

Review of *Stories of Our Living Ephemera: Storytelling Methodologies in the Archives of the Cherokee National Seminaries, 1846–1907*

Ana W. Migwan

Legg, Emily. *Stories of Our Living Ephemera: Storytelling Methodologies in the Archives of the Cherokee National Seminaries, 1846–1907*. Utah State University Press, 2023.

Keywords: [book review](#), [stories](#), [colonization](#), [indigenous rhetoric](#)

Doi: [10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.26](https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.26)

In *Stories of Our Living Ephemera*, Emily Legg uses previously scattered historical and traditional stories from the Cherokee National Seminaries to further the call for Indigenous stories as a rhetorical device in educational practices and research within colonized institutions. The book weaves together stories and historical data as a way of “decenter[ing] the histories of rhetoric and composition” for continued rhetorical resistance to institutional assimilation (19). Legg also intertwines her methodology with her own experiences in chapters like “Origin Stories” and “Archives Out of Story” as a clear example of how Indigenous praxis can work. Additional knowledge Legg relies on to formulate decolonized education principles include the Cherokee medicine wheel and the four cardinal directions. These traditional cultural tools allow Legg to center her methodology on merging the present and the past of Cherokee and Indigenous rhetoric while emphasizing the need to focus on community and all relations. Ultimately, the book serves past and present Indigenous scholarship by building on voices like Rachel C. Jackson and Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyag and continuing the conversations of voices within the Cherokee seminary archives. By expertly capturing critical storytelling for community engagement, Legg welcomes in all relations to learn from the Cherokee archives and apply knowledge-making practices to their teaching, writing methods, and storied ways.

Legg’s *Storytelling Methodologies* is broken down into four sections as a way to organize the book with the Cherokee four directions. The Cherokee medicine wheel begins with the east, which is where the book’s sections begin. Part two on making relations relates to “complicat[ing] Eurocentric means of archival means and historiography by acknowledging and making relations with the histories of the Cherokee National Seminaries with Cherokee ontologies and traditional stories” (15). This section serves as a call to action for fellow Indigenous folks to challenge the way Euro-centric lenses have changed origin stories and places the importance not in dominant narratives of such white-washed stories, but in reconciling documented versions (such as archival versions) with present oral versions; it is pertinent to Legg that each be

Ana W. Migwan is a Rhetoric, Theory, and Culture graduate student and instructor of Composition at Michigan Technological University. She is an enrolled Keweenaw Bay Indian Community member. Currently, her research focuses on Indigenous poetics and rhetoric through the lens of cultural and linguistic reclamation, reconnection, and decolonization. Alongside studying for her Masters, she is an emerging poet. Her forthcoming or published work can be found in *West Trestle Review* and *L I M I N A L . S P A C E S*.

brought into relation with one another.

In the first chapter, Legg's argument is prefaced with family stories and research stories to reframe foundational disciplinary stories. By doing so, Legg revisits established theories from Malea Powell and Shawn Wilson to move away from archives as our true origin and toward a revisionist history that relies on relational accountability (45, 51). The background woven into this chapter guides part two's conclusion in the second chapter where Legg takes off the wolf's (settler's) shoes and dusts off the archives boxes to go where White researchers have previously ignored. In this chapter, she makes it clear that she did not discover these boxes even though she argues for knowledge and meaning-making from their contents. Legg applies the methodology of responsible listening and remembering to recover because avoiding the archives is equal to erasing the stories of ancestors documented within.

Legg's third section transitions her argument to the north to look at knowledge through story. Most notably, in chapter three this concept is explained through the continued Euro-centric lens that presides over research. According to her "...two-dimensional intersections of Euro-centric research isn't just a passing moment that, once we move past it, exists as just a footnote in our methodologies" (83). Through this explanation, Legg explains her situational awareness of stories and their need for continued renewed reflection as another form of relational accountability. By grounding oneself in reflective practice, she explains that the importance of story lies in the telling of it and understanding that stories are also living (84-105). This theory allows for balance to be brought to maintain ways of being for Indigenous peoples in applied theory, pedagogy, and methodologies. As for chapter four, Legg expands on the north direction by expanding on how storytelling methodology is a productive and participatory way of deepening relations. Throughout this section she continues to build on prominent theory from other Indigenous scholars, such as connecting Powell's rhetorical survivance to spoken stories. These scholars assist Legg in asserting her importance in merging past and present stories to resist Eurocentric methods of Indigenous frameworks.

Moving her methods to the western direction in section four, Legg argues that stories are a way of honoring the ancestors and their teachings of passing down knowledge and wisdom. In chapter five, not only does Legg find buried stories and accounts from Cherokee ancestors, but she finds new meaning for rhetoric of Indigenous past. The Cherokee voices within the archives did not report narratives of assimilation. Rather, they were thriving and alive as they always had been; this observation led to Legg questioning the narrative of assimilation as the ones who benefit from such a narrative are those asserting power over the assimilated, rather than the minoritized groups reclaiming their power (134). This chapter dives into reworking narratives through storytelling as a way of practicing balance and maintaining sovereignty through education.

