Serena Demichelis

Interview with Joshua B. Nelson

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Iperstoria interviews Dr. Joshua B. Nelson (Cherokee Nation), associate professor of English and affiliated faculty with Film and Media Studies, Native American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is also Lead Organizer of the Native Crossroads Film Festival and Symposium, hosted by the Department of Film and Media Studies and the Department of Native American Studies at OU.

Dr Nelson is currently working on a documentary on two American Indian Medal of Honor Awardees in the 45th Infantry Division ("Thunderbirds") during World War II, Ernest Childers and Jack Montgomery; he is narrator, host, co-producer and co-writer of the PBS 2021 documentary *Searching for Sequoyah*.[1] In 2014, his book, *Progressive Traditions: Identity in Cherokee Literature and Culture*, tackled and challenged the assimilated/traditional dichotomy which permeates Native American Literary criticism.

We met him together with dr. Simonetta Romagnolo, Cultural Affairs Specialist of the US Consulate in Milan. During the interview, he told us about his research in Italy, his views on cultural identity, *Progressive Traditions* and Sequoyah, his work across media, and much more.

SD: Your visit here constitutes a wonderful opportunity for us to have a conversation with a Native American academic and artist. First, we'd like to know how you've enjoyed your Italian stay so far and whether anything in particular resonated with you during your trip.
JN: On the whole, it's been a great stay. We've been in Arezzo teaching, and I've been able to travel a little bit, for the sake of giving talks and working on the film and going with our students from OU Arezzo to some sites. So it's been wonderful. And one of the things which surprised and resonated with me is the music of Fabrizio de André. I've been looking for music to help me with my language skills, and I came across him. And I'm getting a little obsessed, you know. It's

[1] The trailer and additional information are available at: https://searchingforsequoyah.com/. Last visited 05/12/2022.

just full of such beautiful melodies and such a great sound. You know, it kind of speaks to the Bob Dylan lover in me and I'm also just especially intrigued by his recurring return to Native peoples.

SD: And how did you end up knowing about him?
JN: I probably typed in "who's the Italian Bob Dylan?" And, you know, he popped up. So now I want to swing through Genoa and see what they've got about him there too.

SD: You're working on a new documentary on two WWII Medal of Honor awardees—both from the 45th Infantry ("Thunderbirds") Division. Could you tell us who are the two awardees, and why you chose to focus on them?
JN: It starts for me with Jack Montgomery, who is from rural Oklahoma. He's from a little town called Long, out in the Eastern part of the state, which is actually where my granddad on my mother's side was born.
I came across mention of him somewhere in my work on Cherokee culture and identity and literature. And although I have read a lot about Cherokee culture and identity, I didn't come across him until relatively late in my career. I was probably most of the way through my book and I just got really annoyed that I'd never heard about this Cherokee Medal of Honor awardee and couldn't quite figure out why that was. So I just got obsessed with him and I started investigating his back story. It seemed to me like film was maybe a good way to talk about his life, perhaps more so than a book. I'm not a historian by training, so I didn't want to tell that story from that particular angle. But I thought maybe a documentary film or a kind of an essay film could do it. So, as I learned more about him, I learned more about the 45th Infantry Division, and then I learned about Ernest Childers. The accounts of what these guys did read like a Hollywood script, right? Their efforts were sort of superhuman. Montgomery took about 32 German prisoners single handedly—like, I don't know how you do that spatially. They both [Montgomery and Childers], took out two machine gun nests by themselves, under sniper and mortar fire. It just reads like an Arnold Schwarzenegger film; it is kind of mind-blowing. So I thought, let's talk about those guys and offer up some account of what they represent in terms of larger social-historical questions around Native military service. What is culturally represented by their service is a more intriguing question to me than the usual one, which is what motivated their joining the US Army. Looking at what it means for Native societies in different times and places opens a wider scope than only asking what prompted them to sign up.

