(Review) Sturm, Circe. Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma

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Book review


Sturm’s argument in *Blood Politics* is familiar. The Cherokee Nation’s self-definition is immanently racialized. This definition draws technical support from blood quantum as the basis for racial identification. And yet, even given that scientistic formulation, race within the Cherokee population is still negotiable thanks to other para-racial categories of belonging such as language, religion, culture, phenotype and paper documentation. But how complicated is this argument really, and how many times can it be rearticulated around short ethnographic vignettes?

The ethnographic component of the text is thin. Sturm uses short accounts of her experiences of fieldwork to set up most of her chapters. They function superficially, then, as punctuation to signify shifts in the text rather than saying much substantively about the emic Cherokee experience. They convey metacommunicative competence the way all ethnographic materials are supposed to: ‘As the ethnographer, I was there, then. As the reader you were not. Reader, please pay attention.’

The compelling story of Cherokee blood politics does not require such diacritical marks. The real action in the text lies in the evolution of blood thinking among the Cherokee described historically rather than ethnographically. The initial operation of Cherokee descent through matrilineage, for instance, raises the question about the future uptake of Euroamerican blood notions. ‘The matrilineal clan system’, writes Sturm, ‘ensured that the child of a Cherokee woman and European man would be identified as Cherokee . . . there was no such thing as halfbreed’ (p. 31). In one sense, then, the Cherokee were predisposed to offering full citizenship to offspring, though technically they were only ‘half’ Cherokee by blood. The subsequent change to bilateral descent signalled the end of tribal purity passed through the mother. Furthermore, this early allocation of membership did not rationalize beyond fractional halves of blood quanta. The shift to blood quanta emerged at the moment the Five Civilized Tribes were expected to take up farming on plots allocated under the Dawes Act of 1887. Indians were required to enroll and specify their degree of affiliation with the tribe by blood quanta ranging from 1/1 to 1/256. Further entrenching this blood thinking was the concurrent emergence of racial biology and eugenics, of which the Cherokee leadership was surprisingly informed, according to the author.
Sturm argues that the history of displacement, relocation and reservation is a major factor in the emergence of Cherokee ‘nationhood’. The US military, for instance, might retaliate against the actions of one clan by attacking another, seeing all as one entity. Realizing their joint responsibility for future security, the Cherokee adopted an organized structure of governance, culminating in a federal capital at Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Sturm sets up the two ‘competing definitions of race’ in Cherokee national discourse: race as nation and race as blood quantum. Evidence of the mutual incompatibility of these notions is the failure of blood quantum reforms. Tribal leaders view the very definition of their nation as rooted in blood quanta. As the generations pass, however, acceptance of ever smaller fractions in blood composition reduces the ‘purity’ of the Cherokee nation. These same leaders are loath to restrict membership to limited blood quanta for fear of reduced government funding based on population. So continues, in this regard, a definite but tacit connection between blood politics and material survival. Previously, this connection saw material subsistence of individual Cherokee depend upon land allotment, itself dependent upon blood quantum. Today, this connection places collective prosperity in the hands of the state, which allocates status and material recognition in terms of population magnitude. While this dependency may well be overstated, a future study might take up the notion of a ‘possessive investment’ in Indianness, to borrow from George Lipsitz’s seminal work on white identity in America. Such a study might look to Indian gaming, land and mineral rights, and other alienable interests with economic consequences.

Finally, what of the relation between race and culture? It is here that Sturm relies predictably on the work of Omi and Winant to argue that the Cherokee reference to blood quanta slips periodically when confronted with other categories of belonging. Thus she tells of a medicine man who, despite his green eyes, is considered a full-blood by virtue of his cultural position within the community. Elsewhere, phenotypically Indian youth are considered mixed blood when they cannot speak the language and full-blood when they can. Pointing to Omi and Winant, she uses this and other examples to demonstrate that race is in fact the subject of ‘racial projects’, where its definition depends upon efforts to materially organize a society and structure difference to that end. Sturm shows how culture and race interact to provide the Cherokee with flexible measures of timeless essence and historicized practice. Without culture, the Five Tribes are merely a race, defined in terms of blood and – given current intermarriage trends – on a path toward dilution. Without race, the Cherokee are merely a subculture – Americans with unique practices subject to the erosions of time and assimilation.

The lesson: together, culture and race reinforce one another, ensuring that practice remains alive, but permit the practices of today to retain their aura of timelessness. For students of nationalism, this should not be a surprise.

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