Native American "Absences":
Cherokee Culture and the Poetry of Philosophy

ABSTRACT:
In this essay, after a brief decolonial analysis of the concept of "poetry" in Indigenous communities, I will investigate the poetic-philosophical implications of Cherokee culture, more specifically the poetic essence of the Cherokee language, the poetic aspects of Cherokee myth (pre-history) and post-myth (history), and the poetic-philosophical powers of Cherokee ritual. My first section analyzes the poetic essence, structure, special features, and historical context of the Cherokee language, drawing on Ruth Holmes and Betty Sharp Smith's language textbook, *Beginning Cherokee*.[1] My second section considers poetic aspects of the pre-history and history of the Cherokee Nation considered as a text, using Robert J. Conley's *The Cherokee Nation: A History*.[2] And my third section investigates the poetic nature of the Cherokee rituals' myth-ontological background and its existential psychological implications, via J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett's *The Cherokee Full Circle: A Practical Guide to Ceremonies and Traditions*.[3] Collectively, these analyses will suggest that, just as the Cherokee and other tribes are the slandered, disenfranchised, suppressed and covered-over Indigenous peoples of the North American continent, so poetry writ large (including Indigenous philosophy) is the slandered, disenfranchised, suppressed and covered-over arche of western philosophy (as I have previously explored via a new interpretation of Nietzsche). In short, I will argue that both poetry and Cherokee culture can be understood as indigenous "absences" which are in truth vital and enduring presences.

Having elsewhere explored the central role of poetry in Native American thought in general (in a review of Anne Waters' anthology, *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*), in the present essay I offer a closer look at the equal importance of poetry in the language, history, and rituals of the Cherokee people.[4] Though in many Native American societies, there is admittedly no word for "poetry" nor a distinct area of poetic practice, I would argue that the poetic, just like the religious, makes itself felt in any human culture. Since one is thus at a loss when looking for poetry straightforwardly in Native American cultures (as, arguably, looking for poetry straightforwardly is always wrong-headed), I will instead turn to Jerome Rothenberg's understanding of "primitive poetry" (hereafter, "Indigenous poetry") from

[1] Ruth B. Holmes & Betty Sharp Smith, eds. *Beginning Cherokee*, 2nd Ed. (Norman, OK: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1977).
[2] Robert J. Conley. *The Cherokee Nation: A History*, (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2005).
[3] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle: A Practical Guide to Ceremonies and Traditions*. (Rochester, VT: Bear and Co., 2002).
[4] See Joshua M. Hall, "*American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*" (review), *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2018), pp. 280-293..

his prefaces to his anthology *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* to arrive at an initial sense of Indigenous "poetry."[5]

But first, a brief elaboration of what I mean by saying that poetry in general is the slandered, disenfranchised, suppressed and covered-over arche of western philosophy. Here I draw on a previous journal article that derives a new Nietzschean "poetics" distilled from Nietzsche's *Gay Science*.[6] There are six crucial passages in *The Gay Science* in which Nietzsche's "poetics" (broadly construed) is articulated, half of which concern poetry in general and the other half of which concern the figure of the poet specifically, though the meanings of both *poetry* and *poet* are torsioned and greatly expanded. For the sake of clarity, let me summarize these passages in the following graph:

Poetry:		The Poet:
-1. poetry as otherwise than presence (i.e., as absence, as potentiality)	→	**-4. poet as glorified liar** (by presenting absence as presence, conflating actuality and potentiality)
-2. poetry as otherwise than *logos* (i.e., as originating as magic spells)	→	**-5. poet as *mythos*-maker** (by applying the magical/mythical dimension of language to life)
-3. poetry as unacknowledged *arche* of prose (i.e., of prose philosophy)	→	**-6. poet as unacknowledged *arche* of philosopher** (because the 'higher man' is unaware that he is already the life-poet)

These six points are taken from six aphorisms in *The Gay Science* that are centrally concerned with poetry as such. Three are found in Book Two, one in Book Three, and two in Book Four.

[5] Jerome Rothenberg. *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*, 2nd Ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).
[6] Joshua M. Hall, "Slanted Truths: *The Gay Science* as Nietzsche's *Ars Poetica*," *Evental Aesthetics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016), pp. 98-117.

Altogether, they offer a sense of Nietzsche's understanding of poetry, and thereby of his own poetic practices as well. The first three aphorisms investigate (1) the poet's power, (2) of poetry itself, and (3) of the phenomenon of "prose" as a kind of calcified poetry, respectively. And the last three aphorisms further explore the nature of the poet in ways that liberate the figure of the poet from both (4) a religiously-informed portrayal as medium of transcendent truth, and (5, 6) a narrow conceptualization as one who simply writes poems as a instances of a literary genre.

With this background in mind, and turning now to Rothenberg, from the outset he cautions us against equating "primitive" with "unsophisticated," insisting that, "where poetry is concerned, 'primitive' means complex."[7] Poetry, he argues, "like language itself, existed everywhere: as powerful, even complex, in its presumed beginnings as in many of its later works."[8] Also, Ancient Indigenous poetry did not signify, as modern and contemporary poetry tend to, a specialized and isolated discipline, but was instead much broader and more inclusive than the traditional western concept. Poetry "appeared," Rothenberg claims, "as a true necessity: not a small corner of the world for those who lived it but equal to the world itself."[9]

> It's very hard to decide what precisely are the boundaries of 'primitive' poetry or of a 'primitive' poem, since there's often no activity differentiated as such, but the words or vocables are part of a larger total 'work' that may go on for hours, even days, at a stretch. What we would separate as music & dance & myth & painting is also part of that work, & the need for separation is a question of 'our' interest & preconceptions, not of 'theirs.'[10]

In such a vague context, Rothenberg allows that "We will have a different 'poem' depending on where we catch the movement, & we may start to ask: Is something within this work the 'poem,' or is everything?"[11] Perhaps this vagueness is necessary and potentially instructive for Global Northerners today.

According to Rothenberg, like Ancient Indigenous poetry, the Ancient Indigenous "poet" is similarly difficult to pin down. But they are certainly different from our conception of an individual typing their verses into a laptop. "The poet (who may also be dancer, singer, magician, whatever the event demands of him) masters a series of techniques that can fuse the

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[7] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxvi.
[8] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxvii.
[9] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxvii.
[10] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxvi.
[11] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxvii.

most seemingly contradictory propositions."[12] Rothenberg terms these "poets" as "(in a variant of Eliade's phrase) the principle 'technicians of the sacred'," thus the anthology's title.[13] In the context of these vague "works," and dancing, singing, magician-poets, Rothenberg offers a definition of "the poem" as "'the solidarity of all life' leading toward a 'law of metamorphosis' in thought & word," whether such a poem "[is] carried by the voice & [is] sung or chanted or spoken in specific situations."[14] Rothenberg also defines poetry more simply as "charged language."[15] Finally, Rothenberg draws on this conception of Indigenous "poets" and "poetry" to call for a return in the contemporary west to "a meaningful ritual life – life lived at the level of poetry… a new poetry & art rooted in performance."[16] I will attempt to honor this return by being attentive to resonances between this conception of Indigenous poetry and the remaining texts of my investigation.

