Survival of the Tribe: How the Cherokee Nation Fought Genocide

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ABSTRACT

The history of Indigenous Nations' relationship to the United States colonial project and has long been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry and community reflection. Among these nations, the Cherokee Nation stands out as one of the most frequently misunderstood. Utilizing an interview with Paul Douglas Matheny Jr. as a methodological framework, this study reveals that the narrative of the Cherokee Nation is far more complex than many scholars have suggested or, in some cases, explicitly argued. Drawing directly from Matheny's testimony, this analysis traces the evolution of a coherent Cherokee identity across precolonial and postcolonial contexts. It demonstrates that the Cherokee Nation's historical trajectory is better understood as a struggle to navigate and resist colonial power structures rather than a failure to assimilate into colonial society. This reinterpretation not only provides a more accurate scholarly depiction of Cherokee history but also has the potential to mitigate harm among Cherokee individuals who have experienced disconnection from their community over time.

Contrary to popular belief, the Trail of Tears did not force all central native peoples west into states such as Oklahoma. Paul Douglas Matheny Jr, a retired Naval Commander, former Naval recruiter, and enrolled member of the United Cherokee AniYunWiYa Nation, is one descendant of those who remained. Matheny's story is a complex turn of events that resulted in his being completely disconnected from his community, making it necessary for him to reconnect with his Cherokee roots late in his life. Situations like Matheny's often become the subject of scholarly analysis. Many scholars, such as Thomas E. Mails and other popular writers, such as the anonymous authors at Captivating History,[1] hypothesize that the Cherokee Nation rapidly assimilated into colonial practices as a possible reason for their loss of culture (Mails 1996, xi). However, through a careful analysis of Matheny's story, I argue that his narrative offers a more nuanced understanding of the Cherokee Nation's relationship to settler colonialism. This paper considers the details of Matheny's story, drawing from an extensive oral history interview conducted in the fall of 2022 along with additional sources.

Using Thomas Tweed's theory of religion as a lens, I argue that, rather than reinforcing the assimilation hypothesis, scholars should focus on failed attempts at accommodation. White people for decades have called the Cherokee Nation the first "civilized tribe," a term steeped in colonial arrogance. A more fitting description would be world-class survivalists, who were crushed under the relentless violence of settler colonialism.

Paul Matheny spent most of his life having a vague understanding of his Indigenous heritage. From what he has said, his family was not very proud of that history. Due to Matheny's participation in Indigenous storytelling, outlined by Nathanlie Piquemal, which focuses on relationships, repetition, and myth, I have combined several of his reconnection origin stories for this paper. His journey of reconnection with his Indigenous heritage came about due to two important life events: his experience recruiting in Indigenous communities for the United States Navy and his close friendship with David Young-Wolf. I cannot say for certain which event came first, but his relationship with Young-Wolf is most important to him. He recounts their relationship:

In 1997, Arkansas State University, I met Dr. David Young-Wolf, okay, and he's there showing all of his carvings, and I'm there to do a demonstrational [inaudible] dance. We're introduced. We immediately connect, and we exchange business cards. And over from 1997 until 2006, he would share with me the research he was doing. He would recommend me to read books. If you're going to understand the Trail of

1. Captivating History is a corporation founded by Matthew Clayton in which authors publish collective works anonymously for mass production.

Tears, you really need to read this book and this book and this book. If you're going to go to visit an American tribe, you need to understand their background before you go thoroughly, so you won't make a mistake…that began my journey in learning about not only the Cherokees but American Indian culture in general. (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

David Young-Wolf was a lawyer who worked on behalf of the United States Government to evaluate the groups in Missouri and Arkansas claiming Cherokee ancestry. Through this work, Young-Wolf became an expert on many important elements of Cherokee hardship. In Matheny's words, "He became an expert in travel law, in treaty law, and he was really good with Cherokee genealogy" (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022). It was with this knowledge that Young-Wolf helped Matheny connect with his identity as a Cherokee man. Matheny explains:

