

## ESSAY

# Illegible Histories, Invisible Movements: Indigenous Refusal in Blake Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears*

GABRIELLA FRIEDMAN

GABRIELLA FRIEDMAN is a Mellon Post-doctoral Fellow at Skidmore College. Her work has appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *American Literature*, and other venues. This essay emerged from her current book project on how Black and Indigenous speculative fiction reconfigures the historical novel.

In 2016, HBO's science fiction drama *Westworld* premiered to widespread acclaim. The TV series, based on the 1973 film written and directed by Michael Crichton, revolves around an amusement park filled with android "hosts" built to entertain wealthy humans by allowing these humans to murder, rape, and otherwise brutalize the androids as part of a "Wild West" adventure. The show's central plotline involves the hosts discovering and grappling with their sentience. Alongside other staples of American westerns, such as cowboys, outlaws, and madams, the *Westworld* park includes a fictional Native American tribe called the Ghost Nation. In season one, the show portrays the Ghost Nation stereotypically as a mass of fierce savages, faces covered in war paint and stamped with bloody handprints. In *Westworld's* second season, the plot thickens: an episode called "Kiksuya"—written mostly in Lakota, the language that the Ghost Nation was programmed to speak—focuses on the tribal leader Akecheta, revealing a moving backstory and rich interiority. The episode has been commended for its critique of "the sweep of American history," during which white settlers have justified brutality against Native people and other racialized groups by "mak[ing] them seem less human" (Gilbert). "Kiksuya" challenges hegemonic narratives that depict Native Americans with simplistic clichés, whether as ferocious warriors or as spiritually enlightened beings. Critics have also praised the showrunners for casting the Hunkpapa Lakota actor Zahn McClarnon as Akecheta and for hiring the Oglala Lakota

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language and cultural consultants Larry Pourier and Cordelia White Elk (Roberts).

“Kiksuya” calls attention to the limits of liberal historical narratives that are rooted in recognition and inclusion. While “Kiksuya” appears to critique how settlers have represented Indigenous people, the episode features no actual Indigenous characters—only simulations like Akecheta, a member of a fictional tribe invented by a white man named Robert Ford, the creator of the Westworld park. Moreover, Akecheta’s story quickly becomes absorbed into *Westworld*’s existential musings and robot uprising plot.<sup>1</sup> In other words, *Westworld* seeks to make Native people visible—literally through the hiring of a Lakota actor and narratively through its critique of hegemonic US history—but it is not invested in decolonization. Significantly, the showrunners’ focus on cultural sensitivity does not prevent the show from using consumable images of Indigenous people to power its narrative—a narrative driven by the desires of non-Indigenous characters and intended for a primarily non-Indigenous viewership. *Westworld*’s settler capitalist imperative, however, is packaged as a progressive critique and authenticated by the presence of Indigenous actors and consultants.

*Westworld* exemplifies a common problem of narratives about Indigenous people created by settlers or primarily for settler audiences. It is all too easy for such seemingly progressive critiques of US history—which attempt to make visible Indigenous presence, overturn hegemonic narratives, and depict Native people in culturally sensitive ways—to align with the violent methods settlers have used to forward conquest. Several years before the premiere of *Westworld*, the Cherokee writer Blake Hausman took up this problem in *Riding the Trail of Tears*, a novel that uses the trope of technological simulation for ends different from those of HBO’s series. The novel centers on a virtual reality (VR) experience called the Tsalagi Removal Exodus Point Park (TREPP), which allows tourists to experience the Cherokee Removal in a way that is both user-friendly and educational. Customers purchase an identity, select a desired level of violence, and strap into VR “Chairsuits” to enter the

nineteenth century. The game’s goal is to make it from Georgia to Indian Territory in Oklahoma alive. The novel’s protagonist, Tallulah, who is enrolled in both the Eastern Band of Cherokee and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, works as a tour guide tasked with helping players navigate the journey. The “thrilling struggle to survive” is “meant to be fun for the whole family” (Hausman 58, 59), as well as an opportunity to share Cherokee culture with tourists who might “broaden their horizons” through the experience (78). Hausman deploys the trope of VR to ask, What are the stakes of making a history of atrocity against Indigenous people more visible to settlers? Can such a history be rendered tangible but not consumable? And, most importantly, what is the relationship between learning or teaching about the history of settler colonialism and acting in the service of decolonization?

This essay examines how *Riding the Trail of Tears* theorizes questions of visibility in the context of contemporary debates about recognition and historical representation. Existing scholarship on *Riding the Trail of Tears* articulates the novel’s historiographic interventions, with a focus on how the novel revises historical narratives from a Cherokee perspective.<sup>2</sup> My essay complements existing interpretations by situating the novel in a moment when many North American institutions—from museums and universities to mainstream media organizations like HBO—are grappling with the legacies of Indigenous genocide. Such efforts often occur within a framework of multicultural inclusion that seeks to make Indigenous histories and cultures visible—and palatable or consumable—to settler audiences. As Indigenous studies scholars like Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), Audra Simpson (Mohawk), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō/Skwah), David Garneau (Métis), and Elizabeth A. Povinelli argue, the politics of recognition often revamp colonial power instead of destabilizing it.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, settler institutions use the discourse of multicultural inclusion to depute Indigenous people into positions of complicity.<sup>4</sup> The imbrication of settler colonialism with capitalism’s drive to commodify Indigenous life heightens these dangers.

Turning away from forms of historicizing that hinge on visibility, Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* explores the political potential of invisibility and illegibility as tools for decolonization.

Throughout this essay, I rely on tentative language—"partially explain," "seems to," and so on—in my readings of *Riding the Trail of Tears*. Such language draws attention to the challenges of interpreting this novel—challenges I believe are crucial to its aesthetic form and political project. Academic conventions encourage the performance of intellectual confidence, but the novel invites readers to let go of such conventions. In a related vein, literary scholars often assume that texts are equally available for interpretation to all readers who encounter them, but Hausman's novel challenges this assumption. In doing so, the novel leads readers into a hesitant, careful reading practice attuned to the limits of what we should know. Such a reading practice resonates with the approach of the storytellers interviewed by Christopher B. Teuton (Cherokee) for his book *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars' Club*. These storytellers ironically call themselves "liars" to foreground the inherent trickiness of storytelling.<sup>5</sup> Fluidity, slippage, and uncertainty are central in their stories, yet interpretation remains both possible and necessary. Hausman's novel, too, foregrounds this toggling between uncertainty and understanding. The novel thus inculcates a reading method that seems aligned with Indigenous epistemologies.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the novel also teaches readers—particularly non-Native ones—to engage with Indigeneity and Indigenous literatures without rendering them legible in the violent ways that Hausman critiques.

