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Uncovering the Voices That Have Been Silenced: How the Cherokee Young Women are Continuing the Traditions of Their Ancestors Through Literature and Rhetoric

When the Cherokee women, back in 1817, first heard the news that they were being stripped of their lands, they decided to fight for what was right by speaking up, using their voices to be heard around the world. They created petitions and speeches, explaining their love for their people, motherhood, and the land, and how it was “their duty as mothers” to fight for the right to stay in the southeastern part of the United States (Lauter 2399). Unfortunately, these powerhouse women were forced to leave their homes, and subjected to endure the Trail of Tears, where “perhaps half of the Cherokee people perished” (Lauter 2398). Almost thirty years after the petitions were created, a new generation of Cherokees is taking the stand to have its voice heard as well. Young women that were sent to the Cherokee National Female Seminary helped create the *Cherokee Rosebuds* (later renamed *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*), a newspaper run by fellow Cherokee sisters to shed light on their own stories and experiences. Cherokee women’s history, along with Cherokee literary women’s history, leads to a crucial understanding of their different experiences and situations, over a large span of time, and illuminates the role that agency plays in their determination to speak up for what is right and keep their traditions alive. By analyzing the writings of the *Cherokee Rosebuds*, I argue that we trace an important on-going literary history to the Cherokee women’s writing in the nineteenth century, and demonstrate how their examples and traditions continue to guide the Cherokee young women of today.

Though the Cherokee women’s voices were silenced when their petitions were ignored, their writings have given scholars the opportunity to dig deeper into the horrific events that occurred. For example, scholars have been able to conduct considerable research and gain

remarkable insights from the writings of Catherine Brown, “arguably the earliest Native woman author of published, self-written texts in the United States,” and see history through her eyes (Gaul 2). Brown, like many other Cherokee women, used her writing “as evidence of the success of such efforts” to reclaim what was rightly theirs. Each of the Cherokee women have “gone to every corner of our country, and thus, though dead, . . . yet speaketh” up and raised awareness for the Cherokee women in today’s society (Gaul 3). Their voices still live on today to help scholars and students alike understand the magnitude of the inequality endured by the Cherokee Nation; their example helped create the Cherokee Nation’s mission, which is to be “committed to protecting [their] inherent sovereignty, preserving and promoting Cherokee culture, language and values, and improving the quality of life for the next seven generations of Cherokee citizens” (Cherokee Nation). These women created petitions, seeking understanding and empathy from the white men who were husbands and fathers to their children, wanting to continually raise them on the Cherokee soil. Their voices are continually being uncovered by today’s scholars to better understand the importance of their history and see the similarities between the Cherokee women of today and their ancestors, and examine how it affects American history as well. For example, Theda Perdue believes that the study of Cherokee women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is not only a great asset to enlarging our “understanding of Cherokee history, but also fills in the gaps in our knowledge of American history” to fit missing puzzle pieces back into order (qtd. in Smith 403). Though the government’s reconstruction “disenfranchised women—pushing into the background the strong influence women had long asserted in Cherokee politics—” and leaving them to journey through the Trail of Tears, these incredible women never gave up what they felt was rightfully theirs (Lauter 2397). The Cherokee mothers, who were mothers to essentially all people in the tribe, in this time period of turmoil, provided a clear

example of leadership in that they “did not merely succumb to or resist change, but fought for survival” with each petition that they wrote, and each step that they took on their horrific journey, ensuring that their voices would be heard again someday (Smith 404).

I argue, though scholars discuss how voices diminished because of the Trail of Tears, that recovering the works of the girls from the *Cherokee Rosebuds* newspapers allow these young women to maintain the literary traditions of their ancestors. They are able to tell their own stories in a culture and society that has been restructured to having male figures as public spokesmen for the Cherokee voice; the petitions of 1817, 1818, and 1821 point out that these young women are striving to reassert their voices into the narrative, reaching out for readers and listeners alike to understand the values of what they have to say. The Cherokee women, as their duty, fought for motherhood and the right to remain on their sacred soil. Although they tried their best to reach the government through their petitions, the women left behind all of their possessions, embarking on the Trail of Tears which ruined lives for nearly a fourth of their tribe. However, even despite the highly structured and filtered religious school that they are required to attend, the Cherokee girls are still telling their own stories; even stories of motherhood and nature, just as their ancestors did before them. The stories within the *Cherokee Rosebuds* newspaper are continuing the Cherokee women’s rhetoric; each article describes how these seminary girls find the importance in relating their own stories and having their voices be heard. Through analyzing a few of the newspaper pieces, and focusing on how these stories bring Cherokee girls’ agency to life, one can see the inherited fight within each of them, struggling to have a real voice that is finally heard.