> So, as time went by, and he and I became very good friends, and I gave him all my genealogy information. He says, "If this is truly your great-great-great-grandfather, he walked on the Trail of Tears. Here's his name. Okay? His name is Jim Campbell, but sometimes they list him as James Campbell," so I call my cousins in Alabama, and he says, "Oh yeah. He's in [the] family bible, and he is the person that great-great-grandmother said was her grandfather." So, now I've got a name of a person. So, over a period of time, David would share with me this information, and he gave me enough hints on how to do research on my own. I began to find individuals who were obviously American Indians who were related to me. That's how I got started. (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

Matheny's connection with David Young-Wolf, along with his involvement in the Pow Wow circuit and recruitment work for the Navy on Indigenous Reservations across the country, influenced his decision to share his knowledge of Cherokee traditions and the Trail of Tears. He began presenting this information to local primary schools in his community.

He became so popular doing this that his guest lecture appearances led him to work on the Trial of Tears as an official member of the National Trail of Tears Association at Tuscumbia Landing. There, Matheny gained additional information through the relationships he formed.

What began as a small introduction to David Young-Wolf and an agreement to perform recruitment among Indigenous communities on behalf of the U.S. Navy blossomed into a sense of community and knowledge that has become a large portion of

his life. In fact, during the interview, Matheny informed me that he was invited by the National Trail of Tears Association to give a presentation at the Florence Indian Mound Museum in Alabama.

Matheny's story of self-discovery points to a much larger story about Cherokee history, which has intrigued people for generations. The disconnection with his Cherokee heritage is not an isolated event. As Mails explains, "So quickly and completely was the old religious and material culture modified and then discarded that evidence of it passed into near oblivion" (Mails 1996, ix). Like Matheny, the entire Cherokee Nation has been disconnected

from great portions of its traditional belief system and people due to settler colonialism. As a result, many internal conflicts occurred over who is correct in their assessments of history and Cherokee identity. Matheny says:

Each Cherokee tribe pays historians to write his version of Cherokee history. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma has their historians that write their history, their version. The United Keetoowah Band has their version, and the Eastern Band Cherokees have their version, in which they will say, we are more Cherokee than the other two because we stayed in the mountains. They would say that. (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

External observers have also tried to make their own assessments of what happened to the Cherokee Nation. Although it is not my place as a non-Indigenous person to comment on the internal conflicts within modern attempts at Cherokee histories; I wish to challenge arguments perpetuated by other outside scholars and argue for a more sympathetic view of the Cherokee Nation.

Those who write on Cherokee history have speculated why so many people are disconnected from ancestral practices. The most common answer is that the Cherokee simply assimilated rather than attempting to resist through preservation as other Indigenous Nations did. The authors at Captivating History write, "After being defeated and forced to sell or simply cede their land, the Cherokee decided to try and assimilate. They were one of the most successful tribes when it came to blending in" (Captivating History 2022, 2). Similarly, Mails notes, "[The Cherokee are] best known due to their amazingly rapid transformation from the ancient culture to white ways between 1700 and 1825 and for their becoming the first 'civilized' tribe" (Mails 1996, xi). Either they misunderstand the word assimilation, or they have not taken the time to understand the lived experience of Indigenous people like Matheny. To understand more fully why the Cherokee people acted the way they did, one must first understand who the Cherokee were before colonial contact and the hardships they faced after contact.

