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Decolonizing American Indian History:

Influences that Created Shifts in Cherokee Ethnogenesis

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This essay is broadly framed within the context of Genocide and Holocaust Studies and incorporates language of International Law and the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Cherokee history examined through this lens and more tightly through the lens of race and ethnicity requires a penetrating understanding of complexities that informed assimilation and shaped Cherokee identity prior to ethnic cleansing and exile from the eastern United States. Federal policies served as assimilation experiments that targeted the early Cherokee. Vehement settler terrorism and avarice served to advance westward expansion while breeding out Indigenous bloodlines intended to bleach complexions and erase ethnic phenotypes in order to genetically alter the biology of Cherokee people. Christianization became as a tool of ethnocide to refashion Indian peoples into images that reflected Euroamerican society.

The myth that Cherokee relinquished Indian identity continues to spark scholarly debates over assumptions that they preferred Euroamerican culture and traditions over indigeneity. Debates of Cherokee identity continue today among historians, legal scholars, federal policy-makers, anthropologists, and throughout Indian Country. This essay asks two principle questions. Was assimilation intended to erase physical traits, memory, and conscious connection to who Cherokee were as a distinctive peoples? Was religious conversion and Americanizing Indigenous peoples a tenant for intentionally shifting Cherokee identity?

Primary evidence finds Cherokee adaptation of “white” identity was a response to federal policies of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The Cherokee shapeshifted, if you will, politically, socially, and religiously. Assimilating into larger society was a means of surviving polices of westward expansionism that was rooted in a complex history of ethnocide.¹ Cherokee cultural

¹ Etymology of the term traces to Raphael Lemkin who first coined the term genocide in 1943. Lemkin combined the Greek word for tribe (genos) and the Latin word for killing (cide). Lemkin, offered the term

and ethnic identity resulted from racialized violence, inter-cultural relations with larger society, religious conversion, and engagement with foreign governments.

Ethnogenesis, as used here, is an anthropological theory of identity transformation. I use the term in this essay to refer to transformation of Cherokee markers of cultural group identity that shifted over time. Barbara Voss from the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University defines ethnogenesis as “the emergence of new cultural identities.” A focused application of ethnogenesis theory serves as an instrument for investigating influences and consequences on racial and cultural identity that resulted in transformation of identity practices. This application also reveals “how ethnic identity practices are deployed in the exercise of power.”² I apply the theory of ethnogenesis to analyze shifting identity and culture following the American Revolution that transformed Cherokee identity prior to forced removal and to counter popular assumptions that pre-removal Cherokee assimilated into larger society because they desired to become white and relinquish indigeneity or *indianness*.³ For the purpose of this essay I will use the term indigeneity to mean Indigenous identity and cultural markers. Markers that identified the Cherokee as an ethnic or racial group include shared common language, ancestry, culture, and common territory or ancestral homelands.

“ethnocide” as a broader use for genocide; Sarah T. Williams, “What is genos (race or tribe) cide (to kill)?” Armenian, Assyrian and Hellenic Genocide News, Star Tribune, last modified November 5, 2000, accessed January 22, 2019, <http://www.atour.com/~aahgn/news/20001107b.html>; Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 65–67, Shaw argues “the idea of ethnocide as 'cultural genocide' distinct from physically violent genocide is misleading, since cultural genocide can only be the cultural dimension of genocide, something which is integral to every genocidal attack [...] It is better to refer to cultural suppression for pre-genocidal denial of culture, the cultural dimension of genocide for suppression that is part of broader genocidal process, and unintentional group destruction for cases where groups are destroyed by disease and famine that are originally unintended.”

² Barbara L. Voss, “What’s New? Rethinking Ethnogenesis in the Archaeology of Colonialism,” *American Antiquity*, 80, no. 4 (July 2015), 665, last modified July 2015, accessed June 24, 2019, <http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-antiquity/article/whats-new-rethinking-ethnogenesis-in-the-archaeology-of-colonialism/091C79F872074D480911375455D38A42>.

³ T. M. Weik, “The Archaeology of Ethnogenesis,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, (2014), 291-305; “What is Ethnogenesis,” World Atlas.com, “The violence brought about by [Euro] exploration, killing, and disease in the 1700s” blended differing Indian peoples into new groups from “refuges who survived the Spanish invasion,” accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-ethnogenesis.html>.

Federal Policy and Assimilation Experiments

American assimilation campaigns were archetypes, or in the words of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “templates” intended to exterminate the Cherokee and all Indigenous peoples.⁴ Knox, President George Washington’s Secretary of War, believed through treaties that required assimilation the Cherokee could be “render[ed] ... proper subjects for the experiment.”⁵ The 1791 Treaty of Holston served as an assimilation strategy of Washington and Knox. The treaty was presented as an option for Cherokee families to avoid forced removal by embracing a new identity as White elites. Knox, proposed to “civilize the savages” as an economical approach intended to dissolve tribal traditions that would lead to federal ownership of Indian homelands without the expense of war.⁶ The format for Americanizing the Cherokee intended to groom them to become a sedentary agrarian society based upon the American model. The Cherokee saw this as a diplomatic prospect to recover great losses after the defeat of their British allies during the American Revolution. The unequal Treaty of Holston promised to provide the Cherokee with material assistance and financial aid in exchange for reshaping their gender roles to mirror Americans, become farmers, and incorporate the plantation economy.⁷ Federal agent, Benjamin Hawkins, was appointed to oversee, enforce, and assess these changes in southeastern tribes and institute the Americanized methods of farming based on male toil and capitalism that was

⁴ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United State*, 88.

