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“published to an Indian”: When the intimate turns political, or the role of intermarriages in Cherokee-US politics

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In a 1999 article about Elaine Goodale Eastman, author, activist, and wife of Sioux author, doctor, and activist Charles Alexander Eastman, Katherine Ellinghaus argued that the late 20th century feminist slogan “the personal is political” is a useful concept to analyze marriages between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. The political dimension of intermarriages seems indeed to be deeply rooted in the DNA of the relationship between Native Americans and Europeans. Contrary to what American mythology would have us believe, Pocahontas did not marry John Smith out of love but was abducted by the English colonists and married to John Rolfe, in 1614, to ensure peace between the Powhatan people and the English. According to Mattaponi sacred oral history, Pocahontas accepted to marry Rolfe because she “hoped that her marriage to Rolfe would help create a bond between her people and his, especially after having had a baby by one of them. After all, her father, Wahunsenaca, had wanted the English colonists to be part of the Powhatan nation” (Custalow & Daniel 65). John Smith, who had met Pocahontas as a child, had been made aware of the political implications of a possible marriage with her: “Some prophetic spirit calculated he had the savages in such subjection he would have made himself a king by marrying Pocahontas, Powhatan’s daughter” (Smith 113).

In the 1720’s, Virginia trader William Byrd not only still believed that the best way to achieve lasting peace between the Native Americans and the English colonizers was intermarriage, but he even hinted at the fact that it was also the best way to assimilate the Native Americans, by “civilization” and conversion:

[The English] had now made peace with the Indians, but there was one thing wanting to make that peace lasting. The Natives could, by no means, persuade [*sic*] themselves that the English were heartily their Friends, so long as they disdained to intermarry with them. And, in earnest, had the English consulted their own Security and the good of the Colony – Had they intended either to Civilize or Convert these Gentiles, they would have brought their Stomachs to embrace this prudent Alliance. (Byrd 3)

In a phrasing in which today's reader may read innuendoes probably unintended by Byrd, he explicitly added: "For, after all that can be said, a sprightly Lover is the most prevailing Missionary that can be sent amongst these, or any other Infidels" (Byrd 4).

In order to make intermarriage more acceptable, or, to paraphrase William Byrd, easier to "stomach," he redefines the Indians as less savage and heathenish than perceived by the colonizers, even less corrupted by the trappings of European civilization, and with physical features that redeemed the darkness of their skin:

The Indians are generally tall and well-proportion'd, which may make full amends for the darkness of their Complexions. Add to this, that they are healthy & Strong, with Constitutions untainted by Lewdness, and not enfeebled by Luxury. Besides, Morals and all considered, I cant think the Indians were much greater Heathens than the first Adventurers, who, had they been good Christians, would have had the Charity to take this only method of converting the Natives to Christianity. (Byrd 3)

Other than peace and conversion, intermarriage with the Native Americans presented a third significant political advantage, according to William Byrd: the colonization of the land by the Europeans would appear more acceptable to the Natives: "Besides, the poor Indians would have had less reason to Complain that the English took away their Land, if they had received it by way of Portion with their Daughters" (Byrd 4). To conclude Byrd's philosophy about intermarriage, all means of colonization – political alliance, religious conversion, and acquisition of land – could be made more effective by a colonization of the Native American women's uterus, with the added benefit of seeing the "race" vanish: "Nor wou'd the Shade of the Skin have been any reproach at this day; for if a Moor may be washt white in 3 Generations, Surely an Indian might have been blancht in two" (Byrd 4).

Of course, this kind of considerations are better understood if one keeps in mind the geopolitical context in Byrd's days, that is the rivalry between European imperialist nations to control as much as possible of the American continent. This explains that Byrd compares the English attitude to the French, hoping to point his fellow countrymen into action:

The French, for their parts, have not been so Squeamish in Canada, who upon Trial find abundance of Attraction in the Indians. Their late Grand Monarch thought it not below even the Dignity of a Frenchman to become one flesh with this People, and therefore Ordered 100 Livres for any of his Subjects, Man or Woman, that would intermarry with a Native.

By this piece of Policy we find the French Interest very much Strengthen'd amongst the Savages, and their Religion, such as it is, propagatd just as far as their Love. And I heartily wish this well-concerted Scheme don't hereafter give the

French an Advantage over his Majesty's good Subjects on the Northern Continent of America. (Byrd 4)

William Byrd's text shows clearly how the intimate can be political indeed. In spite of Byrd's seemingly scientific approach of the subject, however, intermarriage might not have had the effects he hoped for. The point of the present paper is to demonstrate that intermarriage may not have changed the Cherokees, for example, as much as historians have claimed, nor as much as some of the Euro-American parties of the unions might have expected.