Scholars agree that the colonization of North America resulted in the immense suffering of Indigenous Nations. U.S. children are taught in classrooms about how smallpox devastated Indigenous populations, that the buffalo were hunted to near extinction, and that the Cherokee were marched out of the East and displaced in Oklahoma. However, the honest version of the story is much more horrifying and genocidal. Angelique EagleWoman makes the argument that the United States has committed genocide according to every category listed by the United Nations in the 1948 Prevention and Punishment of the Crimes of Genocide (EagleWoman 2015, 440). She lists them as follows: killing a member of a group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to a group, inflicting unlivable conditions upon a group in order to cause death of the whole or in part, preventing births within a group, and trafficking the children of a group. In support of this claim, EagleWoman outlines how the United States is guilty of each criterion regarding Indigenous Nations. She explains that United States gave official orders to gun down Indigenous peoples during the nation's founding years and continued through the early 1900s. She describes how the United States took Indigenous lands by generating large debts, killing the means for Indigenous survival, and forcing them on reservations. She outlines how the United States has worked to prevent Indigenous births through forced sterilization clinics up through the 1970s. Finally, she details how the United States took Indigenous children from their families and placed them in boarding schools or with white families (EagleWoman 2015, 440-445). The Cherokee Nation is no stranger to these atrocities.

Historian David E. Stannard, using primary sources from the era of the American Revolution, provides the following context for the genocide against the Cherokee Nation:

> "Their towns is all burned," wrote one contemporary, "their Corn cut down and [the Cherokee] drove [themselves] into the Woods to perish and a great many of them killed." Before long, observed James Mooney, the Cherokee were on "the verge of extinction." Over and over again their towns had been laid in ashes and their fields wasted. Their best warriors had been killed and their women and children had sickened and starved in the mountains. (Stannard 1992, 156)

Suffering continued in the mountains among those who stayed behind after the Trial of Tears. Another tool of genocide was forced sterilization, which is a practice preventing the next generation of Indigenous communities from being born. Legal scholar Sophia Shepherd, in conversation with Chuck Hoskin, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, discussed the Claremore Indian Hospital in Oklahoma, where hundreds of Indigenous

women—many of them Cherokee—were subjected to nonconsensual sterilization (Shepherd 2021, 91). Shepherd explains that the U.S. government gave federal funding to incentivize doctors to perform the nonconsensual operations and coerce women into procedures through threats (Shepherd 2021, 92). However, when asked to compensate the Indigenous victims for their losses, the U.S. government refused despite giving compensation to other ethnic groups who suffered similarly (Shepherd 2021, 90).

The impact of Boarding Schools is another example of this genocide. Children were forcibly removed from their families and prohibited from speaking Indigenous languages or practicing traditional cultural customs. Sarah Sneed, an Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) tribal member and Havard Law School graduate, discusses the Eastern Band Cherokee Boarding School, a facility near the Qualla Boundary operating between 1882 and 1954 (Sneed 2009, 1-8). She tells the story of her mother:

> Our mom, born Mary Smith, told about how one day around 1920, while picking blackberries, she and her sister, Rosie, were scooped up by John Crowe, a tribal lawman and truant officer, placed into the back of a wagon with other children and taken to the Cherokee Boarding School. Her widowed mother, Lucy Ann, had not given consent, nor was she notified, that her daughters had been taken to school . . . [.] One of the first meals Mom was served at school was macaroni. She had never seen the likes of this strange food, but having had some experience with intestinal parasites, thought she was being asked to eat a plate of worms. Her rejection of the food was met with a knuckle rapping by a fierce, yonega-ageya dormitory matron. Mom was five years old and couldn't understand why Lucy Ann didn't come to take her and Rosie home, away from this terrifying environment. (Sneed 2009, 49)

Sneed's story is an important microcosm of the larger story about how Indigenous children were stolen from their communities. Likewise, Young-Wolf's story highlights the trauma of boarding schools and how some parents were able to get their children out. In fact, the only time Matheny cursed during the interview was when discussing David Young-Wolf's time at the Eastern Band Cherokee Boarding School.