### Historicizing and the Problem of Visibility

Native visibility is double-edged. Since the first European settlers discursively marked the Americas as terra nullius, Indigenous erasure has been a condition of possibility for settler nation-states.<sup>7</sup> However, countering erasure is not merely a matter of highlighting Native presence. As the Cherokee/Choctaw scholar Louis Owens puts it, "In order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world—in order

to be seen at all—the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside. As Hollywood and every savvy Indian fundraiser know, there is nothing like traditional regalia and a drum to get the cash flowing" (12–13). The pressure for Native people to present themselves in a circumscribed way results from the settler investment in creating and consuming what Gerald Vizenor (Minnesota Chippewa) calls the *indian*.<sup>8</sup> Native-coded images are used for marketing everything from shoes to motor oil and sports teams since, in the colonial imaginary, Native people can represent "strength and courage," the "simple innocence of nature," "ferocity," "agility," and more (Francis 146). As such images circulate, "[t]ribal realities are superseded by simulations of the unreal, and tribal wisdom is weakened by those imitations, however sincere" (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* 8). Colonial images buttress ideas about Native authenticity, present Native people as vanishing or vanished, and obscure the complexity of Indigenous societies.

The perils of visibility go beyond stereotyping. Garneau argues that "[t]he colonial attitude is characterized not only by scopophilia, a drive to look, but also by an urge to penetrate, to traverse, to know, to translate, to own and exploit" (23). *Riding the Trail of Tears* connects ocular seeing with epistemological knowing when Tallulah uses excessive visual metaphors with her tourists to cover up her lack of comprehension when the virtual reality machine goes awry—"she's defaulting to visual clichés precisely because she can't see!" (Hausman 91). To see is to know, and to be visible is to be knowable and thus subject to particular formations of power. As Audra Simpson puts it, "Knowing and representing people within [colonized] places required more than military might; it required the methods and modalities of knowing—in particular, categorization, ethnological comparison, linguistic translation, and ethnography" (*Mohawk Interruptus* 95).

Indigenous thinkers are well aware of the dangers entailed by being visible to the settler gaze. Simpson calls for "an improved ethnographic form within Indigenous North America," invested in "the making of claims and the staking of limits"

(*Mohawk Interruptus* 102). Such “ethnographies of refusal” require an “ethnographic calculus” that considers “what you need to know and what I refuse to write” (105). In Simpson’s case, this calculus came into play when she wrote an academic ethnography while keeping Mohawk sovereignty as her priority: she and her informants kept certain information veiled. While for liberal humanist thinkers the idea of limiting information is “a violation of shared standards of justice and truth,” the refusal to reveal all can be a decolonizing practice (“On Ethnographic Refusal” 74). As the Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice puts it, “claiming entitlement to all peoples’ knowledge is, after all, just one of the many expropriating features of settler colonial violence” (*Why* 25). Simpson and Justice demonstrate how being rendered knowable can tether Native people not just to settler stereotypes but also to settler society’s political and social structures.

Hausman’s novel suggests that even when it is accurate and well intended, the act of making Indigenous history visible can play into settler colonial processes of assimilation. The technological basis for the TREPP was invented by Tallulah’s grandfather, a Cherokee inventor named Art Wilson. The original technology, called “Surround Vision” (Hausman 33), was “a big red Jeep Cherokee with television windows” (32). The driver and passengers could watch digital Cherokees walk the Trail on the screens. The narrator refers to Art as a “cultural emissary of the Cherokee Nation,” implying that Art invented the TREPP to present the history of the Trail of Tears from a Cherokee perspective (145).<sup>9</sup> The Jeep allowed tourists to see—literally, on ten TV screens all around them—the “mass of bent and broken bodies that stretched up to ten miles long at the beginning of the trip” (33). Presumably, making this history visible would both educate viewers and cultivate empathy for Cherokee people. Upon Art’s death, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian (in Cherokee, North Carolina) inherited Art’s inventions and eventually sold the intellectual property rights to a non-Native businessman named Jim Campbell. Campbell’s foundation developed the TREPP from the Jeep Cherokee prototype into the immersive VR experience.

The sale of the TREPP to Campbell has a real-life analogue. The Museum of the Cherokee Indian is run by the Eastern Band of Cherokee and opened in 1976. In 1998, during a major remodel, the museum’s directors hired a “Disney affiliate to design and film the animated parts of the exhibit” to make it more engaging for tourists (Beard-Moose 106). According to Christina Taylor Beard-Moose, who studied the museum before and after the remodel, Disney’s involvement resulted in entertaining but simplified and sometimes inaccurate portrayals of Cherokee life, omitting critical aspects of the history such as “the matrilineal, matrilineal, and matrifocal systems that the Cherokees lived with prior to and after removal” (115). The museum’s design gives visitors the impression that the Cherokees are little different from white settlers, erasing the specificity of “culturally Cherokee lifeways” (115). It is important to note that it is not my intention (nor is it Beard-Moose’s) to condemn the Eastern Band for allowing the Disneyfication of the museum. Indeed, Beard-Moose argues that Cherokee private life resists incorporation into settler colonial structures, even though public attractions run by the Eastern Band or by individual Cherokees often play purposely into settler stereotypes. That said, the museum’s representations of Cherokee life, calibrated at least in part for the settler gaze, at times reinforce colonial ideas about Indigenous people and negatively influence Cherokee youth who view them (Beard-Moose 116).

