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Uncovering Trahlyta: Examining Textual Manifestations of Dahlonge's Cherokee Indian Princess

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UNCOVERING TRAHLYTA: EXAMINING TEXTUAL MANIFESTATIONS OF
DAHLONEGA'S CHEROKEE INDIAN PRINCESS

by

ALLISON PINE

Under the Direction of Gina Caison, PhD

ABSTRACT

Despite playing a large role in the history of the Cherokee Removal, Dahlonega, Georgia has received relatively little academic attention. This study looks at the Native Southern heritage of Dahlonega through the example of Trahlyta, a Cherokee Indian Princess buried at the intersection of two highways marked by a pile of rocks and a Georgia Historical Marker. Trahlyta has appeared in the folklore and literature of Dahlonega for over a hundred years. She has been the subject of a short story, a play, a novel, blog posts, and songs. Although it seems likely that Trahlyta is a figure created by white Georgians, her various manifestations reveal a great deal about the relationship between Dahlonega and its Cherokee past.

INDEX WORDS: Georgia, Gold Rush, Folklore, Native American Studies, Southern Studies

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2016

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DEDICATION

Thank you to my wonderful family and friends who have been a part of this journey. Mom, Dad, and Kim, you gave me a foundation of love and support that has carried me through to where I am today. I know you've never doubted me for a second. Adam, thank you for everything. I couldn't be here without you.

Thank you to Dahlonega for being my home for four years, for the professors at the University of North Georgia encouraging me to follow my dreams, for the people I met there who continue to enrich my life, and for being a constant source of inspiration.

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the mountains of north Georgia, right outside of a town called Dahlonega, sits a Georgia historical marker next to a pile of rocks centrally located at the intersection of two highways. The historical marker outlines a story about a Cherokee Indian princess named Trahlyta whose grave supposedly lies underneath the towering stones. She remained eternally youthful because of nearby magical springs, until she was kidnapped by a rejected suitor. Her beauty and life began to fade because she was away from her springs. Before her death, she was brought back to her homeland and buried near these beloved springs. Eventually, people in the area developed a custom where those who passed the site would leave a stone or token, resulting in the large pile of rocks and trinkets seen today. At least, that's how the story goes.

Trahlyta's story isn't particularly unique; there are many similar places in the South.¹ Many versions of the Trahlyta story are available in different formats: the Georgia Historical Marker, songs, a play, a novel, oral tradition, and blog posts to name a few. These versions vary in content, and each is influenced by the time period during which it is told, as well as its stated purpose. I intend to examine the changes over time of the differing versions of the story, noting each version's historical context as well as its stated purpose in order to evaluate the meaning of these changes.

The story of Trahlyta likely originated in the 1860s-1870s and was first published in 1875, well after the Cherokee Removal of 1836-1839. Even though the story is likely not Cherokee in origin and is generally misrepresentative of Cherokee people and culture, it has still been able to remain in this space, unlike the Cherokee Nation itself. While few physical artifacts

¹ James Mooney in *Myths of the Cherokee* discusses a number of local legends of Georgia, many of which are similar to Trahlyta's story, for example, Hiwassee and Nacoochee. Mooney addresses which stories are "pseudo-myths" (stories created by white Georgians about Cherokee people) and which are from Cherokee mythology.

from Cherokee people remain in Dahlonega, what does remain is the non-Native desire to be part of the Cherokee culture, to use what they see as a pillar of naturalness and belonging to the land they now inhabit. The name “Dahlonega” itself a misinterpretation of the Cherokee word Dalonige, meaning “yellow” or “gold.” This name is a reminder to the people who now consider themselves natives that they were not the first to inhabit that land. There is a sense of unsettled insecurity in the story, a need for validation and connection with Trahlyta, who is one with the land. In many iterations of the tale that come from a personal perspective, the storyteller will emphasize a feeling of one-ness with the land while visiting the site. Indeed, a pilgrimage to the spot has become a spiritual experience for some and at least a tradition for most people in the area.

I argue that this fixation on (mis)using Cherokee culture was and is all a part of the need to belong while simultaneously being unable to do so. Perhaps the white Dahlonegans decided to give the town a Cherokee name in order to preserve something of what had been before them, or maybe it was a way to make themselves feel like natives. However, the very need to justify seems to imply a sense of insecurity in the land. Like the grave site covered in rocks, they continue piling on stories in order to feel like a part of the tradition, but rather than burying and obscuring those who had once lived there, it just makes their absence all the more obvious.

Although I will be incorporating different methodologies because this study is interdisciplinary, overall I will focus on scholarly sources that utilize Native Southern studies, as this field encompasses many of the other fields that inform this project (Folklore, Southern culture, Native political issues and ethnohistory, etc.). Although I don't believe that Trahlyta's story directly comes from Cherokee oral tradition, the area of Native Southern studies is highly relevant because it examines topics of representation, authenticity, and appropriation. Also, the

Southern studies is important as it explores the development of the South, and Southern cultural mythology is at the core of this story's creation. While most of the chapters highlight one or two secondary sources for comparison or context, several scholars are referenced throughout, including Shari Huhndorf, Diana Taylor, and Philip Deloria.

This project mostly examines the different versions of Trahlyta's story chronologically, since they likely influence each other as the story is retold over time. I don't focus on making many assertions as to the direct linkage between the different versions, since it is mostly impossible to prove that individual authors definitely read other versions. There are some notable exceptions to this, such as *Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hills* (1956), which has lines taken word for word from "The Forest Flower" (1875). Otherwise, especially as time progresses, it is difficult to say where a particular author learned of the story directly.

The second chapter of this project gives the background of the Dahlonega area, including the history of Cherokee people in the area. The relationship between Cherokee Removal and the Gold Rush of Dahlonega is often misrepresented and misunderstood, so it is important to examine. Even the origin of the name "Dahlonega" is vital to understanding the Native Southern legacy of the area.

The third chapter describes the origin of the Trahlyta character and the story of the grave, which seems to have begun upon the discovery of Porter Springs. Although there are no sources that can give complete certainty as to where the story came from, the beginning of Trahlyta, as she is known today, seems to be from the late 1800s. This chapter also analyzes the first publication of Trahlyta's legend, an 1875 short story written by Helen R. Rice called "The Forest Flower." The historical sources that I rely on most heavily for context in this chapter are Andrew

Cain's *History of Lumpkin County for the First Hundred Years* and James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*.

The fourth chapter is titled "Performing Trahlyta," in reference to Diana Taylor's studies of performance in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, which acts as a theoretical framework for the analysis I do in that chapter. First, I examine the historical marker and the ritual surrounding it (leaving a stone on the pile when you pass by), using Andrew Denson's exploration of the New Echota site as context for the time period in which the historical marker was created (1953). I then look at the play written by Doris Kenimer, *Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hills* (1955) that uses Trahlyta's story as the first act. I also compare this work to Gregory Smithers' "A Cherokee Epic: Kermit Hunter's *Unto These Hills* and the Mythologizing of Cherokee History," once again in order to give context to the time period, but also because *Unto These Hills* directly inspired Kenimer.

In the fifth chapter, I look at Trahlyta's function in online sources. She has been the inspiration for blogs, Youtube videos, and songs throughout the 2000s. This project does not attempt to tackle all uses of Trahlyta online; to do so would necessitate a separate project, but I do look at some examples that seem most relevant. I compare two different songs available online named for and starring Trahlyta, one by Barry Bailey and one by a band called Found Objects of Desire. I also examine three blog posts, all describing a visit to Trahlyta's Grave and its effect on them. Unfortunately, information about the creators of these texts is limited, but I try to make assertions using the information that is available.

Chapter six examines the novel written by Tim Westover, *Auraria*. The title is in reference to a ghost town located near Dahlonega that was its rival during the Gold Rush. The novel is mostly focused on an amalgamation of Southern folklore and history ranging from North

Carolina to Georgia. Trahlyta is depicted as a spirit who guides the protagonist through his adventures. I use this as an opportunity to examine Trahlyta's role as a ghost in the novel, and how it compares to her haunting of Dahlonega's literary heritage, using Renée Bergland's *The National Uncanny* for theoretical grounding.

Chapter seven concludes the project by examining the role that Trahlyta fulfills in the town of Dahlonega today as well as my speculation of her future. Even today Trahlyta can be seen in various places at the University of North Georgia, various organizations in Dahlonega, and in the minds of residents. I end by examining my own purpose in analyzing Trahlyta and contributing my own artifact (this project) to the history of Dahlonega.

It is important for me to mention that the purpose of this project is not to assign blame to individuals or even to Dahlonega as a whole. The perpetuation of problematic depictions of Native people isn't accidental, but often it isn't intentional either. This doesn't make it acceptable, but is rather just the reality of the situation. While it does show a fundamental misunderstanding of Native culture, systemic racism that erases Native history, and general ignorance of Native issues, the use of Trahlyta is not, in any version I've been able to identify (oral or otherwise) done with malice. People aren't attracted to the story of Trahlyta out of a sense of purposeful superiority or hatred. In fact, the intentions are quite often the opposite. Many people feel as though they are doing a good thing in attempting to preserve Cherokee culture when they retell the story.

Philip Deloria describes a similar impulse in *Indians in Unexpected Places*, when discussing why people laugh when they see a photograph of a Native woman at a hairdresser. Of course that laugh is because of surprise – a subversion of (a racist) expectation. The hairdresser is contemporary, whereas the Native woman is not part of modernity. This is what makes the

image funny, but it is problematic; it hinges on the belief that Native people are antiquated, part of the past, or even that they no longer exist. He clarifies though, that “One is brought to chuckle, not through overt and willful racism, but through a thickness of consciousness, layered up over cultural and individual time” (10). The people who enjoy the Trahlyta story are similar; they aren’t willfully doing something hurtful (stereotyping, erasing, and resigning Native people to the past), but rather are engaging in a part of a larger cultural mentality.

Before beginning the project, it is important to discuss the interplay of authenticity, folklore, the South, the idea of the real, and the Native South. Authenticity is a complicated term, especially in discussions of the South. The South is often recognized as a stronghold of culture – more soulful, more real, and more authentic than other places. I argue that this has a lot to do with folklore and perceptions of it. Folklore is defined by its transmission from direct human interaction.² A recipe that a grandmother teaches her grandchild in the kitchen by cooking together is an example of folk teaching/learning; reading a recipe from a cookbook on Southern recipes is not.

This distinction is important to understand, not least because it leads to three important points about folklore. Firstly, “folklore” is not synonymous with “real.” Secondly, the designation as folklore doesn’t make a form of knowledge better or worse; it is a descriptor of transmission, not a designation of quality. Thirdly, folklore is not reserved to the rural, to the old-fashioned, nor to the South. These misconceptions are vital to address, because the belief in them is at the core of misconceptions of the South and the Native South.

² I use the term “folklore” throughout the paper to mean all forms of folk culture: foodways, clothing, stories, legends, proverbs, etc.

Of course, terms like “folklore,” “legend,” and “myth” are also used in popular culture to denote falseness. Particularly, these terms are meant to be contrary to objective truth, although they may have some sort of metaphorical truth behind them. However, in regards to Southern folk culture, degrees of “real” really mean “authentic.” There is a perception that folkways are not modern, might not be factually the most correct way to do things, but contain some element of naturalness; folkways are in contrast to modernity, which, while efficient, is seen as artificial and soulless. An example would be urban and/or non-Southern interest in moonshine; people from areas that do not traditionally produce moonshine do not try it because they feel it will be superior to other forms of liquor, but rather because they see any flaws as proving the human touch. It is implied that homemade moonshine is made by human hand, not in a factory by a machine, and as such represents a past that many people feel out of touch with.

