangers and Kin” looks to concepts of hospitality, adoption, and naturalization as dispositional tools through which to mediate acute crises over identity and political belonging. Noting the longstanding conflicts between governors and the governed, between the people and the state, as they play out in Cherokee and other political communities, Nelson suggests that a return to dispositional values of local governance, consensus politics, and a healthy valuing of multiplicity and dissent would enable Cherokee people to re-envision “a more compassionate” nationhood “built upon the participatory consensus of the people” and the recognition and restoration (political and otherwise) of “definite, organic historical connections tying ... excluded others to Cherokee people” (231, 204). At issue is not simply the question of whether or not to “recognize” freedmen as citizens or how best to account for the interests of Cherokee children against those of Cherokee state and federal bureaucracies. Rather, the question for Nelson seems to be how Cherokees might reckon contemporary conflicts with “traditionally progressive” dispositions that locate authority, identity, and belonging in ostensibly more flexible and responsive social

structures independent of the state (i.e. family, town, religious community, benevolent organizations, etc.). Though left implicit, Nelson here is calling for *political project* to re-vision Cherokee governance legible as a centralized, sovereign political authority in *external* affairs with settler-states and other tribal nations, while distributing social authority, expanding political participation, and guaranteeing mechanisms for dissent and local self-determination in *internal* matters. This political project is also tied to an *ethical* project to honestly and critically reckon contemporary understandings of identity, family, citizenship, and community belonging (often tethered to settler logics of race, patriarchy, and hierarchical, coercive authority) with the multiple forms and strategies of association practiced throughout Cherokee history.

While I'm deeply attracted to such work, I'm less clear on how it might play out "on the ground" so speak. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent "indigenous anarchism" can function practically to address these tensions, and in what conditions it might more productively be applied. For instance, how does consensus governance work in a tribal-nation with an economically-diverse and geographically-dispersed citizenship exceeding 300,000 and growing, who are often deeply divided on questions of race, identity, culture, and political authority like the Cherokee or Navajo nations? How does it help us makes sense of the emergence of state-endorsed "satellite" communities of citizens forming in urban centers across the country with recent efforts within the fourteen county area to restrict political participation of non-resident citizens and reduce the presumed influence of diasporic communities in local political affairs? As this example suggests, power and coercion aren't always the product of a Cherokee leviathan in the same way that consensus politics and local authority don't always guarantee the dispositions "indigenous anarchism" advocates. At a more prosaic level, considering the largely conservative, Christian influence on Cherokee politics at both local and state levels, it's also doubtful whether the language of "anarchism" would find purchase outside of academic and intellectual circles. While useful as a theoretical framework to engage the important and necessary work of critiquing the limitations and blindspots of other intellectual and political paradigms, exchanging the language of anarchism for Bourdieu's "dispositions" or Nelson's own "principled practices" might prove more useful in the long run.

Put differently, as much as I share Nelson's suspicion of centralized authority and value the dispositions he excavates with such nuance and precision, I hesitate to claim that state power (or related concepts of nationhood and sovereignty) aren't both necessary and useful for Cherokee peoples. Whether we like it or not, states negotiate with states, and nations, not peoples, are invested with sovereignty, however complicated and problematic those relations are. In a world where Native children can be removed from their families against the wishes of both their communities *and* the express designs of federal legislation; where Indigenous trust lands and resources are still routinely stolen as a function of unrelated legislation; where Native women remain vulnerable in a settler legal system where "justice" is denied them at every turn; and where Native bodies are routinely gunned down by racist, overly-zealous, or simply incompetent police forces suggests the continuing need for a strong political authority of some kind. On the other hand, Indigenous nation-states are quite as capable as their settler counterparts of coercion and violence, whether in the rash of disenrollment and disenfranchisement campaigns tied to profit and material resources; in citizenship and residential laws that privilege racial identity and blood quantum over kinship, family, and cultural/local ties; or in privileging state priorities over and above those of local communities. As *Progressive Traditions* makes plainly evident, these

are neither neat nor easy questions to work through. Without question, we need to theorize these relationships further within both tribally-specific and trans-Indigenous contexts, and hold tribal states accountable to the people in the same measure that we hold settler states accountable to the trust relationship. I am convinced that part of doing so will involve “refashion[ing] contemporary communities in healthy alignment” with the dispositions, principles, practices, and values explored throughout the text as a means to better negotiate difference (204) and revalue “historic and organic connections” across race, religion, culture, geography, politics, and family (215). By advancing a tribally-specific conversation about *formalizing* these dispositions into a social and political program not exclusively tied to or moderated by Cherokee state power, Nelson goes a long way to realize both projects. That it ties this project to an ethical mandate ultimately designed to extricate Cherokee communities from settler-logics of elimination by drawing our attention to the multiple forms and strategies of association practiced throughout Cherokee history situates *Progressive Traditions* alongside some of the more exciting, innovative, and provocative work currently taking place in the field. I fully expect it to find a wide readership among Cherokees as well as Native/Indigenous scholars alike.

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