With this background on Indigenous poetry in place, for the remainder of this essay I will focus on three specific aspects of one specific Native American culture, namely the language, history and rituals of the Cherokee people. To elaborate, I will explore (1) the poetic essence, structure, features and historical context of the Cherokee language (specifically the Oklahoma dialect thereof); (2) the poetic pre-history and history of the Cherokee; and (3) the cultural context, myth-ontological background, and existential psychological accompaniment of Cherokee rituals. To conclude this introduction, I will relate these three aspects of my inquiry to the issue of poetry. First, since poetry is the oldest and quintessential art of verbal language, one can think of the phenomenological emergence of language as the becoming-poetry of art.[17] Second, history, for its part, is the becoming-linguistic—the poetic making-textual—of a group of human beings. And ritual, thirdly, can be understood as behavior and practice made poetic. All three, furthermore, relate gracefully to, and blend poetically into, each other. History and ritual both constitute discourses or languages; language and ritual are both deeply historical

[12] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxviii.
[13] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxv. The reference here is to Mircea Eliade. For more on Eliade in relationship to poetry, see Joshua M. Hall, "A Critique of Philosophical Shamanism," *The Pluralist*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2022), 87-106.
[14] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, pp. xxviii, xxvi.
[15] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, pp. xxviii, xx.
[16] Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians*, pp. xviii-xix.
[17] For more on poetry's pride of place, see Joshua M. Hall, "Kandinksy's Composition VI: Heideggerian Poetry in Noah's Ark," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* Vol. 46, No. 2 (2012), pp. 74-88.

phenomena; and ritual is, in a sense, the physical preservation of a culture's history centered in the embodied performance of its language.

I. The Cherokee Language: Spontaneous Poetry

To repeat, the four elements of the Cherokee language that I will explore, in connection with Indigenous poetry-philosophy, are its essence, structure, features, and historical context. As the noted Cherokee historian Robert J. Conley observes, "Cherokees speak an Iroquoian language, their nearest linguistic relatives being the Iroquoian people from around the Great Lakes: Mohawks, Oneidas, Senecas, Onondagas, and Cayugas."[18] The heart of the Cherokee language is that it is a *spontaneous artform*, and since poetry is the quintessential art of the medium of language, by replacement one can argue that the essence of the Cherokee language is – to borrow a term from the language textbook *Beginning Cherokee*, noting the language's many dynamic and colorful nouns – "spontaneous poetry."

One might also helpfully contrast this poetic proclivity of the Cherokee language with modern western languages, especially English, which has arguably violently expunged their own poetic dimensions in a largely unconscious historical effort of the governing and knowledge-management classes to render the language a more and more effective tool for imperial colonization. Because the latter arguably requires, above all, clarity, precision, the removal of vagueness and ambiguity, atomized individual components that can be segregated and controlled, and an exhaustive vocabulary for micromanaging subjugated populations (including native English speakers).

"Graphic terms such as these," as noted by the authors Ruth Bradley Smith and Betty Sharp Smith, "constitute a delightful spontaneous art-form."[19] Two examples of the nouns they are referring to here are the Cherokee words for (a) "blossom" or "flower," namely "it-opens out, blooms," and (b) for "grape(s)," namely "twined along."[20] As these examples show, and as I will discuss further below, insofar as they have verbal content, such nouns are also functionally

[18] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 5.
[19] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.
[20] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 101.

miniature sentences. In linguistics, this is what is called being a "polysynthetic language," and Cherokee has been studied extensively as an exemplar of this phenomenon.[21]

There are four central traits which contribute to this spontaneous poetic heart of the Cherokee language, as captured in the following quote from *Beginning Cherokee*: "The language is well adapted to express sardonic humor, poetic insight and stark simplicity, often all three at once."[22] The first trait, humor (though it is not obvious at first glance), belongs intimately to the domain of poetry when poetry is conceptualized in opposition to prosaic language. That is, the prosaic tends to be boring, and often serious in tone even when it is not serious in content. Historically, poets have laughed at the world as one way among others to embrace, applaud, mock, reform and celebrate the world, just as philosophers have tended to reject or affirm the world in a spirit of utmost seriousness. The second trait, poetic insight, speaks for itself of its inherent connection to the art of poetry (in the broadest sense). The third trait, simplicity, is also not an obvious candidate for deity in the poetic pantheon. However, especially when thought in combination with the frequently accompanying attributes of brevity and concreteness, simplicity can be readily understood as a quality of the poetic – as opposed to the lengthy expanses of prose, the dull ramblings of prosaic speech, and the oft oxygen-poor abstractions of philosophy. Further, whether when operating primarily as the brute force of sound or through the medium of summoned images, poetry's forte is the simplicity of immediacy and immanence. The fourth trait, finally, is the trinitarian bond that condenses and compacts humor, insight and simplicity into one elegant expression. And what is poetry, in the narrowest sense, if not artfully condensed expression? The Cherokee language, in sum, is a mature language still pregnant with its infancy of poetry.

I now turn to the structure of the Cherokee language, which *Beginning Cherokee* characterizes as (1) "meticulous and economical," (2) "flexible, concise and versatile" (3) "taxing on the ingenuity" and (4) "inclusive of details." The authors elaborate on the first point as follows:

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[21] See, for two examples, Sean P. Harvey, "'Must Not Their Languages Be Savage and Barbarous Like Them?': Philology, Indian Removal, and Race Science," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vo. 30, No. 4 (2010), pp. 505-532; and Marianne Mithun, "The Evolution of Noun Incorporation," *Language*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (1984), pp. 847-894.
[22] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 7.

> Cherokee is a meticulous language, marvelously economical in structure. Much of it is simple. There are no cases to memorize, no articles, no…prepositions or explanatory phrases and clauses.[23]

No cases, articles, prepositions, or explanatory phrases and clauses. Thus, the English sentence, "He is the man from Nebraska who is going to the rally," would be transformed in Cherokee into "Nebraska man goes rally." From twelve words to four, from two clauses and one phrase to just one clause. The meticulousness of the language calls to mind poetic craftsmanship.

Turning to the second characteristic, the authors explain that "the language is extremely flexible…it has a concise and versatile system for combining and amplifying each word nucleus (word base)."[24] The Cherokee sentence in a sense grows from an internal motion, amplifying and complicating itself from the inside out, like a Deleuzian rhizome (as opposed to the English sentence, which is a combination of various smaller independent and discrete particles). This dynamic, creative flexibility, originating from a concise base, is also a poetic characteristic (as opposed to static, eternal and rigid constructs composed of a large complex of elements, which characterize much of Western philosophy).

As for the third characteristic, because of this concise, versatile, flexible nature, Holmes and Smith observe that, "Cherokee may be said to tax the ingenuity and English the memory."[25] And in thus having one's ingenuity "taxed," the creative power inherent in the Cherokee language is made manifest. One does not merely memorize by rote an enormous number of words, tenses, cases, rules and exceptions, but instead poetically improvises and creates new forms.

Finally from these characteristics, despite this simpler base, the authors claim that "the terse efficiency of the Cherokee system provides for inclusion of details often omitted by the English speaker."[26] This richness of detail is also well suited for poetic expression. Small variations attached to basic words provides for a wealth of detail, along with entire sentences' worth of content contained and explicated in condensed parts of speech. The primary vehicles for this function are nouns and verbs, to which issue I return below.

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[23] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. v.
[24] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. v.
[25] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. v.
[26] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. v.

I now turn from these four characteristics of the structure of the Cherokee language, as identified by the textbook authors, to consider additional features of the Cherokee language that render it even more poetic. I begin with a consideration of Cherokee speech, the primary poetic attribute of which is its *economy*, and then move to grammar, the primary poetic attribute of which is its *condensation*. The first poetically economical element of Cherokee speech is physiological. Even the tongue, the primary physical organ of speech, demonstrates an economical orientation when speaking Cherokee – in this case an economy of movement. "In Cherokee speaking position the tongue never wags."[27]. Secondly, the transfer from thought to physical expression in Cherokee speech also follows an economical strategy. In *Beginning Cherokee*, the student is advised that after memorizing the longer, official versions of various words, they will "later" be able to "do as the Cherokees do – think long and speak short."[28] In other words, physical speech in Cherokee is a poetically condensed version of thought in Cherokee. A third example of poetic economy in Cherokee speech is the occasional signifying function of pitch. Although, according to the authors, "the differences in tone do not usually change the meaning as they do in Chinese," they do change the meaning "in certain words, some of them very common ones… 'day'… 'salt'… 'water'… 'warm'."[29] And since pitch is pervasively associated with music, and music is (like poetry) an artform connected to language, the use of pitch to change signification in Cherokee could be said to supply an additional musical-poetic dimension to spoken Cherokee.