Matheny recounts:

> Dr. Young-Wolf was born on the Cherokee reservation. They would prefer to call it the Qualla boundary, in Cherokee, North Carolina. His father was in the 82nd Airborne; his father was in the Army. His mother was also in [the] Army. Now, David went to the Cherokee Boy School in Cherokee, North Carolina, until he was about twelve years old. His father got promoted to officer. So, his father says, word

> for word, "I'm getting you out of that hell hole. I'm sending you to Valley Force Military Academy." (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

Both stories highlight the trauma of a child completely disconnected from their parents and Indigenous heritage. Those who are part of David Young-Wolf's community say he never spoke about his time at the boarding school and that he was not a man who shied away from hard discussions. As Matheny accounts, Young-Wolf was willing to discuss his time fighting in Vietnam without issue. Much like Matheny, Young-Wolf had to reconnect with his Indigeneity at a later point in his life. It was not until he made it through law school that he was able to contribute to historical preservation through his work on the Trail of Tears.

There were many reasons for the genocide against Indigenous peoples. One example that tends to go unremarked is land theft and its intended ecocide. Although it is not defined by the United Nations, I argue land theft to be an extremely important element of genocide. The 1831U.S. Supreme Court decision of Cherokee Nation v. George led to the Trail of Tears and has had reverberations not only throughout Turtle Island but also the world (cf. Miller 2024). As Peter d'Errico describes it, the Cherokee not only lost their land but also Indigenous Nations everywhere were stripped of their sovereignty and reduced from "Nations" to "Tribes" (d'Errico 2022, 149-159).

Based on the evidence, the Cherokee Nation faced and continues to endure genocide by the United States government according to all definitions provided by the United Nations and even some that are not. With that said, contrary to what Mails and Captivating History would lead readers to believe, the Cherokee Nation could not simply assimilate into the United States while the latter was, and is, trying to exterminate it. Rather, the Cherokee have survived, albeit in pieces, because of a sheer determination to survive. Thomas Tweed's concepts of crossing and dueling highlight how this might have been possible.

According to Tweed, "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and subhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries" (Tweed 2006, 55). Religion is an ideology structured by the existence of people. Some scholars, such as Philip P. Arnold, argue that the Cherokee culture is not a religion (Arnold 2023, 1-11). Religion, according to Tweed, helps people navigate their existence by drawing on their community, or relation to a larger idea, which allows them to both cross and dwell, to be content in their worldview or to alter it. Cultures, like religion, help people navigate their existences by establishing an identity in the same ways. Therefore, to use Tweed's theory to analyze the Cherokee Nation's

circumstances, I use religion and culture synonymously. In doing so, the concepts of crossing and dwelling can highlight the complex state of the Cherokee Nation as they move throughout space and time.

According to Tweed, "Dwelling practices situate the religious in time and space, positioning them in four chronotopes: the body, the home, and the homeland, and the cosmos" (Tweed 2006, 123). Instead of home and homeland, I substitute these categories with land and resources because, historically, the lives of the Cherokee people have been intertwined with their ability to maintain their survival. Resources are indispensable to the Nation's orientation with the world around them, far more than the sentiment of any particular area. In this community, a territory is valuable not because it has borders but because of the resources within it. Based on my interview with Matheny, three important elements to the Cherokee people are (1) bodies, which relate to the existence of the Nation, (2) resources, which are how the Nation will survive, and (3) the cosmos, which is how members of the Nation relate their existence to a bigger idea of cosmic significance. In illustrating this point, Matheny discusses the Green Corn and Ripe Corn Ceremonies:

> The Green Corn [Ceremony] is when they plant the corn. They want the corn to ripen and be a good crop, but it also represents the survival of the tribe. Corn was extremely important in the survival of the tribe…one of the things they did was the women picked out the husbands and wives. They would say, "This guy…he's healthy, he's a good hunter, he'll be a good husband. So, I want my granddaughter to marry him." …the women, that shows you how powerful the women were… tribal culture is about survival. The tribe doesn't survive if healthy men and women won't get together and have healthy children. Okay? So, that was extremely important. And then The Ripe Corn Ceremony…would be celebrating that they were having a good harvest, and that…they wouldn't starve; they would have enough food to get through the winter. (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