The Cherokee women's rhetoric toward their heart-felt petitions show their willingness as women and fighters to stand for what they believe in, especially in their own roles as mothers.

American novelist Katy Simpson Smith argues:

Eighteenth-century Cherokee society defined motherhood as a social, economic, and political institution. That institution included not only the relationship between biological mother and child, but also women's broader kin networks, their productive connection to fertile land and economic subsistence, and their political role as mothers of the Cherokee nation. The paths to these various roles, however, narrowed in the early nineteenth century. (404)

With these sudden changes in their roles, the Cherokee women began raising their voices, taking ownership over the land by claiming “the right of the soil” and the right to continue raising their loved ones as they pleased, and by creating petitions for the Government and chiefs and warriors of council (Lauter 2401). They held their duty to motherhood very sacred, “for as soon as one child is raised, [they] have others in [their] arms, for such is [their] situation & will consider [their] circumstance” (Lauter 2400). Even if some were childless, they still took on the name of mother, to the point that one white settler was very confused because it seemed that “all the female relatives are called Mother” (Smith 406). The love that these women have for their families and for teaching traditions is a large part of why they felt the need to petition the government for the right to stay on their sacred grounds. Nancy Ward, one the Cherokee women's finest, held the title of “Beloved Woman,” meaning that she made a significant impact on her community. With this title, she was able to speak up and vote in the tribal council of chiefs, forcing others to listen to her voice (Miles 226). Though she was near the end of her life at the time of these petitions, she still mustered up enough energy to speak up and express her

thoughts on the Cherokees' desires and reasons for wanting their families to stay on the land. Her words of wanting her "many grandchildren" to do well on "our land" was a cry for understanding of the rationale behind staying put on the land that had become their home (Lauter 2400).

Not only did the "petitioners immediately assert their identity as mothers" but also as a voice for the Cherokee Nation as a whole (Miles 226). As the petitions continued, the Cherokee women did not give up without a fight. They continued to speak up at councils, having the committees listen to their "sentiments on any subject where [their] interest [was] as much at stake as any other part of the community" (Lauter 2401). Not only did they use terms of motherhood to remain on the land, but they spoke of Mother Nature and the motherhood of her role as reasons why the Cherokees should have remained where they were planted. They argued that God gave them their land, and that, over the years, they had created a sacred and intimate relationship with the soil. They also saw themselves "not only as creators of life, but also stewards of land" to maintain the order and traditions of the Cherokee nation (Miles 226). The Cherokee women claimed their roles in the home, the landscape and agricultural production, and in the social relationships all around them. Throughout the petitions, the Cherokee women were not afraid to put men in their place and remind them where they came from. Speaking to a crowd of men during negotiations, one Cherokee mother warned the men that she hoped they would remember that they each "sprung from a woman" and that without them, they would not be here to even strive to remove them off of their sacred land (Smith 411). Many of the Cherokee women felt extremely distant from their white husbands, calling them their "worst enemies" because of their greedy desires to take the land and increase their riches, and these women were not afraid to call them out on it (Lauter 2401). However, their petitions fell on deaf ears, and eventually they were forced to leave their sacred land behind and join their people on the Trail of Tears.

The Trail of Tears was a horrific moment in history in which the Cherokee people were forced to travel eight hundred arduous miles to their new Indian Territory. One Cherokee woman described the journey as one of “inexpressible sadness and regret” as they all traveled for an entire year to their new destination (Johnston 97). Though over sixteen thousand Cherokees protested against a signed treaty, there was no escaping the madness, especially due to death and disease, that eventually silenced the Cherokee women and all the efforts that they put into keeping their land. The Cherokee women’s experiences on the trail were much more intense than the males, mostly because of pregnancy and rape. The Trail of Tears took the lives of at least four thousand Cherokees, which is estimated to be around a fourth of the tribe (Johnston 76). It was a time of mourning for all, that was not only “an exile of a community” but a difficult and gruesome “attempted elimination of a people” who were only trying to stand their ground and fight for what was rightly theirs (Justice 60).