In the 1820s, in Cornwall, Connecticut, two young women from prominent New England families, Sarah Northrup and Harriett Gold, married John Ridge and Elias Boudinot, respectively, two young Cherokee students of the local Foreign Mission school. The impact of Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot's marriage, specifically, on the local community is well documented, thanks to the correspondence left by several members of the Gold family. This marriage can constitute an illustration of how the intimate can turn political, mainly in two ways, if one takes "political" in the literal sense of the word referring to the complex of relations between people in society. First, the marriage was political because it was a public scandal. Secondly, it was political because potentially meant as a medium for the assimilation of the Cherokees.

Among the Cherokees, however, intermarriages had a very different impact, albeit not devoid of political implications.

Before I briefly raise a few questions about how the personal turned political in both communities, one has to keep in mind that although the intimate may be political, it is still, by definition, a private matter. Thus, my point is not to generalize what may be said about this case to all intermarriages between Euro-Americans and Native Americans, or even Cherokees, but rather to shed some light on one particular instance with the hope of producing no more than a hint at a bigger picture.

Harriett Gold: Navigating between intimacy and publicity

All marriages are, to some extent, political since they are made public so that society at large recognizes a man and a woman as being married. At the same time, most marriages,

however, are fundamentally private and intimate matters. Harriett Gold experienced in a particularly acute way the difficult navigation between intimacy and publicity that is inherent in every marriage. The marriage of Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot is an interesting case to study because in Cornwall, Connecticut, it became a very public affair indeed.

When Harriett wrote to her sister Flora and brother-in-law Herman Vaill that she was “published to an Indian,” she implied much more than to say that the bans had been posted: “Yes it is so – the time has come when your Sister Harriett is already published to an Indian. If you have seen Mr Stone quarterly report you have seen our names and intentions” (Harriett Gold to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, 25 June 1825; Gaul 83). The report mentioned by Harriett was the report of the Foreign Mission School for June 1825 in which the prospective marriage was violently condemned:

We feel ourselves bound to say, that after the unequivocal disapprobation of such connexions, expressed by the Agents, and by the Christian public universally; we regard the conduct of those who have been engaged in or accessory to this transaction, as criminal; as offering an insult to the known feelings of the Christian community.” (Gaul 87)

Harriett’s own brother Stephen dramatically contributed to the publicity of his sister’s pending marriage to an Indian by burning the fiancés in effigy in the Cornwall main plaza: in the same letter, Harriett complained:

I fear Brother Stephen has, to prevent scandal brought a real scandal upon himself which cannot easily be wiped off. Even the most unprincipled say, they never heard of any thing so low even among the heathen as that of burning a Sister in effigy. (Harriett Gold to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, 25 June 1825; Gaul 85)

Ironically, this very publicity is what seems to have bothered Harriett’s family, so much that they tended to exaggerate its impact. Daniel Brinsmade, another of Harriett’s brothers-in-law, complained to Herman and Flora that “the Cornwall business is all before the publick the agents have published the thing to the world” (Daniel Brinsmade to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, 29 June 1825; Gaul 89). Another irony is that her family often blamed Harriett for being too secretive about her engagement: Herman Vaill wrote to her that her sisters “feel as though their dear sister H. had not confided in them as she ought. They feel as if you had deceived them” (Herman Vaill to Harriett Gold, 29 June 1825; Gaul 100). And he added:

Nor must it be doubted but that all this has been going on with the knowledge, & at least, the silent secret aid, & approbation of your Parents, & this too, in the very face of your Mother’s repeated protestations of ignorance, & of your Father’s

public affidavit; which all who have read will now turn against him, as evidence that he has knowingly disguised the truth. (Gaul 98-99)

In the end, it seems that it is the eventual publicity of the secrecy that the family feared the most. At least that is the argument that Vaill hoped would make Harriett change her mind:

The ignorance in which your brothers & sisters have been kept with regard to this mysterious affair, has been very trying to them; & will continue to be so, when, (should you go on) the world shall know it. But, we must vindicate ourselves from all charges of knowledge or participation in it, & if it does go on, I shall publish this letter of wh. I have kept a copy. But I do hope that will not be necessary (Gaul 101).]