Hausman appears well aware of the ambivalent impacts of tourism on the Eastern Cherokee and the challenges of presenting Indigenous history to settlers. The co-option of Art Wilson’s well-intended invention (through the transformation of his prototype into a mega-attraction) suggests that making Indigenous history visible to settlers does not inherently serve the decolonial interests of Indigenous people. Jim Campbell’s foundation paid Tallulah’s rent and part of her college tuition in return for her services as a “cultural consultant” (Hausman 172). However, to gain these economic benefits, she must help incorporate into the ride the visual signifiers that settlers often associate with Indigeneity. First, the TREPP presents Indigenous people as having

essential phenotypic qualities. Tallulah is prominently featured in the TREPP promotional photos, which “accentuate her hair. Indian hair. The most Indian of her features” (361). Even more disturbingly, tourists receive visible features associated with Indigeneity when they are inside the ride. In a high-tech iteration of what Philip J. Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) calls “playing Indian,” they come to look “noticeably Indian. The white folks are darker, Michael Hopkins [a black man] is a shade lighter, and the Johnson twins are roughly the same. Everyone’s cheekbones have grown a touch higher” (Hausman 79).<sup>10</sup> As soon as tourists enter the First Cabin, a looted Cherokee home that serves as the beginning of the Trail, there is a broken mirror conveniently available so that they can spend a few moments “celebrating their new skins” (79). As Deloria argues, consumerist Indian play requires Native people to “make a material performance of their Indianness—one that visibly [defines] native people’s racial difference,” even as it, paradoxically, “rel[ies] on a culture-based blurring of social boundaries” (149). The TREPP accentuates this blurring by changing the tourists’ phenotypes. The TREPP muddles the lines between settler and Native person while also defining Indigeneity through Euro-American racial criteria rooted in notions of phenotype and, presumably, in blood quantum.

The ride and Tallulah as a tour guide also purposely play into stereotypes of Native authenticity—the kind of authenticity that “could be bought and sold in material forms” (Deloria 148)—to make Indigeneity recognizable to settlers. At one point, when her tourists are becoming discouraged while walking the Trail, Tallulah “reaches her hands up high, reaching slowly as if each second were an endless vision, reaching for the blue ceiling as if she were the incarnated indigenous holy ghost” (Hausman 87). This “spiritual performance,” as the narrator calls it, appears to encourage the tour group to keep trekking (87). Though for Tallulah such simulations of Indigenous ceremony are conscious—she sees herself as “a performance artist” or even “a history whore” (27)—they nonetheless buttress settler colonial stereotypes. Tallulah must lead her tourists to Indian Territory, but to do so,

as Miriam C. Brown Spiers notes, she “encourages them to surrender in order to survive” the wrath of the soldiers (69). As Tallulah models passivity, she embodies the *indian*, a figure of “tragic victimry” (Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses* 33).

Stereotypical performances of Indigeneity by Native people are not always complicit. Christopher J. Pexa (Spirit Lake Nation) argues that such performances by nineteenth-century Dakhóta intellectuals were deployed to hide Dakhóta relational ethics within liberal discourses so that “ciphered Dakhóta knowledge” could be passed on to future generations of the Oyáte (94). Pexa suggests that sometimes performing to settler expectations can be a way for Native people to sustain their communities. For instance, Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota *wichásha wakháŋ*, performed mock ceremonies for tourist entertainment in England, France, and the United States. These ceremonies “allowed Black Elk and his family to reconnect in bodily and storied ways with lands and locales that were historically precious to them” (175). The rusing of “unheroic decolonizers” like Black Elk is “less explicit than refusal” but has similar goals (12).

The novel offers some evidence for reading Tallulah as an unheroic decolonizer. Though she works for a settler-controlled company, she maintains personal ties with Cherokee people, including her Grandma Lee and her boyfriend, John Bushyhead. Furthermore, as a tour guide, she engages in the type of teasing characteristic of unheroic decolonizers. For instance, when asked if she is named after the actress Tallulah Bankhead, she likes to quip, “Actually, Tallulah Bankhead was named after me” (Hausman 22), calling attention to Tallulah Falls and to the fact that “it all comes back to Cherokee words and ancient rivers and things that lived here long before the Old South began to imagine itself as Old” (23). The “reversed causality” of her joke places Native lands and people at the center of US history and culture (23). In this vein, Joshua Jackson and Megan Vallowe argue that the novel uses its “portrayal of Tallulah Wilson to represent the Beloved Path” (116), one of two complementary philosophies that, according to Justice, “thread their way through Cherokee

literary and cultural expressions" (*Our Fire* 16). While the "Beloved Path" embraces strategic accommodation, the second contrasting philosophy, called "Chickamauga consciousness," foregrounds a "rhetorical rejection of literary, historical, or philosophical accommodation" (*Our Fire* 30). If Tallulah represents the Beloved Path, or if she is an unheroic decolonizer, her stance toward the tourists might be read as quiet resistance.

However, even as the novel is cognizant of Tallulah's complex social positioning, Hausman highlights the pitfalls of ambivalent forms of decolonization that require excessive accommodation. Despite Tallulah's subtle jabs, the TREPP makes Indigenous people visible and knowable in order to incorporate them into institutions of settler colonial life. Carol Edelman Warrior (Ninilchik Village Tribe) illuminates how this process works, arguing that the act of freezing often precedes the act of consumption. Native people who are "fixed through treaty, law, policy (and the internalization of settler-colonial discourse) can be more readily commodified and incorporated into the colonial, or 'wrong,' national body" (385). By forcing Native people "to take one form, to stop moving, and to fulfill one reduced purpose" (385), settler institutions render Native people "controllable, dominatable, and, ultimately, consumable" (386). Hausman's novel suggests that some methods of performing history make Native people visible, but do so precisely by freezing them (in space, in time, in particular representations) so they can be incorporated into settler colonial society. The TREPP reduces Cherokees to stock characters, and Tallulah herself performs Indigeneity in ways that feed into settler colonial expectations.

Tallulah's interactions with two groups of characters—the Little Little People and the Misfits—teach her about the decolonial value of illegibility and eventually help her enact an explicit form of refusal.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the novel engages the "red/white structure" formed by the complementary philosophies that Justice describes (*Our Fire* 30), it ultimately suggests a third path: refusal, a generative turning away from settler norms that is neither accommodation nor outright rebellion. Because

Cherokee people have historically adopted a wide range of methods to preserve their communities—to "adapt and realign ourselves to the cosmos," as Justice puts it (*Our Fire* 8)—this third path does not necessarily constitute a rejection of more traditional Cherokee methods of resistance represented by the red/white structure. Instead, refusal serves as another instrument in the toolbox of decolonial struggle.