For Matheny, the two most important elements of the ceremony are bodies and resources: bodies, because of his emphasis on marriage and social status associated with survival, and resources, because of his emphasis on the corn's ability to provide throughout the winter. In connection with Tweed's framework, the marriage ceremonies, the acquiring of social status based on hunting ability, and the corn's sustaining properties constitute a form of dwelling. Another aspect of the Green Corn Ceremony is cosmic significance. As anthropologist John Witthoft writes, "The dance content and specific features of the Creek and Cherokee green corn festivals suggest that one function of this

ceremony is the placation and propitiation of the whole pantheon, including the sun, the fire, the thunders, the corn spirit, the spirits of plants, and the spirits of the animals upon which man preys" (Witthoft 1949, 69).

From this observation, the Green Corn Ceremony illustrates how the Cherokee Nation interacted with cosmic forces beyond the physical world. Experiencing life in these elements is what it means to dwell, following Tweed, and therefore provides an idea of how Cherokee life may have looked before colonial genocide. In addition, Cherokee dwelling, within this period, creates a mythological orientation by which accommodation tactics, or crossing, against genocide can be measured and articulated.

Tweed defines crossing as moving from place to place in multiple senses of the concept. Terrestrial crossing is a transformation of the physical land or relation to other people; however, Tweed does not limit his concept to just physically moving from place to place. He also argues that religion enables people to cross in the corporeal and cosmological senses as well. Corporeal crossing is a transformation in the understanding of what it means to be a body, and cosmic crossing is a transformation in ideas about what it means to be human concerning an individual's or group's cosmic significance (Tweed 2006, 123). Applying the concept of crossing to the Cherokee Nation is a helpful tool in understanding how the Cherokee adapted in an effort to resist genocide.

Each element of genocide, the confiscation of Cherokee lands, the abduction of Cherokee children, and the killing of Cherokee people through mass murder and forced sterilization, is a tactic meant to hit the core of Cherokee culture. Taking land destroys the Cherokee sense of home; taking children destroys their cosmology by destroying the memory of it, and the mass murder and forced sterilization of Cherokee people destroy their bodies. Genocide is a calculated systematic annihilation of the very existence of a people. However, in response, the

Cherokee Nation did not go quietly into oblivion. Matheny explains the resilience of the Cherokee people when he says:

> Remember, the Cherokee became enculturated real quickly. Then they learn…how to do business. Probably the richest man in Georgia when they removed all the Cherokees from Georgia, or most of them, was James, who was [the] brother of John Ross…why? Because he was a great businessman. The Cherokees learned to do business. He learned to grow tobacco. He learned to grow cotton. And he knew how to sell tobacco and sell cotton to white people. He knew how to grow corn and sell corn. James had a lot of money, and of course, he and his brother John, who

> was principal chief, [did]…their best to keep the Cherokee in North Georgia from being removed. (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

The Cherokee knew how to grow tobacco, corn, and cotton before colonialism. However, as Matheny describes, the Cherokee Nation adapted their traditional farming practices to accommodate their need for large sums of capital to survive within settler colonial society. This strategy allowed members like James Ross to have a political and economic influence within a growing settler colonial context. Due to the close relationship between land and the resources that accompany it, I argue this qualifies as Cherokee land relations crossing into the colonizer's world.

Within the context of colonization, a conflict between U.S. and Cherokee notions of embodiment emerges. For the Cherokee, racialized forms of embodiment were an unknown and dangerous ideological justification for genocide. The Cherokee Nations' sense of who they are as a people began to shift as a result. Nevertheless, the Cherokee learned and adapted quickly. By the time of their removal, the Cherokee Nation was well regarded among many colonizers despite their racist views towards Indigenous peoples. For example, historians Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green present an historical document written by Elias Boudinot, a well-known 19th-century mixed-race Cherokee politician in 1831, which articulates a common sentiment among colonists pretraining to the Cherokee removal from Georgia:

> The Cherokees have been reclaimed from their wild habits – Instead of wild and ferocious savages thirsting for blood, they have become the mild 'citizens,' the friends and brothers of the white man – Instead of the superstitious heathens, many of them have become the worshippers of the true God. Well would it have been if the cheering fruits of those labors had been fostered and encouraged by an enlightened community! But alas! ...they are now deprived of rights they once enjoyed – a neighboring power is now permitted to extend its withering hand over them – their own laws, intended to regulate their society, to encourage culture and to suppress vice, must now be abolished, and civilized acts, passed for the purpose of expelling them, must be substituted. (Perdue and Green 2005, 144-145)

In Matheny's estimation, before colonial contact, the Cherokee Nation thought of themselves as a community. The Cherokee were more concerned with how well a person could hunt or bear children. However, after colonial contact, a new social order presented itself to the Cherokee people, and they carefully constructed an image that would benefit them and ensure their survival. To this end, the Cherokee changed much of their epistemological appearance, including their cosmology.

Rather than the Cherokee Nation changing their epistemological beliefs, I argue the most likely scenario is that they changed their epistemological appearance. Evidence of this reconfiguration can be found among confused scholars, as Mails writes:

> No veil hangs over the ancient Cherokees [more] than that clouding their earliest beliefs regarding the Creator and the origins of their religious customs…the creation and origin material collected…the most complete available…included such extensive near duplications of the first five books of the Bible as to cause readers to conclude that early in the historic period the Cherokees began to weave the newly learned biblical material into their own legends. (Mails 1996, 145)

The Cherokee willingly wove their own cosmological stories into that of their oppressors. A possible explanation for this practice is a strategic move on behalf of the Cherokee. While appearing to be fully Christianized, the Cherokee were able to keep their original cosmological beliefs secret. However, a possible unintended consequence of this concealment is the disconnection of alienated descendants such as Paul Matheny and David Young-Wolf, as well as the larger Cherokee Nation, from their fully intact version of precolonial cosmology.

Paul Matheny's disconnection from his Cherokee roots and subsequent quest for reconnection is not an isolated event. His story of reconnecting with his Cherokee lineage through his relationship with David Young-Wolf mirrors the larger Cherokee Nation's pursuit of a shared precolonial historical narrative. Stories like these have prompted questions about why these stories exist. Disagreements have become controversial not only among communities of Cherokee but also among outside speculators, such as Mails and the Captivating History corporation, who have reached their own controversial conclusions. While the internal conflict among the Cherokee communities is beyond the scope of this paper, the outside speculations must be addressed. At least among Mails and Captivating History, it is common to label the Cherokee Nation as an assimilated people. Given the evidence presented in this essay, I propose that is far from the truth.

As Matheny's account makes clear, the Cherokee Nation was a group who valued survival as a core element of its culture before colonial contact. Using Tweed's elements of dwelling, this value becomes evident. Their resources were valuable for their ability to feed the community. Their bodies were valued for their ability to procreate and provide for new members of the community, and their cosmological beliefs were valued in so far as the spirits could aid their people. It is my argument that the goal of survival never changed for the Cherokee Nation, despite the United States' goal of genocide (cf.

Schwartzberg 2023). Rather, their circumstances pushed them into such a drastically different way of life. For the first time, the Cherokee Nation faced insurmountable odds after contact with colonial forces. Their ability to dwell in their current state became impossible, resulting in desperate attempts at crossing that would have left them unrecognizable to their precolonial counterparts. For the Cherokee, resources became capital, good hunters became civilized tribal members, and the Cherokee beliefs took on an indistinguishable Christian appearance, all for the survival of the Nation.

Elias Boudinot, as with many colonizers, no longer saw the Cherokee Nation as a threat to white civilization and James Ross became one of the wealthiest men in Georgia. For a time, the Cherokee Nation's crossing tactics for survival were successful. People who talk like Elias Boudinot came to see the Cherokee Nation as a neighbor, and James Ross used his power and influence to keep the Cherokee Nation safe. For these reasons, the Cherokee resisted, however futile it may have been.