Despite being removed from their lands, and being demoted within their own societal structure, the Cherokee women’s agency and desire to raise awareness of the Cherokee people began to arise again. Nearly thirty years after the Cherokee women petitions were created, their daughters and granddaughters are now similarly raising their voices through literature and rhetoric in their Seminary’s newspaper. The stories in the Rosebud volumes give evidence that Cherokee girls and women continue to find ways to make themselves heard. The Cherokee Female Seminary was a girls-only Christian organization where each student had to be at least half-Cherokee and willing to follow a tight schedule of learning and worship (Abbott 192). It was here, in their the highly structured religious school in Park Hill, Oklahoma, that they learned how to become excellent Christian women and tell the world their own stories, including stories of motherhood and nature, just as their ancestors did before them. Like their petitioning mothers

and grandmothers, these young girls strive to continue their ancestors' traditions of exploring the land and keeping to their inner duty of motherhood by putting pen to paper to tell their own stories.

One of the stories that relates to motherhood and the goodness that comes from speaking up for what is right is from a girl named Ida, and entitled "The Curious Garden." In this short story, Ida describes in detail how she and a friend happen to discover a garden full of unique and beautiful flowers. She goes on to describe one of these flowers by saying, "This *perfect flower* once bloomed in Eastern lands, by few admired; trampled under foot, and surrounded by enemies, who did everything in their power to destroy it. But still it lived; and *now* is cherished in many a garden spot of earth" (*A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 1 August 1855, p. 3). The description of these flowers relates to the different Cherokee women who helped write the petitions to save the Cherokee nation. Though it was the *perfect flower*, it was still not treated properly, being trampled not only by the government and white settlers, but from within as well, as these women felt that their duty and divine roles of motherhood were being taken from them; and just as the Trail of Tears tragically destroyed many of the Cherokee members, nevertheless the strong voices of the Cherokee women continue to live on today. Ida discreetly displays that though many died fighting to keep their rights, their words are still cherished. Their words are what allow these young women to speak up about the customs of their ancestors, and to speak up about the Cherokee duties and traditions. The petitions are cherished because they are an important part of history, and Ida does an excellent job at conveying all of this through the rhetoric and symbolism of flowers.

Another story in *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds* newspaper that visualizes the gratitude that these young women have for their ancestors comes from another article called "Beauty" by

Alice, which explains what true beauty is to her. She starts off by describing the beauty of nature through the “lofty hills and mountains; fertile valleys and spreading prairies covered with their thousand flowers. Here and there, thick forests meet the faze; the little rippling brooks go singing by, and noble rivers roll on to the mighty ocean” (*A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 1 August 1855, p. 2). From here she explains physical beauty, and illustrates how many people are praised for their physical attributes. However, Alice continues by arguing that “there is a beauty which exists within, worth more than ail these outward ornaments, . . . It is the *beauty of the intellect*.” Alice beautifully expresses her thoughts and vivid imaginations of ways in which the intellect of the mind surpasses the other two forms of beauty, and further explains that there is still even more beauty out there in the world:

But there is a *higher* beauty still, —before which physical, and even intellectual beauty grow dim. It is found where right feelings and principles are cherished in the heart. Like flowers, the more they are cultivated the more beautiful they become, and if watered by dews from the *Fountain of Life*, they will spread the radiance of *Moral Beauty* over the soul. Physical beauty may pass away, and intellectual beauty decay; but *moral* beauty will never fade. (*A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 1 August 1855, p. 2)

Alice gracefully expresses her love for her ancestors and for their *moral* beauty to fight for their lives and force others to hear their cries. Though the Cherokee women’s petitions show their intellect in reaching out to the Government and expressing their viewpoints to chiefs and warriors, it is their hearts, and their examples of choosing to do what is right, that is most beautiful in Alice’s eyes. It is the moral beauty of a person that surpasses all the others, and it is

what this author, through her own writing, hopes to possess someday as she becomes a Cherokee woman of hope and honor.

The Cherokee women's petitions were not written in vain; generations later, these young women, just like Alice, can still hear their calls for freedom and equality in motherhood and the abilities and desires to bloom where they had been planted for years. The beauty of the petitions lies within its words and the voices that never gave up in their call to action. These, and many more, articles from the *Cherokee Rose Buds* and *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds* newspapers show how these seminary girls found the importance in relating their own stories and having their voices heard through literature and gratitude for what their ancestors have done for them. These two forms of literature are filling the gap of disconnect between the Cherokee women and the generations of Cherokee young women to follow. Just as scholars are now arguing about the petitions, it is important to recognize that the tradition for standing up for motherhood and one's home/sacred land, through a women's voice, continued past removal. As scholars, such as Tiya Miles and Katy Simpson Smith, continue to rebuild the importance of the Cherokee women's petitions, it is also important to recognize how these traditions continue on even after the Trail of Tears. By looking at the *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, we trace an important on-going literary history to the Cherokee women's writing in the nineteenth century, and witness how their example and traditions continue to guide the Cherokee young women of today's time.

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