To understand Tallulah's transformation, we must first examine the novel's meditations on visibility and legibility. Addressing the dangers of visibility, the novel theorizes the liberatory possibilities of obscuring some kinds of Indigenous knowledge. Though the TREPP's malfunction remains a mystery to the novel's characters, readers eventually piece together that metanormal beings have infiltrated the ride and are changing its programming. The narrator of the novel is one of these beings. I refer to this narrator with the pronoun "they" since we do not know what the narrator's gender is, or whether their people even have genders. The narrator states that "according to the books you can access from a reputable library," the Cherokee oral tradition is commonly accepted to contain "two main categories of Cherokee characters who look like humans": the Little People and the Nunnehi (Hausman 5). However, the narrator belongs to a third category of beings, which they refer to as the "Little Little People." The narrator explains that the Little Little People were cut from Cherokee oral narratives several hundred years before colonization, during a revolution when the Cherokees overthrew their class of priests.<sup>12</sup> During this revolution, the narrator claims, the oral tradition mutated, and the Little Little People were forgotten. Furthermore, because the Little Little People are "smaller than [human] tear ducts," they elude vision, and their existence is unknown to humans (3).

If *Riding the Trail of Tears* were invested in making erased stories visible, the narrator would likely want to return the Little Little People back into the historical archive. But while the novel constitutes an account to the reader, the narrator shows ambivalence about this project of revelation, an ambivalence that makes sense. As Christopher B.

Teuton explains, “Sharing knowledge is a part of Cherokee traditional culture, but that does not mean that all Cherokee knowledge is open to all Cherokee people, much less the general public” (*Cherokee Stories* 4). Moreover, non-Native audiences sometimes misuse tribal knowledge. The narrator of *Riding the Trail of Tears* notes that stories from the Cherokee oral tradition appear in books that one can borrow through “a reputable library.” This accessibility poses dangers since, as Justice puts it, Indigenous “textualities and interpretative traditions generally require particular kinds of extensive specialized training that are most often limited to specific community members. . . . Outsiders who approach them as simply a different form of writing are likely to misread them or, worse, misuse them, with often quite negative results” (*Why* 23). It is possible to share Indigenous oral traditions and knowledge with outsiders—and Native people have done so ethically—but misappropriation remains a concern.<sup>13</sup>

This concern might partially explain the narrator’s ambivalence, especially their statement that “the benefit of being outside the stories is that no one knows about you.” They continue: “The point is that documentation gives people a profile, and humans are both seduced and terrified by profiles” (Hausman 6). I suggest that the narrator resists making the story of the Little Little People fully knowable because concealment makes it harder for settlers to appropriate Indigenous knowledge. Moreover, invisibility enables a turn from colonial recognition, allowing for political strategies that more effectively counter the violence of settler colonialism. Hausman’s novel repeatedly demonstrates the benefits of invisibility, both literal (being hidden from the eye) and epistemological (being concealed from thought). These forms of invisibility enable characters to disrupt colonial structures through covert movement and direct action that fly under the radar of settler surveillance.

### Surreptitious Movement and Direct Action

The concept of direct action traditionally has strong links to visibility. Commonly conceptualized as

“unconventional, nonviolent political action that is undertaken when conventional politics is unavailable or inadequate to effect significant change,” this set of political tactics seeks “to place items on the public agenda, mobilize groups, penalize intransigent officials, publicize problems or misdeeds, and work for transparency in public matters” (Terchek 937). The Red Power movement, while multifaceted, included a strong emphasis on “encourag[ing] white Americans to view Native life more as Native people did” (S. Teuton 5). During actions like the occupation of Alcatraz Island, “Indians offered public reevaluations of competing histories” (S. Teuton 10). In a similar vein, Dean Rader coined the term “engaged resistance” to describe a common mode of twentieth-century Indigenous activism, ignited and typified by Alcatraz. The occupiers “established a place, and they constructed a vantage point from which to show us how to see it” (Rader 11). Like later forms of engaged resistance, the Alcatraz occupation was used to “articulate a sovereign position and communicate with the American populace” (Rader 11).

In recent years, however, Indigenous studies scholars have questioned the idea that direct action requires visibility. Coulthard argues that direct action is useful not necessarily because it publicizes Indigenous issues, but because it is a tangible mobilization of Indigenous people’s “*resentment*: a politicized expression of Indigenous anger and outrage directed at structural and symbolic violence” (109). Resentment “can indicate a breakdown of colonial subjection and thus open up the possibility of developing alternative subjectivities and anticolonial practices” (115). For instance, blockades negate capitalist exploitation of Indigenous lands by “block[ing] the flow of resources,” and they simultaneously “embody an enactment of Indigenous law” (170). In a broader conceptualization, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson contends that “[p]lacing Indigenous bodies on the land in any Indigenous context through engagement with Indigenous practices is direct action” (236).<sup>14</sup> Like Coulthard, Simpson argues that to refuse colonial institutions is to “generate something different” (17). The kinds of direct action Coulthard and Simpson describe are rooted not in

engaged resistance or attempts to alter settler viewpoints, but rather in the generative refusal of settler norms.

The narrator of *Riding the Trail of Tears* enacts a practice of refusal in the very telling of the story. Specifically, the narrator uses what Robinson calls “structural refusal,” or “formal and aesthetic strategies that impede Indigenous knowledge extraction and instrumentalization” (23). As I discussed earlier, the narrator refuses to reinsert the story of the Little Little People back into the historical record, since that would also risk making the story accessible to people who may misuse this knowledge, including the reader of the novel. Nor is the narrator particularly interested in making visible a genealogy of erasure: aside from the brief account of the priests, the narrator reveals nothing about why precisely this revolution would have caused the erasure of the Little Little People from Cherokee oral narratives. Finally, the narrator does not reveal how precisely the Little Little People affect the program, or what their presence in human bodies does. Readers know only the effects: the ride malfunctions. The novel never resolves or clarifies these various opacities. More strikingly, the narrator offers multiple theories about events in the novel (how the Misfits were created, for instance) without confirming any of them. Illegibility—an insistent refusal to render everything readable—undergirds the novel’s aesthetic form.

