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RECLAIMING A STORY: RECASTING THE CHEROKEE IMAGE THROUGH MELODRAMATIC NARRATIVE

by Eddie Glenn

In the summer of 2007, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma faced perhaps its biggest public relations dilemma since the forced relocation of the tribe nearly 170 years earlier. In March of that year, Cherokees voted to restrict tribal membership to those who could trace ancestry to signers of the Dawes Rolls, a 1906 census of Cherokees conducted by the United States (US) government. The vote was a result of a tribal high court ruling that the Cherokee constitution was unclear about requirements for tribal membership. The ruling permitted Freedmen, descendents of slaves owned by Cherokees before Emancipation, to obtain membership in the tribe. However, the 2007 approval of a constitutional amendment restricting membership revoked the Freedmen's Cherokee affiliation.

The revocation of Freedman tribal membership resulted in a firestorm of criticism from national media. In a *USA Today* editorial, Lois Hatton, comparing the revocation of Freedman membership to the Cherokee's own oppression by the US government, stated that "[t]he Cherokees are disenfranchising the Freedmen in the same way they were forcibly removed from their land. When we do not learn the lessons of history, we are inclined to repeat the errors" (Hatton, 2007). William Katz, on George Mason University's *History News Network*, noted a tinge of irony in what he described as a patently racist vote. The constitutional amendment excluding Freedmen was approved on the anniversary of the Bloody Sunday march that motivated Congress to approve the 1965 Voting Rights Act. While former president Bill Clinton and other dignitaries were commemorating the historic march, "the Cherokee Nation chose a lower road." Cherokees voted to exclude Freedmen from the tribe, Katz wrote, "because [the Freedmen's] ancestors included people of African descent" (Katz, 2007). The title of a June 8, 2007 *New York Times* editorial clearly indicated that publication's position on the Cherokee vote: "The Shame of the Cherokee Nation." A subsequent letter to the *New York Times*, written by Jon Velie, lead council in a lawsuit filed by a group of Freedmen against the tribe, evoked the image of civil rights icon Martin Luther King. Velie framed the

Freedmen's exclusion from the tribe as another episode in the long struggle for equality by African Americans: "Dr. King might have said that the Freedmen are not free. They are shackled in the manacles of discrimination and exiled...while the Cherokee Nation floats in its vast ocean of prosperity" (Velie, 2007). As portrayed through the national media, the Cherokee's vote was—to say the least—unpopular.

However, the most damaging blow to the tribe came, not from the media, but from the United States Congress. On June 21, 2007, members of the Congressional Black Caucus introduced a bill threatening to "sever United States' government relations with the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma until such time as the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma restores full tribal citizenship to the Cherokee Freedmen disenfranchised in the March 3, 2007 vote..." (US Congress, 2007–08, p. 1). A severance between the two governments meant far more than lack of recognition of the tribe. The bill would terminate treaty-obligated payments from the US government to the Cherokee Nation, costing the tribe over \$300 million (Smith, 2008). Thus, the Cherokee Nation was faced with a tarnished image, and the threat of economic damage.

To address this exigency, the Cherokee Nation undertook a campaign of image recasting, aimed directly at members of Congress. The tribal government produced a short film titled *The Truth about the Freedmen Issue*, challenging both the accusations of racism leveled by national media and the punitive actions by the Congressional Black Caucus. According to Cherokee Nation Communications Director Mike Miller, the film was distributed on DVD format in August 2008—as H.R. 2824 was moving through the congressional legislative process toward a vote—to "Congress, congressional staffers, and other people in the federal government who are involved in the Freedmen issue" (personal communication, 8 Oct. 2008).

The failure of H.R. 2824 (Cherokee Nation, *Both Houses...*) implies that the tribe's image recasting efforts were successful, but leaves unanswered the question: How did those efforts operate rhetorically to defend the Cherokee Nation against accusations of contributing a Native American footnote to the centuries-long story of American racism—a story that Martin Luther King called "one of the most shameful chapters of the American scene" (Church leaders, p. 2). In this essay, I argue that the Cherokee Nation engaged in a process of image restoration and narrative repatriation by appropriating an existing melodramatic narrative. That melodramatic narrative, created and propagated by dominant white American culture, but appropriated by the Cherokee Nation in *The Truth*, cast H.R. 2824 as yet another instance of the US government's attempt to subjugate the tribe. I will first provide an overview of narrative—specifically, melodramatic narrative—as a method of argumentation. Then I will discuss the Trail of Tears melo-drama, as commonly understood by white America. Finally, I will conclude with implications of this analysis.