The poetic character of Cherokee grammar as condensation can be further divided into three types of condensation, namely presences, differences and absences. Examples of presences include the hearsay marker, the shape marker or classifier, and the locomotion-capable suffix. The category of differences includes the relative (a) number of words used to describe the same things, (b) intimacy among the various parts of speech, (c) everyday conversion of parts of speech, (d) structure of verbs and nouns, and (e) number of words for relations of relationship and ownership. And the category of absences, involves the fact that there exists in Cherokee no word for "please," no articles, no need for the verb "to be" in simple sentences, no specific verb for "to bleed," and no distinction between the phrases "I did it," "I do" and "I am."

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[27] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 10.
[28] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 33.
[29] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 39.

The first example of a form of condensation that is present in Cherokee grammar and absent from English grammar, is the hearsay marker, also found in Quechua, the language of South American empire of the Incas. The hearsay marker, Holmes and Smith explain, is a "suffix to separate hearsay from personal observation."[30] Thus, the origin of any statement, whether directly seen or only reported by a third party, is conveyed in Cherokee in the condensed form of a small marker (as opposed to the additional clause required to express hearsay in a conventional English sentence). For example, "She got the new job" + [this was not directly observed] = "*I heard* that she got the new job."

The second example of a form of condensation present in Cherokee and absent from English is the shape marker or classifier. "Cherokee does not use different verbs as English does to deal with different shapes and textures"; instead, it uses "shape markers (classifiers)" (underlining original).[31] For example, in English one would say, "Pour the juice in the bowl" and "Insert the plug into the outlet," but one would never say either "Insert the juice into the bowl" or "Pour the plug into the outlet." In Cherokee, by contrast, one would say something that translates literally into "Put the juice-it-is-liquid in the bowl" and "Put the plug-it-is-long in the outlet."[32] Holmes and Smith further explain the structure of the shape markers as follows:

> The Information in classifying verbs is divided first into two categories, Living and Non-living. Everything with a shape marker indicates whether the thing/entity is alive or not' and if alive, the classification is complete. Non-living things, however, are sub-divided into four more classifications: Flexible…Long…Indefinite…Liquid.[33]

"Only about twenty Cherokee verbs need classifiers," the authors observe, "but they are some of the most necessary ones in everyday use."[34] As with irregular verbs in English, it is supposed that the rarity/importance doublet of Cherokee classifiers indicates that they go back to the language and culture's origins.[35] Also interestingly, "the classifying verbs above," meaning verbs

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[30] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.
[31] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, pp. 23-24.
[32] Returning to the theme of humor as poetic device, it is worth noting that "It is a form of Cherokee joke to re-classify things in fun" (24). One might, for example, say "Bob-he-is-liquid needs a backbone." Such jokes poetically, imaginatively restructure the world, allowing us to see things in different ways, and perhaps ultimately allowing us to actualize different possibilities in and for our worlds.
[33] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 24.
[34] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 24.
[35] Origins which are, arguably, necessarily and universally poetic. For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Core Aspects of Dance: Condillac and Mead on 'Gesture'," *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2013), pp. 352-371.

using shape markers or classifiers, "all deal with direct personal contact."[36] This linkage of the shape marker verbs to direct contact strengthens the case for linking them to the earliest period of the Cherokee language.

A third form of condensation present in Cherokee grammar and absent in English is the special locomotion-capable suffix. "In general," the textbook authors explain, "words forming plurals with -ni- are thought of as potent, capable of independent movement."[37] An extra sense of dynamism is thereby conveyed in the compact form of a one-syllable suffix. (On a similar note, the only difference between the Cherokee words for air and wind "u-no-le" and "u-no-le'-hi" is the extra syllable at the end, pronounced "hih" or "hee," which itself sounds like the movement of the wind).[38] On the other hand, "Words forming their plurals with di- are thought of as passive, incapable of independent movement."[39] It is therefore interesting that, according to Holmes and Smith, "all plants take living plural adjectives."[40] The authors later clarify, however, that this function of "differences in the treatment of words that refer to something as human, living or non-living" only happens "when the word…is plural."[41]

I now turning from forms of condensation present in Cherokee (but not English) to forms of condensation that are present in both languages but function differently. The first such form involves the number of words allotted to describe different kinds of things.

> In English, there are many special words for the individual cries of domestic animals (mew, bleat, bray, crow, low, neigh) and few reserved for wild animals. In Cherokee, the opposite is true…there are many descriptive terms for wild animals.[42]

The second form of condensation different in Cherokee than in English involves the relationship among the parts of speech. "Verbs, nouns and adjectives or adverbs," the authors note, "are more closely related to one another in Cherokee than in English."[43] Moreover, this close relationship among all the parts of speech enables what is known as *conversion*. "Cherokee converts extensively all the time," the Holmes and Smith write, "especially from verbs to other word

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[36] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 24.
[37] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 109.
[38] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 94.
[39] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 109.
[40] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 109.
[41] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 111.
[42] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 143.
[43] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.

classes."[44] For an example, consider the following literal translation of the English sentence, "The doors are shut tight": "Closely closed closers."[45]

This extensive conversion stands in stark contrast to English, which only converts on a very limited basis in everyday usage—except, significantly, in English poetry, where its use is common. "Conversion that is not part of everyday use," they observe, "has always been practiced by poets in the English language in order to give common words fresh force."[46] In other words, the same thing that poets do consciously to the English language to make it more poetic, is something that happens automatically and "all the time" in the Cherokee language. Yet another reason to view Cherokee as a fundamentally poetic language.

The third form of condensation different in Cherokee than in English is known as the mini-sentence, in which individual parts of speech possess the structure of a sentence. "Bound pronouns," Holmes and Smith elaborate, "make every Cherokee verb a complete sentence in itself containing both a subject and predicate in the same word."[47] Additionally, in Cherokee, "bound pronouns are a necessary part of every verb."[48] Finally, because of this sentence power, "Cherokee verbs describe not only when something happens, but also how."[49] This "how" provides an additional poetic flavoring to verbs, which flavor must be added, in English, in a more piecemeal way. In short, a Cherokee verb can do the work of an English verb, adverb, adverbial phrase, adjective, adjectival phrase, and other phrases and clauses—all in one word.

This condensed structure is similar in Cherokee nouns. Not only are they "concise, vivid and factual," according to Holmes and Smith, but "the average Cherokee noun…has a literal or 'inside' meaning." This is the poetry of the noun, the fact that when a Cherokee person says, "a flower is over there," she is literally saying "it-opens out blooms there."[50] Like "flower," a Cherokee noun "is often a short description of the thing designated and could pass for a sentence since the description usually contains a verb" (vi). Thus the verb is doubled, the "bloom blooms."[51] In this way, even ordinary speech becomes a complex and condensed layering of dynamism and poetry. To take another example, the Cherokee word *cemetery*, translated literally

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[44] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 42.
[45] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.
[46] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 42.
[47] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 99.
[48] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 99.
[49] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.
[50] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.
[51] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.

into English, is "they are laid there by others, not finally."[52] Moreover, these nouns, like nouns in all languages, also evolve. The Cherokee word for "car" or "automobile" used to be "it-stares" then became "it-goes-on-rubber-coverings" and then became the same word that had always been used for carriages, "to-ride-along-in."[53] Cherokee sentences are thus literally sentences bursting with sentences.

Of special interest to the present essay is the example of the Cherokee word for poet, "*digowe**li**sgi kahnohetl**v**sgi*," which, translated literally, is "writer-down of chants."[54] This literal translation reveals two important things about the role of poetry (in the narrow, literary genre sense) for Cherokee language communities. First, that the expression for "poetry" is a long, two-word phrase suggests that it is not commonly used, which in turn suggest that poetry as a literary genre is probably not particularly central to Cherokee culture. Second, the phrase refers to chants, suggesting a privileging of that oral, social and typically ritualistic phenomenon, which also usually involves dance, music, costumes, etc. Thus, poetry for the Cherokee seems more like ancient, multimodal performance than modern lyric poetry, with its printed words read silently.