⁵ Jeff W. Bishop. “Henry Knox U.S. Secretary of War A letter to President George Washington July 7, 1789,” *The Cherokee Trail of Tears: A People’s Resistance against the Forced Removal from their Southeast Homeland as Related in Their Own Words* (Newnan, GA: Boll Weevil Press, 2017), 7. *American State Papers: Indian Affairs, I, No. 4:53*. Accessed July 12, 2019. <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsp&fileName=007/llsp007.db&recNum=54>.

⁶ Eurocentric, archaic, or offensively racialized words by today’s standards are left as they are found in the primary or secondary documents but I have stricken them in my research; Tiya Miles, *African American History at the Chief Vann House*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006), viii

⁷ Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 35-36.

dependent upon slave labor.⁸ For White society, this was their solution to the “Indian problem” and expanded the institution of slavery westward into Indian Territory.⁹ It is important to note that “unequal treaties” like those entered into with the Cherokee are defined in International Law as coercive, predatory, and unjust treaties that cede territory and create leadership divisions. Unjust bilateral treaties are “unequal” because they are predatory agreements signed to establish benefits for the dominant power while restricting sovereignty of subordinate powers.¹⁰ The subordinate party in unequal treaties holds a position of unequal negotiation. Inequitable terms support extortion of territorial rights and sovereignty among other cessions.¹¹ Promises made in treaties hold legal responsibilities. Under international law a promise is conditional in that it is final and binding.¹²

Avarice and Settler Terrorism

Angie Debo’s *And Still the Waters Run: A Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* shifted the narrative and historical gaze on to White society, their racialized prejudice, and nearly incurable avarice and violence.¹³ Debo argued that post Euro-invader contact and settler colonialism offset the balance of Native agency. The Treaty of Hopewell was another unequal contract which was entered into in 1785 due to White terrorism and mob violence against the

⁸ Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind*, 36.

⁹ “A Solution to the ‘Indian Problem’ 1887,” *National Archives: David M. Rubenstein Gallery*, accessed March 3, 2019, <http://recordsofrights.org/events/54/a-solution-to-the-indian-problem>;

A Solution to the “Indian Problem” is an installation at the National Archives in the David M. Rubenstein gallery. This digital exhibit is located online at *Records of Rights.org*. The National Archives, General Records of the U.S. Government is relevant to Cherokee genocide in that the exhibit includes original images of the Memorial of the Cherokee 1829, Andrew Jackson’s Message on Indian Removal 1830, Indian Removal Act of 1830, Memorial From Ladies of Steubenville 1830, Lands Assigned to Emigrant Indians 1830, and the Dawes Act of 1877.

¹⁰ Elena Conde Pérez and Zhaklin Valerieva Yaneva, *Unequal Treaties in International Law*, last modified August 30, 2016, accessed March 14, 2019, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199796953/obo-9780199796953-0131.xml>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Promise,” *Oxford Public International Law Citator*, accessed April 10, 2019, <http://opil.ouplaw.com/view/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e2009>.

¹³ Angie Debo, *FemBio.org*, accessed July 8, 2019, <http://www.fembio.org/english/biography.php/woman/biography/angie-debo>.

Cherokee. The Cherokee entered into the treaty for federal protection against Whites in exchange for tribal land cessions. Federal protection was not upheld which breeched the contract and intensified acts of terrorism and land poaching that led to the Treaty of Holston six years later. Secretary of War Knox stated the Treaty of Hopewell would convince the Indians of the good intentions of the United States and they would learn to “venerate and obey that power from whom they derived security against the avarice and injustice of lawless frontier people.”¹⁴

Christianizing: Breeding Out Indian Identity

Miscegenation, racialized, and sexualized attitudes are documented in letters by Christian and military leaders from the mid eighteenth century into the nineteenth century. One example in 1757 is a letter written by Reverend Peter Fountaine, son of Nobel French Huguenots and a clergyman at Westover Church near today’s Charles City, Virginia wrote: “Our traders have indeed their ~~squaws~~ at the Indian towns where they trade, they leave their offspring like bulls or bears to be provided for at random by their mothers.”¹⁵ The Reverend stated, “we ought to have intermarried with them, which would have incorporated them with us effectively, and [...] made them good Christians.”¹⁶ Fountaine continued his racialized banter using Christian references in his letter to a recipient whose name was Moses: “methinks, I can hear you observe, What! An Englishman intermarry with Indians? But I can convince you they are guilty of much more heinous practices in the sight of God.” More heinous in the sight of God, according to Fountaine

¹⁴ American State Papers: Indian Affairs: I, 4:53, Accessed March 7, 2019.