Moreover, the narrator and the other Little Little People use their invisibility to enact concrete change. We learn that the narrator has been living on Tallulah’s body, “lodging myself into the kinks between the bones where her eyes and nose converge” and traveling daily between the organic world where Tallulah lives and the digital world where she works (Hausman 7). The narrator is the first to make this leap outside the program. Some of the Little Little People did not believe it was possible to live outside the TREPP: “We were programmed to believe that things digital could never fully enter the consciousness of things organic” (2). The narrator disproves this belief, giving credence to those Little Little People who argue that they “were by nature built to move, that invisibility

is a right worth exercising” (7).<sup>15</sup> While some of the narrator’s fellows at first fear the organic world, they are seduced by the narrator’s stories and start “planting themselves inside the tourists” (8). Invisibility enhances the mobility of the Little Little People, and, as numerous Indigenous scholars have argued, mobility is central to decolonization.<sup>16</sup>

It is because they are both imperceptible to the human eye and “outside the stories” that the Little Little People can productively infiltrate the VR system (6). The novel hints (but does not confirm) that their movement between organic and virtual reality causes the TREPP’s computer program to malfunction: Technical Control can no longer control violence levels, tourists begin to lose consciousness within the ride, and one tourist, Irma Rosenberg, is transported to the wrong location in the VR world. In response to these events, Tallulah “wonders if Tour Group 5709 contains an insurgent customer, someone who has brought a virus into the system” (180), whereas a digital character referred to as the Chef theorizes that “[t]here’s a glitch in the system. Something intrusive” (205). Significantly, the Little Little People do not rewrite the computer code that controls the TREPP. Instead, their covert movement within and beyond the bounds of the TREPP apparently produces the glitch in the ride’s programming. The Little Little People’s tactics bring to mind arguments Indigenous studies scholars have made about the centrality of material change to decolonization. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, for instance, argues that efforts to counter stereotypes about Indigenous people are important, but because they do not require substantive actions (such as the return of land to Indigenous peoples), such efforts “only give the illusion of real change” (113). Direct action does create real change, often by preventing a settler colonial system from functioning. In *Riding the Trail of Tears*, the Little Little People perform direct action that relies on invisibility. They do not publicize the violence of settler colonialism or change public narratives about themselves, but instead act to increase their mobility. Through their surreptitious movement, they seemingly introduce a virus into the program of coloniality, causing the system to break.



There is also a second group of Native characters in the novel who use surreptitious movement to enable direct action. The malfunction of the TREPP splits Irma off from the rest of the tour group. Irma enters a mysterious realm unknown to either Tallulah or the TREPP programmers. This realm is a liminal space between what the novel refers to as “causality loops,” temporal loops within VR that allow multiple tour groups to hook into the ride simultaneously without meeting one another on the Trail. To someone within VR, this realm looks like a stockade resembling the military camps that confined the Cherokees and other Native tribes during the Indian Removals. The VR stockade contains hundreds of digital Cherokees clothed in garb from across time (buckskins, ribbon shirts, military uniforms, feathers, sports jackets). They are led by seven elders, each of whom wears a baseball cap with a sports logo. Both Irma and the narrator refer to the characters in the stockade as “the Misfits.” The Misfits seem to be *Indians* who are aware of their simulated existence and have become fugitives.

The Misfits painstakingly conceal themselves from the tourists and guides. They speak in riddles and refuse to tell Irma their names, even though she repeatedly asks. The Misfit elders claim that they “don’t have names” because “one cannot be a target if one has no name” (Hausman 115, 117). The Misfits are hunted by another mysterious group whom they call “the Suits.” Indians Hat (one of the elders) says that the Suits “don’t have names either” but that they “gave us names in order to single us out” (117). When the Suits appear in the stockade, looking for Irma, they shoot several of the younger Misfits before the Chef, who lives among the Misfits with his two sons, Ish and Fish, distracts the Suits with food. Though the novel does not definitively reveal who the Suits are, they could be interpreted as embodiments of the mechanisms that settler societies use to track, contain, and brutalize Native people, including the legal system. As one of the elders explains, the Suits “always wear suits” because “blood doesn’t show on power suits” (118). The elder’s statement foregrounds how settler colonial violence enacted through law

often appears not only benign—the blood is hidden by dark power suits—but also seemingly nameless and nonagential.

To escape the Suits, the elders have hidden their names, and they are teaching the younger Misfits in the stockade to do the same. Responding to Irma’s concern that without names the younger Misfits will not “know who they are,” the Misfit elders reply that “[t]hey don’t want to be someone,” because “[s]omeone can be conquered by our enemies. . . . But once you have become *no* one, they can no longer conquer you” (118). Refusing to have names, the elders say, allows the Misfits to “understand [their] programming” and “unlearn the things they were programmed to do” (118). The Misfits are programmed to remain in their liminal space within the game, which is represented by the stockade. The elders say that “we cannot leave while we still think we’re the people we were programmed to be” (119). Visually, the stockade looks and feels like a rigid physical structure: “The walls were built of tall logs anchored together, the tops of the logs carved into sharp points that had an ominous tone. . . . But the structure did not move. . . . It was firm and all too solid” (165). Among other meanings, the stockade might represent the settler colonial structures that confine and immobilize Native people, such as reservations, boarding schools, and prisons.

The Misfits are programmed not only to remain confined but also to hurt themselves physically. After the appearance of the Suits, the Misfits “gave themselves a collective beating. . . . They grunted and screamed and cried and wailed and made themselves bleed” (164). The concept of programming seems to metonymically depict how Indigenous people internalize colonialism and racialization. The idea that settler colonialism causes social and health problems in Native communities is widely documented.<sup>17</sup> Hausman’s novel seems to gesture toward this body of work on trauma in its depictions of the Misfits’ programming. In settler colonial societies, Indigenous people’s trauma—when it is acknowledged at all—is medicalized. Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan) argues that medicalized discourses of trauma can stifle Indigenous nation

building. Medicalized understandings of trauma elide the tangible effects of settler colonialism, such as settler control of land (106). Million highlights the double-edged effect of bringing Indigenous suffering into the settler public sphere by way of medicalized trauma discourses: “These Native voices become ‘public’ only after their intensity is framed within languages authorized in social programs. . . . They become empowered by trauma’s discourse at the same time they become its subjects” (94). Put differently, Indigenous people must make their suffering visible and legible within Euro-American frameworks to have that suffering recognized. When Indigenous people fail or refuse to do so, their stories are received as “unbelievable” because they are not “in correspondence with the narratives of white academics and bureaucrats on what their own experience *was supposed to be*” (94).