The last form of condensation different in Cherokee than in English is that, in Holmes and Smith's words, "ownership and relationship are expressed differently."[55] Furthermore, "there is one 'my' of ownership in Cherokee" while there are "several 'my's' of relationship."[56] Thus, relationship and interdependency appear to be prioritized over possession, control, dominance and mastery – which one might describe this as a preference for poetic relationality over philosophical imperialism.[57]

I will now, finally, turn from condensations that function differently in Cherokee and English, to consider several condensations present in English grammar but absent from Cherokee grammar. First, "Making your wishes known," Holmes and Smith assert, "can be called an automatic 'please' in Cherokee."[58] There is no place for the artifice or superficiality of "please"

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[52] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vi.
[53] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. vii.
[54] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 132.
[55] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 150.
[56] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 150.
[57] Over time, however, the Cherokee language is losing ground to the Western imperialists, as the following passage illustrates: "The Cherokee language used to contain a larger variety of relationship terms, such as special words for grandparents, aunts and uncles on the mother's or father's side, and for older or younger brothers. These have dropped out of use" (Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 160).
[58] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 23.

etiquette as in English. Second, "Cherokee has no articles ('a', 'an' or 'the'), and only uses 'it' when referring to some concrete thing the speaker has in mind."[59] This makes more room for ambiguity and polysemy, and forces Cherokee users to rely heavily on context, which seems a more poetic strategy than English's prosaic combination of abstract elements. Third, "Cherokee does not need the verb 'to be' in simple statements of fact, so 'It is cold' in English, is simplified into 'Cold' or 'Coldness' in Cherokee."[60] In Wittgenstein's sense, being is more often simply "shown" in Cherokee, as opposed to being explicitly "said," which latter strategy is arguably the more common one in English. Fourth, "There is no specific word for 'bleeding'," which is poetically ironic given the Eurocentric view of Indigenous persons as savages and brutes, and also given the massive suffering and bloodshed that Indigenous persons (including the Cherokee) have undergone at the hands of Westerners.[61] Fifth and lastly, "I did it," "I do" and "I am" are all the same phrase in Cherokee: "*Ahy**v***."[62] Being and doing therefore seem more intimately linked for the Cherokee than for English-speakers, which suggests a more poetic world, where being is understood as itself a dynamic form of doing.

For my final observations regarding the Cherokee language as demonstrative of Indigenous poetry-philosophy, I move to the historical context and development of that language. First, the Cherokees are in a sense the most literary-poetic – in the strictest sense – of all North American Indigenous cultures for the following reason: "only the Cherokees possess a writing system equivalent to the European alphabet."[63] Second, there is the issue of the syllabary qua syllabary. "A syllabary," Holmes and Smith explain,

> is a variety of alphabet in which each letter in a word stands for a whole syllable… English is an alphabet, while Japanese and Sanskrit are modified syllabaries. Cherokee is completely a syllabary, except for one letter.[64]

The syllabary status of the Cherokee language is poetically significant because a syllabary is more sonically-based and less abstract than a regular alphabet, which brings it closer to the concrete domain of poetry than to the abstract domain of philosophy. Third is the spelling system of the syllabary. "Cherokee spelling is easy though it is not standardized," Holmes and Smith

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[59] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 41.
[60] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 41.
[61] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 229.
[62] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 92.
[63] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 7.
[64] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 8.

write, and each "person spells as the word sounds to him."[65] There is thus a poetic flexibility and creativity of interpretation democratically open to all users of the language, who are not bound to (necessarily) abstract system of pronunciation. Fourth, the Cherokee are famous for having so much of their literariness wrapped up in one individual. "Only one man, Sequoyah," the authors claim, "has undoubtedly invented his own alphabet."[66] This is an instance of poetic condensation if there ever was one. Other scholars, however, have cast doubt on this one-man theory, and "some have suggested that the syllabary is in reality an ancient system of Cherokee writing that had fallen into disuse and secrecy and had been all but forgotten."[67] Fifth is the fact that Sequoyah "avoided copying from other alphabets."[68] Although the official, contemporary, standardized script looks very much like the Roman alphabet, this was a later revision carried out for practical reasons. "Dr. Samuel A. Worcester designed the [current, official] font," the textbook authors explain "from which to print Cherokee material."[69] But this was not done without Sequoia's cooperation, who recognized the considerable practical advantages offered by the revised font. (With regard to poetic simplicity, it is also interesting that there exists "no cursive (long-hand) or lower-case in Cherokee").[70] The original script, which has been preserved, is very beautiful and bears virtually no resemblance to the Roman alphabet, making the Cherokee syllabary an even more creative and aesthetic accomplishment. Sixth and finally, Conley notes that, "Following a demonstration in 1821 to show how it worked, Cherokees began learning the syllabary 'almost overnight'."[71] Even the time taken to absorb the poetic Sequoia syllabary demonstrates condensation, this time a condensation of time itself.

To recapitulate my survey of the Cherokee language, I will briefly state how its poetic aspects relate back to *indigenous absence*, the unifying figure of the present essay. What the Cherokee language lacks that the English language possesses, thereby making the English language conducive to analytical types of philosophy, is what I will call a combinatorial structure. By this phrase, I mean an enormous, highly differentiated field of small, abstract, independent units, variously combinable to produce near-infinite constructions. English is, in this sense, a combinatorial-structured language. Cherokee, on the other hand, has a much smaller

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[65] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 8.
[66] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 8.
[67] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 105.
[68] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 12.
[69] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 12.
[70] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 14.
[71] Ruth Bradley Smith & Betty Sharp Smith, *Beginning Cherokee*, p. 105.

vocabulary, and its basic units are not so easily differentiated, nor are they as small, nor independent from one another, nor usually capable of being abstracted from the context that generates them.

Instead, the basic elements of Cherokee have more of a condensed, organic, complex structure, and tend to produce their constructions through a creative, internal dynamic of self-complication. In other words, Cherokee is an enmeshed, not a combinatorial, language. Moreover, this absence of combinatorial structure is necessary, and determines the essence of the Cherokee language. It is this precisely condensed, concrete, dynamic structure of Cherokee that grants it much of its poetic power, thereby facilitating the kind of poetic Native American philosophy that I have been exploring. I would therefore argue, in short, that combinatorial structure is indigenously absent from the Cherokee language.

II. The History of the Cherokee Nation: A Poetics of Misrepresentation

Having considered the poetic characteristics of the Cherokee language, in this second section I will investigate the pre-history and history of the Cherokee people. For this purpose, I will consider the first history written by a legal member of a Cherokee tribe, Robert J. Conley's *The Cherokee Nation: A History* (2005), in order to demonstrate what I call a pre-historical poetics of mystery and blending, and a historical poetics of misrepresentation and deception. I begin with poetic aspects of the pre-mythological and mythological phases of Cherokee culture. Recent research indicates, according to Conley, that "Modern Man [caps original] existed in North America, specifically in what is now Southern California, at least fifty thousand years ago, at a time when Europe and Asia were still populated by Neanderthal Man."[72] (In connection with this fact, I note that the Cherokee word for "Cherokee," *ayvwiya*, translated literally as "The Real People," is almost exactly the same word as the Cherokee verb that means "(s)he originates truly"). Thus, the cultures that arguably developed more poetically—those indigenous to this North American continent—may be older and more original than the comparatively abstraction-favoring cultures of Europe, just as poetry always predates the development of prose (according, for example, to my abovementioned two journal articles).

[72] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 2.

The creation myths of the Cherokee demonstrate a striking resemblance to various other creation myths around the world. Their basic cosmology demonstrates a markedly Norse resemblance, as the following excerpt relates:

> The worldview of the early Cherokees, who called themselves Ani-yunwi-ya (the Real People) or sometimes Ani-Keetuwahgi (People of Keetoowah), described three worlds. There was the world on top of the Sky Vault, and there was a world underneath the one on which we live. Both the world above and the world below were populated by powerful spiritual beings, and those two spiritual worlds were opposed to one another. The world we live on was thus seen to have been placed in a very dangerous position, and the most important thing for us to do was to maintain the proper balance between the two opposing forces above and below us.