A concern for the family's reputation transpires in these quotes, as in many other passages of Vaill's letters. The reputation of the missionaries and their school was also at stake. Vaill never made really clear, however, why this marriage, and the secret around it, would be of ill repute. He simply stated, in the same long June 29, 1825 letter to Harriett, that the missionaries' work – "to prepare [the Indians] to become [...] the sober, chaste, kind husbands of wives from among their own people" (Gaul 95) – would be undermined by a second intermarriage, after Sarah Northrup and John Ridge's. Some members of the family, however, expressed bluntly what others may have not dared write; on July 2, 1825, Cornelius Everest, another brother-in-law, wrote to Harriett's brother Stephen:

Ah, it is all to be summed up in this – our sister loves an Indian!
Shame on such love. Sad was the day when the mission school was planted in Cornwall. What wild enthusiasm has been cherished by some in that place! And how much wickedness has been committed under the cloak of religion & of a missionary spirit. But can this unnatural—this foolish—this wicked & mischievous connection be permitted to take place? O the thought is too much to bear. (Cornelius Everest to Stephen Gold, 2 July 1825; Gaul 103)

Probably illustrating an early case of NIMBYism, the main problem for Harriett's brothers-in-law was that intermarriage, which Vaill claimed to support,¹ happened in their family: "The same excitement is again produced as in the case of the other wedding. But O it

¹ As to the Principle you know that I have maintained it as correct, & scriptural that such connexions should be formed. I have always, in this respect, been an advocate for intermarriages &c. (Herman Vaill to Harriett Gold, 5 March 1826; Gaul 141).

is a different case. It comes home to us" (Cornelius Everest to Stephen Gold, 2 July 1825; Gaul 103).

The hypocrisy of some of Harriett's Christian entourage may be likened to the hypocrisy underlying assimilationist policies at the end of the 19th century, which were meant to "civilize" the Indians by keeping them aside from US society in reservations. Herman Vaill, for example, got lost in this contradiction when he wrote that he wanted what was good for the Indians, as long as it did not involve a young girl from the family to marry one of them:

I rejoice that success has so far attended the efforts of Christians in their behalf; & one of the great reasons why I advise you to abandon your intention of marrying among them, is, that under existing circumstances, such a step will probably do far more to hinder than to promote, the measures which are in operation for their welfare (Herman Vaill to Harriett Gold, 29 June 1825; Gaul 92).

Against Boudinot himself, Vaill had no grudges. On the contrary, he had much hope for the good he might do for his people. If only he understood, however, that he did not have to marry a Gold girl to do so:

I have always respected him for his talents, for his diligence in [study?] & the proficiency he made in learning, while at the F. M. School; & for his hopeful piety. I know nothing personally against him as to his disposition; & I would even hope that he may not be one of those who return to their former sins, but that he may prove himself faithful to Christ, & grateful to his Christian benefactors; & of great good for his Nation. But to become thus useful, & to prove himself thus grateful to his friends, & faithful to Christ, it is not necessary that he should marry a white woman. (Herman Vaill to Harriett Gold, 29 June 1825; Gaul 92)

Vaill claimed he wanted the best for the Native Americans as long as it did not interfere with the Foreign Mission school's reputation: "The object of it was to civilize, & to Christianize the heathen; to prepare them to become, like Thomas Hopoo, the sober, chaste, kind husbands of wives from among their own people, & and to qualify them to become the enlightened, converted & and obedient subjects of the kingdom of Christ" (Herman Vaill to Harriett Gold, 29 June 1825; Gaul 95).

Thus, apparently, at least in the Cornwall community, the idea of doing good for the Indians – converting, assimilating or "civilizing" them – was more readily associated to intermarriage than love. As a consequence, one may wonder whether one should see Harriet Gold's marriage to Elias Boudinot in the same light as Katherine Ellinghaus sees Elaine Goodale's marriage to Charles Eastman.