SD: Would you say it's weird that you did not know about Montgomery and Childers before?
JN: Truth be told, I probably couldn't name very many other Medal of Honor awardees. So, it's not that anomalous, I suppose. And I am not a huge military fan either, so I understand it's complicated to celebrate militarism without qualification.
At the same time, I think it's important to recognize that in the same way that Sequoyah represented for me a Cherokee hero of the intellect, for those who are inclined towards public service or military service, they could use a Cherokee hero, too. And it makes sense to me that we should try to celebrate that service in the same way that maybe we could celebrate Wilma Mankiller as a model of Cherokee leadership in the political realm. So that's part of what I'm up to with these guys.

SD: And you are cooperating with the 45th Infantry Division Museum, if I am not mistaken.
JN: Yes, the good folks at the 45th Infantry Museum there in Oklahoma City have been fantastic. Denise Neil, the director, has been sending me stuff. They've let me into their archives of pictures, amazing pictures. Mike Gonzales, the curator there, knows everything about the 45th. They've been really generous in sharing their visual materials with me. Combining that with the cinematic archive that we get from the National Archive in DC, I think we'll have plenty to work with. That said, I've also been in touch with some folks from the Winterline Museum in Venafro and the Operation Avalanche Museum [Eboli]. In fact, we're going to move down south and spend some more time in the area.

SD: Did you travel to the places which saw these events happen?
JN: Yes, although so far we have only been able to go to a couple of spots, and it was on a really fast trip. We went past the place where the 45th landed near Paestum and worked our way into the interior.
I should say that part of the idea is to go to the places where the 45th went around the same time of year that they were there so that we get a sense of what the landscape looked like in that season. Land features so prominently in Indigenous cinema, I wanted to feature the land in Italy in a parallel way.
Because I was teaching in Arezzo, we haven't been able to get out as much, but the spot that we found was in Oliveto Citra. I was consulting maps and I was trying to find the areas where these vague descriptions point to, and I found what I thought was the ballpark area near a cemetery there. We filmed for a little while and we wandered around. Then, on the way back, we saw a kind of a ruined house up on a hill that we couldn't see from the other angle. And we saw that

there was an American and an Italian flag flying out front. We went up and investigated and there was a plaque on the side of the wall that had a poem about war. It didn't seem to indicate much about what it was for or what it was commemorating, but there was a title, and it was called "Collina degli Eroi."[2] So when we got back I looked that up and it turned out that they had recently commemorated the spot as a memorial to the 45th Infantry and to Ernest Childers in particular.

It was really mind blowing and moving, so I can't wait to get back there. I wrote to the town leadership and they were very kind to write back and say, yeah, yeah, come see us, you know, we'll tell you what we know. So I don't think it was the exact spot where Childers performed his actions, but it's in the vicinity. As I'm reading more about this history, I'm learning how it is all about observation, and how much cover there is available, in a war that's driven by mortar fire and artillery. To see how very exposed that area was and to imagine whatever he had inside him, what compelled him to make this advance, made it all the more mind blowing. There is also a really quick story about that episode. When Childers was coming up on the second machine gun nest, he had run out of hand grenades, and he was trying to persuade the Germans inside to reveal themselves. And so he found a rock about the size and shape of a hand grenade and threw that, which caused them to pop their heads up; and that's how he managed to kill them with his rifle and take the machine gun nest.

I've seen interviews that he's given when he used to give talks at a local school that's named for him, and he told a story about learning how to shoot like that, and it was the same kind of story I heard from my grandfather. They both talked about how they would feed their families by hunting and when they would go hunting, their parents would give them one shell to take. They didn't have pockets full of bullets, because shells were expensive when they were growing up, you know, in the 1920s, 1930s. They had to get really accurate from a very early age. So those rural skills translated into something that turned out to be, you know, really important in ways for these guys later on in their life. I'm fascinated by this conjunction of the soldiers' agrarian backgrounds with terrifying, modern industrial warfare. What a momentous transition.