Another fascinating narrative from the Cherokee creation stories is what I will call *The Wakefulness Test*. According to the story, all the animals and plants had been commanded by divine authorities to stay up as long as they possibly could. Though all presumably tried their hardest, as the days passed the ranks of the waking grew smaller and smaller. Until finally, as Conley retells,

> on the seventh night, of all the animals only the owl, the panther, and one or two more were still awake. To these were given the power to see and to go about in the dark, and to make prey of the birds and animals which must sleep at night. Of the trees only the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the holly, and the laurel were awake to the end, and to them it was given to be always green and to be greatest for medicine, but to the others it was said: "Because you have not endured to the end you shall lose our hair every winter."[73]

Thus, the creatures of the night and the creatures of the living winter, from an ancient Cherokee perspective, owe their powers to their stamina for wakefulness, to brute endurance. The owl, the panther, the cedar and the pine were thereby promoted to the most honored of all Cherokee flora and fauna. The spoils therefrom were, for the animals, unchallenged predatory rights, and for the plants, an unparalleled ability to heal human beings. The Wakefulness Test is also interesting in that it prefigures Darwin's theory of natural selection, albeit on a diurnal time frame. Further, in a radically different direction, one could suggest phenomenologically that the night is to the day

[73] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, pp. 4-5.

as poetry is to prose, insofar as the night is the more mysterious, aesthetic, charged complement to the day's blandness, functionality and prosaic atmosphere.

Along with the (in)famous Bering Strait theory, which Anne Waters rejects as an unsubstantiated rationalization of Western imperialism, Conley relates the following, better substantiated Cherokee migration theory:

> the Cherokees likely came from South American and migrated north through Central America and Mexico, eventually stopping for a time in the northeast along with the other Iroquoian-speaking tribes there…Then, following a long period of warfare with those people and with the Delawares, they moved southward again, settling in "the old southeast" [of the United States].[74]

This alternative Cherokee narrative would explain not only the strong phenotypical resemblance between the Indigenous people of South America and the Cherokee, but also the linguistic similarities between South American languages such as Quechua and the Cherokee language, including the abovementioned hearsay marker. As Conley freely admits, however, "no one of the origin stories referred to above can be proved."[75]

The later pre-history immediately preceding Cherokee/European contact is also shrouded in poetic mystery. "According to a tale told to Mooney," Conley relates,

> there was once a time when the Cherokees did have a central government, a government of priests. These priests, called the Ani-Kutani, became all powerful and eventually began to abuse their powers.[76]

At this point, the Cherokee people supposedly,

> revolted and killed all of the priests. After that each town became autonomous. Each town government was democratic.[77]

This story would help support the observation, made by an early European trade interpreter, regarding "how jealous that People [the Cherokee] had always been of their liberties.".[78] Conley is apparently persuaded by this theory, concluding that it "seems reasonable to assume that the

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[74] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 6. For more, see Anne Waters, "That Alchemical Bering Strait Theory," in *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays.*
[75] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 6.
[76] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 11.
[77] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 11.
[78] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 29.

Cherokees were probably a mound-building theocracy at least into the early part of the 1500s," during the reign of their priestly class.[79]

I will now survey various poetic elements from recorded Cherokee history, which finds the tribe living, according to Conley, in "the southeastern part of the present United States."[80] The first examples involve the dual leadership of the Cherokee town at the time of European contact.

> The Peace Chief was in charge of domestic issues and the ceremonial life of the town. The War Chief was charged with matters involving outsiders, not just war, but negotiations, alliances, trade, and other external matters.[81]

What is poetic about this arrangement is, first, the colorful titles of the chiefs. The Peace Chief was also called the White Chief, presumably since his position was peaceful, while the War Chief was also called the Red Chief, likely because of the bloody duties his job entailed. There were also equivalent leadership positions for Cherokee women, and the woman peace chief's title is also poetic, namely "Pretty Woman."[82]

Also interesting regarding the Red Chief is the fact that his authority extended to all kinds of external relations, including trade. Trade and war were thus linked for the pre-contact Cherokee under the leadership of one man, poetically blending trade into an extension of war, and vice versa. "War was also for the most part a seasonal activity," Conley concludes, "and like other activities, it involved a great deal of ritual and ceremony" (11). Conley adds the important caveat, however, that Indigenous warfare "would have been called "brigandage" (i.e., banditry) in Europe."[83] Cherokee warfare tended to operate on a much smaller scale, in almost every sense, and involved fighting primarily, Conley explains, with "the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, the Shawnees, the Delawares, and even with members of the Iroquois Confederacy."[84] Overall, Conley concludes, "war was, more often than not, a manifestation of the deep-seated belief that all things must be kept in balance"—a part of the poetic balance of Red and White, life and death—all governed by ritual.[85] Ritual was also vital even in everyday life. "In addition to the busy ceremonial cycle," Conley writes, "daily life was full of little

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[79] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 17.
[80] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 6.
[81] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 6.
[82] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 6.
[83] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 51.
[84] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 11.
[85] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 51.

ritualistic observances, that every individual had to be aware of constantly."[86] I will return in detail to this issue below.

Cherokee culture also demonstrated a significant poetic blending of various social roles. For example, "A cousin on the mother's side, in the clan system, would be called brother or sister."[87] As I will address below, the adoption of "fictive kin" was also widespread, in which a close friend would be poetically re-styled into a member of the family. Another example of this poetic blending is a consequence of the fact that the Cherokee were very welcoming of open and like-minded Westerners who wished to share their lifestyle. This practice was sufficiently common by the mid-eighteenth century that, Conley observes, a "mixed-blood population was developing among the Cherokees."[88]

The most prominent poetic aspect of Cherokee history, though, is what I will call poetic misrepresentation, defined as follows: a creative re-writing of actual events in directions favorable to those in power. For the rest of this section, I will attempt to expose some suppressed information that demonstrates the extent and profundity of the fiction that poses as historical fact in the United States' historical accounts of the Cherokee people.

For my first instance of poetic misrepresentation, Conley notes that "there is no historical record of any group of human beings who ever lived in a state of savagery."[89] Savagery is merely a term of comparative condemnation that poetically disguises the fear one culture feels for another with the mask of superior virtue. By calling Cherokees "savages," Europeans were able to more easily perpetrate all manner of injustice and suffering on the Cherokee people, a people who have always been as civilized and sophisticated, by the standards of their own value-systems, as any other society. One of the commonest justifications for the view that the Cherokee were fundamentally savages was their alleged predilection for torture. According to Conley, however,

> a systematic examination of the documents of the early contact era, published by Nathaniel Knowles in1940, found no references to torture by Indians of the southeast coast region until almost 200 years after white contact.[90]

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[86] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 7.
[87] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 69.
[88] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 41.
[89] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 43.
[90] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 65.

In short, the Cherokee were not essentially savages, but merely learned how to behave "savagely" from the lighter-skinned savages of Europe. Additional purported evidence of the savagery of the Cherokee people is found in the stereotype of all indigenous tribes as nomadic hunter-gatherers. Even the rudiments of Cherokee history, however, betray the outright falsity of this stereotype.