In *The Real South*, Scott Romine discusses the desire for “pristine, uncontaminated tradition” and asserts that he views this impulse as neither inherently good nor bad (15). But he brings up an important fact about authenticity, particularly as it relates to folklore: many people want it to be (or assume it is) static and constant. While folklore is conservative in some ways (preserving a particular culture or way of life) it is simultaneously fluid, changing as the needs of a society change. Static forms of folklore cannot exist for long in a society because above all, folklore is pragmatic.

Folklore itself is also a complex term. For example, in a 1996 article from the *Journal of Folklore Research*, 21 different scholars define the term “folklore,” and no two definitions are the same. In fact, some are even directly contradictory. The definition that most closely resembles the one I will use in this paper (and most illuminates what I intend to discuss) is from Theodor H. Gaster:

Folklore is that part of a people's culture which is preserved, consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs and observances of general currency, in myths, legends, and tales of common acceptance; and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual. Because it is a repository of popular traditions and an integral element of the popular 'climate,' folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for more formal literature and art; but it is distinct therefrom in that it is essentially of the people, by the people, and for the people. (258)

The essential elements as they pertain to my study are: folklore as a conscious and unconscious preservation of culture, folklore as an expression of a collective mentality of a group, and folklore as a source of inspiration for literature.

Another important characteristic of folklore that is relevant to the study of Trahlyta is her weaving in and of different genres, including different forms of folklore and literature. It is difficult, and likely impossible, to directly trace where each version of the story gets its influences, whether it be from folklore (orally transmitted stories) or earlier literary texts. Additionally, it is not only possible, but extremely likely that formal literature has changed the way in which the oral tradition is passed down. B.A. Botkin in "Definition of Folklore" describes this phenomenon and its consequences:

The transference of oral tradition to writing and print does not destroy its validity as folklore but rather, while freezing or fixing its form, helps to keep it alive and to diffuse it among those to whom it is not native or fundamental. For the folk memory forgets as much as it retains and restricts and corrupts as much as it transmits and improves. (256)

This means that rather than looking at the various literary forms of Trahlyta as a corruption of folklore, we should consider it to just be another part of the process in developing the story.

Without the extension into formal literary texts, Trahlyta might not have survived up to today. Likewise, literary texts would also not be enough to sustain her long term, since none of them are widely-known popular works. The two types of knowledge transference – literature and folklore – in this case rely on one another to continue to exist.

The needs of people in a society change from generation to generation, so folk knowledge must as well. In order for folklore to pass to another generation, it must serve a purpose. For example, my grandfather told me stories about his parents teaching him how to slaughter a chicken in order to eat it for dinner. This was the product of his environment as the child of recent immigrants to America in the early twentieth century. This knowledge did not get passed on to me, only two generations later, because of my childhood environment with different financial, social, and economic needs. Simply put, I didn't need to know how to slaughter a chicken in order to eat as a child. This lack of folk knowledge is not good or bad; my experiences as a child weren't inherently better or worse because my mother bought our chicken at the grocery store. The necessity for that folk knowledge did not survive through the generations.

However, the passage of folk traditions is not always as cut-and-dried as being a necessity for survival. Sometimes the purpose that folklore fulfills is less tangible, filling our emotional and mental needs. For example, I certainly don't need to know my mother's traditional recipe for marinara sauce to physically survive – I could easily buy it from the store, just like I do with already butchered chicken – but I have the desire to know, the personal drive to continue that tradition. Engaging in that ritual and learning process from person to person allows me to connect with people I've never met (my great-grandparents) and people who are no longer alive (my grandpa), as well as perhaps even people I will never meet (my great-great grandchildren).

This folk knowledge is something I feel I can pass on to my children; it fulfills the purpose of feeling connected, both to the past and to the future.

The logic of these examples, showing the reasons that folklore does and does not continue in a culture, informs the core of my examination of Trahlyta. The big question I had once I realized she has been reincarnated in so many forms (folklore, print media, songs, literature, digital media) was: why her? Something about her captured the imagination of people for over 140 years, something about her story makes people want to connect with her past (or the past she represents) as well as to perpetuate her as part of the future. Of many possibilities, residents of Dahlonega have chosen Trahlyta as a character to pass on to their children and their community at large. Of course, Trahlyta has changed in form and function over the generations (she has to in order to survive), but her name and her basic story have remained.

The fact that Trahlyta has remained throughout the last century and a half is not a coincidence. As Diana Taylor asks in *The Archive and The Repertoire* of figures that cross culture, “Of all the many potential specters, why do certain ones gain such power (143)?” and “How, then, do some ghosts dance over cultural boundaries while others are stopped, strip-searched, and denied entry (147)?”³ For a folk story, a ghost, or any faction of culture to continue to pass from generation to generation, it must serve a purpose. From this perspective I examine the character of Trahlyta and the different versions of her story, with the understanding that her passage through time is essential to understanding her place in Dahlonega’s past, present, and future. It is not mere coincidence that an imagined Cherokee Indian princess constantly appears in white Georgian imaginings of authenticity.

³ In this section, Taylor is unpacking the global mourning of Princess Diana, particularly, “Why Diana and not somebody else?” (143). She compares the response to Diana’s death to Selena’s death; the first was treated as universal, and the second was not. Selena’s death was reserved to the local; her death was too coded with a particular perspective to travel across borders the way Diana’s death did.

The same obsession with authenticity that drives people to the South (particularly the rural South) is not so different from the Southern obsession with their Native past. Both are impulses to achieve something “real,” something “authentic.” Melanie Taylor, in *Reconstructing the Native South*, identifies this, saying: “Part of this oversight rests in persistently anachronistic notions about both groups: these narratives suppose that Indians are relics preserved in the ether of a tragic colonial past and that the South has yet to fully transcend the residues of slavery, segregation, and its biracial legacy” (1). I argue that in both instances as well, folklore is often chosen as the determiner of authenticity. A misconception of folklore is that it inherently represents the past, the true, and the real. This conflation of folklore with visions of the Southern and Native cultures is problematic in that it sets them in opposition to modernity.

Complicating this issue of representation and stereotyping of Native and Southern cultures is the fact that many people are willing to live up to these expectations, often profitably. The business of creating an authentic, folksy environment that lives up to the expectations of outsiders is a financially fruitful one. This was true at Porter Springs in the 1800s (where Trahlyta, at least as we know her today, originated), which claimed to give visitors an authentic experience in nature, relying on both location in the rural South and the Native past for validation. It was true when Dahlonega began the Gold Rush Days Festival to attract visitors and created entertainment based on its authentically Southern and Cherokee past(s). And it is still true today in a Dahlonega that hosts not one, but two “old-timey” festivals celebrating and selling Native and Southern culture.⁴ Offering an escape from urbanization and modernity in Dahlonega has not only relied on its Southern past, but its Native past as well; in Dahlonega,

⁴ The two biggest annual festivals in Dahlonega today are the Gold Rush Days Festival and Bear on the Square.

these two pasts are intertwined. After all, Trahlyta is not just any Cherokee princess, but Dahlonega's Cherokee princess.

2 CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Removal and Memories about Cherokee People

Before examining the story of Trahlyta, it is essential to understand the complex historical circumstances leading up to her development. The history of Dahlonega also lays the groundwork for understanding the removal of nineteenth-century Cherokee culture in the Dahlonega and Lumpkin County area. This erasure of Cherokee culture and history is a distinguishing characteristic of later versions of the Trahlyta story.

A common misconception about the relationship between the Dahlonega Gold Rush and the Removal of the Cherokee people is that the lust for gold of white Georgians was the direct (or only) reason for Removal. The Dahlonega city website itself, in the section about Native American history, claims that “The meaning of the word ta-lo-ne-ga, ‘yellow,’ speaks volumes about what eventually drove the Cherokee out on the infamous Trail of Tears— gold!” However convenient this historical remembrance is, it is an oversimplified depiction.

In reality, tensions among white and Indian residents of the area had been building – particularly since the Compact of 1802. Historian Theda Perdue explains that while:

until 1819, the federal government had been making some progress with the Cherokees [...] Georgia, the cotton state with the largest Cherokee population, insisted that the federal government live up to the terms of the Compact of 1802. In this agreement, the state gave up territory, which eventually became Alabama and Mississippi, on the condition that the federal government extinguish Indian title to land within the state (Perdue n.p.)

White Georgians were growing impatient with the federal government's pace in dealing with the Indian "problem," and once gold was found in the area, the cries of indignation fueled by greed drowned out any hopes of rational discussion on the matter. For decades, they felt that they had been entitled to the area in which Cherokee people were still living, which was exacerbated by the discovery of gold.⁵

Another key part of Removal, which is impossible to ignore, is racism and a belief in white supremacy. The assertion that greed was the sole or main factor in Removal, a very popular narrative in the Dahlonega area, erases the essential fact that white people felt entitled to the land because of their perceived racial superiority. As Tim Alan Garrison explains in *The Legal Ideology of Removal: the Southern Judiciary and the Sovereignty of Native American Nations*: "Expansionist politicians such as George Gilmer and George Troup of Georgia seized office and suggested to their constituencies that Indians were not exploiting their land in the way that Providence had intended. Hence, they argued, white people were within their rights when they took land away from the Indian tribes" (Garrison 7). While greed was an important factor, the belief in the inferiority of Cherokee people, that they were not good enough to own the land, was also a major part of what led to such vicious action.

Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, in *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, emphasize that "after the War of 1812, an agricultural boom, the transportation revolution, and the development of a national market brought changes to the country between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River" (15). The growth of the plantation economy

⁵ Some valuable sources on Cherokee Removal are Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green's *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, Tim Garrison's "Cherokee Removal," and *The Legal Ideology of Removal: The Southern Judiciary and the Sovereignty of Native American Nations*.

in Georgia then led to massive population growth. They explain that the growing population was a big part of the pressure being put on the Cherokee people to vacate their lands.

One of the first ways that white Georgians dealt with the issue of their violent past after Removal was to view it as an inevitable part of progress: unfortunate but unavoidable. They also began to mythologize Native people, thus not only physically removing them, but culturally and historically removing them as well. Native people fell from narratives as actual people and instead became figures of an endangered race. In “The Legacy of Indian Removal” Perdue points out, however, “not only did individual Indians remain, but native communities also struggled over the next century and a half to carve out a place for themselves in the South” (3). Eventually, white Georgians began to identify with the experience of Removal, though they themselves were in many senses the perpetrators. Perdue, notes how in “1893 the Atlanta Constitution described the affluence of removed Cherokees in an article entitled ‘Prosperous Ex-Georgians’” (18). By the end of the century in which Removal happened, guilt had already become a characteristic of the white Southern mentality. This guilt was often expressed by memorializing Cherokee people and minimizing white involvement in violence and attempting to equate the white Southern experience with those of Native people.

The physical repercussions of Removal are obvious, but some might not understand the consequences of the historical and cultural erasure Native people have suffered. Moreover, some white Dahlenegans, particularly those who have a soft spot for the story of Trahlyta, might not see the harm in perpetuating the story, whether or not it is true.⁶ After all, in evaluating different perspectives from the area, it seems as though many people are trying desperately to honor and

⁶ True, in this sense, meaning from a superstitious standpoint (bad luck/good luck from the stone placing ritual), an authenticity standpoint (if the story is Cherokee in origin), and in a physical sense (if someone is actually buried at the site).

remember Native people and to connect with them. However, Perdue explains that “collapsing all of removal history into one sentimental narrative featuring the Cherokees simplified the past for non-Indians while, in effect, denying the suffering of many other native peoples” (23). In essence, trying to minimize past violence adds to future violence against Native people.

