



An indigenous man lies dead, his axe abandoned at his side. A soldier in union blue grips his sword nearby. Another two men are in a bloody struggle — a white settler’s knife to an indigenous man’s throat. This postcard recreates a scene out of the history of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. It depicts white settlers attacking Cherokee Indians as part of the forced removal they encountered during the colonisation of America. But all of the actors in this scene are white. The actors portraying Cherokee tribesmen are in wigs and body paint.

American postcards have a history of having atrocities printed on them. In the Southern States, there has been a long tradition of printing lynchings — extrajudicial murders usually committed by a mob fueled by racial hatred — on “collector’s postcards” to be sold as memorabilia or at a profit. These postcards only serve one purpose — to further cement white supremacist culture in America.

But, this postcard is different however, as the scene depicted is part of a performance used to turn a profit for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

This scene is part of the outdoor play *Unto These Hills*, which is one of the largest outdoor historical dramas in the United States, and has — for decades — defined how millions of Americans see the Cherokee people. But this play was originally written by a white man, primarily for a white American audience.

In the late 40s, the Western North Carolina Communities development organization, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians were looking for ways to economically develop their home region in the Smoky Mountains, which is in western North Carolina. Inspired by other outdoor plays such as *The Lost Colony* about Roanoke, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians commissioned Kermit Hunter, a University of North Carolina grad student to write an outdoor play about the Cherokee. The play follows important Cherokee figures from various scenes throughout the tribe's history, from their first contact with Spanish Conquistadors, to the discovery of gold on their lands that led to white settlers illegally occupying said land, until the forced removal of thousands of people along the Trail of Tears under Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal act.

The play written by Kermit Hunter was riddled with historical inaccuracies and cultural misrepresentations as Hunter did little to actually research Cherokee culture. Every indigenous character talked in the third person — a harmful stereotype towards indigenous people. The actors who played Cherokee people were dressed and danced as Great Plains Indians, not actual Cherokees. The *Eagle Dance*, an audience favourite, bears little resemblance to the traditional dance the tribe did. Hunter portrays the Cherokee sympathetically, but his characters are little more than stereotypes of “the noble savage”. The play rarely involved any Cherokee people in its production, despite being directly about their history. It lacked any of the historical complexity that surrounded these events. This went on for decades unchanged.

What needed to change?

In 2006, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians decided to hire Hanay Geiogamah, a Kiowa Indian and the founder of the American Indian Dance Theatre, to revise and rewrite the script and address these problems. Geiogamah did so, working with historians and Cherokee tribespeople to better represent the stories told and get more Cherokee people involved in acting and producing the show. The changes included more interpretive, yet accurate dances to tell the story of the tribe, leaving out the stereotypes, and rewriting some characters to better portray the historical complexities of the events the play follows. It seemed that Native Peoples were finally able to tell their own stories in a way that seemed to be their own.

But this stirred up controversy with white Americans, who demanded to keep the play as it had always been — even if it ignored the actual history of the Cherokee people and the atrocities that they faced.

Many of these critics took to lambasting the play on review websites, expressing their outrage that “history was being rewritten”. White Americans feel the need to be heavily involved with how we tell our national history — particularly our whitewashed and sterilised view on American history — and that this history should be used to build “national pride”. This is still seen today throughout the country and is a controversial subject for many, especially within the realms of education and schools. This feeling of dictating history stems mostly from blind American nationalism and white supremacy, whether intentional or not. Many of the critics blasting Geiogamah’s rewritten play failed to understand their and their ancestor’s involvement in the history being told, and that the tribe’s history isn’t for them to dictate.

Do you know your own history?

Like, *your* history. Not your nation's or people's history.

Now, Americans have an obsession with their genealogy.

Since the United States is a country founded off of colonialism and had the majority of its population immigrate there, many Americans feel a sense of rootlessness. For Black Americans, this is because they were forcibly taken from their ancestral lands and then were blocked from their own history. For many white Americans, it is mainly out of a sense of curiosity about where their ancestors emigrated from. However, white American's interest in genealogy has much more vile origins — to prove their nativism; that they're "true" Americans.