> Needham and Arthur visited the Overhills town of Chota, or Echota, in 1673, and Arthur later described a town built along the river, with high cliffs on the opposite side of the river, and a twelve-foot high wall of logs around the other three sides of the town. There were scaffolds with parapets to defend the walls. He described the houses as being built along streets. At Chota, he said, there were 150 canoes, the smallest of which would carry twenty men.[91]

This means that, at least as early as the mid-to-late seventeenth century, the Cherokee nation lived in large cities, complete with fortifications, means for water travel on large scale, and street-lined homes. This is hardly a description of a nomadic people traveling through the woods, never settling in one place long enough to justify building anything more permanent than a teepee. Largely as a result of these barbaric misrepresentations, large-scale land theft from the Cherokee people was condoned, accepted, encouraged, and even extremely popular and profitable. There was even (at least) one organization, "The Transylvania Company," which Conley notes was "formed by Judge Richard Henderson and Nathaniel Hart of North Carolina for the express purpose of illegally acquiring and then reselling Cherokee land."[92]

From the first Cherokee-European contact, the most prolific sources of truth tampering and outright falsity in Cherokee history have been "official" Euro-American accounts of economic and political relations with the Cherokee nation. Particularly egregious are the many treaties between the Cherokee Nation and the U.S., as in Conley's following ironic example, namely the U.S. Treaty with the Cherokee, from 1791:

> The greatest irony in the treaty shows up in Article XIV. "That the Cherokee nation," it says, "maybe led to a greater degree of civilization, and to become herdsmen and cultivators, instead of remaining in a state of hunters, the United States will from time to time furnish gratuitously the said nation with useful implements of husbandry." In other

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[91] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 26.
[92] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 62.

> words, they will attempt to make farmers of people who have only been hunters. And this language comes from people who had been fighting the Cherokees by destroying their crops and stealing their surplus food supplies.[93]

After perpetrating such crimes against the Cherokee Nation, the United States also found it necessary to poetically smear the heroism of Cherokee patriots who openly opposed and fought back against these crimes committed by the Euro-Americans, rendering these patriots as criminals, outlaws and villains.

Most notable among these tarnished Cherokee heroes is Dragging Canoe (1740-1792), the son of Ada'gal'kala, the self-styled first president of the Cherokee Nation. Dragging Canoe was vigorously opposed to selling any land to the Euro-Americans. According to Conley, he "openly opposed both [his father Ada'gal'kala] and Agan'stat' [the second Cherokee President]" and "spoke out vigorously against the selling of the land."[94] A courageous and outspoken critic, Dragging Canoe also showed himself to be something of a prophet where Western relations were concerned. "You [white men] have bought a fair land," he once said, "but you will find its settlement dark and bloody."[95] Dragging Canoe also observed that "The white men have almost surrounded us, leaving us only a little spot of ground to stand upon, and it seems to be their intention to destroy us as a nation."[96] Given statements such as these, one can easily sympathize with Conley's question, "Is it any wonder that the white American recorders of history have made a monster of the patriot?"[97]

Just as U.S. historians have poetically transformed Cherokee patriots into villains, it has also celebrated individuals whose treatment of the Cherokee nation was nothing less than villainous as U.S. patriots. Perhaps most surprising of these poetic role reversals is that of Thomas Jefferson, for example in his policies following the infamous "Louisiana Purchase." One of Jefferson's underhanded strategies for buying the land from the Cherokee—after having

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[93] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 76.
[94] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 58.
[95] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 58.
[96] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 59.
[97] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation*, p. 69. It is also interesting, however, how much even this outspoken opponent of Western infringement of the Cherokee people was significantly impacted by western culture. Conley notes that "(Dragging Canoe's own son was called Young Dragging Canoe, a reflection of the European practice of naming a child after its father, a practice in direct conflict with the ages-old Cherokee tradition of tracing descent female lines" (70). Conley then suggests that this might be one of the reasons behind the actions of his pro-peace opponent, the U. S. beloved Nancy Ward. "So perhaps Nancy Ward's actions do not so much reflect a choice of the white settlers over her own people, but rather reflect a choice of female rights and prerogatives over the changing attitudes and habits that she saw growing around her (70).

pretended to "buy" it from France – was the government "factory system."[98] Conley elaborates on this system as follows:

> The idea was to allow the Indians to run up debts that they could not possibly pay. At that point, the United States government would offer to pay the debt in exchange for more land .[99]

The "factory system" was a group of trading outposts, the operators of which were instructed to sell to the Indigenous persons by offering them – and only them – unlimited credit. This was not the only unethical Jeffersonian strategy for ridding the Southeastern U.S. of the Cherokee people.

> Jefferson's other tactic: to bribe "chiefs" and "leading men" to sign their names to treaties of land cession. Then when the United States "acquired" from France all of the land from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, in what became known as the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Jefferson had a place to send the Cherokees and other unwanted eastern Indians.[100]

Yet another gross injustice by the U.S. federal, state, or local authorities vis-à-vis the Cherokee nation concerns the state of Georgia. "Denouncing the Cherokees as savages," Conley relates, "Georgia abandoned both dignity and ethics and through her government, press, and courts began, in 1820, a vicious attack upon the Cherokees that was to continue for eighteen years."[101] In the lowest moment of these attacks, "the Georgia legislature passed its infamous "anti-Cherokee laws."[102] Among various other unethical and unconstitutional provisions, the legislature "made it illegal for Cherokees to talk against emigration to the West," thereby intentionally limiting freedom of speech within United States borders.[103] The Cherokee presence in Georgia was perceived by the state as so thoroughly disruptive that "Georgia had even threatened to secede from the union back in the 1830s over the issue of Cherokee removal."[104]

The now-universally condemned Trail of Tears, too, was only made possible by illegal, unethical and unconstitutional means. On December 29, 1835, Conley notes,

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[98] Conley reminds us that the United States in fact bought no land from France, because France did not own the North American land it was purporting to sell. "What the United States did buy from France was the exclusive right to negotiate with the Indians who owned the land." Further, "bribes were involved in the negotiations" to buy the Indigenous land (83-4).
[99] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 83.
[100] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 83.
[101] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 106.
[102] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 133.
[103] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 133.
[104] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 171.

> the Treaty Party signed the Treaty of New Echota, a treaty of total removal… The entire process was illegal… The price for all of the Cherokee lands left in the East was five million dollars.[105]

Preceding the Cherokee's departure, "at least two thousand Cherokees died" in U.S. government "concentration camps."[106] And the financial cost of the Trail of Tears was "$1,263,338.38," which was "deducted from the amount paid to the Cherokees for the land in the East."[107] Even after illegally forcing the Cherokee to leave their homelands and resettle in present-day Oklahoma, the U.S. government was still not willing to at least leave them alone. Despite large-scale success, including an innovative and highly effective educational system, the United States government decided that the Cherokee were an unselfish society to a problematic degree:

> the defect of the [Cherokee] system was apparent. They have got as far as they can go, because they hold their land in common… there is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization."[108]

In order to rectify a condition of selflessness that it apparently found so undesirable, the U.S. soon deemed it necessary to legally coerce the Cherokee to adopt individual land ownership, which the U.S. supposed would finally induce in them a sufficient degree of selfishness. "The Dawes Act, then," Conley wrote, "was passed to make the Indians into individual landowners, which in turn would lead to their becoming selfish and then at last civilized."[109] The legislation was stringently enforced, and "by Act of Congress, March 3, 1893, a three-member 'Dawes Commission' was created and empowered to deal with each of the Five Civilized Tribes [including the Cherokee] for allotment of their lands in severalty." The "the job of the commission was," Conley writes, "to try to convince them to agree to the breakup of their landholdings, or try to figure out a way to break the treaties."[110] A certain amount of land was allotted to each Cherokee citizen, and the leftover land was systematically and almost completely seized, often illegally, by non-Indigenous settlers and the Unites States.

My final example of poetic misrepresentation in Cherokee history comes from the celebration of Oklahoma statehood. On November 16, 1907, Conley writes, "Oklahoma

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[105] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 141.
[106] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 154.
[107] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 157.
[108] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 193, quoting Senator Henry Dawes.
[109] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 193.
[110] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 194.

Territory and Indian Territory were combined to create the new state of Oklahoma."[111] Commemorating this event, the U.S. held "a mock marriage between Miss Indian Territory (a white girl dressed up as an Indian "maiden") and Mr. Oklahoma Territory (a white cowboy)."[112] Thus, at the legal and political consummation of the elimination of the Cherokee Nation, its imperial colonizer staged a metaphor of consensual union that nevertheless, the colonized member of which was an imperialist member in masquerade. In a poetically apt metaphor for the entire history of U.S./Cherokee relations, instead of genuine political recognition, there was only a degrading poetic farce.