People like Elias Boudinot did not win the argument among the colonists. The Cherokee were labeled less than human despite all attempts to appease white senses of civilization. People like James Ross could use any amount of capital influence to stop the Cherokee Nation from being forced away from their ancestral lands. Despite being regarded as the most "civilized tribe," it was not enough. Unfortunately, genocide will not be accommodated.

As U.S. Chief Justice John Marshall said when discussing whether the treaties between the Cherokee Nation and the United States should be upheld, "It may well be doubted whether those tribes which reside within the acknowledged boundaries of the United States can, with strict accuracy, be denominated foreign nations…they occupy a territory to which we assert a title independent of their will" (Cherokee Nation v. Georgia 1831, 30 U.S. 18). Marshall's words outline the complete irrelevance of anything the Cherokee Nation said or did. Ultimately, the United States was going to destroy them one way or another. A claim of assimilation, incorporation with no resistance, is a gross oversimplification and, frankly, an insult to the legacy of the Cherokee Nation. When Captivating History writes, "Jackson's promise justified their assimilation. His words made it all seem worth it. If all they had to do was pledge allegiance to the flag, adopt the new American culture, and continue to farm the land, then there was hope for them after all," they are creating a narrative that leaves out a significant amount of the story (Captivating History 2021, 25). The Cherokee did not "keep farming the land"; they changed from traditional agriculture to monocropping in an effort to gain monetary influence to protect their community. The Cherokee did not "adopt the new American culture." They intentionally weaved Cherokee beliefs into Christian ones in order to

epistemologically blend in. These things matter. The Cherokee Nation did not lie down and hope for the best as Captivating History would like readers to believe. The Cherokee Nation fought as well as they knew how, and the fight matters, especially to people such as Paul Matheny and David Young-Wolf.

When empathizing with Matheny, one must consider the psychological impact of opening a book in search of answers, only to encounter Mails' argument that his ancestors abandoned him in their pursuit of assimilation into white society. Matheny accounts his ancestral break as followings:

> My grandmother was Oma Gunter. Her great-great-great-grandfather was John Gunter. Guntersville is named after him. Guntersville, Alabama, and he married the local Cherokee chief's daughter so he could do business with Cherokees on the Tennessee River. So, my grandmother, who was not at all interested in her American Indian heritage, was proud of the fact that, that Guntersville was named after her great-great- great-great-grandfather. (Belmont and Matheny Interview 2022)

If Matheny were to accept the assimilation hypothesis advanced by Mails and Captivating History, he could be compelled to interpret this history as, in part, an act of senseless abandonment. However, based on the evidence from the stories Matheny shared with me, this interpretation is inconsistent with the Cherokee Nation that Matheny has come to know. A more accurate understanding, grounded in the evidence, emphasizes the strategic nature of these circumstances. Given the context, the Cherokee Nation did not send their daughter to marry a white man lightly; rather, it was likely a desperate, albeit failed, strategy for survival under dire conditions. While such nuances may be irrelevant to a corporate entity like Captivating History, which is primarily concerned with selling books, or to an impartial scholar examining the macro- level trajectory of Cherokee history, they are of profound significance to Paul Matheny.

Thomas Mails and Captivating History misinterpret failed accommodation as assimilation and, moreover, that the assimilation hypothesis undermines the legacy of the Cherokee Nation and its people. Drawing on Paul Matheny's testimony, Thomas Tweed's theories of crossing and dwelling, and additional sources, there is a coherent Cherokee identity that spans from precolonial to postcolonial contexts. Driven by the effects of genocide, scholars can observe the Cherokee Nation's transition—from reliance on natural resources to engagement with capital, from skilled hunters to 'civilized' tribal members, and from beliefs presenting as Cherokee traditions to those hiding

in Christianity. In light of the evidence, assimilation was never the objective of the Cherokee Nation, and it is imperative that reconnecting members, such as Paul Matheny, be afforded the dignity of a more accurate portrayal.

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