

*Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation.* By Jonathan Lear. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008. 187 pages. \$22.95.

*Radical Hope* explores what happens to a people when the material reality—the stuff used to weave webs of meaning—is altered to such a degree that their very subjectivity is at stake. Lear ends the book with a reference to the centuries old practice of the Crow Warrior Homecoming, lost for a time and made relevant again by the participation of Crow and other Native Americans in military campaigns from World War I to Iraq and Afghanistan. Including this Crow practice allows Lear to write his concluding sentence about the courage shown by the Chief of the Crow Nation at the end of the nineteenth century, a sentence the reader comes to long for by the end of the book: “And thus I think a case can be made that Plenty Coups offered the Crow a *traditional* way of going forward” (154). To get to this point, Lear weaves together narrative and philosophical argument with gifts of timing and foreshadowing not usually (or rather, not lately) reserved for the philosopher. As a result, whether you know the history of the Crow, you find yourself wanting to know how the story ends precisely in order to learn the answer to Lear’s most pressing question: how do you survive when your way of life is no longer possible?

The question, Lear asserts, is not particular to the Crow. Rather, the experiences of the Crow, grounded in shared practices, allow him to highlight the “peculiar form of human vulnerability” that comes with being cultural animals. In the case of the Crow, Lear concludes that the practices that surrounded war and hunting were constitutive of Crow subjectivity—so much so that when the buffalo were gone and intertribal conflict was outlawed by the U.S. government, what it meant *to be* a Crow was in danger. His philosophical inquiry arises from his interpretation of this statement by Plenty Coups: “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened” (2). Lear carefully deploys this enigmatic statement throughout the book to trouble the reader and engender a sense of urgency around what Lear takes to be the normative, and not merely descriptive, question of

how to survive cultural devastation.

*Radical Hope* makes good on the promise of its subtitle as the three sections—moving from question to analysis to proposal—model for the reader what it is to do ethics in light of this particular challenge, as well as more generally. The first section, “After This, Nothing Happened,” locates the question under investigation (what constitutes happening?) while introducing readers to the Crow practices that Lear subjects to his brand of philosophical anthropology. While he spends little time describing his methodology, Lear carefully distinguishes it from anthropology proper, which he describes as concerned with how a culture and persons actually live(d) and view(ed) the world. Instead, for Lear, philosophical anthropology uses a “textured historical context” to trigger the imagination and put us in touch with the human condition. And it works. At a time when many remain paralyzed in the wake of charges of universalism and cultural imperialism, Lear uses his cultural and temporal distance from Plenty Coups and the Crow to examine a problem that is nearly impossible to investigate from within one’s own time and cultural place.

The practices that make up the textured historical context center around a time in Crow history when war and hunting organized the daily activities, and, according to Lear, the subject formation, of Crow persons. Lear finds the practices of counting coup, planting the coup stick, and communal interpretation of dreams particularly significant not only because they are linked to material survival of a people, but more importantly because they are linked to psychic survival. For example, the practice of planting the coup stick during battle signified to one’s enemy and one’s people that a Crow warrior was willing to die to protect the Crow Nation. In turn, counting coup came to mean both having the courage to strike one’s enemy before killing him and later recounting such feats of courage in front of the community. When intertribal warfare is no longer legal or even viable (nothing of significance is left to battle over), the practices of counting coup and planting the coup stick do not simply cease to produce meaning; they no longer produce a certain kind of person. If there is a “breakdown of the fields in which occurrences occur” (34)—in which counting coup can no longer be recognized *as* counting coup—how can a Crow continue to be recognized (by himself and others) *as being* Crow?

“Ethics at the Horizon,” the second section, offers an analysis of what is at stake when a people face the very thing for which their cultural imagination cannot account for: the end of that way of life. What must the good life look like to suffer the “risk of conceptual loss” (123)? Lear explicitly draws upon an Aristotelian account of the good life, and in particular, his description of the virtue of courage. He offers a poignant example of how Plenty Coups displayed courage in his description of the chief laying his coup stick at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Ironically, he argues, “In giving up the symbol of protecting Crow territory he actually succeeded in protecting it” (48). In Lear’s view, Plenty Coups was not giving up the coup stick but rather planting it, and in so doing, thinning out the meaning embedded in that practice so that it might survive in a new context. While planting the coup stick was an important display of courage, Plenty Coups’s dream in which the tree of the chickadee is the only tree left standing after a storm sets up Lear’s most

important claim: to survive cultural devastation requires not giving up one's practices, but rather the courage to face a new context without knowing beforehand what you and your practices will look like on the other side of the storm.

In the final section, "Critique of Abysmal Reasoning," Lear thins out the Aristotelian account of courage and argues that the Crows' ability to listen and learn like the chickadee allowed them to survive cultural devastation. Neither reckless nor paralyzed, Plenty Coups invested his hope in the fact that the courage their practices had engendered would survive even if the practices themselves eventually came to mean something different to the Crow. "This hope is radical in that it is aiming for a subjectivity that is at once Crow and does not yet exist" (104). While *Radical Hope* is carefully constructed so as to appeal to multiple audiences, Lear's use of "radical hope" ought to strike a chord with religious communities from whom he borrows his eschatological language. While he includes references to Crow religion throughout his account of cultural devastation (in particular in his references to communal interpretation of dreams), his unwillingness to decide whether a spiritual or psycho-social explanation is a better fit for Plenty Coups's experiences results in the psycho-social retaining explanatory power while religion is relegated to second-order status. When it comes to the normative dimension of his argument, however, Lear's ethics shares much with Derrida's later approach to politics in its adoption (or revival) of religious concepts.

*Radical Hope* has its limits, most of which are dutifully catalogued multiple times. Lear carefully points out at each turn that while he draws from various historical documents, he does not make any claims about the historical accuracy of his narrative. Nor does he wish to make claims about Plenty Coups's intentions and beliefs. As a piece of philosophical anthropology *Radical Hope* seeks to use the particularity, though not necessarily the accuracy, of Crow practices and subjectivity to say something more general about human capacities and what we ought to do by virtue of being cultural beings. Lear's many asides to this effect may leave some readers wondering whether they could incorporate qualitative methodology while remaining within the parameters of philosophical anthropology. What might it mean to take the question of what *is* in the particular to be as central to what *ought to be*?

*Radical Hope*'s most valuable contribution is a strong argument for religion and practice as once again central to the work of philosophical ethics. For Lear, having the courage to accept that the future of a people (including philosophers) is embedded in practices (forgotten, taken for granted, and in question) is both radical and necessary. Indeed, what Lear offers philosophy may in fact be a traditional way of going forward.

Andrea Tucker  
Vanderbilt University