Narrative

Existing narratives are stories that are already known and shared by audiences. According to Herman Stelzner, such stories serve as resources for public argument and rhetorical expression (1971, p.163). Thomas Rosteck notes a surprising paucity of analysis of existing narrative as argument, since “elsewhere in the humanities, students of literature have long understood that when the essential elements of a well-known ‘story’ interact with aspects of a social scene and with the subjective experiences of an audience, then universal human reactions are elicited” (1992, p. 22). He cites Spenser, Swift, and Shakespeare as just three of the writers who have “utilized pre-existing narratives, well-known to their audiences, as comment on social or political issues, as strategies for description, and as invitations for response to public exigency” (ibid.).

According to Walter Fisher, narratives in general function rhetorically through shared meaning for those who “live, create, or interpret them” (1984, p. 2). Hayden White suggests that “far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted” (1980, p. 6). In sum, narrative provides a template by which experiences in our social world may be measured. The Cherokee Nation’s response to the threat of funding by the federal government utilizes an existing narrative of US government oppression of the Cherokees—what I will call the Trail of Tears narrative—in a melodramatic form.

Melodrama is described by Michael Osborn and John Bakke as a form of narrative expression that provides “a way of seeing or sizing up a situation....[Melodrama] explains to an audience how and why certain events occur and rules out coincidence and chance as their causes” (1998, p. 221). Melodramatic characters possess six distinct traits (Osborn and Bakke, 1998, p. 222), the first of which is a representation of absolute morality. Melodrama presents heroes and villains as representations of pure good and evil respectively (Grimsted, 1968, p. 221). These absolute representations focus audience response on uncomplicated approval or disapproval—what Robert B. Heilman calls a “monopathy” of emotional experience (1969, p. 85).

A second trait of the melodramatic characters is preeminence, specifically in relation to history (Osborn and Bakke, 1998, p. 222). Melodrama focuses the audience’s attention “upon those who experience events, and upon their feelings of outrage, sorrow, frustration, anger and the like” (ibid). As Heilman notes:

What melodrama typically offers is the exaltation of victory, indignation at wrongdoing, the pitiableness of victims, the frustration of the indeterminate outcome, the warming participation in courage, the despair of defeat, the shock of disaster, the sadness of death. (1968, p. 95)

Such presentations allow the audience to make easy emotional choices about the events and characters portrayed through melodrama. As the choice is typically between good and evil, the audience can reasonably be expected to choose the former over the latter.

A third trait of melodramatic characters is a simplistic representation of humanity. The portrayal of a character as pure good or evil presents those characteristics synecdochally, so that any evil in a hero, or good in a villain, is denied expression. It is this trait of simplicity, according to Osborn and Bakke, that distinguishes melodrama from great literature, in which characters are far more in-depth expressions of humanity.

A fourth trait of melodramatic characters is rigidity, and along with it an inability to change. As observed by Jeffrey D. Mason “no one learns, no one changes” (1993, p. 197) in melodrama. Such rigidity is necessary to retain the dialectic of relationships within the melodrama. Growth, change, transformation, and complication would destroy the tension between hero and villain that gives melodrama its rhetorical power. “Melodramatic heroes and villains require each other” (Osborn and Bakke, 1998, p. 223).

Fifth, characters in melodrama are stereotypes, without individualistic traits. They represent class or group portraits, offering a unified group identity to the “good” and “evil” representations (Mason, 1993, pp.10–11). Any individuality expressed would “endanger the noble stereotype constructed by the rhetoric. Any form of idiosyncrasy is incompatible with the melodramatic style” (Osborn and Bakke, 1998, p. 223).

Sixth, and most importantly, melodramatic characters justify arguments. They are not interesting in and of themselves. “[T]hey do not deflect from the discursive business, but rather point directly and instantly to the rhetor’s message” (Osborn and Bakke, 1998, p. 223). Their purpose is to simplify for the audience a choice—between good and evil—and strengthen commitment to that choice. In the following section, I will demonstrate that a simplified rendering of the Cherokee’s centuries-long relationship with the US government provided the tribe with a narrative context against which the congressional attempts to cut funding was foregrounded in *The Truth about the Freedmen Issue*.

The Trail of Tears Narrative

In 1839, the Cherokee Nation was forcibly removed from its homeland in what is now the southeastern United States, and marched by military escort to Indian Territory, today the state of Oklahoma. An estimated 4,000 Cherokees died of hunger, exposure, and disease along what became known as “The trail where they cried,” or The Trail of Tears (A Brief History, no date).