SD Perhaps we will have time to go back to the new documentary later on, but since we have you here, I also wanted to ask you a few questions about *Searching for Sequoyah*, the documentary for which you have been co-producer and narrator, host and co-writer.

JN: Yes, with producer LeAnne Howe and director James M. Fortier.

[2] "Hill of Heroes."

SD: You decided to focus on the circumstances of his death, instead of just his accomplishments, which are pretty well known, and his life; do you feel like you filled this gap with the documentary and how did it go?

JN: So you know, I don't want to give too much away, but in some sense, focusing on his death and his last journey is actually not the focus. That's a narrative hook that we used, and I think it works pretty well in emphasizing the mystery aspect of it. That's a trick, you know. It is a way to engage audiences.

Behind the curtain, one of our major tasks was to explore the legacy of Sequoyah, particularly his work on the language and how that shows up in Cherokee culture and Cherokee art today. So that was our shadow purpose, and I think it worked out pretty well in terms of the mystery itself. We actually abandoned that search in the film for, I think, responsible reasons. We started to worry about people breaking out bulldozers and backhoes to excavate places where they think Sequoyah had come to rest and that just was outside of what we were trying to do. In larger terms, our aim was to uncover the reach of Cherokee people across the globe. This was another big payoff for us with the film, and something that we maybe didn't totally expect to discover in the process of making the film. But you know, when we look at the ongoing traces of Cherokee people far away from Tahlequah, down in Mexico or now in Naples, or, you know, if we look back to, say, London, with the 18th century trips of the Cherokee diplomats, I think it expands our idea of the influence of the Cherokee world in empowering ways.

SD: Do you think that since a lot of the cast members were also descendants of Sequoyah this had an impact on the final outcome? And how?

JN: I do. Part of the reason again that we did that was as a structuring principle, to think about who it is that you're going to include, what voices to build in. Moreover, we tried to be judicious about the fields from which the participants or the descendants came: art, dance, politics, traditional practices, language revitalization and other areas. And hopefully it functioned as a metaphor for his legacy more broadly. So it's not like it's just the descendants who are carrying on the work that he did. We can also find a proliferation of his influence in all these different spheres.

SD: Considering you often deal with actual people and their actual lives, how are you tackling the issue of the relationship between fact and fiction and history and fiction?

JN: In some ways I've got different gears that I use in the different work that I'm doing. So if I'm writing a monograph about Cherokee identity linked up with Cherokee history and culture,

I try to give myself relatively little room for freedom in interpreting facts apart from the historical record.
But part of the problem that I was finding while I was researching that book was that I was coming across different historical accounts presenting themselves as factual and objective, that were saying the exact opposite thing about different matters and both were presenting these statements of fact as if they were uncomplicated. And I was trying my best in that book to sort through these different accounts and come to as reliable a statement as possible about where the structure of Cherokee governance came from, for instance. So there I tried again not to give myself very much room for play, though hopefully I've come up with some insights. But you know, they're not too creative.
As for films, what happens is that fiction becomes fact in some ways, especially as we're dealing with Sequoyah, who is an enigmatic figure we only think we know a lot of things about. The fictions that arise up around him become part of legend, right? And embracing that fictionality is something that you have much more license to do, or that we felt we had much more license to do here, than in a work on identity theory.
All of this becomes part of the fabric of our understanding of the past, and an important part of it. So how it is that someone becomes mythic in a culture requires that we deal with that kind of syuzhet of history, right? The way that we tell or order the facts that have come to us.

SD: You have a very diverse background in terms of methodology and approaches, I would say you have a pluralist approach.
JN: I think so, which is maybe another way of saying, like Groucho Marx, that I wouldn't feel comfortable joining any club that would have me. In other words, I am absolutely happy to borrow, hopefully in effective ways. I think it's kind of silly to ignore insights, wherever they come from.