Despite all the horrible crimes against the Cherokee by Euro-Americans, it is important to remember that not all of the latter were sympathetic to these cruel and unjust practices. U.S. poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, spoke of the Trail of Tears as follows:

> 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.[113]

Stepping back now for another look at the big picture, what is the link between this history and my unifying figure of indigenous absence? The most glaring lack in the history of Cherokee history is factual accuracy. By the standards of a correspondence theory of truth, it lacks truth. In its place, various lies, exaggerations, and complete fictions (some with admittedly considerable ingenuity and poetic flair) have been preserved. But is this lack of truth a necessary lack in the history of Cherokee history?

It could be argued that the Cherokee nation could not possibly be in the state (Oklahoma) that it is in today without the massively destructive and unethical actions of the same country that has consistently, poetically refashioned its versions of Cherokee history. Part of what it means to be a Cherokee person today is to stand in a position of political dependence, assimilation and slavery to an imperialist power made possible by that power's poetic misrepresentations of Cherokee heritage. It therefore seems that, in fact, truth as the correspondence between

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[111] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 202.
[112] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 202.
[113] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation,* p. 148. Regarding President Andrew Jackson's "in-famous, Indian bill," legendary hero Davy Crockett wrote that he "believed it was a wicket, unjust measure…" and chose to oppose it in Congress despite a considerable political backlash from his supporters (134). Additionally, Sam Houston, the first President of Texas, lost his bid for reelection "largely because of his defense of the Cherokee position" (160).

representation and the reality it represents is indigenously absent from the United States' history of the Cherokee Nation.

III. Cherokee Rituals: Abyssal Explosion

In this final section, I offer a brief analysis of the myth-ontological background of Cherokee ritual. More specifically, I will discuss its overarching theme – the world as a poet-poetized poem – and its central concepts (The Universal Circle of Life, The Four Directions, and The Four Dimensions), and its three-pronged expression (pantheism, panacea, and what I term pan-poetics). From this structure, finally, there emerges a poetically transformative existential psychology, organized around the theme of wellness as self-poetizing and the concepts of Medicine, Medicine Way, and Beauty Way. My primary source in this endeavor is *The Cherokee Full Circle: A Practical Guide to Ceremonies and Traditions*, authored by J. T. Garrett and Michael Tlanusta Garrett, a father and son team of traditionally trained Medicine Men, the revered shaman figures of Cherokee culture.[114] This shamanic status is significant for the present essay, in part, because Rothenberg makes much of the shaman figure as the prime example of the powerful and revered interdisciplinary creator of "primitive" poetry, in cultures across the globe. And this description certainly applies to the Medicine Man in Cherokee culture.

I begin with the three central concepts of Cherokee myth-ontology, starting with "Universal Circle of Life." This phrase, to the twenty-first century Western ear, probably sounds like a vacuous New Age principle, more at home in a self-help book than in the actual mythology of an ancient culture. This ancient culture, however, was in fact an authentic determining factor for the now often-inauthentic elements of the New Age Movement. The tendency to sloppiness in the latter should not impugn the structure of the former. Garrett & Garrett articulate this concept as follows:

> the fire in the center, the birth, that spirals into the direction of the East for the protection of family while developing. Then life spirals to the direction of the South to learn how to play, "and to learn of the fairness of games in nature."[115] At about the age of seven we start our spiral to the direction of the West, where we learn competition and endurance

[114] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*.

[115] It seems significant that, though deceptive and trouble-making—the coyote-like Trickster figure of the rabbit is one of the important symbols. Thus, the poetic spirit of play native to the Direction of the South is also considered sacred by the Cherokee.

> for work and play through the teen years. Then we spiral to the direction of the North, where we learn the skills and knowledge of an adult to be a teacher and master of our abilities or trade. We continue to spiral until we reach our elder years as we return to the sacred fire of life, to begin again in the spirit world as ancestors.[116]

In other words, The Universal Circle of Life is the course taken by the cosmos as well as its movement through that course, the dynamism of which composes The Four Directions, which I explicate further below. The "fire in the center" refers to the Cherokee belief that life and reality start "with the formation of an original cell or circle that is in spirit. This spirit originates with the Great One, which comes to lifeform in the presence of the 'thunder beings,' as described by earlier Cherokee."[117] Put more simply, the Supreme Being acts in coordination with the lightning deities to create a human soul or person. These lightning deities could perhaps be characterized as the poetic additive – the flash and sizzle – added to the prosaic kernel of the soul as created by the Supreme Being.

The Universal Circle is also divided, according to Garrett & Garrett, into what the Cherokee call "The Four Directions," which function as guideposts for the journey of the human lifespan. These guideposts, in turn, constitute the basis of the "Four Dimensions," understood by the Cherokee as spheres of power and influence. According to these two Medicine Men, "The names" of the Four Directions "in the old language describe a state or being that influences us, such as North affecting our mental state; South affecting our natural state; East affecting our spiritual state; and West affecting our physical state."[118] Different animal species are associated with, and symbolize the significant traits of, each of these Directions. Garrett & Garrett elaborate as follows:

> The sun and the eagle are symbols of the East… They represent the spirit of **clarity** and **honesty**. The small animals such as the beaver or the rabbit are symbols of the South that represent the spirit of **innocence** and **renewal**. The bear is a symbol of the West that represents the spirit of **introspection** and **strength**. The deer, wolf, and hawk are symbols of the North, representing the spirit of **trust** and **purity**.[119]

The Four Directions thus symbolize specific human virtues as well.

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[116] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 70.
[117] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 66.
[118] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 67.
[119] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 72 (boldface original).

The last central concept in the myth-ontology of Cherokee ritual is "The Four Dimensions," believed to directly impact all human behavior. "The magnitude of each" of the Four Dimension "in our lives represents our *being*," according to Garrett & Garrett.[120] One finds, in this statement alone, an extensive poetizing of the four basic quarters of all embodied space, of human experience of directionality in space, and of spatiality per se. North is not merely the way to get somewhere, or the place from which the cold comes, but a direction of generosity and wisdom symbolized by the deer. South is not merely where one is heading when one leaves the North, but more importantly, an existential dimension in which to learn the sacredness of play and games. The Four Directions also contain religious significance. "In many Native American traditions," Garrett & Garrett note, "to 'offer prayers' means calling out to the four winds for the spirit of each direction from which that wind comes to bring its sacred power to us."[121] These winds, I would add, can be thought of as air poetized into motion, able to transfer its poetic power to us.

Considered together, these three central concepts of Cherokee myth-ontology (The Universal Circle, The Four Directions, and The Four Dimensions), find three primary expressions, namely pan-poetics, pantheism and panacea. First, "Everything on Mother Earth," Garrett & Garrett write, "is part of the song and dance of life."[122] Song is poeticized speech; dance is poeticized movement. Everything on the earth is its own poetry, resulting in a kind of *pan-poetics*, or inherent poetry of all reality. Second, "There is an old saying: All that moves is sacred – only by understanding this can you realize the rhythm of Mother Earth, and thereby know how to place your feet."[123] This poetry of life which every being on earth is, is a sacred and holy poetry. Everything that moves, motion itself, is holy, which is a classic definition of pantheism. And third, "everything in nature is a form of medicine if one knows how to recognize it and use it."[124] Everything on earth can be used to benefit, improve, and heal other things on earth. Whatever one experiences, whatever one finds, can be put to good use, if one only knows how to apply it appropriately. This is the nature of reality as self-*panacea*.

This triple expression, particularly the third one, constitutes the existential psychological complement to Cherokee myth-ontology. The central concept in that psychology, as Garrett &

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[120] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 90.
[121] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 62.
[122] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 29.
[123] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 30.
[124] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 40.