Even before the removal, however, a melodramatic narrative of the relationship between the Cherokee Nation and the United States was emerging. The Cherokee removal was vehemently protested by non-Indian American citizens. In a letter to President Martin

Van Buren in 1836, shortly after a small group of Cherokees had signed a removal treaty on behalf of the entire tribe, Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed concern that:

[T]he American President and the Cabinet, the Senate and the House of Representatives, neither hear these [Cherokees] nor see them, and are contracting to put this active nation into carts and boats, and to drag them over mountains and rivers to a wilderness at a vast distance beyond the Mississippi. (Emerson, no date)

In true melodramatic form, Emerson expresses the moral dialectic of the Trail of Tears, couching the removal in terms of good and evil:

In the name of God, sir, we ask you if this be so. Do the newspapers rightly inform us? Man and women with pale and perplexed faces meet one another in the streets and churches here, and ask if this be so....The piety, the principle that is left in the United States, if only in its coarsest form, a regard to the speech of men, forbid us to entertain it as a fact. Such a dereliction of all faith and virtue, such a denial of justice, and such deafness to screams for mercy were never heard of in times of peace and in the dealing of a nation with its own allies and wards, since the earth was made. (Emerson, no date)

A full decade before the removal, in a memorial dated January 11, 1830, a group of Philadelphia citizens likewise expressed moral indignation of the treatment of the Cherokees by the US government:

[I]t is the sincere desire of your memorialists that the Government of the United States and all others who presume to act towards the Indians may be endowed not only with a spirit of ordinary benevolence, but a remembrance of solemn accountability of nations, no less than individuals, to a supreme tribunal, may purify their feelings, and direct their purposes. (Philadelphia memorial, no date).

A similar memorial drafted the same year by a group of Boston citizens, resolved that:

[W]e should regard it as a great calamity, if, in a plain case, the Government of the United States should forfeit the solemn pledges, which have been so often given to a weak and dependent ally; inasmuch as such a course would probably bring upon us the reproaches of

mankind, and would certainly expose us to the judgments of Heaven.
(Boston memorial, no date).

Emerson and the memorialists of Philadelphia and Boston portray the United States government as—if not explicitly evil—at least derelict “of all faith and virtue.” The Cherokee Nation, however, is portrayed as the hero—albeit a pitifully weak one—who is suffering at the hands of the dominant, villainous United States.

As characters in a melodramatic narrative do not vary from their stereotypical portraits (Mason, 1993, p. 197) lest the dialectic between their representative qualities be negated, we should perhaps not be surprised that the same melodramatic narrative presented by Emerson was manifested 139 years later in a popular rock song by Paul Revere and the Raiders. Indian Reservation, sung from a first-person Cherokee perspective, with the implied villain—the US government—referred to only as “they,” was a number one hit on the Billboard charts in 1971. The song vilifies the “they,” who “put us on this reservation,” “took away our Native tongue, taught their English to our young,” and “took away our way of life” (Loudermilk, 1971). The popularity of the song—it spent twenty-two weeks on the charts and was Columbia Records best-selling record in 1971 (Romanowski and George-Warren, p. 831)—implies that the Trail of Tears melodramatic narrative still resonated in late twentieth century popular culture.

As recently as 2005, Mariana Achugar and Mary Schleppegrell noted the Cherokee removal as one of two well-known historical events, along with the Great Depression, in which well-developed causal relationships between events were not well presented in American history texts. Simply put, the two historic episodes are presented too melodramatically to provide lessons in causal relationships to American school children.

It is noteworthy that the modern Cherokee Nation, on its official website, does not appear to subscribe whole-heartedly to the existing Trail of Tears melodramatic narrative. In a page on the site dedicated to a history of the Trail of Tears, at least partial responsibility for the removal of the tribe from its ancestral homelands is attributed to a group of Cherokees who signed the Treaty of New Echota, which ceded the traditional lands of the Cherokee Nation to the United States. In signing away the Cherokees’ claims to their homeland, those individuals:

...also signed their own death warrants. The Cherokee Nation Council earlier had passed a law that called for the death penalty for anyone who agreed to give up tribal land. The signing and the removal led to bitter factionalism and the deaths of most of the Treaty Party leaders once in Indian Territory. (Brief History, no date)

This recognition of the complexities—and complicities—of individual Cherokees during the time of the removal, however, minimizes the dialectic tension between the characters of the melodramatic Trail of Tears narrative. In the rhetorical deployment of that narrative, the tribe adhered to the melodrama, as it exists and is commonly understood by the dominant non-Indian American culture.