2.2 Naming of Dahlonega

While initially it might seem odd that a town involved in Removal would name itself using the language of its victims, the actual situation is more nuanced. Georgians were anxious to have the land they felt belonged to them,⁷ and by the time a couple of decades had passed they were tired of waiting. During this time, when forced removal was becoming an inevitable threat on the horizon, gold was found in the sparsely inhabited area (by either settlers or Cherokee people) known now as Dahlonega. A variety of people then came to populate the land, including white people and Cherokee people, and in this time, it was named Dahlonega.⁸

Of Dahlonega’s naming, Andrew Cain’s *History of Lumpkin County for the First Hundred Years, 1832-1932* (1932) says that “the place chosen for the county seat was not officially named until about the first of October, 1833” (Cain 63). And although things were beginning to become hostile for the Cherokee people, Removal was not until 1838-39. So there was a section of time between the development of Dahlonega and the Removal, during which the city gained its Cherokee name. As to who named the town itself, Cain says that:

The name was given to the town by the Inferior Court of Lumpkin County and was announced to the world by the *Western Herald*, a newspaper established in Auraria in April, 1833. The announcement in the *Herald* was as follows: ‘The Inferior Court of

⁷ This sense of entitlement from a legal perspective is strongly related with the Compact of 1802.

⁸ For a more detailed description of the origins of Dahlonega, see Chapter 4 of Andrew Cain’s *History of Lumpkin County for the First Hundred Years*, named “Early Years in Dahlonega.”

Lumpkin County have unanimously agreed upon the name of Talonega for the village. It is the Cherokee name for gold and we think it highly appropriate.’ (Cain 63)

The name was not given as remembrance of a people who had been kicked out of an established town, but rather as a topical name during a time in which it was plausible that the land might remain owned, or at least inhabited by Cherokee people.

A common misconception surrounding the city is that it comes from the Cherokee word for gold, which many imply to mean the gold in the ground found at the site. However, this is incorrect, as explained as early as Cain’s text⁹. Cain includes an excerpt from the Atlanta Constitution published on July 11th, 1879, which clarifies questions with the name Dahlonega, as told by Col. W. P. Price:

Mr. Stephens will not object to having this matter set right, especially by one who had the honor or the accident to be born in Dahlonega before the red man left the place he had named. The writer of this has often heard the word pronounced by the natives and heard their definition of it. [...] The word Dahlonega in the Indian dialect refers to nothing but color, to-wit: yellow or gold color (Cain 64).

In this regard, Cain’s assertion seems to be correct, according to the dictionary available on the official website for the Cherokee Nation, the word for “yellow” is listed phonetically as “da-lo-ni-ge” (ᐃᐅᐅᐅ). However, some confusion could come into play here as the entry for “gold” is “a-de-lv-da-lo-ni-ge” (ᐃᐅᐅᐅᐅᐅ), with “a-de-la” (ᐃᐅᐅ) meaning “money.”

According to records from James Mooney’s *Myths of the Cherokee* (1900) and Cain, relationships between white people and Cherokee people of the Dahlonega area on an individual

⁹ Cain explains that this is already a major point of contention by 1932. By this point people were already confused/misremembering.

level were complex. Mooney, for example, asserts that although there were some “stronghold[s] of Cherokee conservatism” by the early 1800s, many Cherokee people had begun to intermarry with white people (Mooney 83). While both Cain and Mooney generally try to be sympathetic, some of their observations can be problematic. Mooney makes note of the accomplishments of people from the Cherokee Nation, including John Ross and John Ridge, as well as Sequoyah, although these observations seem to indicate an interest in them as they live up to “civilized” ideals. Cain similarly attempts to show how “civilized” Cherokee people are by commenting on their accomplishments, such as developing a newspaper (*The Cherokee Phoenix*).

Perdue enforces these accounts, discussing that “before removal, Indians had been a major presence in the South. Thoroughfares ran through their nations, and most southerners, during the course of their lives, probably encountered an Indian or two, at the very least” (17-18). But if this was the case, and the lives of Cherokee people and white Georgians were so integrated, how could they be forgotten so quickly from recent history, as the popularity around the Trahlyta story shows? Perdue addresses this, saying that “with removal, this high visibility ended and southerners began to consider Indians merely as part of the region's past” (18). So relations had existed and even occasionally been close in the Dahlonega area before Removal, in the early 1800s, but while individuals might have been able to live near and with each other, the position of the state of Georgia was extremely hostile, even before the Gold Rush.

It is important to note that the misunderstandings surrounding Trahlyta are not unique, but rather are the culmination of many other misrepresentations of Dahlonega’s history. These misrepresentations of Dahlonega’s origins – the name, Removal, the role that Cherokee people played in Dahlonega’s history – are all centered on its forgotten Native past. Examining these misconceptions reveals how entwined the Native and the Southern histories are.

3 CHAPTER 3: THE ORIGIN OF TRAHLYTA

3.1 Porter Springs

Pinpointing the exact origins of the Trahlyta story is incredibly difficult, especially since it seems as though it began as an oral tradition. Regardless, it came into documentation and thus was first recorded historically in regards to Porter Springs, a popular spa from the 1870s. Cain explains the relationship between Trahlyta and Porter Springs:

The Rev. Joseph McKee, a Methodist minister from Dawson County, discovered the spring on part of the B.S. Porter plantation. Later he wrote about it in the ‘Methodist Advocate’. McKee asked the Rev. William Tate, a Baptist preacher who lived nearby, to help him clean out the spring. They found a wall of thin rocks, which had been set by hand around the spring. McKee decided it had been made by Indians. He remembered the Cherokee legend of Princess Trahlyta who supposedly kept her beauty by bathing in the waters. (4)

According to a personal account in Anne Dismukes Amerson’s *“I Remember Dahlonega,”* this event happened in 1868 (227). Whether or not Rev. McKee recalled an actual story told to him by a Cherokee person is likely impossible to prove or disprove, but regardless, he realized the potential this story held in creating a desirable vacation destination.

Rev. McKee soon found out that the Cherokee lore surrounding the area could be a great boon to his spa. According to Amerson: “guests loved hearing the colorful local legend about the Indian princess Trahlyta, who stayed youthful and beautiful by drinking from the spring and bathing in its waters” (Amerson 65). However, it was not just the story which was of interest to the visitors, but also the ritual of visiting the supposed grave site of Trahlyta, a tradition which continues to this day: “a popular outing for guests at Porter Springs was to visit Trahlyta’s grave

located nearby and to pass a stone to the mound” (65). This is likely a large part of why this story has remained pervasive and popular; the addition of an actual physical place to an interesting story made the experience seem all the more real. For visitors who were likely taken in by the perceived magical medicinal qualities, having a physical place to “prove” the legitimacy of the story was invaluable.

Amerson gives an insightful interpretation of this popularity in the fourth volume of her “*I Remember Dahlonega*” series, saying, “perhaps hearing how Trahlyta maintained her youthful beauty by bathing in the spring gave Porter Springs guests the inspiration they needed to brave showering in the icy spring water” (122-123). However, even this reveals that there was interest in associating oneself with the Cherokee people. Even the ritual of visiting the grave is supposedly recreating a Cherokee experience and tradition. Native studies scholar Shari Huhndorf gives another explanation of this joint interest in the natural and Native worlds: “In the 1890s, health became almost an obsession, one that could best be indulged in the outdoors, as far as possible from the decay of urban life” (67). The spa, the story, and the ritual gave white people a way to “escape” from their modernizing world and recreate the “authentic” Cherokee experience.

White interest in (and admiration of) Native culture developed surprising rapidly after Removal. This interest was also tied closely with forgetfulness: fairly soon after Removal, Native people began to be perceived as part of a long-past history. For example, only thirty years after Removal, Rev. McKee “concluded [the springs] had been made as much as a thousand years earlier by early native inhabitants” (“*I Remember Dahlonega*” 227). Rev. McKee’s reflection antiquates the artifact, and legacy of the Cherokee people. It assigns the Cherokee story to prehistory rather than relatively recent history (within a lifetime). By this point in time,

many white Americans like Rev. McKee felt that Native people no longer posed a threat.

Huhndorf explains that “the bloody U.S.-Indian wars in the West wound down in the 1870s” and “the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 usually signals the end of the military conquest of Native America” (21). In the public perception, Native people were on the way out; a part of history.

This would be an even more exaggerated experience in the South where Removal would give the perception of Native people being gone completely (out of sight, out of mind). Huhndorf says that because of these violent suppressions (Removal, US Indian Wars, and the Wounded-Knee Massacre), making Native people “no longer a challenge to white civilization, [and] thus began to play a more ambivalent role in the American cultural imagination” (21). Essentially, Native Americans in white cultural mythology faded into members of the past, rather than the present.

It is possible that this story was told to Rev. McKee by a Cherokee person, or by someone who had heard it from a Cherokee person, since Cherokee people and white Georgians had inhabited the same area until 1838. However, the story seems to have some clear elements that differ from more traditional Cherokee lore. Furthermore, the story isn't mentioned in James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*, which is extensive and covers Lumpkin County. Mooney specifically addresses Georgia place names and local tales, in a section titled “Local Legends of Georgia.” This section makes no mention of the Trahlyta story but does give some key insights. Mooney introduces several perpetrators of what he calls “pseudo-myths,” specifically naming Rev. George White's *Historical Collections of Georgia* as a source of misinformation on Cherokee folklore, promoting inaccurate stories. Mooney then details several pseudo-myths from which the story of Trahlyta could have easily evolved. Particularly, he talks about Nacoochee¹⁰

¹⁰ For more information on this story see Burrison, John A. "Sauttee and Nacoochee: Anatomy of a Lovers' Leap Legend." *Southern Folklore* 47 (1990): 117-32. Web.

(in nearby White County), a tale starring “a beautiful Indian princess, who unfortunately fell in love with a chieftain of a hostile tribe [...] the two were buried in the same grave and the mound was raised over the spot” (416). He also dismisses the Hiwassee story, with a similar love-focused storyline, as “very pretty, but [...] pure invention” (416). Mooney then confirms that the creation of false Cherokee lore, words, and names was commonplace in Georgia by the 1900s.

Although looking at Mooney’s text, it may seem that the story is a white Dahlonegan invention, it was not unheard of for Cherokee people to be part of the process in creating misconceptions about their own belief systems or mythology. Claudio Saunt, in “Telling Stories: The Political Uses of Myth and History in the Cherokee and Creek Nations” explains how this seemingly confusing occurrence began:

For most of the eighteenth century, when Cherokees and Creeks were not yet familiar with European narrative conventions, they sought common ground with colonists by recounting stories about the past that freely mixed elements from Indian and European traditions. Given the relative weakness of the colonies at the time, perhaps Indians did not see the need to speak the language of their antagonists so completely. (674)

Later, in the nineteenth century,¹¹ this conflation of Cherokee and European form was seen as an opportunity to try and defend Cherokee possession of the land, at a time when Cherokee sovereignty was in grave danger.

Saunt also explains the role that Cherokee leaders played in creating Cherokee myths that appealed to white people: “Cherokee principal chief John Ross, educated by a private tutor and later at boarding school, recognized that he could exploit Western fantasies about myth to defend his nation” (684). In other words, creating stories that appealed to white people was an act of

¹¹ For example, Saunt says that “Cherokee principal chief John Ross (1790-1866) [...] exploited European and Euro-American fantasies about myth to defend his nation.” (684)

survival and an attempt to defend the existence of the Cherokee nation, not dissimilar to other ways in which Cherokee people tried to prove that they were “civilized.” Unfortunately, like other attempts to convince white people about the legitimacy of the Cherokee Nation, it was not enough to stop the onslaught of political, legal, and physical violence.

