



## INTRODUCTION

# 10.1 – Tsalagi Scholars: Land, Stories, Relations

This issue of *Transmotion* features work by members of Tsalagi Scholars, an online gathering of educators and researchers who are citizens of one of the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes: one in North Carolina, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and two in Oklahoma, the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians and the Cherokee Nation.

The group was formed in 2009 and was given the Cherokee name of digadatseli'i, which means: "We all belong to each other; for someone to take care of something" ([www.thinktsalagi.org/scholars](http://www.thinktsalagi.org/scholars)). The group was composed of "Cherokee scholars and teachers with a focus on revitalizing the Cherokee language, accountability to each other, and the promotion of Cherokee sovereignty."

I am a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and I am a member of the editorial board for *Transmotion*. An editor approached me about a Cherokee issue, and so I posted a call for papers on the Tsalagi Scholars listserv. What resulted was an interesting mixture of topics from established scholars and those starting their careers. Brian Burkhart is a professor at the University of Oklahoma, and a former colleague of mine at California State University, Northridge. Eva Garrouette is a professor at Boston College. Jonathan

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Radocay is an assistant professor at the University of Washington; Kathryn Walkiewicz is an assistant professor at the University of California, San Diego; and Alissa Baker is a research associate with the Cherokee Nation and a research associate with Tohi Consultation. Garroutte's co-author, Tanner Scott, is not (yet) a member of Tsalagi Scholars; he works in the Digital Archives of Indigenous Language Preservation at Northeastern University in Boston. These authors are citizens of the Cherokee Nation. I received no submissions from UKBI or EBCI scholars, but this may not be surprising when we consider the Cherokee Nation has more than 460,000 citizens, while the Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians have about 14,000 each.

In addition to the work by Cherokee scholars, this issue includes the 2024 literary journal produced by students, with the guidance of English teacher Faith Brooks, at Cherokee High School on the land of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The students produced poems, fiction, essays, and visual art for the annual issue, giving *Transmotion* readers a glimpse of what future Cherokee leaders are thinking and feeling. The cover for this issue of *Transmotion* features two works by EBCI students. The contrast in their works reminds me of that between Cherokee war chiefs and peace chiefs. Jimya Driver's white oak basket reminds me of "tohi," the principal of balance and equanimity, while Gabe Crowe's buffalo mask reminds me of the conflict that we find in our lives (sometimes necessarily, such as when we must resist injustice). I asked Eva Garroutte if she knew of a word for the opposite of tohi, and, after consulting a Cherokee first-language speaker, she offered udehytohtanvhi, which means "bothered," "troubled," or "afflicted."

The students present some works that are uniquely Cherokee and some that may be universal for teenagers. For instance, Christian Alfaro's "The Burning Sycamore" is an ambitious story about a hero from long ago who faces a series of monsters from Cherokee mythos. Meanwhile, Alexzaya Lossie's poem "In the Silent Chambers" speaks of internal doubts that all young people may feel, regardless of their heritage or status in life: "Anxiety though formidable/ Is not invincible/ With each breath each step forward/ Comes the strength to confront, to overcome."

Driver, Crowe, Alfaro, and Lossie were seniors in Spring 2024 and have graduated from Cherokee High School. They are out in the world accomplishing great things now.

The task for an introduction such as this is describing themes or concepts that link its essays. Despite the various topics covered in this issue, the links are easy to name: land, stories, and relations.



Jonathan Radocay's contribution describes his own experience of being on the land in the Cherokee Nation, looking for his family's allotment, and learning how Cherokees have storied themselves and the land into binding relationships. The process of allotting Cherokee land was the U.S. government's attempt at "severance," of dividing the people from the land and from each other, but, ironically, those efforts have contributed to an "allotment survivance." Radocay writes, "I came to realize that contemporary Cherokee people have taken up the very structure designed to sever connection to our homelands in the early twentieth-century to articulate forms of persistent belonging...." This structure of severance included "allotment jackets," which were the documents through which land became privately owned—and many times then entered a market economy that treated land as a commodity. However, those same records became a mechanism for diasporic Cherokees to find their way back to the homeland. Each allotment record includes a township-and-range map of the allotment, which assists a Cherokee person, such as Radocay, to reclaim moments and locations of family history.

He compares his own experiences to those described in *Allotment Stories*, edited by Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) and Jean M. O'Brien (White Earth Ojibwe). His and other narratives "imagine and enact post-allotment Indigenous futures." These stories "complicate—if not refuse—narratives of loss and allotment's privatized logic of division."


In her essay, Alissa Baker discusses the implications of an earlier displacement: Cherokee removal from the eastern homeland to Indian Territory that separated the people from important ceremonial and medicinal plants. Baker describes efforts by the Cherokee Nation to bring an eastern relative to the new homeland: ginseng. The plant is culturally important, but it does not seem to prosper in Northeast Oklahoma. Personally, I am fascinated by the challenge Cherokees faced in rehoming; that is, establishing new relations to the land and its occupants while also maintaining Cherokee culture and identity; Cherokees must have been remade to some degree by making a new home, and that new home must have been remade to some degree by relations with the new occupants.