Drawing on that existing Trail of Tears narrative, *The Truth about the Freedmen Issue* presents the exigency at hand—the threat of funding cuts by Congress—in the melodramatic terms of the long and often contentious relationship between the US government and Cherokee people. In the opening disembodied narration of the video, Cherokees are described as a people “struggling to preserve a cultural heritage.” The Trail of Tears narrative is evoked as that “cultural heritage” is described as “rich in history.” Enthymematically, the rich history of the Cherokee Nation, to many—if not most—Americans, *is* the Trail of Tears narrative. According to Kathleen McCay, former director of special projects at the Cherokee Heritage Center, a museum in the Cherokee capital of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the oppression of the Cherokees by the US government is the most salient aspect of Cherokee history for many visitors to the museum: “The white people who show up are very apologetic because they’re very familiar with that storyline of the Trail of Tears” (personal communication, September 10, 2010).

That narrative is evoked quickly again in *The Truth*, when H.R. 2824 is described as an effort by some congressional members to “terminate the Cherokee Nation, casting it aside, and cutting off necessary funding for its neediest residents.” Five minutes into the film, that description of H.R. 2824 is restated, almost word for word, as the Trail of Tears narrative is presented visually in a transition from stock footage of the U.S. Capitol building—the lair of the melodramatic villain—to a video clip of a small Cherokee girl: a most innocent representation of the victimized hero. The eighteen-second transition exudes melodrama, in both a narrative and a visual sense.

The melodrama is evoked again in a vignette featuring Bud Squirrel, a spokesperson for the Cherokee Nation’s food distribution center. Squirrel explains the purpose of the center—providing food to the neediest members of the tribe—and then describes the potential results of the passage of H.R. 2824: “It would be a devastating blow to a lot of people—140,000 individuals that receive help [every] year.” While the vignette begins visually with Squirrel sitting in an aisle of the food distribution center, it transitions to elderly tribal members and children walking through the center, filling shopping carts with food. Again, the melodrama of the enthymematic narrative is eclipsed only by that of the visual imagery.

The melodramatic narrative becomes increasingly explicit, however, as the video draws to a close. The disembodied narrator states that “H.R. 2824...unnecessarily punishes those who do not deserve punishment” as the visual images transition between a Cherokee mother and child playing in a park and a group of traditionally dressed elderly

Cherokee women singing in a choir. This scene is immediately followed by a vignette of Cherokee tribal member Karen Comingdeer, who expresses the interpretation of H.R. 2824 in terms of the Trail of Tears narrative in the most explicit manner yet implemented in *The Truth*: “These members of Congress are trying to play judge, jury, and executioner of the Cherokee Nation....”

The melodramatic Trail of Tears narrative is presented most explicitly, however, in the final vignette of the video. Angela Pettit was presented early in the video as a victim of uterine cancer who relies on federally funded Cherokee Nation healthcare services for her very existence. As slow piano music plays in the soundtrack background, Pettit makes a second appearance, evoking the melodramatic relationship between the US and Cherokee governments to deliver the final personal narration of the video: “If I could speak to Congress, I would tell them to please reconsider going forward with this bill.” As Pettit’s voice cracks with emotion, she continues: “Because, the way I feel in my heart about it is, the Native Americans have a lot of perseverance, and we have been put through so much, if this goes through, it’ll be—it’ll be another round of trying to terminate us. There are thousands and thousands of lives in their hands.”

By drawing on the existing Trail of Tears melodrama, *The Truth* presents the argument that the proposed punitive congressional action against the Cherokee Nation is yet one more episode in the narrative of good versus evil that has characterized the relationship of the two governments. Audience members—congressional representatives—are presented with two choices: Choose the side of good, and vote against H.R. 2824 on behalf of the victimized heroes of the narrative; or, align themselves with their predecessors in the halls of power on Capitol Hill, and continue the villainous subjugation of the long-suffering Cherokee people by passing the bill.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the Cherokee Nation, in *The Truth about the Cherokee Freedmen*, appropriated a common melodramatic narrative—about the tribe, but not created by Cherokees themselves—to counter proposed congressional punitive measures.

I will conclude by suggesting three implications of this analysis. The first involves resistance to biopolitical strategies implemented by a dominant governing power; the second illuminates our understanding of melodramatic narrative as a form of argumentation; and the third addresses the political import of Native American narrative sovereignty.

The Dawes Rolls, the 1906 U.S. government census of Cherokees and other Native tribes, created a standard for “Indian-ness” still implemented today to determine who is, and who is not, an “official” federally recognized Indian. Each Cherokee Nation member is issued a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood by the US government (Conley, 2008, p.