Because the elders have learned to refuse the surveillance of settler society, they are neither injured by the Suits nor prone to the self-injury that the other Misfits suffer. In other words, the elders “resist [their] programming” by embracing illegibility and turning to Indigenous communal practices that are not sanctioned by or understandable to settlers (Hausman 169). For example, in response to the escalating self-inflicted violence, the elders “began to sing. . . . Their songs affected the crowd, but progress was slow” (166). To speed up the process, Ish and Fish fire a cannon so that “the reverb blast shook the entire stockade and silenced the masses” (167). When read through traditional Euro-American notions of trauma, this is a surprising act: instead of encouraging the Misfits to express their trauma, Ish and Fish silence them with the cannon blast. But this act, which rejects the conventional notion that trauma must be narrated, enables the elders to serve the community better.

The elders begin to sing again, now with a new refrain: “Remember ourselves, remember nothing” (168). This refrain is seemingly paradoxical—an example of the productive uncertainty that the novel frequently inculcates—but one way to read it is as a call to embrace illegibility that works in the service of reinstating Native collective self-determination. The elders’ call to “[r]emember

ourselves” might invoke something like the Anishinaabemowin concept of *biskaabiiyang*, translated as “returning to ourselves,” which the Anishinaabe scholar Grace L. Dillon describes as “a healing impulse and a manifesto for all peoples, whether Indigenous or just passing through, about discarding the dirty baggage imposed by the impacts of oppression, and alternatively refashioning ancestral traditions in order to flourish in the post-Native Apocalypse” (10). But what does it mean to “remember nothing,” the second part of the elders’ refrain? Earlier the elders had insisted that it is beneficial to be “no one” rather than “someone”: “no one” cannot be targeted or tracked. To be “someone” is to claim a visible, perhaps empowered subjectivity, but it is also to be detectable. That which is detectable is liable to be captured, contained, and violated. Moreover, as Robinson discusses, settlers frequently abuse Indigenous songs, so the elders have good reason to make their singing difficult to appropriate.<sup>18</sup> The two imperatives are bound together in the elders’ refrain: the call to “refashion ancestral traditions in order to flourish,” as Dillon puts it, is tied to the call to escape the kind of subjectivity that confines precisely through making visible.

As with the Little Little People, the illegibility of the Misfits enables their movement, and they eventually leave the stockade. The elders “believe the Suits have placed us here in order to keep us out of the mountains,” the homeland of the Cherokee (Hausman 198). Led by the elders, the Misfits make their way back to the Smoky Mountains, meeting with Tallulah’s tour group on the way there. While Tallulah initially insists that they are “supposed to go west” in order to complete the game, the Misfit elders tell her, “We don’t want the game to end” (281). Bringing Tallulah and the tourists with them, the Misfits reverse the direction of the Trail of Tears in an act of “reclamation” (199). Because the Misfits “seem to be imbued with Indigenous knowledge and an innate sense of their Cherokee homeland” (Brown Spiers 67), they teach Tallulah about the value of reconnecting with Indigenous lands. This reclamation becomes possible because of the Misfits’ cultivated illegibility

and the nourishment that the Chef provides. As Brown Spiers has noted, the Chef, Ish, and Fish resemble characters from the Cherokee oral tradition; the novel makes this connection explicit when Tallulah thinks of the Chef as Kanati and his sons as the Good Boy and the Wild Boy.

In short, the Misfits, especially the Chef and his sons, embody the vibrancy of the oral tradition even amid the simulated *indians* crafted by settlers. As Christopher B. Teuton puts it, Cherokee stories are “living things,” changing with each retelling (*Cherokee Stories* 4). As “the foundation of Cherokee culture,” stories “teach a person about Cherokee values” and thus help sustain community (7, 9). Storytelling enables what Vizenor calls survivance, “an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Fugitive Poses* 15).<sup>19</sup> When the Chef and his sons cook community meals in their kitchen, they provide fugitive nourishment: nourishment within the degradation of removal and confinement.<sup>20</sup> They help the Misfits and Tallulah reconnect to their land partly by destroying the artificial constructions created by settlers. When Fish shoots Deer Cooker, “the tragic Cherokee” serving as one of the TREPP’s stock characters, the “blood bubbles from Deer Cooker’s body like water boiling over the edges of a full pot” (Hausman 271). The destruction of *indian* simulations is connected with food, a tangible form of nourishment associated with community building. As Tallulah watches the Chef serve her food, she speculates that “there must be magic in the cream sauce, magic in the man who made it” (310). Even as Hausman’s novel takes down stereotypes, it is not merely about creating more authentic or so-called culturally sensitive representations of Native people. For the Misfits, material acts of decolonization—sustaining Native community and retaking land—take center stage.

### The Question of Solidarity

While *Riding the Trail of Tears* emphasizes Indigenous resurgence led by Indigenous people—out of the settler gaze—it does not let settlers off the hook. In particular, the novel critiques settlers

who think of themselves as allies to Indigenous people. None of the people on Tallulah’s tour are openly racist or anti-Indigenous, nor are they depicted as especially ignorant of US history. For instance, “Tour Group 5709 readily agrees that Columbus did not discover America” (65). Many of the tourists seem legitimately interested in learning about Cherokee history and culture. Nonetheless, they frequently engage in troubling behavior. For example, Nell Johnson, a schoolteacher who announces she was once married to a “Lumbee Indian” (48), frames settler colonial violence as past, mournfully stating, “It’s just awful what they did back then” (79). Carmen, a college student, racializes Cherokee people when she asks whether Tallulah is “full-blood” (61). The members of Tour Group 5709 might think of themselves as allies, but they often fail in enacting solidarity with Indigenous people.

Irma’s experiences with the Misfits offer a potent case study about solidarity. Irma is generally portrayed as sympathetic, if clueless. Because she is a Jewish woman whose family members died in the Holocaust, she believes she shares something in common with Native people. Yet her behavior replicates the tracking activities of the Suits when she insists on learning the Misfits’ names. When that fails, Irma exclaims, “This is all very unsettling. When can I start naming you?” (121). Irma’s desire to name the Misfits resonates with Warrior’s contention that settler colonialism subjects Native people to “immobilization and incorporation” when Native “bodies, lands, religions, relations, and aesthetics are defined in such a way as to foreclose political dynamism, constraining action to a limited set of options that become increasingly unattractive as the world around us changes” (385). Warrior describes this process as “naming and claiming” (386). By refusing naming, the Misfits resist the immobilizing force of colonial mastery through which settlers define Indigenous people in the limited ways Warrior describes. Irma’s desire to discover the Misfits’ names—or, worse, to impose names on them—reflects her desire for mastery. The Misfits’ refusal is “unsettling” precisely because it disrupts her attempts to render them legible: they escape her grasp just as they do the grasp of the Suits.