¹⁵ I have left the ~~stricken words~~ in quotes found in primary or secondary documents. I intentionally leave terms and phrases ~~marked through~~ as stylized writing to establish activist narrative, resistance writing, and to emphasize the power of word choice

¹⁶ John Oldmixon, *The British Empire in the American* (London; 1708), II, 232; James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South 1776-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 169.

was the Black females that White Christian men were sexing.¹⁷ Equally heinous to Fountaine were biracial offspring. Sex with Indians produced biracial children who, according to Reverend Fountaine, dirtied White blood and afforded no land gains. Fountaine argued, “Now, if instead of this abominable practice which hath polluted the blood of so many among us, we had taken Indian wives in the first place it would have been some compensation for their lands.”¹⁸

Colonel William Byrd of Westover, Virginia, revealed that he shared the views of Fountaine regarding intermarriage with Indians. Miscegenation was considered a duty to the colony and a duty to the church that made having sex with Indian females palatable for White men. Byrd professed, “And in earnest, had the English consulted their own security and the good of the colony, had they intended either to civilize or convert these gentiles, they would have brought their stomachs to embrace this prudent Alliance.” Byrd was confident the dark skin tone of Indigenous people could be overlooked because the “Indian was usually tall and well proportioned, which makes full amends for the darkness of their complexions. I can’t think the Indians were very much greater ~~heathen~~ than the first Adventurers, who, had they been very good Christians, would have had the Charity to take this only method of converting the Natives to Christianity.”¹⁹ According to Byrd, Indians and Blacks could be bred into appearing White within two to three generations. Byrd concluded, “Besides, the poor Indians would have had less reason to complain that the English took their Lands, if they received it by way of a marriage portion with their daughters. Had such affinities been contracted in the beginning [...] Nor would

¹⁷ Oldmixon, *The British Empire in the American*, II, 232; Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South 1776-1860*, 170; Inter-ethnic children, were “born in a state of slavery” if their mother was enslaved.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Spencer, *The Writings of Colonel William Byrd, of Westover in Virginia*, 8-9; Maury, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family*, 349-250; Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South 1776-1860*, 170-171; I have left the ~~stricken words~~ in quotes found in primary or secondary documents. I intentionally leave terms and phrases ~~marked through~~ as stylized writing to establish activist narrative, resistance writing, and to emphasize the power of word choice.

the shade of the skin have been any reproach at this day; for if the Moor may be washed in three generations, surely the Indian might be blanched in two.²⁰

Conclusion

Euroamerican philosophy of White superiority fortified identity politics structured for the erasure of Indigenous peoples through indoctrination, assimilation, by force, and even through rape. Settler colonialism partnered with Indian policy and Christian ideology became a formula for ethnocide. Westward expansion resulted in the advance of race-based chattel slavery and the southern plantation economy that created racialized views within the Cherokee nation which mirrored those of White society.

The touchstone of this essay reveals why early Cherokee assimilated into larger Euroamerican society. The simplified answer is that they acculturated and utilized assimilation to resist erasure from the American landscape. The more complex understanding requires a penetrating analysis of the vehement climate of race relations that followed the American Revolutionary War through the Indian Removal era. Settler colonialism, dispossession from tribal territories, religious conversion, and Americanizing Indigenous peoples deepens the complexities at the core of shifts in Cherokee identity. Evidence in this essay supports my argument that the Cherokee assimilated because they were early targets of experiments designed to refashion them, culturally and biologically, into White Americans. To be clear, federal administrations required Cherokee assimilation in exchange for exemption from ethnic cleansing from their tribal territory which, as we know, was not upheld by the United States.

The Cherokee acclimated to the invasion of Euroamericans, utilized apparatuses of government, embraced diplomacy, and employed varied levels of assimilation to resist not only forced exile but complete eradication of Indigenous societies. John Trudell stressed in the

²⁰ The Writings of Colonel William Byrd, 8-9.

documentary *Power, Authority, and Tribal Genocide* that assimilation is an “effective and essential part of genocide [...] a deadly erasure of memory and our whole conscious connection to who we are.”²¹ I agree with Trudell’s assessment and hope my research is deeply rooted enough to contribute this statement to debates; we, Indigenous peoples, are all descents of the American Indian Holocaust and in the words of historian Walter L. Hixson, “North America is a crime scene.”²²

²¹ John Trudell, “Power, Authority and Tribal Genocide,” Youtube.com, accessed February 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbEGYIxx2_I.

²² Carroll P. Kakel III, “Patterns and Crimes of Empire: Comparative Perspectives on Fascists and non-Fascist Extermination,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 33, no 1 (2019), 9, accessed June 1, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/23256249.2019.1548164; Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples’ History*, 228. During the Philippine–American War (1899–1902), when anti-imperialists in Congress charged that U.S. subjugation of the Filipinos was a crime, Lodge forthrightly responded that if that was true, “then our whole past record of expansion is a crime.” This quote comes from in Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 171.