35). That “Indian Card,” as it is called, indicates what fraction of Indian blood each person possesses. That “blood quantum” is determined by the number of generations between a Cherokee and his or her Dawes Roll-signing ancestor, and whether any non-Indian relatives are present in those generations (Kathleen McCay, personal communication, September 10, 2010). Certainly, no attempt is made in *The Truth about the Cherokee Freedmen* to protest the actual existence of that biopolitical standard. However, the film does represent a successful attempt by the tribe to maintain that standard within bounds acceptable to the majority of Cherokee voters, as evinced by the passage of the 2007 tribal constitution amendment.

In terms of the actual argumentative strategy of the film, *The Truth about the Cherokee Freedmen* presents a functionalist approach to melodramatic narratives, specifically those existent and salient to a particular audience—in this case, the dominant American culture. In their study of the competing melodramas constructed during the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike, Osborn and Bakke note that “[w]e determine melodrama’s rhetorical significance by measuring its impact upon the people and events that are engaged in controversy” (1998, p. 229). By Osborn and Bakke’s standard, the Trail of Tears melodrama, as it was deployed in *The Truth*, appears to pass the test of “rhetorical significance.” Moreover, it appears to have been implemented strategically, rather than emerging from the milieu of an ongoing conflict, as was the case of the melodramatic narratives of the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike. An examination of the political leadership of the tribe provides support for this supposition.

Chad Smith, the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation during the Freedmen controversy, is also an attorney and historian who has designed a Cherokee history course (Chad “Cornstassle” Smith). From the three-inch-thick text for the course, we know that nineteenth century Cherokees voluntarily agreed to the treaty that led to the horrors experienced on the Trail of Tears, though the majority of the tribal members were forced to leave. We know that the tribe received a payment of five million dollars for their ancestral homelands in what is now Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. We know that, before the removal, many Cherokees were far wealthier than their white neighbors in the state of Georgia, and lived in extravagant Southern-style mansions. We know Cherokees, like many other wealthy Southerners, engaged in the odious practice of human slavery—a fact that eventually re-emerged in the Freedmen controversy (Smith, 1999). These documented historical observations, all of which negate the dialectic of the melodrama, were presented in a textbook edited by the executive leader of the Cherokee Nation government. He is obviously aware of the oversimplification of the Trail of Tears melodrama as it is commonly understood by many Americans. Yet, employed as a rhetorical strategy by the tribe, the melodrama was effective in thwarting a serious financial crisis. That efficacy implies a strategy of existing melodramatic narrative that may serve well in countering accusations of racism in an endemically race-conscious

society. It should be noted, however, that the marginalized nature of both the Cherokees and the Freedmen make this specific example a unique situation indeed.

The inconsistencies between the Trail of Tears melodrama and the recorded history of the tribe point to another implication as well, particularly in light of the obvious fact that the leadership of the Cherokee Nation is well aware of those inconsistencies. The rhetorical implementation of a melodrama about Cherokees—but not created by Cherokees—represents a unique instance of “narrative sovereignty,” a concept that Arnold Krupat describes as Native Americans’ agency in the expression of their own stories, in their own ways (2007, p. 629). The Cherokee Nation’s exercise of narrative sovereignty in this case serves a pragmatic purpose. In exercising narrative sovereignty, the tribe defended its political sovereignty, countering Congressional efforts to force the tribe into service as a “federal instrumentality” as described by Alex Tallchief Skibine (2000). Tribal legal systems have, over time, become increasingly similar in structure to the federal government system. As the structures of those tribal systems have become more colonized, so have the processes, so that tribal governments have become little more than conduits of federal governmental control over the lives of Native peoples. Through such processes, Skibine argues, tribes “stand to lose the uniquely ‘tribal’ or ‘native’ component of their sovereignty” (2000, Section III, Interference with Tribal Culture). The exercise of narrative sovereignty by the Cherokee Nation in *The Truth* couches H.R. 2824 as not only a colonizing process, as described by Skibine, but also as the most recent subplot in the Trail of Tears melodramatic narrative.

Michelle H. Raheja defines the appropriation of modern film, video, and new media technologies in Native American creative works as “visual sovereignty.” Such acts have “the potential to both undermine stereotypes of indigenous peoples and to strengthen ... communities in the wake of genocide and colonialism” (2007, p. 1161). I would suggest that Native American expressive sovereignty—be it narrative or visual—is not limited to artistic works. Such expressions can serve to strengthen, not only communities, but political sovereignty itself. The Cherokee Nation’s appropriation of the Trail of Tears melodrama constitutes such an act of sovereignty, strategically implemented for political purposes. In *The Truth about the Freedmen Issue*, Cherokees reclaimed their own story—modified though it was from years of melodramatic service to the dominant culture—and expressed it in their own way and for their own purposes, not “in the wake” of oppression, but as a weapon against it.

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