Irma's desire for (and expectation of) mastery is also apparent in other ways. When the elders speak in Cherokee, she exclaims, "And when you talk around me like that. . . it only reminds me that I'm not supposed to be here" (Hausman 125). As a white settler, Irma expects inclusion in any space she enters. Moreover, while Irma follows the Chef's orders, helping him cook and distribute food, she seeks information as a reward for her help. She stipulates, "I dished up your corn chowder and fed your whole Misfit tribe. Now you owe me an answer" (191). Irma's demand reflects how white settlers who claim to be allies expect compensation for anti-colonial efforts. With the Chef's response to Irma—"Owe you?," he asks pointedly—the novel draws attention to the violent nature of Irma's demand. In short, Irma's identification with the Misfits and desire to understand them do not ensure solidarity with them.

However, there are also a few moments when Irma acts, at least momentarily, in solidarity with Indigenous people. One instance occurs while the elders sing their song to the rest of the Misfits. The elders' song calms many of the Misfits, but not all of them: Irma sees "a nearby teenage girl" who is violently slapping herself after throwing herself "back-first to the earth" (169). At first, Irma tries to remember the training she received when working for a domestic violence hotline, but she cannot recall the script she was taught. Instead, Irma "grabbed the girl's arms, holding them gently and firmly, calmly forcing the girl to resist her programming. Irma held the girl's hands with steady resolve, and the girl clawed, venting. But she began to slow" and eventually "grabbed Irma's hands and stood up, a reluctant but thankful grin forming on her face" (169, 170). This intervention does not require the girl's specific suffering to be legible to Irma. Nor does Irma partake of Euro-American medicalized notions of trauma like those she might have been taught at the hotline. She acts without giving in to her earlier drive to decode and understand the Misfits. She follows the lead of the Misfit elders but does not sing with them, which would have inappropriately positioned her as one of them. In short, she gives up her demands for visibility from

Native people, as well as her desire to feel like she is "supposed to be" there. It is not Irma's shared humanity, empathy, or parallel history as a descendant of Holocaust survivors that matters, but the tangible actions she takes against settler colonialism.

Unfortunately, Irma's solidarity proves inconsistent. As the Chef readies ration packets ahead of the Misfits' departure from the stockade, Irma displays her selfishness: "What I'd really like to do before I leave is learn how you make your trail mix and dried fruits" (230). Irma wants to benefit from Indigenous knowledge, but she quickly makes a contradictory claim to allyship: "I only want to help you people" (230). The Chef asks her to prepare ration packets, but she continues to pester him for more information about the Misfits' plans, claiming she wants to understand them, until he finally tells her, "That's the beauty of it. You don't need to understand" (231). Irma's role in the Misfits' efforts is not to understand them or to siphon off their knowledge. As a settler, her role is to do the tangible but mundane work that will support their reclamation effort.

### "Her Braids Are Now Invisible"

While for most of the novel Tallulah supports the functioning of settler colonialism through her performances, her interactions with the Misfits and (unknowingly) the Little Little People ultimately allow her to enact resurgence. The physical presence of the narrator in her body and her encounter with the Misfits have transformative consequences. Upon virtually returning to North Carolina with the Misfits, Tallulah has a conversation with the Chef, where he warns her not to reveal his existence to "Homeland Security" when she exits the game (316). Tallulah does not understand why, but the Chef refuses to explain. Later, still within the game, Tallulah has a dream in which she encounters a bear whom she believes to be "her father's spirit" (322). Her interactions with the bear play out as a formulaic scene (perhaps produced by the VR machine) of mourning, forgiveness, and reconciliation—"Tallulah recognized the cliché, but it was just the cliché she needed" (328).

Tallulah exits the ride and is interviewed by agents from Homeland Security, who are investigating the malfunctions in the ride as a terrorist incident. After the interview, Tallulah is momentarily at a loss about how to proceed with her life. Then, “it strikes her. She knows what she needs to do” (352). She goes to the TREPP’s kitchen and asks for a pair of scissors, which she takes into the walk-in refrigerator. Amid the boxes of frozen goods, she cries and cuts off her hair.

Tallulah’s choice to cut her hair is significant for several reasons. In some Indigenous communities, cutting one’s hair is common in bereavement. Tallulah’s dream about her father allowed her to mourn his death. In a different vein, in the Indian boarding schools of the early twentieth century, Native children’s hair was cut as part of the process of assimilation. For Tallulah, though, hair also has an additional resonance. Her hair was perceived as “the most Indian of her features” (361), and the TREPP marketers highlighted her braids in the promotional materials for the ride. Cutting off the hair, in this context, is a move to invisibility—“while Tallulah could never hide her cheekbones, her braids are now invisible” (361). In an ironic reversal of boarding school assimilation tactics, Tallulah was being incorporated into settler colonial structures precisely by highlighting a supposed visible marker of her Indigeneity. Cutting off her hair represents her unwillingness to be recognized by settlers within the violent terms of racialized, commodified Indigeneity. It might be read as an act of what Vizenor calls a “postindian warrior” who “ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance” (*Manifest Manners* 5).

The walk-in refrigerator encapsulates the novel’s conjoining of food, invisibility, and Indigenous resurgence. When Tallulah walks into the refrigerator at the end of the novel to cut her hair, she renders herself less visibly *indian*, but her disappearance from the settler colonial line of sight—instead of erasing her—inaugurates an act of resurgence. She quits her job at the TREPP and travels to the Qualla Boundary in North Carolina, the ancestral Cherokee homeland where her grandmother lives. In other words, Tallulah’s decision to cut off her hair—an act tied to but

not confined by tradition—helps her resist Euro-American methods of knowing and at least partially escape the settler gaze. Quitting her work at the TREPP is an act of generative refusal, one that exemplifies what Tallulah has learned from her interactions with the Misfits and Little Little People. She has learned that an ever-evolving Cherokee culture nourishes her, and that invisibility to settlers can sometimes help protect the future of that culture.