3.2 “The Forest Flower”

Cain seems skeptical of the authenticity of Trahlyta’s story; he claims that he “has been unable to locate this legend in the existing body of Cherokee lore” (Cain 201). Just like the absence of the story in Mooney, this does not necessarily prove or disprove anything about the origin of the story, but Cain does also conflate the origins of Porter Springs and Trahlyta, saying that the story of Trahlyta was “picked up as an oral tradition in the vicinity of Porter Springs and published in brief form on June 6, 1875” (Cain 201). This small reference is to the first identifiable literary use of the story. Cain says that the author of this first publication of the story was “Miss Helen R. Rice, [...] who is said to have learned the legend from her father, who was a Judge of the Superior Court and a friend of the Indians” (201). While this assertion may be true, the timing would strongly indicate that there was some relationship between her interest in the story and the popularity of Porter Springs. Finding more information about Helen R. Rice is difficult, especially considering she published her short story about Trahlyta, “The Forest Flower,” semi-anonymously, only using her initials, “H.R.R.”¹²

Rice’s version of the tale was published in the *Sunny South*, an Atlanta literary magazine that ran from 1875 until 1907. According to an article written by Donnie Summerlin for the Blog of the Digital Library of Georgia (which gives digital access to the magazine), “the *Sunny South*

¹² I was lucky enough to meet with historian Anne Amerson, at which time she gave me a copy of “The Forest Flower,” which I had previously been unable to find. I’m very grateful for her help.

focused largely on southern literature and each issue included short fiction, poetry, and serialized novels aimed at a female audience” (Summerlin). Summerlin also mentions that while the focus was a female readership, the paper was also political in nature, advocating for suffrage for women, the first publication in Atlanta to officially do so. We may speculate that this may have contributed to Rice’s desire for anonymity, and indeed it appears fairly common for authors in the magazine to do the same. Perhaps especially for a daughter of a Judge of the Superior Court, publishing in such a place could have been controversial.

Interestingly, the title of Rice’s version of the Trahlyta story does not have the protagonist's name, but rather is called “*The Forest Flower;*” or *the Cedar Mountain Spring*. Trahlyta’s conflation with nature and being part of the landscape is a common theme in later versions of the story, specifically relating her with flower imagery. This is not an uncommon theme in white imaginings of Native people. Huhndorf says: “the equivalence of Indians with ‘natural products of the soil’ in the first phase of civilization. The more advanced stages of progress predictably leave Indians behind” (34). This certainly seems to apply, as Trahlyta is described as a girl who “bloomed an unplucked flower in her father's wigwam¹³” (Rice 7). This description also applies to her seemingly perpetual virginity, expressed through her unwillingness to leave her father.

This unwillingness to leave, and indeed the story as a whole, reads with striking similarity to Cherokee Removal.¹⁴ The main conflict of the short story is that Trahlyta wants to stay with her father, while Wahsega, “the young sachem¹⁵ of the tribe” wants to take her away

¹³ This is a term used in regards to Northeast Native American nations, but is applied to the Trahlyta story in several versions, perhaps showing a misunderstanding for regional difference.

¹⁴ There doesn’t seem to be a way to tell definitively if this similarity was intentional or coincidental. I was unable to find evidence of Rice’s acquisition of the story or the extent of her knowledge of Native history.

¹⁵ Also a term used in regards to Northeast Native American nations.

with him to marry (Rice 7). Eventually, she begins to overstay her time with her father, leading her “to fade as do the delicate wild flowers before the blaze of the noonday sun” (Rice 7). To remedy this she goes to “an old medicine woman or witch, whose weird incantations and marvelous power excited the wonder, fear, and reverence of her tribe” (Rice 7). The witch tells her the secret of the life-giving spring, which keeps Trahlyta young and beautiful for longer than normal.

However, Wahsega eventually kidnaps her, unable to resist her beauty any longer. Because of this, she begins to die, since she is separated from her springs: “At length, the effect of a removal from the waters of the wonderful spring began to be visible in the languid eyes of Trahlyta” (Rice 7). Rice creates a sympathetic figure in Trahlyta, setting her up as beloved and youthful, and depicting her downfall in dramatic terms: “in the simplicity of her desolate heart she wondered if the Great Spirit did not pity her also” (7). And throughout, Trahlyta remains noble and uncomplaining: “Poor Trahlyta murmured not in the grief that was rapidly crushing all the life and light in her gentle spirit” (Rice 7). However, while she is sympathetic, she is not pathetic or groveling: “Trahlyta had divined her destination from the moment of her capture, and seeing escape hopeless, had calmly proceeded with her captors. All the pride of a long line of chiefs rose within her” (7). Rice depicts her as accepting her fate as the “noble savage.”

The ending of the story also seems to mirror the effects of Removal in its permanence. Wahsega neglects Trahlyta when she stops being beautiful, but he feels remorse and tries to return to her; bringing her favorite flower, “[he] remembered the native grace with which she twined [mountain ivy] in her dark tresses” (Rice 7). He wants to once again have her become part of the land, entwined with it, as is her natural state, but unfortunately, “the repentant Wahsega hastened to the wigwam of his once-loved Trahlyta [...] But, alas! repentance came too

late” (Rice 7). This reaction seems to mimic the consequences of Removal: guilt is a natural reaction, but it can’t undo what has been done.

In a way, Trahlyta does become part of the land again, although in death rather than in life. She is buried at a site which Rice identifies as Stonepile Gap,¹⁶ able to be a part of the land she loved so much, but not alive. This reflects a negative attitude toward Native people, that they can remain in grave sites and place names, as artifacts of the past, but they cannot be living. Rice’s story is sympathetic towards Cherokee people, but ultimately she is supporting the view that they are part of the past and that they cannot coexist in the same space as Georgians.

Rice’s story reflects the tragedy of Removal, creating a tragic (yet admirable) figure out of a Cherokee person subjected to violence, a theme which appealed, and still appeals, to white audiences. This is because of the reorientation of the time and the players in the tragedy, which would allow white readers to feel sorry for Trahlyta without having to admit fault in their past. As far as the text, there is no true villain, or at the very least Wahsega redeems himself in the end, realizing his wrongdoing. Moreover, he is even absolved of his mistake, with Trahlyta giving him “a faint smile of recognition and forgiveness brightened the wan face” (Rice 7). This is a comforting image for white audiences; violence can and will be met with forgiveness.

It is difficult to definitively say what direct impact Rice’s story had on Dahlonega. I haven’t been able to locate many sources that reference her; the only one that directly does so is Cain’s text. However, her story did at least have an impact on the next major publication, a play called *Thar’s Gold in Them Thar Hills*. The connection is clear because the play uses some lines taken directly from Rice’s story. So at the very least, Rice’s story lives on through the play, which has become an icon of Dahlonega’s remembrance of its past.

¹⁶ This is a name still used today for Trahlyta’s grave.

4 CHAPTER 4: PERFORMING TRAHLYTA

4.1 The Historical Marker and the Ritual

Probably the most visible and influential version of the Trahlyta story is the historical marker at the Stonepile Gap, which gives a fairly straightforward recitation:

This pile of stones marks the grave of a Cherokee princess, Trahlyta. According to legend her tribe, living on Cedar Mountain north of here, knew the secret of the magic springs of eternal youth from the Witch of Cedar Mountain. Trahlyta, kidnapped by a rejected suitor, Wahsega, was taken far away and lost her beauty. As she was dying, Wahsega promised to bury her here near her home and the magic springs. Custom arose among the Indians and later the Whites to drop stones, one for each passerby, on her grave for good fortune. The magic springs, now known as Porter Springs, lie 3/4 mile northeast of here.

(Georgia Historical Marker: Trahlyta's Grave)

The historical marker is dated 1953, two years before the beginning of the Gold Rush Days Festival. This proximity indicates a surge of interest in memorializing the past of Dahlonega, about a hundred years after the town's conception. This historical marker is also important in that it solidifies in writing the ritual of going to the grave and leaving a stone, which had previously been an oral tradition.

In his analysis of the construction of the New Echota historical site, also located in Georgia, Andrew Desnson gives an important background on the mid-century interest in memorials, particularly Native American memorials in Georgia. Denson says that "automobile tourism already was expanding quite rapidly in the 1950s and with it historical tourism. This period also was a boom time for 'heritage' activities of all sorts, diverse pursuits designed to allow ordinary people to make intellectual and emotional connections with the past" (Denson

92). This certainly would apply as well to the Stonepile Gap, a destination at the intersection of two highways. As the proximity of the development of Gold Rush days shows, not only were citizens of Dahlonega interested in exploring and celebrating their own history but also in sharing this history with others (often for financial profit).

It may seem contradictory that white Georgians would be so interested in Cherokee history, which inherently implicates their violent past, but Denson offers an explanation for this: “white Georgians could accept an old pre-Civil War role as villains and even apologize for past sins. Most of the Cherokees who visited New Echota during and after its opening would return to places beyond Georgia’s borders and outside of Georgia’s politics. They would stay removed” (Denson 95). Much like the romanticized sympathetic images of the noble savage from the end of the nineteenth century, the mid-twentieth-century white Georgians were not threatened by retribution and as such were able to face their dark past head on. White Georgians were so firm in their belief of their own position of power that they felt they could even erect a memorial with no fear or guilt. Denson highlights this by contrasting the quite different treatment of African-Americans during this time and place, because they represented (to white Georgians) a present threat.

Denson goes further to argue that white Georgians also felt that going so far in their attempts at redemption was largely inwardly focused. He quotes Secretary of State Ben Fortson as saying that New Echota ““will make us better Americans, for Americans use their mistakes as stepping stones¹⁷ for something more worthwhile”” (Denson 88). For them, this was a way to show how far they had developed as a civilization, placing both their own past and Native

¹⁷ Coincidentally, the phrasing here of stepping stones is also interesting when applying these assertions to the Trahlyta story, a grave of a woman literally covered in stones.

Americans in pre-civilization. This also attempts to remove responsibility, making it seem as though the legacy of violence was so far in the past it had no connection to the present.

Denson also asserts that ultimately the visitor of New Echota is supposed to sympathize with the Cherokee people, to assess their own feelings and values outside of their personal attachment to history. He says that “Removal, distant but familiar, has offered non-Indians a secure perspective from which to think about race and racism. It has provided a relatively uncontroversial way to consider deeply contentious issues” (Denson 99). I argue this same assertion could be made concerning Trahlyta’s grave. The mourning of Trahlyta is even more displaced than that at New Echota, representing an unspecified tragedy rather than a specific one. Those who visit Trahlyta’s grave in order to pay respects to the Native past can mourn more generally: “Isn’t it too bad what happened to the Cherokee?” versus “Isn’t it terrible what we (as a country) did/continue to do to the Cherokee?” The difference in those two trains of thought is subtle but important: the first does not position the observer as the outsider, therefore leaving open the ability to identify directly with Trahlyta and all Native people. The second is an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, perhaps even the beginning stages of questioning how we as a society can improve and how we can move forward.

The historical marker is the strangest version of the story. For a folk story to transform from an oral tradition to a literary (or musical) one is not uncommon. Many people, when reflecting on writing about their experiences in an area turn to folklore as a source of narrative inspiration. But for a folk story to warrant such importance in a community that it is depicted in a physical, permanent format is indicative that the story has some great significance. To use my phrasing from the introduction regarding folklore: for a story to necessitate a plaque it must serve some type of purpose.

Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* offers some insight into why people manifest culture physically (especially, in her examples, as it pertains to conquering):

“innumerable practices in the most literate societies require both an archival and an embodied dimensions [...] We have only to think of Columbus planting the Spanish flag in the New World or Armstrong planting the U.S. flag on the moon” (21). Not only do white Dahlonians perpetuate the ideal of ownership over the grave (representative of ownership over the land), but they marked the land itself. Simultaneously, the historical marker reminds the visitor that not only do “we” own it now, but it used to belong to “them.” The presence of the historical marker does not erase Native people from the history of the area, but places them securely in the past.

The historical marker itself also functions as a way of physically/archivally anchoring Cherokee people in the past. Taylor's description of museums applies here:

Museums enact the knower-known relationship by separating the transient visitor from the fixed object of display. Like discoverers, the visitors come and go; they see, they know, they believe – only the deracinated, adorned and ‘empty’ object stays in place.

Museums preserve (a particular history), (certain) traditions, and (dominant) values. They stage the encounter with otherness. (66)

Trahlyta's grave functions as an intermediary, a portal through which white Dahlonians can interpret, relive, and mourn the Cherokee people through a palatable lens that belongs to them. It offers a safe, guiltless way to acknowledge the Cherokee people in which white Georgians have to assume no blame and can feel absolved.

Also relevant are Taylor's observations about "The Couple in the Cage" performance art by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco.¹⁸ Particularly, her discussion of the function of the cage parallels the purpose of Trahlyta's Grave. Taylor says that:

The cage promised the security of partial recognition, visitors could marvel at the stereotype of the uprooted natives without worrying about the contemporary reality of displacement and migration. [...] For some viewers, then, the bars of the cage actually protected against that retaliation, marking the radical boundary between the 'here' and the 'there,' the 'us' and the 'them,' allowing for no inter-, no cross-, no transcultural nada." (71-72)

The stones on Trahlyta's Grave function in much the same way as the bars in the exhibit – a barrier between "us" and "them," "them" also functioning as an unpleasant reality. The stones are a barrier between the visitor to the site and Trahlyta, marking, as all gravestones do, a larger divide of the here and not here, alive and dead.

However, unlike the cage, the stones allow a function of participation that simultaneously makes the performer of the ritual us and them. In placing a stone the performer is playing what they perceive to be the role of the citizen, the local, the capital and lowercase "n" native. At the same time, they are defining the action as other, belonging to someone else, a recreation of another culture. They are engaging in a "custom [which] arose among the Indians and later the Whites," an attempted recreation of the rituals of the people who inhabited the land before them, here framed as people who innocuously left the land (Historical Marker).

¹⁸ Taylor includes a section from Coco Fusco's *English is Broken Here* explaining the project: "Our plan was to live in a golden cage for three days, presenting ourselves as undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for five centuries" (65). Taylor adds that they took this act to many different countries across the world, particularly those with violent histories with Native people.

4.2 Gold Rush Days and Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hills

During the 1950s, Dahlonegans further reflected on their culture, and set about preserving it, celebrating it, and quite possibly profiting off of it. This led to the development of the Gold Rush Days festival, described by Sallie Sorohan's *Gold Rush Days in Dahlonega* (2002) as a way "to promote and share our history with visitors, to make it a giant Lumpkin County homecoming for people who had moved away and to woo a few tourists to Dahlonega" (Sorohan i). This use of the word "homecoming" is interesting here, because Sorohan, as well as Amerson, claims that Cherokee people from North Carolina were among the visitors, with Amerson in *Dahlonega: A Brief History* saying, "In addition to people dressed as pioneers, gold miners and Indians, there were real Indians who came from Cherokee, North Carolina. After the parade they played a game of Cherokee stickball on the college athletic field." (104). There doesn't appear to be much in the way of other evidence if this is true or not, but it does show the readiness of Dahlonegans to conflate their experiences with Cherokee people and their comfort in their status as the "real" natives now, with Native Americans as visitors.

It's also possible that no Native people were in attendance at the first Gold Rush Days festival, or maybe not people from Cherokee, North Carolina. This could be another case of flawed sources merely echoing each other until what they say seems true (not unlike what has occurred with the Trahlyta story). This is the risk with making assertions about a city that does not have extensive historical backgrounds written by professional historians; it becomes difficult to differentiate fact from fiction or from folklore. As mentioned in the introduction, sources on Dahlonega and its history are limited, and the sources that do exist rely heavily on the perceptions of individuals given as fact. This does not mean that all assertions made in these

texts are unreliable, but that they are not always diversified or fact checked and as such they need to be met with some skepticism.

Regardless, one well-documented event was one which turned out to be quite popular, Doris Kenimer's 1955 play, *Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hills* (hereafter referred to as *Thar's Gold*, for brevity). Soroan says that it had "a cast of almost 100 people [and] an estimated crowd of 1,000 people saw the pageant on Saturday and Sunday nights at the high school athletic field" (8). Kenimer was recruited to write the play about Georgia history, and she chose an outdoor, open air, large production. Soroan describes the content as "the history of the gold rush of the 1800s and the events relating to that saga covering the years 1828 to 1849 are portrayed in six scenes. The first scene tells of the romance of Indian Princess Trahlyta and Chief Wahsega, based on 'The Legend of Cedar Mountain'" (Soroan 8). This once again shows how the perpetuation of the story of Trahlyta has led to the erasure of nineteenth century Cherokee history in the area, with the timeframe given (1828-1849) focusing not on violence and the problematic history of Removal, which occurred during this time, but on a likely fabricated legend.

Instead of going with historically accurate depictions of what happened to Cherokee people during the Gold Rush time period, Kenimer focuses on the more palatable – and likely more interesting for white audiences – story of Trahlyta. Kenimer admitted openly to being surprised that she was chosen to write the play, since she was not from Dahlonega and was not a historian or playwright. Any mistakes she made are more of a reflection of overarching cultural attitudes rather than personal prejudice, especially considering that she sites much of her source material to be other people in Dahlonega. In an interview from 1958, she says that "I visited some old-timers and asked questions. They told me some of the most interesting stories you ever

heard. One was about Indian Princess Trahlyta's grave, located at Stone Pile Gap," meaning that her reliance on outside sources and her own interest in creating something interesting likely overrode historical authenticity (Sorohan 10).

Kenimer also reveals that she did in fact speak with Cherokee people when writing the play. In the same *Nugget*¹⁹ article, she says that "the Indians on the Cherokee Indian Reservation laughed at me when I tried to buy an 'authentic teepee.' 'Cherokees didn't live in teepees,' they explained" (Sorohan 11). Similar to the detail claiming that Cherokee people actually attended Gold Rush Days, this assertion is frustratingly brief and difficult to examine further. Also like that detail, this does not excuse the problems with the play, or absolve the people involved. The issues with the play – erasure, inaccuracy, and stereotyping – are still there.

Kenimer reveals another resource for her play, one which also has a complex legacy in representing the Native South. Kenimer mentions in an interview with Anne Amerson that she was inspired by a visit to Cherokee, North Carolina, particularly *Unto These Hills*:

When Dahlonega started celebrating its annual 'Gold Rush Days' in the fifties, the Chamber of Commerce asked me to write a skit to be performed on the balcony of the courthouse as part of the festivities. I had seen 'Unto These Hills' in Cherokee, North Carolina, and dreamed about doing something similar in Dahlonega. Our story seemed just as interesting. ("I Remember Dahlonega 201-202)

Kenimer's phrasing here is fascinating, and reveals the attitude of conflating the experiences of white Georgians with Cherokee people. The beginning of what she considers to be "our" story is what she perceived to be a Cherokee legend, which functions as a sort of pre-history, pre-creation myth for the city of Dahlonega.

¹⁹ The *Nugget* is a local Dahlonega newspaper that is still active today.

With the success in Cherokee, North Carolina and particularly of *Unto These Hills*,²⁰ it's no surprise that Dahlenegans, including Kenimer, were inspired. Gregory Smithers in "A Cherokee Epic: Kermit Hunter's *Unto These Hills* and the Mythologizing of Cherokee History" explains that "appealing to the folkloric and recreational pleasures of the Great Smokies (and Appalachian region more generally) became a central component of tourism advertising during the Cold War decades" (Smithers 2). As mentioned in the beginning of this project, economic profitability has played a large role in the development of Dahlenega's cultural preservation.

It's also not hard to see how people might have conflated the experiences of white Southerners and Native people, because the culture of the South, not unlike that of Native people, was seen as rustic, or simpler, a callback to older times – characterizations that many rural towns are willing to celebrate, not least of which because of the opportunity for profit. Huhndorf says that "the vast changes sweeping a rapidly modernizing American society created a nostalgia for origins, now embodied in the cultural imagination in the 'primitive,'" a description that could apply to either Native or Southern culture (14). Much like the infatuation with engaging in Native American culture by many white people as a form of escapism, the rural South appealed to vacationers who "temporarily left their busy urban lives behind them and traveled by plane, train, or automobile to Appalachia in hope of enjoying pristine rivers and hiking trails while taking in a little local history and culture at nearby museums" (Smithers 2). The goals here are strikingly similar: connect with nature, escape modernity, and engage with the history. The play itself reveals a desire to be part of the Native legacy in a way that benefits white Georgians.

²⁰ Smithers describes *Unto These Hills* "as the story of the Cherokees from a mythological origin-time up to their forced removal westward at the end of the 1830s" (5). However, this was a story not written by a Cherokee person, but rather a white man. Smithers describes how the play was very popular with white audiences.

The title of the first section of Kenimer's play is "The Forest Flower." This, in conjunction with the similar content (occasionally word-for-word), indicates that Kenimer also looked to Helen R. Rice's version for inspiration. Trahlyta is described as flirtatious (similar to Rice's version), but with a soft spot for Wahsega. Although she likes him, she is not ready yet to leave her father and her home, because she "loved the sound of the rushing waters falling over the great stones into the pool underneath" (3). The ending of the play is sympathetic, with Trahlyta dying because she could not reach her spring and Wahsega then falling to the ground in sorrow and dying not soon after out of misery because he knew he was to blame somehow. It takes a rather political twist in its final lines saying that, "the Great Spirit [...] mercifully protected them from the inevitable invasion of the pale face" (5). However, this sympathy is tied with a general disregard for history at the end of the play. As Huhndorf says of other depictions of Native history: "though regrettable, the Indians' fate, it seems, is inevitable in the face of white settlement" (4).

The ending of the "Forest Flower" section of the play also completely misrepresents the events of Removal, in an additional attempt to absolve white Georgians, saying:

The white man pressed on upon the Cherokee. One piece of land after another was sold until, as years passed by, the people, dispossessed of their lands, began to turn their faces toward the west in search of a peaceful resting place. Small bands of hunters crossed the Mississippi to explore the lands and hope for what might be beyond. [...] They lived as the Cherokee had lived years before, before they had ever known the white man or experienced the workings of his heart of stone. (34-35)

This implies a voluntary removal from the land, as opposed to a forced one. The move also is depicted as peaceful, rather than violent, and as though it was resolved quietly, and everyone

lived happily ever after. This ending bears a striking similarity in goal to that of *Unto These Hills*, which Perdue explains, “enabled a largely non-Indian audience to feel bad about a historical tragedy without having to confront its racial implications for either past or present. It separated Indians from a history of racial oppression by infusing the story with a sense of inevitability.” (25) *Thar’s Gold* similarly sets up the beginning of Dahlonega by comfortably explaining how it came into possession by white people, as though it was the natural order.