In her article on Elaine Goodale Eastman, Katherine Ellinghaus explained that Sioux author Charles Alexander Eastman's wife saw her commitment to her husband as a contribution to the reformers' efforts to assimilate the Native Americans. Elaine Goodale made clear, in an autobiographical text published in 1937, that her marriage was vested with a grander political purpose:

When, only a few weeks after our first meeting, I promised to marry Dr. Eastman, it was with a thrilling sense of two-fold consecration. I gave myself wholly in that hour to the traditional duties of wife and mother, abruptly relinquishing all thought of an independent career for the making of a home. At the same time, I embraced with a new and deeper zeal the conception of life-long service to my husband's people. (*Sister to the Sioux* 172)

Assimilation by intermarriage was a fairly common concept among the reformers who called themselves the "Friends of the Indian" at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, among whom was Elaine Goodale. According to Wilbert Ahern, "Speaking with varying degrees of enthusiasm, most suggested that it represented the ultimate solution to the question. 'The Indian problem is likely to disappear in the next century for want of a distinguishable Indian race' was a common sentiment in their 'vanishing policy'" (Ahern 25). In his second annual message to Congress, on December 2nd 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt declared that "in dealing with the Indians our aim should be their ultimate absorption into the body of our people. But in many cases the absorption must and should be very slow." If he did not explicitly call for his fellow Euro-Americans to go find Native spouses, he seemed satisfied with the visible consequences of intermarriage in Indian Territory:

In portions of the Indian Territory the mixture of blood has gone on at the same time with progress in wealth and education, so that there are plenty of men with varying degrees of purity of Indian blood who are absolutely indistinguishable in point of social, political, and economic ability from their white associates. (Roosevelt)

To Roosevelt, clearly, social, political, and economic progress was a biological consequence of intermarriage. Journalist, writer, and activist John Milton Oskison, himself the offspring of intermarriages between Cherokees and Euro-Americans, thought this message by Roosevelt "an exceedingly intelligent one," and he commented the presidential take on the Indian problem writing: "Then the problem is working itself out in an interesting way" (Oskison 353).

In the light of the correspondence between Harriet Gold's family members, it seems that as early as the 1820s, at least some white missionary women were tempted to invest body and soul into an assimilation program. In a letter dated March 5th, 1826, Herman Vaill, resigning himself, wrote to Harriett: "I have the same affectionate, fraternal regard for you as ever; & hope that you will be the instrument of accomplishing much in behalf of that People whom I suppose you now consider as your Nation" (Gaul 141). This letter was an answer to one Harriett sent Herman and Flora Vaill in which she had described her marriage in terms similar to those Goodale would use decades later:

I cannot but rejoice in prospect of spending my days among those ~~illegible~~ despised people & as the time draws nearer I long to begin my work. I think I may reasonably expect many trials, hardships, & privations. May I never be disposed to seek my own ease any farther than is consistent with the greatest usefulness (Harriett Gold to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, 2 January 1826; Gaul 140).

Once in the Cherokee Nation, Harriett recurrently expressed that, marrying a Cherokee, she espoused her husband's people's cause: "The place of my birth is dear to me but I do love this people & with them I wish to live & die" (Elias and Harriett Boudinot to Herman Vaill, 21 November 1827; Gaul 160). She did what she could to help her husband launch the *Cherokee Phoenix* – the first Cherokee newspaper and an instrument of resistance in the crisis the Cherokee Nation faced with encroaching Georgia and impending removal – notably by allowing him to use her connections to publicize a prospectus calling for subscriptions for the paper; in a letter enclosed with the one written by Harriett quoted above, Elias wrote to Herman Vaill, whom he addressed as My Dear Brother: "You will therefore do the Cherokees a great favour if you will present this Prospectus to all whom it may concern, and obtain as many Subscribers as you possibly can, if any are to be had in Connecticut, the land of intermarriages" (Gaul 159).

Harriett, who took pride in calling her children "our little Cherokees" and asked her sister to tell her nieces and nephews that "they have Cherokee Cousins" (Harriett Gold Boudinot to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, 7 January 1831; Gaul 173) may have believed that her union to a Cherokee was a practical step toward unifying the two peoples, and that purpose also guided her in helping her husband with the newspaper.

If indeed intermarriages between Cherokees and Euro-Americans happened with an assimilationist agenda in mind, one may wonder whether they reached their goal or not? A

superficial interpretation of the role played by mixed-bloods among the Cherokees, especially when they were opposed to traditionalists most of whom were full-bloods, is that they favored assimilation and their integration in the United States. Yet this interpretation is easily questioned by the fact that John Ross, only one-eighth Cherokee, led the staunchest resistance against Euro-American encroachment over Cherokee sovereignty.