SD: I guess you probably find it particularly useful when dealing with different media?
JN: Oh yeah, absolutely. You know, film is the perfect venue for pluralism. In many ways it is kind of founded on it, as a genre. It's just fundamentally multivocal, and when you embrace that, the final project gets better, right?

SD: Definitely. But in this sense, have you ever thought about adapting something, as in 'traditional' adaptation?

JN: You know, that's a really intriguing question, and surprisingly challenging. You would think that I would have, since I've taught classes on adaptation, you know? But no, I haven't. And I think part of my problem is that I believe myself to be kind of a derivative artistic creator, and I hate that about myself. I would like to be more original and so I try to remind myself that I have a tendency to borrow things. And that is not fair to adaptation by any stretch, because it's very much an art form unto itself and requires enormous skill to do well, so I've got nothing against adaption. I would pay good money to see, for instance, Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers adapting anything by Louise Erdrich: that would be a combination made in heaven.

SD: Let us move on to a more specifically cultural aspect, and the relationship between literature and culture. What is, if you feel like sharing it with us, your stance about authors, artists and writers representing characters, or worlds in other cultures?

JN: This is an important question and it's one that, honestly, I tend to sidestep. But I do try to treat it historically, particularly in my teaching. So, you know, we look back to what Michelle Raheja calls *redfacing*, the practice of putting non-Native actors in Native roles, which went on, of course, for decades and decades. It's my argument that it was about the time of *Little Big Man*, when Chief Dan George played Old Lodge Skins, that redfacing got revealed as just a fundamentally deficient industry practice. Once we saw Chief Dan George and all of his complexity, humor and nuance, we were no longer willing to settle for Ricardo Montalban or Burt Reynolds or Elvis Presley, or others like them—they just looked stupid after that and like they had never met a Native person and didn't know what they were doing as performers. So it looks to me, you know, if you can put two and two together, getting performers who know their way around the culture makes the artistic product better. That said, where do you draw the line on these kinds of matters? Does a writer not have permission anymore to write outside of their own experience? If that's the case, and we draw a firm line there, all we could ever have is autobiography, and writing would become really solipsistic. So I think it's requisite that we make room for an empathetic imagination, otherwise we wouldn't get fiction, and empathy would suffer thereby, and I don't think we want less empathy in our world. Still, that doesn't mean that, if you're writing characters outside of your experience, or performing them outside of your experience, you get to escape criticism or rejection. But I think if you do your homework and you practice empathy, then we ought to be willing to extend a certain degree of grace to the creators that are involved.

SD: To move now to your book, *Progressive Traditions*, would you like to spend a few words on the hypothesis you advanced to move beyond the dichotomy between cosmopolitan and nationalist approaches to Native culture, so as to dig into the Native American aspect of culture more precisely?

JN: Sure. I'll try to say a few things about it.

In many ways it seemed to me like a lot of the debate around the historical narration of tribal people, not just their governments but tribal *people*, hinged on this idea of the assimilated and the traditional. The shape of governments similarly got cast according to that dichotomous lens and I wondered, while reading a lot of the literature that came before that, on the telling of Native history: if that telling wasn't fictionalized, it was at least told in such a way as to marshal those Native stories into the service of some external ideology, right? Besides, telling the story of the Cherokee people was at the heart of what was compelling that narration for me, and I wanted to try to acknowledge that if I'm telling this story, I, too, am probably telling it for an ideological purpose, but I wanted to do it primarily for the sake of Native participants in the conversation, and I felt like most of those other stories were not privileging that perspective.

So, I don't know whether I was successful or not. But the purpose in my mind was to be as a kind of gadfly to tribal nations, not least because it seemed to me like we were drifting towards greater authoritarianism and greater bureaucracy, greater statism in the development of our nations, and I felt like I didn't see much in the academy that offered the means, or even the grounds to critique that movement, which is something I wanted to do for the sake of tribal people. Other people were doing it, but it seemed like they were doing it for the sake of a cosmopolitanist or a liberalist perspective, and I wanted to set that to the side in order to have more of an in-group conversation. Moreover, I think there's a great deal in our tribal traditions that urges not just caution about the state, but also urges us towards local action as a way of either checking its development or assuming responsibility for our communities ourselves. So that is basically what I wanted to emphasize then and what I want to emphasize now, as I move more into the area of film, and again, particularly for the sake of Native American young folks.