When I visited north central Georgia, where my Cherokee ancestors came from, I was surprised at how the topography was similar to the topography of Northeast Oklahoma. Cherokees removed from that part of Georgia may have been relieved to see a somewhat familiar landscape. However, Cherokees moving from the mountains, forests, and waterfalls of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee may have

experienced the low, rolling hills and slow-moving rivers of Indian Territory as an alien landscape. Also, those very different landscapes would have been home to very different flora. The ginseng strains Baker writes about seem to have trouble thinking of Northeast Oklahoma as home; getting the plant to grow within the borders of the Cherokee Nation has been difficult. I am glad *Transmotion* can present her exploration of this practical demonstration of Cherokee self-determination. She writes, “The efforts of the Cherokee Nation Natural Resources department are examples of Cherokee sovereignty and investments in our futurity to remain Cherokee through ties to our lands and practices....”

Storytelling is another theme for this issue. Tanner Scott and Eva Garrouette deconstruct a brief story from an 1828 issue of the *Cherokee Phoenix*. They provide an object lesson on Cherokee grammar and morphology, and they provide an explanation of why an Aesop fable would appeal to *Phoenix* readers at that moment in Cherokee history. Scott and Garrouette write, “we hope to make our analyses accessible to the population of second-language learners who will increasingly inherit the responsibility of caring for the language as the population of first-language speakers continues to age.” As the Nation faced important decisions about its relationship to the U.S. government, it also experienced internal disagreement, and the story is about the dangers of allowing outsiders to be involved with internal differences. Editor Elias Boudinot’s “placement of Aesop’s fable about the price of infighting—tucking into the *Phoenix* immediately adjacent to the text of the tribe’s new Constitution—suggests a tiny reminder of the same lesson.”

This example illustrates Cherokee adaptability, as Boudinot translates a Western cultural icon, Aesop’s fables, for Cherokee purposes; he looks to an ancient Greek past to think about a Cherokee future. In her essay, Kathryn Walkiewicz discusses two contemporary Cherokee writers who repurpose Western technology and science fiction tropes for Indigenous goals. This pattern of adaptation has long existed in Cherokee culture, and she refers to it as “technovation.” Blake Hausman’s *Riding the Trail of Tears* depicts virtual reality technology being used in a touristic fashion to teach people about Cherokee history, but that dispossession narrative is itself possessed by Little People; tired of reliving the Trail of Tears repeatedly, they commandeer the technology and change the narrative. Daniel H. Wilson’s novels *Robopocalypse* and *Robogenesis* take a frequently imagined scenario—robot sentience and rebellion—but imagine it from an Indigenous perspective that incorporates relationship and reciprocity with other human communities, as they fight for survival, and with the robots with whom they contend. About *Robopocalypse*, Walkiewicz writes, “Having survived the world-altering traumas of colonization, warfare, and Removal, Indigenous characters in the novel are acutely reminded of the need to adapt to changing





circumstances while maintaining an ethics of responsibility and relationality older than colonialism." She writes, "Change-as-vitality is a strong throughline in both Hausman's and Wilson's work." Cherokees have needed the ability to make new relations in new circumstances and in new locations.

Finally, combining the themes of land, stories, and relations, Brian Burkhart creates a tale of Jisdu (Rabbit) receiving lessons from Elohi (Earth) as he travels through a tunnel from his homeland to Rome. The famous trickster arrives at the Vatican in time to share some of his newly acquired knowledge with Catholic priests and academics gathered there. Among many lessons, Elohi teaches Jisdu that language itself (and therefore stories) originates in the land: "Indigeneity is grounded in place... Even language arises from place—not just in the sense of experiences with places, but from the Land itself." Being in a place includes relations among all its inhabitants, human people, non-human people, and the land. Language is one of many important ways those entities build and maintain their relationships. Elohi teaches Jisdu about European settlers trying to negate the relationships among the inhabitants of a place, but that requires also a separation from the source of language and knowledge. Doing that requires what Elohi calls "settler colonial epistemologies of ignorance." Because of this division from the land, Elohi says, "ignorance and falsity are the byproducts of settler epistemic practices rather than knowledge and truth."

When Jisdu arrives in Rome, he crashes a conference of clergy, scientists, and philosophers from around the world. Jisdu attempts to share some of Elohi's lessons with those gathered, such as telling them of the need for "understanding the originary and continual kinship relationship all things have to the Earth." Some folks are receptive and others, such as the Cardinal, are not. Jisdu causes various kinds of chaos, and then refreshments are served, which probably was the rabbit's primary motivation for attending.

A word you will hear a lot in Cherokee gatherings is gadugi. In Burkhart's contribution to this issue, Jisdu defines it as "come and rise together." The rabbit also says the Cherokee have called themselves Anigaduwagi (the people who come together and rise above that which separates them). I like these connotations of rising, and I associate them with lifting up someone. I hope this issue lifts up the work of these Cherokee scholars and students for others to see and appreciate.

Gadugi also includes the notion of helping others, and I am especially honored to help young scholars—Baker, Radocay, and Walkiewicz—be seen by others in their academic

communities and perhaps receive a boost on their career paths. For assistant professors, peer-reviewed publications are essential for tenure. In this small way, *Transmotion* can help secure the place of more citizens of Native nations in academic positions.

Ugido wado!

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