

Gathering the Potawatomi Nation: Revitalization and Identity

By Christopher Wetzel

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Christopher Wetzel offers a much-needed addition to the growing scholarship on indigenous nationhood and the history of the Potawatomi nation. Wetzel approaches Potawatomi revitalization through a sociological lens, applying his expertise in politics and social movements. The author establishes his credentials by recounting the extensive archival, ethnographic, and field work employed to support his research. Most importantly, he is candid about his relationship with the nation and its members. Prior to publication, the author shared his research with select Potawatomi citizens, inviting them to have “the final word” by including their comments and insights in the publication.

Wetzel’s study examines the historical, political, and cultural factors that led to the separation of the nine Potawatomi bands into fairly autonomous units and their eventual reemergence under a more cohesive national status. He argues persuasively that factors such as the 1833 Chicago Treaty and the subsequent Indian Claims Commission pitted one band against the other. Wetzel identifies the development of a new national narrative in response to the commemoration of the Trail of Death, the forced removal of Potawatomi under the terms of the Indian Removal Act.

The book opens with a discussion of the literature on the development of tribal identities (Thomas Biolsi, Melissa Meyer, Circe Sturm, Patricia Barker Lerch, and Gregory Campbell) and follows with a discussion of western theory on nationhood (Max Weber, Benedict Anderson, and Ernest Gellner). The author relies on the insights of Kanien’kehaka scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred to support the challenges expressed throughout Indian Country toward the limiting effect of western-based, non-indigenous interpretations of nation and nationhood.

Wetzel breaks down three categories of analysis—economic, political, and cultural—to explain the Potawatomi’s current national renaissance. Within these categories the author provides extensive data to support his findings. I found his recent data on the impact of gaming revenue illuminating and useful for dispelling the new stereotype of the “rich casino Indian.” Such findings are not analyzed in isolation: Wetzel compares the Potawatomi experience with other Indian nations who share similar histories. The Cherokee, Seminole, and Creek nations also represent multiple bands that were dispersed through the forces of settler colonialism and federal Indian policies. The comparisons invite more research.

In Part II, Wetzel identifies the “culture brokers,” both historical and contemporary, who were critical to this “national articulation.” Culture brokers moved fluidly between the various bands in Kansas, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Canada sharing traditions, language, ceremonies, and stories of the people. They succeeded because of their own personal experiences, their deep cultural knowledge, their roles within various communities and, according to Wetzel, because they were male. While he clearly acknowledges this fact, he mounts an explanation that I found unsatisfying. Wetzel correctly faults “generations of academic studies” for silencing women’s critical roles in nation-building, rendering them “invisible” (p. 92); ironically, however, he only briefly acknowledges

the importance of several Potawatomi women, further contributing to the invisibility of indigenous women in the development of a new national narrative of the Potawatomi nation.

That disappointment aside, I plan to assign Wetzel’s valuable, well-researched work in my classes and to cite it in my own research. He offers not only important data on the Potawatomi nation, but a new analytical framework that will be of great value to scholars in indigenous studies.

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