SD: Speaking of young folks, you're also interested in the educational aspect. How do you think we could start tackling the issue of Indigenization in an environment as the Italian educational one, which is for very many reasons and for very many aspects still not Indigenized at all?

JN: I wish I had a better answer, but I've only been in Italy for a little while and I don't speak Italian. Yeah, so it's pretty presumptuous to come in and say "here's what needs to happen in your country."
However, part of what I'm doing with these talks and in collaboration with the State Department is looking to make some friends. And part of what I would like to offer up in return for the help I've had seeing what there is to see is something about what I know on Native film. If this is of interest to people, then I'm happy to share it. And in fact, we've got to do that same work in the US; we have to do that same work in Oklahoma. Most Oklahomans couldn't name you a Native filmmaker, wouldn't have any idea.
So part of what we try to do at OU, and especially with the Native Crossroads Film Festival, is just spread the word about Native media. When I'm over here and I've given talks, I've been sending people my syllabi, especially where we've got links to films that people can see from Italy. Eventually, we'd like to build out our website for Native Crossroads to help function as a way station for people to come in and get access to these films that they might not be able to come across on their own.

SD: Native Crossroads was interrupted due to COVID. Are you planning to organize a new edition?
JN: Yes, we will keep going. I stepped back from the leadership of the festival while I am in Italy, so my fantastic colleagues at the university, like Joanna Hearne, will carry it on. In fact, I got an e-mail just the other day. I don't know if you know the name Jeff Barnaby, but he was a young filmmaker who directed *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and a horror film called *Blood Quantum*. He was a really forceful voice in Indigenous cinema. He was Canadian and he recently passed, way too young and too early, so my colleague, Sunrise Tippeconnie, who's a Native filmmaker at OU, was giving some thought to a screening to help honor him and his legacy. We've had really good audiences in Oklahoma, especially among Native viewers. They want to see this stuff and they can't see it for the most part, either on broadcast TV or at their local blockbuster cinema.

SD: At this point, could we be speaking of a larger issue concerning historical knowledge about Native people?
JN: Absolutely. And, you know, it's important for everyone to know this, not just for Cherokee people. For instance, recently in Oklahoma there has been talk of building this new turnpike, and people do not want it, especially those whose houses are going to be demolished because of

it. But there is also concern over environmental issues and other community impacts. Had we looked at Cherokee history earlier on, we might have seen earlier on that we had a problem with how the state deals with people's property rights and the voice of rural communities in terms of what kind of development they would like to see or what kind of influence they would like to have over the direction taken by larger communities. We had plenty of notice that there was something we needed to wrap our heads around. Perhaps we should have paid that attention earlier.

Even in this work on the 45th Division, one of the things that I most want to highlight are areas of natural beauty in Italy. I have gone to some places in France where brochures celebrate beautiful cascades, waterfalls, and when I get there, they have gone dry. So, in some ways, these environmental questions are going to be similarly thorny as we move forward, and maybe it makes sense for us to get our heads around them earlier rather than later, before they come to our backyards.

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Serena Demichelis *graduated from the University of Pavia with a thesis on the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and is currently attending the PhD Course in Foreign Literatures and Languages at the University of Verona, where she also teaches Scientific English for Nursing. She has published papers on Herman Melville's* Billy Budd *and on J.D. Salinger's short prose, which is also the focus of her doctoral research. She is part of the editorial staff at* Iperstoria. Journal of American and English Studies *and occasionally cooperates as copyeditor with* Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies. *Among her research interests are the short story in English, the study of characters in fiction, stylistics, literary theory and comparative literature.*