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Rhetorical Resistance to Assimilation Among Cherokee Female Seminary Students

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Abstract

Throughout the nineteenth century, Cherokees invited American missionaries into their territory to establish schools where children and youth could learn the ways of Euroamericans, particularly Christianity and spoken and written English. Although mission schools contributed to acculturation, they also provided means for Cherokees to resist assimilation. Cherokees cited school attendance as evidence they were becoming “civilized” in hopes they could demonstrate to Euroamericans that they were sufficiently like them, thus preventing Removal from their homelands, and students employed what they learned as leverage in dealing with the United States in political matters that affected their tribe. Only a small minority of Cherokee children and adolescents attended these schools (as attendance was not compulsory), but they produced texts that offer insight into the ways in which they resisted assimilation while adapting certain aspects of Euroamerican culture to fit into their tribal context. Analyzing writings by female Cherokee students illuminates how Cherokee women maintained a degree of political autonomy as they were pushed out of formal leadership positions in favor of men as the Cherokee Nation adapted its government to mirror that of the U.S. This study focuses on texts produced by students of the Cherokee Female Seminary in what is now known as Oklahoma toward the end of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, these writings reveal a blending of Cherokee and Euroamerican influences on students’ thought and rhetoric and demonstrate students’ continued loyalty to the Cherokee Nation even as they became more acculturated while attending school.

Keywords: Cherokee education, Cherokee women, Cherokee rhetoric, resistance, acculturation, assimilation, mission schools