Building on the wisdom of her Cherokee ancestors, Legg focuses chapter six on stories surrounding a pre-colonization hereditary, priestly clan "called the "Ani-kutani," "Nicotani," "fire priests," or the "Una-tani" (169). By incorporating these stories into her argument, she is able to present a valuable perspective on

what is deemed “valuable” in one’s research and the value behind writing. Most notably, she settles into the shared-knowledge that “For the Cherokee, the work of writing is more than just a vessel of content or external storage; writing is a material technology that is a source of self-determination, an act of resistance, and a preserver of culture” (174). Those interested in discussions surrounding written and oral Indigenous language(s) may find this chapter particularly helpful—especially for the purpose of survivance and the continuation of what Indigenous ancestors have started for modern generations to preserve.

The final chapter of this section, and of the book, continues the narrative of cultural survivance and keeping alive past traditions through the piecing together of missing texts from the Cherokee archives with online copies kept within family lineages. The particularly compelling stories of chapter seven surround: the “brave, mighty warrior” as an answer to how Cherokee ancestors survived removal and starvation (198-200), as well as the sometimes humorous, sometimes heartfelt, or sometimes insightful perspectives from the Cherokee female seminary newspaper, the *Cherokee Rose Buds* (200-209), and finally how the Cherokee pushed back on colonists like Andrew Jackson by proving their intelligence through colonialist standards (209-219). Reflecting on each of these stories, Legg concludes that by widening the net of mainstream research topics we can uplift narratives of survivance that seek to combat beliefs of Native cultures experiencing total assimilation or complete erasure.

Emily Legg finishes with an epilogue and call to action for the “constellating of Indigenous histories with contemporary experiences” through ceremony and storytelling (223). By understanding that her audience is likely made up of two categories: fellow Natives and non-Native peers, Legg divides her call to action to what would best suit each going forward. For her Native peers, she asks that they continue her work in walking and talking with the ancestors. One way of doing this is by acknowledging the relationship through reciprocity: when you draw from the ancestors knowledge it is good practice to share developments on such knowledge back to them through ceremony.

Advice for both audiences is to follow Andrea Riley-Mukavetz’s advice by practicing relational accountability: engaging with the ancestors as more than just participants because they are intergenerational colleagues and collaborators (230). Bringing Malea Powell back into the conversation, Legg emphasizes that this must be done without privileging one story over another (231), as this would be a direct reflection of how colonialism has prioritized its narrative over others. If everyone—especially those from a minoritized point of view—engaged with storytelling in their research by telling their *own* stories, the pushback on colonization would create a version of academia where marginalized voices don’t have to focus on surviving, but rather thriving together.

Legg argues that we need to “...indigenize [our] stories/theories regardless of the content or focus of our research and writing, knowing these stories do not just belong to Indigenous spaces” as a way of embodying the Indigenous pedagogical knowledge-making that she lays out in her book (234). While Natives apply their ways of being to the content they produce for the academy, so should non-Natives apply this work

with proper acknowledgment—even if their work supposedly has nothing to do with Indigenous rhetorics—because Legg often finds there is overlap between current conversations between Native and non-Native rhetoric. Not engaging is simply another form of erasure.

The first step for non-Natives engaging with Indigenous rhetoric is acknowledging the “colonial settlerism deeply embedded in archival [or any] research, researchers can then begin on the path of ceremonial research and reconciliation” (238). The final pages of Legg’s epilogue details the steps that must be taken when critically engaging with Indigenous rhetoric. She argues these are: making relations through critical practices like positionality, accountability and reciprocity, engaging with Indigenous rhetoric through story, engaging with your own ancestors wisdom (whomever that may be) with respect, and maintaining all relations as a continuous process. Finally, by turning to our culture keepers, what Legg calls stories, we are upholding the responsibilities we have to one another, as well as reframing limiting stories of the past with new answers that merge previous and modern knowledge.

While Emily Legg’s methodology of storytelling may feel exclusive to one field, the information provided throughout could be applicable to any researcher, instructor, or scholar. However, this conversation is particularly useful for those working in the field of rhetoric and/or composition studies—as previous pieces published by Peitho cover overlapping topics such as anti-racist and feminist rhetoric, sociocultural writing for belonging, and storytelling through counter narratives. Legg’s book weaves together a compelling argument for how each of these topics could be applied to either your theories or your classroom. Not only does *Stories of Our Living Ephemera* provide a great example of how to incorporate storytelling into scholarship or classrooms (by doing exactly what she is explaining in her methodology), but it also exemplifies accountability to the people (past and living) that she is basing her methodology on. Legg’s book is more than just a “how to” for non-Natives to apply Indigenous rhetoric to their work, but rather it is a refreshing challenge to critically engage with conversations outside of your own culture. Emily Legg highlights Indigenous conversations within academia to continue the survivance established by foundational scholars before her while asserting the need to keep pushing for more. Survivance doesn’t end with a meager seat at the table—it continues until all relations and their ancestors are treated with respect, reciprocity, and account-