The novel ends with the narrator, too, embarking on a journey, albeit an unwilling one. When Tallulah gets home, having quit her job, she and her boyfriend have sex in the shower. During this process, the narrator gets washed down the bath drain. This revelation illuminates the novel’s opening, where the narrator tells us they are living in the underground sewer system. Though the narrator seems somewhat concerned about this fate, the novel evokes a sense of potentiality and motion as they bob along in “endless water, underground, moving somewhere” (Hausman 370). The narrator’s presence in the water alludes to a Cherokee story in which a water beetle creates the Middle World using mud gathered from the bottom of the water that covers all of creation.<sup>21</sup> In Cherokee cosmology, the Under World where the mud comes from is “a place of water, chaos, and mystery where things mix, but also a source of creative power and change” (C. Teuton, *Cherokee Stories* 21). The narrator seems to be like the water beetle—a maker of a new world and bringer of significant change. In practical terms, the narrator’s presence in the sewer system of the organic (not virtual) reality might enable them to inhabit other bodies just as they inhabited Tallulah’s, initiating the kind of generative glitch that affected the TREPP. Invisible to the eye, the narrator embodies the transformative capability of surreptitious Indigenous action rooted in refusal. The novel thus ends with the promise of decolonial change.

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## NOTES

1. See Cornum (Navajo) for a discussion of how “Kiksuya” tries and fails to break from “the canon of tragic handsome braves

and tragically handsome maidens that is told in classrooms across this stolen simulation of a legitimate nation.”

2. Anderson interprets the novel as an example of “a distinctly Indigenous uncanny” that shows how the Trail of Tears is “undead, unresolved, and in significant ways still unknown” (439, 443). Brown Spiers reads the novel as a refashioning of science fiction tropes in the service of Indigenous “resistance and empowerment in the face of historical trauma” (55). Jackson and Vallowe draw on Cherokee understandings of space-time to show how the novel partakes of Euro-American historical fiction’s emphasis on “cultural renewal, historical recovery, and national revision” while also pushing the genre “away from a focus on settler-oriented histories” (116).

3. These critiques differ in terms of their tribal contexts and their methodological frameworks. Nonetheless, they share the premise that the recognition of Indigenous peoples by settler nation-states can strengthen colonial power.

4. As Robinson puts it in the context of music, “inclusionary performances often make space for and accommodate Indigenous cultural expression while enervating Indigenous political and cultural impact” (8–9).

5. As Christopher B. Teuton summarizes, “Cherokee puns allow for a sometimes necessary slippage of meaning in language, and the club relishes the rich irony of speaking ‘lies’ and being called ‘liars,’ knowing full well that stories are the foundation of Cherokee culture” (*Cherokee Stories* 7).

6. As a settler scholar, I acknowledge that my access to and understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems is limited, as it should be.

7. Through what O’Brien calls “firsting and lasting”—a representational process that “insisted that non-Indians held exclusive sway over modernity, denied modernity to Indians, and in the process created a narrative of Indian extinction that has stubbornly remained in the consciousness and unconsciousness of Americans” (xiii)—settlers have “failed or refused to recognize Indian peoples as such” (xv).

8. Vizenor uses the lowercase, italicized word *indian* as an “ironic name” for simulated images of Native people created by Europeans (*Fugitive Poses* 15).

9. Similarly, Brown Spiers speculates that the ride was originally meant “to present Cherokee history and worldviews to a mainstream audience” (60–61).

10. “Playing Indian,” as theorized by Deloria, refers to white settlers enacting constructed images of Indigeneity through disguise in order to negotiate US American identity.

11. I primarily use the term “refusal,” drawing on Audra Simpson (“On Ethnographic Refusal”) and others, to describe the kind of Indigenous decolonial action performed by Tallulah and other characters. However, I also use related terms, such as “resurgence” (L. Simpson), “resentment” (Coulthard), and “survival” (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*), when they seem appropriate for describing what is happening in the novel. I understand these concepts to be part of a constellation of Indigenous decolonial practices.

12. The story of the revolt against the priests, a class called the Ani-Kutani, is part of the Cherokee oral tradition. As Christopher B. Teuton writes: “Though the Cherokee have seven clans today, the old ones say we once had eight. The Ani-Kutani were the eighth clan, sacred medicine people who wielded tremendous power. . . . But their power corrupted them, and they began taking greater and greater liberties with their fellow Cherokee. . . . The Cherokee rose up against the priests, and a civil war ensued. The Ani-Kutani were destroyed, every remaining member of the clan killed” (*Deep Waters* 3). The story of the Little Little People that the narrator tells in the novel seems to be part of Hausman’s play with the oral tradition.

13. For instance, Justice’s *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* was published by a university press and written for a broad audience that includes non-Native readers, as was Christopher B. Teuton’s book of Cherokee stories.

14. Simpson gives many concrete examples of “everyday acts of resurgence” (236), including “a blockade against deforestation in Nishnabeg territory” and “an alternative justice system for sexual offenders in Hollow Water” (237).

15. The narrator’s claim of a right to invisibility recalls Glissant’s famous evocation of “the right to opacity for everyone” (194).

16. For example, see Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*; Warrior, esp. 387–89; and Martineau and Ritskes.

17. See, for example, Brave Heart and DeBruyn; Evans-Campbell.

18. Robinson notes that “Indigenous ontologies of songs as law, healing, rights, and history” render them “much more than merely sonic resources and material.” Using Indigenous songs inappropriately results in “an abuse of power through the theft of family/community/personal history” (131).

19. *Survivance* is Vizenor’s intentionally fluid term describing how Native people counter simulations: it is “more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence” (*Fugitive Poses* 15).

20. Community events involving food are significant in Cherokee culture, and cooking (traditionally done by Cherokee women) is “a source of individual and family prestige” (Beard-Moose 8).

21. For a version of this story told by the Cherokee elder Sequoyah Guess, see C. Teuton, *Cherokee Stories* 39–40.

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**Abstract:** This essay analyzes Blake Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* to explore the complexities of rendering history visible—both viewable and knowable—in the context of settler colonial capitalism. The novel centers on a virtual reality (VR) experience called the Tsalagi Removal Exodus Point Park (TREPP), which allows tourists to experience the Cherokee Removal as an educational and entertaining experience. Through the trope of VR, the novel articulates how historicizing invested in visibility risks turning Native people and knowledge into consumable objects. Instead of seeking colonial recognition by making their history visible, characters in *Riding the Trail of Tears* mobilize invisibility to jam the machine of settler colonialism. Their surreptitious movement leads to direct action that counters settler appropriation. The novel thus highlights the importance of Indigenous refusal and models specific strategies for enacting it.