This non-violent reinterpretation of the Dahlonega origin story is also essential for an event such as Gold Rush Days, with the function of creating a happy, prideful view of history. Huhndorf explains that “fundamental contradictions in American identity and history – the tension between the ideal of a free and democratic nation and the reality of racial hierarchies, the discrepancy between the myth of peaceful expansion and the history of bloody conquest – reemerge again and again in the cultural imagination” (11). It would be impossible to sell the idea of a quaint mountain town history festival without first dismissing the unpleasantness of the past, and addressing the seeming contradiction. However, this does reveal that Cherokee people of the north Georgia area, though misremembered, cannot be forgotten. As Huhndorf points out, Native people have a presence that “haunted (and continues to haunt) the American cultural imagination” (23). In later chapters, I will show how this eventually manifests into a more literal haunting, as Trahlyta transforms fully into a ghost of Dahlonega.

The sympathizing with Cherokee people and minimizing of Removal is reminiscent of Huhndorf’s discussion of Asa Carter’s works²¹:

²¹ Huhndorf explains that Asa Carter was a white supremacist and Ku Klux Klan member who wrote *The Education of Little Tree* using the name Forrest Carter, in which he pretended to be a Cherokee person writing about his childhood. It was later revealed that this was a fictionalized account.

Agrarian Southerners and earth-embracing Indians [...] become allied politically because of their shared values as well as their shared fates. In addition, both ostensibly share a fundamentally ‘primitive’ nature, a quality that renders them distinctly from, and in some ways superior to, their more civilized and thus corrupt Northern counterparts. (139)

In *Thar’s Gold*, the audience is meant to identify with Trahlyta and Wahsega, the first Dahlenegans, victims of white (not specified Southern) progress.

The performance of the play and the ritual both signify a shift in attitude toward the story of Trahlyta. Removed from the violence of the 1800s, in the mid-twentieth century, there was an impulse to merge the Native and Southern experiences, but without acknowledging the reality of the unfortunate past. While Rice’s version showed an interest in memorializing the Native past (however inaccurately), the ritual and play show a desire to identify with Trahlyta and to claim her as part of Dahlenega. This is the time in which she becomes solidified as an emblem of Dahlenega’s history, which later evolves into her acting as a representative of the past; a way to access simultaneously the Native and Southern past.

5 CHAPTER 5: SONG AND BLOG, TRAHLYTA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

5.1 Trahlyta in Music

The story of Trahlyta has not been confined to prose, but it has also become a subject for music, in particular two songs which are quite different in style, but share some striking parallels. The first, named “Trahlyta and Wahsega” (2010), was written by a man from north Georgia named Barry Winfred Bailey, who says he has written “200 original songs” and whose style is described as “Native Americanna/Celtic/appalachia/Rap/Country Alternative/Rock [sic]” (BarryBaileyMusic). The second is just called “Trahlyta,” also from 2010 by an Atlanta band called Found Objects of Desire with tags such as “alternative,” “folklore,” “indie rock,”

“mystical,” “nature,” “spirit,” and “psychedelic.” Both seem invested in the conflation of “Native American” and “alternative” cultures, especially where Native American is representative of spirituality. They also both play with the idea of mixing elements from different genres (incidentally, this apparently includes “Native American” as a genre).

It may seem odd that an urban band with stylistic callbacks to ‘60’s and ‘70’s era psychedelic rock and a man from rural north Georgia with a single guitar and country music influences could be so similar, but both represent white counterculture. As residents of Georgia know, even though the distance between Atlanta and Dahlonega is not physically far, the cultural differences are often quite palpable. In *Playing Indian* Philip Deloria explores the idea of the Native American as representing white counterculture movements, even cultural movements that seem in contradiction with each other, he asserts that “whenever white Americans have confronted crises of identity, some of them have inevitably turned to Indians” (156). Interestingly, this has been an impulse that has spanned generations, as well as political and ideological groups. Deloria explains this attraction by saying that the contradiction of the Native American identity is the reason: “Indians could be both civilized and indigenous. They could critique modernity yet reap its benefits. They could revel in the creative pleasure of liberated meanings while still grasping for something fundamentally American” (157). Of course, the definition of what it means to be American and the specific identities people strive for can be quite different.

Bailey begins his video by first telling his version of the Trahlyta story, which he calls “an old Cherokee legend, an old Cherokee love story,” before he sings it. This is interesting because although he claims to have written hundreds of original songs, he does not mention adapting this story, though it is quite different from other versions. In Bailey’s song, Trahlyta is

hundreds of years old and Wahsega is a warrior from “the West” who is so desirous of her that he abducts her. For the only time we are given a somewhat concrete description of how far Wahsega took her– a plot hole in other versions that seem to imply they were quite close to the magical springs. The story also comes with a concrete moral that isn’t in any other version, which is that “if anyone places a misplaced stone on the grave he will live a little longer and he will be reminded of the anguish and tragedy of overpossessive love.” So rather than directly relating to the story of Native Americans in Dahlonega, overall the message is one that is universal.

From his other songs, it seems that Bailey likes to mix elements from different cultures, particularly Cherokee, other Native American tribes, as well as Celtic traditions and an appreciation for nature, particularly in north Georgia. He doesn’t mention specifically his acquisition of Cherokee knowledge, but he does say “hello” in Cherokee at the beginning of the video and is wearing a shirt for a Native American event of some type. He also has other videos on his YouTube page with the purpose of instructing people about Cherokee culture, including one titled “3 easy to sing traditional Cherokee songs” that he says are “traditional songs played on nontraditional instruments.” He also mentions that he learned these songs from Cherokee elders “at sunrise services in Cherokee, N.C.” Other videos show him at what appear to be gatherings of Native people in North Georgia²². It is unclear if Bailey is a member of the Cherokee Nation or has a Cherokee heritage or if he is just intensely interested in Cherokee culture.

Bailey’s uncertain status as a Native American person – perhaps even a member of the Cherokee Nation – raises an interesting question in regards to what roles actual Cherokee people

²² I wasn’t able to confirm whether or not these were gatherings of Native people, enthusiasts, or both.

play in this likely white-created myth.²³ From its very conception, it is possible that the story was inspired by one told by a Cherokee person, or that it was actually created by a Cherokee person, but this does not solve the issues with the story and its use. For example, both Amerson and Sorohan mention that Cherokee people from Cherokee, North Carolina came to the Gold Rush Days Festival. But the presence of actual Cherokee people doesn't fix the issues with the story itself, nor the way it was used. In this instance, I'd say their lack of involvement in developing the play or the festival speaks volumes about their exclusion from this story.

If Bailey is a Cherokee person and would make the argument that the story of Trahlyta is a Cherokee story, this really reveals how intertwined Native culture and Southern culture can be and the complexity involved in living them at the same time. Regardless, his interpretation of the Trahlyta story is problematic in that it reinforces the use of Cherokee people in order to achieve some greater purpose, as already done in earlier versions. While he is clearly interested in celebrating Cherokee culture, this story does not do that. Because of its problematic origins – its history, and its content – the story is still perpetuating negative stereotypes. However, it seems as though this perpetuation of stereotypes is done unintentionally. As I stated in the introduction, it is not the intention of this project to assign moral judgements to individuals, rather to expose larger problematic cultural constructs.

Similarly, the band Found Objects of Desire are interested in conflating different styles and cultures, but their intention seems to be mostly to do so for aesthetic reasons. They borrow from different forms of mythology, including an Aztec hymn. Likely their purpose isn't for truthfulness and authenticity as much as using the aesthetics of Native American culture, or what

²³ Unfortunately, Mr. Bailey passed away before the completion of this project, so I was unable to contact him about his perspective directly. His insight would have been a wonderful addition to this project, but I'm glad to have found his unique perspective on the Trahlyta story. From what I have found, he remains a beloved figure in the North Georgia area because of his commitment to his community.

they perceive to be Native American culture. Their version does reveal some interesting elements that come up again in blog posts, as will be discussed later in this chapter, where versions of the story have begun to serve as a spiritual experience for the writer. The song says that the grave is “such a peaceful place, I felt a warmth rising from below,” which shows how in a digital context the focus has shifted to the experience of the visitor.

The song also, perhaps more than other version so far, directly erases nineteenth-century Cherokee history by aligning Trahlyta (the stereotypical prehistorical Native American) with gold and the gold rush.²⁴ For example, the song says that “Trahlyta was a Georgia girl in a goldmine” and “there's nothing Fancy about this Gap/nothing Blue about this Ridge /just gold in the water just gold in the spring that'll make me young again/just gold in the spring that'll set things real again.” Despite the Trahlyta story typically being placed in “prehistory”²⁵ and the Gold Rush happening in the nineteenth century, the song makes it seem as though the two (gold and Trahlyta) were significant in tandem. At the very least, historically, Trahlyta would not have qualified as a “Georgia girl.” These lyrics depict Native people as mystic figures of prehistory (magical, but also uncivilized) all the way up to the 1800s, a portrayal that erases actual Cherokee history.

5.2 The Pilgrimage in Blog Form

In the 2010s, Trahlyta also became a figure of interest for internet blogs; her gravesite became a site of interest for a type of spiritual pilgrimage. These pilgrimages to the Stonepile seem to be a way for bloggers to try and access what they perceive to be authenticity. All of these blogs identify the Stonepile Gap as spiritual, and the bloggers claim that they felt a

²⁴ This will come up again when discussing the novel *Auraria* by Tim Westover.

²⁵ Almost all the previous versions give an indication that Trahlyta lived pre-contact.

connection with Trahlyta, and as such the land, when visiting. This is similar to Huhndorf's analysis of the popularity of *Dances with Wolves* among white audiences. Huhndorf argues that *Dances with Wolves* "starkly evokes the conquest of Native America, the precondition of the birth of the white nation, only to assuage the guilt stemming from that painful history" (4). Similarly, the visitor to the Stonepile Gap can feel a connection with the "Native experience"²⁶ by identifying with Trahlyta, and in doing so they can place themselves in the position of the victim, rather than the victimizer.

While it seems as though these people are trying to identify with and even memorialize Native beliefs and history, the problem lies in the fact that they are really only interested in Native culture as it fulfills their own expectations. The tone of these blog posts shows features that Huhndorf identifies as common among white counterculture attempts to relate to the Native experience, particularly "the quest for an alternative spirituality to accomplish personal growth [...] although again this particular concern with personal growth finds no place in Native traditions" (165). Huhndorf correctly identifies that the use of Native culture (more often *perceived* Native culture) as a gateway to fulfill personal spiritual goals, rather than to understand it from a Native perspective, is not uncommon among white Americans.

However, in the South there is another layer of complexity to this impulse found elsewhere. Melanie Taylor argues that, "When modern southerners acknowledge the region's Native roots, they generally do so to validate their own residency there in critical moments of regional rehabilitation" (28). The focus of these blogs is solely individual spiritual progression through authenticity, an endeavor that is definitively Anglo-American, but they also function as a way for white Southerners to mentally secure their place.

²⁶ Or, what they perceive the Native experience to be.

Although there are many examples of the Stonepile Gap pilgrimage, three proved to be the most interesting and comprehensible: "That Rebel with a Blog," "Authentica Classics," and "Appalachian Woman." Just from the titles of the blogs, it seems that the authors are interested in southernness and authenticity, two things that Trahlyta represents to them. The entry for "That Rebel with a Blog" is named "Call Me Trahlyta," showing a direct desire to connect with Trahlyta. The blog post recounts the story but focuses mainly on the feelings of the writer and her spiritual experience while visiting the gravesite. She says that it "was no coincidence," that her work took her to visit the area, as though there is some greater spiritual work at play. She also says that she left two stones and that doing so made her feel different. She ends with a reflection on the experience in order to contextualize it for her own life, saying: "'What do Trahlyta's grave and the Blue Ridge Mountains have to do with me being depressed and unable to write? I feel Trahlyta's suffering.'" So for her, the story is representative of a greater suffering beyond the individual experience, and visiting the grave was cathartic.

