

Sounds of Tohi: Cherokee Health and Well-Being in Southern Appalachia. By Lisa J. Lefler and Thomas N. Belt. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2023. 103 pages. \$34.99 cloth; \$22.00 e-book.

Lisa J. Lefler and Thomas N. Belt's *Sounds of Tohi: Cherokee Health and Well-Being in Southern Appalachia* offers an extraordinary rendition of Indigenous language revitalization, linguistic insight, and scientific inquiry into the transformative potential of language reclamation. At its core is *tohi* (VA), a Cherokee concept encompassing a state of holistic balance, peace, and well-being. Through this framework, the authors explore how Cherokee conceptualizations of health are inextricably linked to language, land, and matrilineal practices.

Belt, a speaker of Cherokee, discusses the profound role language plays in fostering well-being, describing it as a living force: "The sound of our voices, in terms of songs and sacred formulas . . . emit a specific sound that makes healing conducive" (11). This linguistic foundation positions *tohi* as an active, living force—one that is enacted through linguistic practices embodying relational well-being through family, community, and environment.

Moreover, Cherokee linguistic structures inherently encode relational principles. For instance, the habitual aspects of Cherokee verbs, marked by long vowels, reflect continuity and interconnectedness, reinforcing the notion of health as an ongoing, communal process (13). In this context, the Cherokee language is more than just a form of communication; it is an indispensable participant in sustaining health and balance.

The authors place Indigenous women at the heart of their discussion, emphasizing their historical roles as leaders, nurturers, and healers. They argue that the subjugation of Native women was central to colonial agendas, as it disrupted the matrilineal systems that had long sustained Cherokee society. As they note, "Without the subjugation of Native women, colonization could not have happened," a statement that undoubtedly reveals the devastating impacts of patriarchal impositions (29).

Lefler and Belt explain that, for the Cherokee, matrilineality was far more than a social structure—it was a cornerstone of balance and well-being. Women's leadership roles ensured intergenerational stability and upheld the relational ethics central to *tohi*. The authors stress that "healing cannot occur without the restoration of their traditional roles" (30). This call to action accentuates the urgency of reclaiming traditional practices.

Contemporary efforts to empower women as cultural and wellness leaders are a testament to this reclamation. Belt's reflections on his mother and grandmother provide deeply personal examples of how matrilineal wisdom endured even in the face of adversity. His accounts of his mother's use of plant medicine, for instance, highlight

the enduring relevance of Cherokee women's knowledge in addressing modern health crises (xvi–xvii). These stories are not just historical artifacts; they are sources of hope, showing how matrilineal traditions remain vital for community healing and resilience.

Lefler and Belt argue that for the Cherokee, land is not a resource to be commodified but a living participant in health and identity. They emphasize that disconnection from ancestral lands has disrupted the cultural and physical well-being of Cherokee communities, severing ties to the sources of balance and resilience. This disruption, they argue, mirrors the loss of language, as both land and language are essential carriers of Cherokee knowledge and relational ethics. Reclaiming one often necessitates reclaiming the other, as both are woven into the fabric of *tobi*. The author's exploration of cosmography deepens this discussion by highlighting the spiritual and historical significance of specific landscapes. Lefler and Belt describe these places as "living sites" that anchor identity and foster resilience (39). Such landscapes are more than markers of history; they are dynamic spaces that nurture well-being and cultural continuity. Similarly, the Cherokee language encodes intimate knowledge of these places, preserving stories, practices, and relationships that inform the community's identity and health. Displaced communities can restore harmony and heal from colonization by reconnecting with sacred places alongside the language that animates them.

Lefler and Belt examine cultural reclamation as a vital pathway to addressing the enduring impacts of historical and intergenerational trauma. They argue that displacement, violence, and cultural suppression have left profound biological, social, and psychological scars on Cherokee communities. Drawing on epigenetic research, they explore how stressors such as forced removal and cultural alienation disrupt health and well-being across generations. As they note, "Epigenetics allows us to understand the long-term implications of historical and intergenerational trauma, adverse childhood experiences, chronic stress, and chronic disease" (14). By integrating cultural models such as *gadugi* (*SSY*)—a practice of collective service—Lefler and Belt highlight how Cherokee traditions have the potential to counteract the isolating effects of trauma. *Gadugi* embodies relational values that strengthen social networks and foster resilience, creating a framework for community-based healing. This participatory ethos aligns with Cherokee worldviews, in which healing is understood as a shared responsibility rather than an individual pursuit—a perspective that Lefler and Belt extend into their critique of Western health paradigms.

The book challenges the reductionist focus of Western health models, advocating instead for holistic and community-driven approaches to well-being. Belt's analogy of health as house-building encapsulates this philosophy: "You and I are going to build this house. We're going to be in it together. I'm going to do just as much work as you are" (11). This vision of collaborative care reflects Cherokee worldviews, in which healing is a shared responsibility rather than an individual pursuit.

Lefler and Belt also emphasize the linguistic dimensions of healing, illustrating how Cherokee terms for health and behavior reflect relational ethics. For instance, the concept of *duyuk'dv'i* (*SGAOT*)—the right path—conveys the importance of balance, reciprocity, and ethical living (13). These insights provide practical tools for health practitioners working with Indigenous communities, underlining the need for

culturally grounded interventions that respect and incorporate traditional knowledge systems.

Lefler and Belt skillfully reveal how Cherokee traditions—rooted in language, land, and matrilineal systems—offer profound frameworks for resilience and healing. Through *tobi*, they present a holistic vision of balance that transcends the reductionism of Western health paradigms. Their work challenges readers—scholars, practitioners, and community members alike—to reconsider health not as an isolated, individual pursuit but as a shared responsibility deeply intertwined with cultural and ecological relationships. By weaving together linguistic insight, cultural reclamation, and scientific inquiry, the authors illuminate pathways for communities to mend the wounds of colonization. *Sounds of Tobi* is not just a testament to the resilience of Cherokee traditions but an invitation to reimagine health as a shared, relational journey.

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