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Not Jimmie Durham's Cherokee

Roy Boney Jr.

Jimmie Durham has enjoyed a very successful art career of masquerading as a Cherokee for decades. It's puzzling because his pronouncements about Cherokee culture make no sense, and very few scholars seem to question or critically examine them, only furthering the myth and entrenching him in the art establishment.

Durham once claimed the first Cherokee person was formed when a coyote regurgitated parts of different animals it ate. Most Cherokees know of his incoherence: "In the Cherokee language the word for *world* and the word for *history* are the same." He would reiterate this sentiment in his statement for the show in *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations* at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992. This statement is as false as they come. For the record, the Cherokee word for *world* is ᐃᐃᐃ *elohi*, which refers to *earth* or even the *universe* in certain contexts. *History* is ᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ *kanohesgi*, which means the telling of a story.

Enter *Zeke Proctor's Letter*, a piece of Durham's that uses a facsimile of a letter written in the Cherokee syllabary by Zeke Proctor. The original letter is two pages long and is dated August 25, 1877. Its subject is on the status and court date of a prisoner for whom Proctor is trying to arrange details for release. It was written to ᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ Utseledv, the Cherokee name of Chief Charles Thompson, and his secretary, listed only as ᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ Nvwodiyai, a common Cherokee name for males. Durham used only the second page of the letter for the piece, which is essentially Proctor's valediction to

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the recipients as he urges them to promptly write a response. Infuriatingly, in the May 2017 feature in *Art in America* on Durham, Jonathan Griffin attributes the writing to Durham himself: "In some cases he writes in Cherokee, as in the four-part drawing *Zeke Proctor's Letter* (1989), where he transcribes a historical Cherokee text beside drawings and a contemporary, fictional letter in English."

On each copy of the letter, the artist drew images and wrote musings, including a drawing of a coyote regurgitating a man and a statement proclaiming "Indians lost because their technological level was basically stone age." His illustration of an errant version of our cosmological story aside, had Durham been in touch with the Cherokee community, he would have known the Cherokees are innovators when it comes to technology, especially as it relates to our writing system. We have adapted the Cherokee syllabary to every form of writing technology since the syllabary's handwritten invention in 1821 by Sequoyah. By 1989, the year of Durham's piece, we had already developed IBM Selectric typewriter elements in Cherokee, the first Cherokee word processor (a letter demonstrating the technology was given to Chief Wilma Mankiller by way of a dot matrix printer in 1987), and fonts that would be used in desktop publishing in the early 1990s were already in development. We have a long history of fighting our battles with words using the latest technologies. Even the syllabary in this article was typed in a font made possible by the Cherokee encoding in the Unicode standard alongside other major languages of the world.

In the *Art in America* feature, Griffin refers to a quote from Durham on why he doesn't provide Cherokee translations: "What I want them to know is that they can't know that." I think it's highly likely that Durham himself doesn't know. In an exhibit he co-curated in 1986, the show's title, ᏆᏍᏏᏏᏏᏏ, makes no sense as a complete Cherokee word, despite it being translated by Durham as "We Are Always Turning Around on Purpose." Additionally, in the phonetic transliteration of the title itself, he misspelled it. At best, it could potentially be parsed as "turning good," but even that is a stretch.

As a Cherokee artist who uses the syllabary in my own artwork, members of the Cherokee community scrutinize any Cherokee writing I use for accuracy, and any time I've made a mistaken you can be sure I was called on it. It's part of being held accountable to the Cherokee community. Durham has avoided that kind of accountability his whole career.

As for Proctor himself, he is a pivotal figure in Cherokee history. He was a survivor of the Trail of Tears removal and a Keetoowah, which means he actively practiced and was a keeper of our traditions. He was also a statesman and served as a sheriff in his community and as a Cherokee Nation senator. He lived in the Goingsnake District of Cherokee Nation near the Arkansas border. Proctor was famously involved in a murder trial that led to a shootout between US marshals and several Cherokees, an event known as the Goingsnake Massacre of April 1872. The subsequent dismissal of the United States' case against Proctor proved to be a landmark legal victory for the Cherokee Nation's sovereignty. It clearly established that the tribe itself recognized who its own people were and had the legal jurisdiction over their affairs. It also resulted in Proctor being the only person in history to have a treaty with the United

States as an individual. Volumes have been written on the importance of these events. Proctor's significance in history will be forever remembered. Stories abound of Proctor being protected by his fellow Keetoowahs during this time by practical and spiritual means. He was recognized as member of the Cherokee community culturally and by legal definition. He is still proudly claimed by Cherokee people today. This is in stark contrast to Durham.

The Proctor letter is an important example of a social document of the Cherokee people, demonstrating a lively, literate exchange in our language on topics like jurisprudence. During the post-Civil War era, usage of the syllabary was perhaps at its peak among Cherokees, so much so that Cherokee historians often refer to the rich, intellectual current of the time as the Cherokee Nation's Golden Age. Even as Oklahoma statehood in 1907 effectively dissolved tribal governance until later in the 20th century, the syllabary remained a significant cultural identifier for many Cherokees, regardless of whether they could read it or not. The artist's decision to use a fragment of a letter written in Cherokee syllabary from such a major historical figure is just another instance of him trying to falsely lay claim to this heritage. That Durham desecrated it with his acerbic humor and cultural ignorance only adds insult to injury.

A year after Durham debuted *Zeke Proctor's Letter*, a fragment of the letter appeared in another piece of his titled *Not Lothar Baumgarten's Cherokee*. Baumgarten is a German artist whose permanent installation, *The Tongue of the Cherokee*, features inscriptions of Cherokee syllables in glass panels in the skylight of the Carnegie Museum of Art's Hall of Sculpture in Pittsburgh. According to the catalogue for his retrospective, *At the Center of the World*, Durham's piece, ironically, was in response to non-Native Baumgarten using Cherokee language as his subject. Durham paired Proctor's letter fragment with a handwritten text in Finnish, which translates as, "Each of us is a direction. Among the Cherokee, the government is formed by a council, to which in fact every Cherokee belongs. In the council, it is each person's duty to listen carefully to what others say and to express their own thoughts precisely and in full."

In recent years, Durham has toned down his explicit claims of being Cherokee, and research has proven his claims to be thoroughly false. Even so, it would be wise for his admirers in the art establishment to heed his own words here, in Finnish no less, and listen to what actual Cherokee people feel about Durham's legacy. His status as a major figure in art history should be reexamined with critical scholarship that includes the Cherokee voice, not because it's a case of identity policing, but because Cherokees value our heritage and history. Having lost so much through the centuries, we can't let someone steal more from us. It's also just lazy scholarship to leave out the Cherokee community. There are so many Cherokees out there who would gladly offer insight and expertise on this crucial discussion. After all, we are proudly *Not Jimmie Durham's Cherokee*.

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