The "Appalachian Woman" post is titled "Native American Heritage Day," with the major topic being paying homage to Native American history. The author explains, "With it being Thanksgiving week and all, the Native Americans have been on my mind a lot. I'm a European mutt with light blue eyes and pasty white skin, so I make no claims to the culture but it's one that has always interested me." She also mentions Removal and how terrible it was, but chooses Trahlyta to focus on because she, "much like me, loved these gorgeous North Georgia mountains." So once again, the experiences of the Cherokee people are used as a type of overall message for all people. The conflation of Trahlyta with Removal once again seems to erase nineteenth century Cherokee history. This author too expresses how spiritual the experience of visiting the grave was, saying "I stood in this dangerous intersection with only a foot or two

between me and the cars driving by, I had a sense of peace and calm come over me. Maybe it's the fact that I too love these North Georgia mountains so much, but I felt Trahlyta's presence that day."

This account from the "Appalachian Woman" blog also introduces a new element of the Trahlyta story that doesn't appear before her journey onto the Internet: a curse. The "Appalachian Woman" says that "Twice over the years, the Highway Department has tried to move Trahlyta's grave from its precarious location, and in both attempts someone was killed while moving the pile. They decided to leave it be, and so Trahlyta remains in her final resting place in the mountains she loved so dearly." It is hard (likely impossible) to identify where this addition to the Trahlyta story originated, but there don't seem to be any records indicating this is true. Regardless, it seems to be a contemporary manifestation of the same anxiety that got the grave a marker in the first place, just expressed differently. It seems like the logical next step in a world that is at least beginning to understand Native American tragedies on a larger scale, and that Native American people do actually still exist (and that previous interpretations of history might be wrong). White Americans are still dealing with the guilt as they become even partially aware that Native American issues still exist. As this author shows, white Americans are starting, on a larger scale, to be aware of issues with Columbus, with Thanksgiving, and perhaps not just feelings bad, but actually feeling like the violence that happened was wrong (not unfortunate and inevitable).

This knowledge, combined with fear, guilt, and misunderstanding, has manifested into a warning of the physical dangers associated with the grave. As newer generations come to terms with guilt, the consequences become more severe. In past versions, like the one on the historical marker, putting a stone on the grave could give you good luck, and was an acknowledgement of

Native people, but in a way that ultimately benefited white Dahlonégans (they got instant gratification for their good deed!). Now, there are consequences; remove at your own risk. The Stonepile Gap is untouchable, immovable, on pain of death. The ghost of Trahlyta has, at the same time, become more accessible and more dangerous.

The "Authentica Classics" blog similarly enforces and perpetuates the idea of the powerful and potentially malevolent ghost of Trahlyta. The author says that people have tried to remove the grave and died, but "passersby [who] pay their respects [...] benefit from her gift of good fortune!" This means that engaging in the ritual is not only a cathartic personal spiritual experience, but that the reason for doing it is to be respectful, presumably of the dangerous ghost haunting it. Once again, the spirituality of the place is open to all visitors, a universal experience: "Trahlyta's spirit is shared by all who stop...all who leave a piece of themselves."

The visitation of the grave site is not only an attempt to find individual spiritual fulfillment, but seems to be driven by a need to participate in a form of mourning and/or paying respects. Taylor examines not only the idea of mourning, but of universal, rather than individual, mourning. She questions why certain figures (her example is Princess Diana) necessitate or attract large-scale mourning, while others do not. Taylor talks about the public need to mourn and re-mourn Princess Diana, saying that "the prescribed, twice-behaved nature of funerals also has another, ritual function. The formal handling of painful or dangerous transitions, or passings, helps regulate the expenditure of emotion. Funerals have long served to channel and control grief" (140). Visiting Trahlyta and placing a stone on her grave functions as a way of controlling grief at the loss of Native people, simultaneously addressing the guilt intertwined with that grief.

However, the issue with Trahlyta is that she does not really represent the Native past of Dahlonéga, but the version of it that is accessible to current visitors. She's the Native history that

people like, she's interesting, magical, and relatable. Like Taylor's description of Diana's death, that it "shunned particularism, stressing that this death was also about everything and everyone," Trahlyta has become a figure greater than a single person; she is an icon representing an idealized image (147). The grave makes the mourning process available for all to visit, to document, to take part in. In this way, Trahlyta becomes not just a Cherokee princess, but is open to mourning from everyone.

Through the songs and the blog posts, it becomes clear that Trahlyta has been accepted as an icon of Dahlonega. Not only is she used by residents and locals, but those outside of Dahlonega as well, transplants and people wanting to get to know Dahlonega better. At this point, she became an assumed member of the Dahlonega mythological collective. She even became a strong enough character to become part of a novel by a non-local writer wanting to capture the essence of the area.

6 CHAPTER 6: THE NOVEL, THE GHOST OF TRAHLYTA

The lengthiest incarnation of Trahlyta is Tim Westover's 2012 *Auraria: A Novel*. In this work, Westover creates a story weaving fantasy and history that takes place in Dahlonega's early rival town, Auraria. However, since Auraria is no longer a functioning populated town, much of the folklore associated with the area comes from Dahlonega. One of the main characters of this book is Trahlyta, the impish ghost of an Indian girl. Despite the general dismissal of the Cherokee Indian Princess trope today, this Trahlyta introduces herself gladly as a princess of the land. One element that remains, in the absence of any of her love story/abduction, is her connection with the land. Westover admits to the heavy fictionalization of his story, and doesn't claim to be creating a historically accurate novel; in fact he takes elements from many different historical and mythological places to blend for his story. He even admits to this in the end, and is

one of the few to do so in writing, to not entirely believing in the authenticity of the grave or the story: “according to archaeologists and historians, it’s unlikely that the cairn marks a burial site – it’s only a souvenir from an earlier era of tourism.” (“A Note on Sources”). I personally haven’t found any sources that outright say there is no one buried there, but neither does there seem to be information confirming there is.

Westover published his novel based on researching the area, and one of the “artifacts” of the area he chose to focus on was Trahlyta. Westover is not a Dahlonega local, but he spent years reading and researching the folklore and history of the area. In one interview he mentions committing two years’ time to doing the proper research from the story. Westover mixes folklore and history of the Lumpkin County area, as well as characteristics from other areas of the South, such as south Georgia and North Carolina. In an article for *Deep South Magazine* he says that, “these fantastic stories and bits of history are not my imaginings, but my performance is recombining them into a particular piece” (Bass).

Auraria follows the story of outsider John Holtzclaw as he navigates the mysterious ex-mining boom town of Auraria, in Lumpkin County. Sent there by his employer Shadburn to buy all the land he can for unknown reasons, Holtzclaw meets human and non-human residents of the town. One Auraria local in particular is Princess Trahlyta, a water spirit who takes a personal interest in Holtzclaw’s mission. Throughout the story Holtzclaw tries to find his way among both natural and supernatural obstacles with Trahlyta as occasionally his ally, occasionally his opponent as the story progresses, but always watching him closely.

In the beginning of the text, Holtzclaw stumbles through the woods to try and find his way to the town of Auraria. As he walks, with no knowledge of the landscape, he is bitten by what he believes to be a snake. He tries to find shelter or water of some sort and magically before

him appears a sign which says, “Water.” As he soaks his injury, “he glanced again at the island and started in surprise. A girl was perched there, her bare feet submerged and splashing in the glassy water” (Westover 25). Trahlyta first appears to him as the guardian of a small body of water, presumably to heal him, likely in reference to the magical springs from the original legend. Trahlyta, the savvy native of the land, educates Holtzclaw (as she does many times thereafter), in this particular instance that his wound is not a bite at all, but a sprain. In this introduction, Westover establishes Trahlyta as a “true native” of the area (noticeably with a lowercase “n”).

Having presented Trahlyta and retaining very specific parts of her character, Westover then goes into a physical description:

She was young— Holtzclaw took her for fifteen or sixteen. The skin was tight on her face, especially around her eyes and brow. Her eyes were set deep, her cheekbones were strong; her eyes— grey? blue? A long curtain of black hair streaked with silver uncharacteristic for her youth, fell down her back. (Westover 27)

In this description he does not clearly state her race, although he gives some markers of stereotypical Native American physical traits, such as high cheekbones, deep set eyes, and long, dark hair. While many versions of the story don’t specify either what age she is (old) or what she appeared to be (young), he makes a point to mention that she is a young teenager. However, he does include the streaks of grey in her hair, a nod to those familiar to the story who are aware of her immortality that she is likely much older than she appears.

He also retains her title as princess, with Trahlyta herself mentioning specifically that “Princess isn’t my name, it’s my title” (27). When Holtzclaw questions her as to what exactly she is princess of, she states, “this spring and the others like it [...] to be princess doesn’t mean to

own it” (27). So while Westover’s description of Trahlyta doesn’t explicitly mention her as a Native American, he retains some of the stereotypes of Native Americans used in other versions of the story. Cherokee people have never had “princesses,” but the trope of the Cherokee princess (often mentioned as an ancestor) has become a trope of many Anglo-American folklore traditions. This element could have been easily dismissed part of Westover’s story, given the knowledge of this falsity in representations of Native Americans, but he chose to keep it and point it out. Perhaps this was his way of retaining the authentic Dahlonaga elements of the story.

When Trahlyta encounters Holtzclaw for the second time, he doesn’t notice her because “she has looked like part of the landscape” (35). When Holtzclaw expresses surprise at seeing her again, she tells him they are very close to where they first encountered one another. When he is in disbelief (he thinks he has traveled many miles, but really he was wandering in circles), she reminds him, “I’m the native [...] and you’re the visitor” (36). Once again, she functions on the surface as the lowercase “n,” general, all-purpose native.

One of the most extreme deviations from other versions of the story is the absence of both familial and romantic relationships for Trahlyta, both of which are vital to other versions. When Holtzclaw questions a local of Auraria, Abigail, she says, “I don’t think she’s anyone’s daughter,” in contrast to other versions where being a daughter of a chief was a defining characteristic (71). Additionally Wahsega doesn’t appear at all in the novel, giving the impression that Trahlyta has no real background, or perhaps not a human background. Trahlyta is referred to many times as a spirit, especially a local spirit, and it may be that the intent is to not establish her as a human at all. At the very least she would be some type of supernatural human, given that her immortality is still intact in this version. When Abigail tells Holtzclaw how she

and Trahlyta are acquainted, she tells him that they played together when Abigail was young, indicating that at the very least Trahlyta hasn't aged over a normal lifetime.

Trahlyta in Westover's novel serves a dual purpose as both the natural and the supernatural. She performs supernatural acts, such as when she "sauntered across the flowing face of the water as though it were a paved pathway" (Westover 70). She indicates that her goal is to remove all of the gold from Auraria, since the gold has ruined the town and her employers (mysterious figures called moon maidens) want it gone. Despite this, however, she emphasizes that there is a natural order: "you cannot tell the rain to fall upwards into the sky" (Westover 101). Although she is able to manipulate nature to some extent, she cannot go against it.

One of the clearest differences between Westover's novel and all other uses of the story is the location. Trahlyta's physical position in Dahlenega specifically is vital to other versions of the story, and yet Westover chose to put her in Auraria. This seems to be because of his dedication to the town of Auraria first, rather than a focus on any of the specific folklore he used. In an article written for *Real South Magazine*, he says of his choice to write about Auraria, "I couldn't visit a place like this [current-day Auraria] and not feel inspired. I love what it once was, even more what it is. [...] I came to Auraria— and wrote a novel about Auraria— because it's almost, but not quite, forgotten" ("The Real Auraria" 17). What Westover is referencing in this passage is that all that remains of Auraria now is a few dilapidated buildings, as opposed to the still bustling, and moreover growing, town of Dahlenega. Of course for an author trying to maximize the air of mystery and the supernatural, a ghost town would make a much better setting than a live one.