This interest stems primarily from colonisation, the Civil War, and American Manifest Destiny: it was a way for white settlers to enforce hierarchies based on race and class. Those descended from elite colonial families used genealogy to justify and increase their high social standing. Whites in the wake of the Civil War, from both the North and the South, used genealogy to bind together nationalism, ancestor worship, and white supremacy into American society which created detrimental hierarchies that are still affecting it today. This all had devastating social, economic, and political effects on people of colour and their descendants.

Similarly, as it is depicted in *Unto These Hills*, the Cherokee people had fiercely resisted federal efforts to remove them in the 1820s and 30s. The Southern Separatists — the people who had fought for their right to self-governance in order to preserve the institution of slavery during the Civil War — they admired the Cherokee resistance. This romanticisation suddenly led to many white Southerners claiming descent from a "Cherokee great-grandmother" in the Antebellum South, often stating that they descended from a

“Cherokee Princess” – which is strange because no such position exists in the tribe’s social structure.

Do I know my own history?

I started researching this myth of descent from a Cherokee Princess because it reminded me of my own situation: for years, we have heard claims of there being a Cherokee Relative from my father's biological family. We have never been able to verify this, through genealogy, and even with DNA tests — where Indigenous DNA can't always be identified, even if there is a direct ancestor. When I discovered that many Antebellum Southerners had pretended to be related to a Cherokee ancestor, I worried that my Alabama-dwelling extended family may have been among them. Maybe, there never was any Cherokee blood in my family, and I may never know the truth.

Native Tribes were subject to federally-defined blood quantum after Indian Removal. These were guidelines that dictated how much Indigenous blood needed to be within a person to determine their identity in order to be federally recognised. These numbers were usually arbitrary, and would automatically exclude anyone who was seen to have any Black blood. This quantum changed often, and determined whether or not Indigenous Americans could get back their land which had been stolen by white settlers, who had gotten it for free. This system was originally used to limit the citizenship of Indigenous people, although some tribes still use similar systems to determine who to let in.

As for the Cherokee, you can gain tribal citizenship if you can prove ancestry to someone originally on the Dawes Roll — a rollcall of everyone who was a part of the “Five Civilised Tribes” that were forcibly moved to what is now Oklahoma: the Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole, Creek, and Chickasaw Tribes.

Today, more Americans claim descent from at least one Cherokee ancestor than any other Native American group. Like me, however, many of them can't prove relation to anyone on the Dawes Roll.

Why
do we keep taking?

By claiming a royal Cherokee ancestor, as my own family might have done, white Southerners had legitimised the antiquity of their "native-born" status as true sons and daughters of the South and America. They used this to justify rebelling against the federal government, as they imagined the Cherokee had done. They claimed this history and ancestry for their own advantage and did nothing to support the Indigenous People whose lands had been taken — they did just the opposite, in fact. These white settlers were able to maintain their whiteness while simultaneously absolving themselves and their descendants from any part that they played in Indian Removal, or the colonising of Indigenous People's lands.

This imagined Cherokee descent lives on in American families — millions of Americans claim a Cherokee ancestor, which would make them the most populous tribe in the country. The reality is that the population of the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes is only around 345,000 people. White Americans who claimed ownership over the Cherokee identity used this as a way to claim American-ness, absolve themselves of the crimes that were committed against Indigenous people across American history, and use both identities to dictate which histories we tell as a country.

So, who's really rewriting history here?

This isn't our story to own or to write.

In 2010, for the first time, Linda Squirrel, a Cherokee and Program Specialist for the Cherokee Historical Association, rewrote the script for *Unto These Hills* and more Cherokee people have gotten involved with the play's production as performers and showrunners. Although that again changed in 2017, when the script was reverted to a slightly rewritten version of Kermit Hunter's play with some historical inaccuracies fixed, and stereotypes removed. This just shows that this progress is never linear and that communities are still working out what is the best way to tell their own history. What remains now is for white Americans to learn to listen.