Garrett note, is "Medicine: a term, familiar within all tribes, that refers to everything in the Circle of Life that influences an American Indian and Alaskan way of life… physical, mental, spiritual, and natural aspects of life that are connected and interrelated."[125] Medicine is therefore a master concept for the ideally balanced life in accord with the world. It also serves as the grammatical root of the all-important Medicine Man. Medicine is a concept possessed of considerable internal variation. In one sense, according to the Garrett Medicine Men, "each of us has our own Medicine."[126] In another sense, however, Garrett & Garrett describe Medicine as something more universal, extending even to the entirety of our species. "As a Cherokee elder put it, 'To understand the Medicine of life is to understand your own purpose for being human beings'."[127] Either way, one's Medicine is one's destination, and finding one's own way to that destination.

The therapeutic complement to this central concept of Cherokee existential psychology – the Medicine Way – is an existential healing, which I parse as wellness through self-poetizing. "Every human being needs something to believe in," write the Medicine Men. "This is our 'Medicine-way'."[128] The Medicine Way is what guides one along the way that one has chosen in order to reach one's Medicine, and like Medicine (at least in one sense or aspect), it is different for each person, just as aesthetic (including poetic) tastes varies across individuals. Such variation notwithstanding, all persons, in finding their Medicine Way, must deal with the myth-ontological facts, including the fact, symbolized by the Universal Circle of Life, that, "what we often see as progression or growth is, indeed, cyclical in nature," as the "entire universe moves and works in circles."[129] These circles and cycles are not perfect and unchanging, however, because "life itself follows a spiral motion."[130] A spiral is a kind of circular cycle that tends to branch out, creating a novel pattern, especially when used in verb form, as in the English expression "to spiral out of control." Put in terms of the present essay, the spiral is the poetry of the circle.

In this poetically spiraling world, Garrett & Garrett continue, we "create ourselves out of silence or out of noise, and we choose our supreme rhythms by which we move with different

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[125] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 11.
[126] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 75.
[127] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 11.
[128] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 112.
[129] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 86.
[130] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 15.

shades of emotion and thought."[131] Hence, "we are music" – songs playing in the rounds of the cosmos, lyric poetry narrating the cycling of time.[132] However, as the Medicine Men authors observe, we lack explicit guidance as to how to compose ourselves. "We respond to the challenge of having no sheet music to guide us in the melodies we produce, and rely on our knowledge of the instruments' capabilities and combinations."[133] For lack of formal leadership, we improvise plans. This is merely another way of describing our Medicine Way, of saying that we follow the poetic slant of reality in poetically shaping our individual lives. To this, I would add that the longer we have been improvising through the spiral of life, the more capable (and correspondingly obligated) we are to assist those with less improvisational experience. For this reason, Garrett & Garrett observe, "Traditionally, it was the unspoken duty of all adults to care for children and act as teachers of wisdom and skills."[134] Fortunately, even the most experienced improvisers, "our ancestors," Garrett & Garrett conclude, "are not something in the past, but they are here with us in every thought and in every cell of our bodies" to help us make our music.[135]

Finally regarding this existential psychology, when one has achieved one's Medicine, by following one's Medicine Way, one's life radiates balance, harmony and virtue – a state that the Cherokee call "the Beauty Way." Those "certain people" who reach that point, Garrett & Garrett explain, "possess a way of harmony that distinguishes them as being 'more at peace with themselves and their world'."[136] In achieving the Beauty Way, as in all other aspects of Cherokee life, the "concept of choice is central."[137] The most important choices to make in achieving the Beauty Way involve striking a balance between two pairs of opposite virtues: independence and belonging, and generosity and mastery. The therapeutic process required to find the right amount of each virtue involves overcoming avoidant, defensive attitudes toward what Garrett & Garrett describe as the four central fears of "rejection, failure, regret, and vulnerability."[138] In facing and thereby overcoming these fears, balance is restored. And in this way, by searching for one's Medicine through one's Medicine Way, the Beauty Way can be achieved.

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[131] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 116.
[132] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 116.
[133] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 116.
[134] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 77.
[135] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 57.
[136] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 91.
[137] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 93.
[138] J. T. Garrett & Michael Tlanusta Garrett, *The Full Circle*, p. 105.

I now offer a paraphrase of the foregoing analysis of Cherokee ritual. Despite its minority status, Native American culture poetically amplifies the diversity of the United States. Despite recognizing legitimate social boundaries, it imaginatively transgresses them to poetically create new kinds of relations. Despite the banality of everyday life, it poetizes life through ritual. The Cherokee in particular make themselves believe that a poetically transformed Medicine Man poetically persuaded the sun to shine. They also make the entire world into a self-healing, sacred poetry, a kind of over-poem composed of individual poems constantly recomposing themselves. And they make the individual believe that wellness is to be found by making one's life just such a self-composing poetry.

But what, finally, is the relationship between Cherokee ritual and my unifying figure of indigenous "absence"? Facilitated, perhaps, by its thoroughly poetic language, and facilitating in turn the poetic misrepresentations that saturate its history, Cherokee rituals demonstrate a remarkable flair for transformation, a considerable ability to poetically make-believe into reality that which is chosen. One could, therefore, argue that what is essentially lacking from Cherokee ritual is a sense of the fixedness of objective reality and its boundaries. (This does not, however, preclude an accompanying belief in the fixedness of social reality and its boundaries, the boundaries of tradition and practice that are presented as the Indigenous defense against pure relativism). In sum, a sense of static eternity is indigenously absent from Cherokee ritual.

To recapitulate my exploration of Cherokee culture, it has been shown as essentially lacking a combinatorial structure in its language, a history of faithful representation in its history, and an objectively fixed reality under-girding its rituals. Fluidity, creativity, spontaneity, and a predisposition for poetic innovation characterize all three of these spheres of Cherokee culture – as it therefore characterizes traditional Cherokee culture in general, and by poetic extension, the other cultures indigenous to this continent. Combining these insights regarding indigenous absence with those that I have pursed elsewhere, I therefore offer the following judgment: Cherokee philosophy is essentially informal and unsystematic (compared to Global Northern norms), drawing on enmeshed languages and distorted histories, and expresses itself in rituals embodying dynamic temporality. Cherokee philosophy is, in other words, self-consciously poetry.

IV. Conclusion

I will now recapitulate the analyses in this essay. First, I rehearsed my previous reinterpretation of Nietzsche's poetics, including the claim that all prose is calcified poetry, despite the insistence of canonical western philosophers to have definitively separated the two and elevated philosophy to a higher metaphysical status. Second, I summarized Jerome Rothenberg's analysis of Ancient Indigenous poetry, according to which such poetry is much broader, more inclusive, multimodal (including music, dance, theater, and medicine), and on this basis set out to explore (1) *linguistic becoming-poetic* in the essence, structure, features and historical context of the (Oklahoma dialect) Cherokee language; (2) *historical becoming-poetic* of the Cherokee nation; and (3) *sociological becoming-poetic* in the cultural context, myth-ontological background, and existential psychological accompaniment of Cherokee rituals.

Third, I elaborated on (1) *linguistic becoming-poetic* by exploring the (1a) essence (sardonic humor, poetic insight and stark simplicity), (1b) structure (thrifty, adaptive, ingenious, and detailed), (1c) features (verbal economy, grammatical condensation), and (1d) historical context (only written system, syllabary). Fourth, I elaborate on (2) *historical becoming-poetic* by rehearsing numerous examples of (2a) mystery and blending in Cherokee pre-mythological and mythological history, and (2b) misrepresentation and deception in recorded Cherokee history. And finally, I elaborated on (3) *sociological becoming-poetic* in Cherokee rituals, via their (3a) theme of the world as a poet-poetized-poem, (3b) central concepts of The Universal Circle of Life, The Four Directions, and The Four Dimensions, (3c) expression in pantheism, panacea, and pan-poetics, and (3d) existential psychology of wellness as self-poetizing through the concepts of Medicine, Medicine Way, and Beauty Way.