Westover does pay homage to the original tale near the end of the novel, once the Queen of the Mountains (borrowing the name from a real resort of the area) is opened on Lake Trahlyta

(also named after a real place in Vogel State Park). Like historical visitors to the Queen of the Mountains, the tourists in the book are fascinated by local quirks and folklore. In this, Westover places a “cairn of white stones” as the destination for post-meal constitutionals (252). When visitors arrive at this rock pile near a spring, they are greeted by Princess Trahlyta telling a story very similar to the original Trahlyta tale, an act that seems to blend Westover’s interpretation and the more “traditional” tale.

However, Trahlyta’s story here is not exactly the same as the historical marker or the story written by Rice. Although more similar than his prior use of the character, there is still deviation. Like Princess Trahlyta in Westover’s novel, the main character in the story Princess Trahlyta tells is ageless and raceless: “she saw many ages of the world from within the waters of her spring. Mountains grew from pebbles to mighty peaks to pebbles again. The mighty creatures that once lumbered across the land shrank into the tiny animals we know today” (253). From then on the story continues with a warrior falling in love with her and taking her away, which leads her to age. It ends, as the others do, with her death and the formation of a pile of stones.

At this point, Westover begins to play with irony. Although the character telling the story is Trahlyta and can generally be accepted to be from local folklore source material, the falseness of the story she tells is made evident:

It was not really a grave. The white stones were chipped fragments of marble, left over from the bathroom in Shadburn’s suite. Shadburn conceived of the idea of a grave site as a walking destination memento mori. Holtzclaw wanted to place it above the waterfall, thinking that the combination of sights— the grave, the waterfall, the spring— would make a more attractive whole. Princess Trahlyta concocted the backstory on her own and, in her telling and retelling, made the canonical version (255).

It is clear that Holtzclaw is positing that the purpose of the grave is purely commercial, a sentiment reflected by Westover at the end of the book in the section “A Note on Sources:” “according to archaeologists and historians, it’s unlikely that the cairn marks a burial site – it’s only a souvenir from an earlier era of tourism” (384). However, perhaps this is not pure cynicism on Westover’s part. Trahlyta chooses to tell her own (fake) story, but she herself is real. Perhaps there is a statement here about the complexity of authenticity, especially with a story like this. The origin of the story (that it is Cherokee and that it is magical) may not be real or true, but the significance to the town is and perhaps that is what matters.

More irony occurs when the story comes to a close. Holtzclaw has flooded the town and washed away the gold, both a remedy to the gold-sickness that enveloped the town and Trahlyta’s problems. Once this is done and the tourist-attracting hotel is destroyed, he dismantles the white cairn of stone: “of all the many loose ends he and Shadburn were leaving, the cairn troubled Holtzclaw the most. Future travelers may take it for a meaningful monument and give it undue reverence” (368). Holtzclaw then once again highlights the lack of authenticity of the place, when Abigail warns him about moving the stone, to which he replies, “We said it was bad luck. We invented that” (368). This seems to be a nod to those aware of the potential falsity of the site that remains today.

Westover’s novel, intentionally or unintentionally, manifests the anxieties surrounding the legacy of Trahlyta in a way that has been done frequently in white American literature. Renée Bergland in *The National Uncanny* (2002) describes how “for more than three hundred years, American literature has been haunted by ghostly Indians” (1). Although Trahlyta is directly described as a water spirit, this language, according to Bergland, is all part of the same mindset: “They call Indians demons, apparitions, shapes, specters, phantoms, or ghosts. They

insist that Indians are able to appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously, and also that they are ultimately doomed to vanish. Most often, they describe Indians as absent or dead” (1). It does seem as though Westover is aware that in the Dahlenegan imagination, the only Cherokee person is a dead one.

However, while he plays with this idea in his novel, he doesn’t address it fully. Trahlyta may be powerful, but she’s still not alive and she still fulfills her stereotype as being “one with the land.” She is the access point for Holtzclaw to achieve native/Native status in the community. Why does this matter? Bergland says that “when we focus on Indian ghosts, we risk forgetting the fact that many survived” (3). By remembering Trahlyta as a ghost, the novel feeds into the narrative that Native people are no longer there, that they simply function in the imagination/nightmares/dreams of the community. As Bergland argues, “Although Native Americans can be said to have taken possession of the American imagination, this means that they have vanished into the minds of those who have dispossessed them” (3). Though it may seem empowering for Trahlyta to be an active character and spirit, she’s still not part of the physical land, but the imagined and magical.

Bergland begins her conclusion by saying that “Spectral Indians appear everywhere in our national literature. They haunt eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth- century poems and novels” (159). Clearly, this haunting has continued into the twenty-first century as well, not just in Westover’s novel, or just in literature, but also in the collective imagination of Dahlenega’s residents.

7 CHAPTER 7: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF TRAHLYTA

7.1 The Present

Today, the story of Trahlyta is still alive, vibrant, and ever growing. Along with the play, the songs, the blog posts, the novel, the short story, the ritual, and the historical marker is a number of other forms in which the Trahlyta story perpetuates. The pile of stones marking the grave is still standing, steadfast at the intersection of two highways. Although passersby might not strictly believe in the same way they used to, Trahlyta still plays an important role. According to local historian Anne Dismukes Amerson, Trahlyta's story is one of the most popular choices for the local 8th grade writing contest.

As noted by Amerson, "Trahlyta's name has been immortalized through the legend [and] visitors come from miles around to go swimming and boating at Lake Trahlyta located inside the Vogel State Park in the northern reaches of the county. The name of Wahsega has also been preserved for posterity. Today both a road and a camp bear his name" (*"I Remember Dahlonge"* Volume 3 136). The camp referenced here is a 4-H Center which still functions today, providing "environmental and outdoor education opportunities during the school year and camping experiences to youth during the summer" ("Historical Information").

Interestingly, the camp does not seem to be aware (as least as stated on the website) of the origin of the name Wahsega in regards to the Trahlyta legend. Their explanation is from *The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas Bulletin # 67: May 16, 1998* which states:

The name "Wahsega" doesn't seem to be in Krakow's 1994 book on Georgia place names, [...] it might be from Cherokee or one of the other Indian languages that were originally spoken in Georgia. However, it's also possible that it was transferred from the town of

Watseka, Illinois, with a change in spelling. In fact the Illinois name has been applied to places in several other states. Supposedly Watseka was originally the name of a Potawatomi Indian woman, born in Illinois around 1810, and she in turn was named after the heroine of a Potawatomi legend. The word may mean something like "beautiful woman" ("Historical Information.")

It seems odd that a camp so close in proximity to the Stonepile Gap would omit (willingly or not) the very obvious origin of the name in regards to Dahlonega history.

Dahlonigans have also used her name for more than just place names. Two major examples of this are the *Stonepile Writers' Anthology*, a collection of creative written pieces from inhabitants of north Georgia, and the Dahlonega chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which is named after Trahlyta herself. Apparently, this is a tradition among chapters of the DAR, as Theda Perdue explains:

The recovered memory of removal emerged at the end of the nineteenth century from a growing public interest in history and, among southerners, the Lost Cause. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), founded in 1890, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, founded in 1894, were products of this movement. Reflecting a renewed interest in the native past, a number of DAR chapters took Indian names. (22)

Although there doesn't appear to be clear information on when exactly this chapter was founded, they chose the name Trahlyta. Of all of the women and men who lived in the north Georgia area, the one who was remembered and memorialized was Trahlyta, a woman who was likely never real, and possibly never even part of Cherokee mythology. This shows how, even in a contemporary sense, Dahlonigans are more interested in the "fun" parts of their Native heritage, the ones that entertain and solidify their supremacy.

7.2 The Future

After examining the past and present of Trahlyta, it is important to also think about her future. I believe that the people of Dahlonga are ready to know the full historical background of her and that this is a great opportunity for a greater understanding of the past. People I spoke to when conducting research for this project were fascinated, curious to hear what I had found, to know if the legend was “real.” As shown by the length of this project, that is an inquiry that takes pages and pages to answer fully. Of the complexity in defining “real” in the context of the South, Romine says that “by real South, I refer to something more like the ‘real’/’South’: a set of anxious, transient, even artificial intersections, sutures, or common surfaces between two concepts that are themselves remarkably fluid” (2-3). Romine captures the difficulty of defining something as people are living it and which is changed by the very nature of defining it, such as “realness” or the “South.” Ultimately, in Trahlyta’s case the answer to the question of authenticity/realness is less important than looking ahead.

When analyzing the filming of “The Couple in a Cage” Taylor says that “bringing the spectator into the frame, making people see themselves as implicated in these colonial fantasies, is what the performance and the video were all about” (Taylor 72). That is, in a sense, a huge part of this project: to observe the observers, to understand and illuminate the position of those who visit, perform, and write about Trahlyta; to understand their role in perpetuating and creating Trahlyta, as well as to add them to the archive as objects of examination. Similarly to the video, it is important to think about the implications of creating specimens. Is the purpose of this to blame? To understand? To absolve? Is there anything to be gained in objectifying, or as Taylor puts it, “turning spectators into specimens?” (78). Striving to blame or to absolve seems overly simplistic, and yet settling only to observe doesn’t do enough to enact change.

I wanted to create an artifact that analyzes the spectators (and creators) in order to both reflect on the process of objectification and to bring awareness of these circumstances. To eliminate the last 100+ years of art and folklore from this area would be a problematic endeavor. I choose instead to understand it as best I can: to look at the consequences and see where we can go from here. I believe that in future Native studies of the area, subjects like this must be examined, otherwise we are doing a disservice to the legacy of the area and to Native people. To not look at the use of the Trahlyta story and honestly evaluate the motivations is egregious in the same way as pretending that Removal didn't happen.

To realize that this story is not Cherokee in origin and to label it as problematic and eliminate it is not the correct decision. In order to move forward and understand the path towards progress, the role that stories like Trahlyta play must be acknowledged. However, it is equally important to actually commit to moving forward. Recognizing the problematic elements of the story and feeling absolved are an incomplete process. This is why the historical marker does not successfully and usefully preserve history; it makes visitors feel absolved without having acknowledged past and present Native issues.

This story has been used to deal with the gap that many white Dahlonigans feel when they reflect on their history and see that (in their perception) Native people are no longer there. At its core, this impulse to look for answers is good. It means that there is a drive there to fix things, to explain, to understand. The way that Trahlyta has been used in many ways minimizes and mythologizes Cherokee history in the area, but this doesn't have to be the case. Studying the progress of a story like this can reveal deeper emotions of guilt, confusion, and loss.

Theda Perdue concludes "The Legacy of Indian Removal" by saying:

Indians provide us with an opportunity to examine different experiences and perspectives in the history of the South, ones that do not follow the standard narrative but instead promise both to challenge and to enrich it. It is a legacy of Indian removal that I encourage all Southern historians to acknowledge. (36)

This applies directly to the story of Trahlyta, in this case not just the legend itself, but the story of the story. Getting to know Trahlyta and her relationship with Dahlonega can give not just scholars, but the people of Dahlonega a richer understanding of the area's history.

The Native and the Southern as incarnated in Trahlyta are intertwined, as I said at the beginning of this project. It is not my place, or anyone else's, to attempt to separate them. To do so would not only be impossible, but unethical. Trahlyta's place as a Native Southern figure and artifact should be embraced, but also should be acknowledged for what it is. Understanding Trahlyta is a way to begin to understand these two things – the South and the Native – that are so often depicted as separate. She can be a figure to combat the erasure that she currently represents, by offering a way to understand the past and move on into the future.

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