When Elias Boudinot and John Ridge married their Euro-American wives, they did not abandon Cherokee values. They both resisted removal and defended Cherokee sovereignty, notably in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, edited by Boudinot. When they finally yielded to the idea of removal, it was because they became convinced that life with their Euro-American neighbors had become impossible.

How was intermarriage perceived in Cherokee society?

English traders started to settle in Cherokee towns and marry Cherokee women at the end of the 17th century (Mooney 31). Because of how the history of the relationship between Native Americans and European colonizers has been told for a long time, scholars have naturally intuited that these intermarriages were bound to transform the matrilineal and matrilocal order of Cherokee society. Men coming from European societies in which women were relegated to an inferior position would supposedly never have accepted to let their wives be the head of the family.

The ready availability of sources showing, starting at the beginning of the 19th century, that the Cherokees adopted Euro-American societal and political systems – written laws, centralization of government, written constitution, Euro-American schools, etc. along with acceptance of intermarriages – misled some historians into believing that the Cherokees abandoned their values and institutions for those proposed or imposed by Euro-Americans. To put it briefly, adjustment was mistaken for assimilation.

To understand the impact of intermarriage on Cherokee society, the scholar has to “run counter to the preponderance of evidence” (Perdue 568), in Theda Perdue’s terms. Or, maybe more precisely, form and content of the evidence have to be differentiated. This very simple and basic principle of text analysis is very often enough to challenge the master narrative. In 1827, the Cherokees did write a Constitution modeled on the US Constitution

establishing a centralized power vested in three branches of government. However, this constitution – which they published in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, in English and in the Cherokee syllabary invented by Sequoyah in 1821 – asserted Cherokee sovereignty on Cherokee territory and principles coming from an ancient Cherokee past, like communal property. In their laws, the Cherokees also protected matrilineal rules of property.

We know that the Cherokees have always accepted the possibility of intermarriage with the Whites,² as they never refused the presence of Euro-American workers in their midst. On October 26, 1819, one of the first written laws of the Cherokee Nation welcomed Euro-Americans in the tribe if they were “schoolmasters, blacksmiths, millers, salt petre and gun powder manufacturers, ferrymen and turnpike keepers, and mechanics” (*Laws* 6). A few days later, on November 2nd, 1819, a law was passed to protect the Cherokee wife’s property in case of a marriage to a white man, as well as in case of divorce. Here, intermarriages are clearly not considered as a means to move away from Cherokee values in order to adopt Euro-American ways. With such a law, not only the Cherokees protected the matrilineal organization of society, they also protected their lands from being taken away by Euro-American husbands. One Cherokee way, however, polygamy, seems to be lost on the occasion of this law. Forbidden to white husbands, it is only recommended that Cherokee husbands also give up the practice. The recommendation will become a prohibition by virtue of a law passed on November 10th, 1825 (*Laws* 57).

With the November 2nd, 1819 law mentioned above, we also learn that Cherokee citizenship was automatically granted to white men who married Cherokee women, whereas the latter were not granted U.S. citizenship by the U.S. federal government until a law was passed in 1888. According to a Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, “prior to this act, an Indian woman entering into marriage with a citizen of the United States did not become a citizen.” And he added:

² They had issues, however, with intermarriage with Africans, as made clear by Section 4 of Article III of the 1827 constitution: “The descendants of Cherokee men by all free women, except the African race, whose parents may have been living together as man and wife, according to the customs and laws of this Nation, shall be entitled to all the rights and privileges of this Nation, as well as the posterity of Cherokee women by all free men. No person who is of negro or mulatto parentage, either by the father or mother side, shall be eligible to hold any office of profit, honor or trust under this Government” (*Laws of the Cherokee Nation* 120).

Therefore the children of Indian women married to citizens of the United States prior to August 9, 1888, have been regarded and treated as Indians and as members of the tribe to which their mother belonged, so far as their rights of property were concerned. (1894 Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 65)

The Cherokees granted citizenship to children born of intermarriages as early as November 10th, 1825:

Resolved by the National Committee and Council, That the children of Cherokee men and white women, living in the Cherokee Nation as man and wife, be, and they are, hereby acknowledged, to be equally entitled to all the immunities and privileges enjoyed by the citizens descending from the Cherokee race, by the mother's side. (Laws 57)

In the passage above from the 1894 report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, written after land allotment was passed into an act in 1887, we notice that the issue of land was intricately linked to that of intermarriage, thus making the latter a political issue not only because of questions of assimilation but also because it allowed the U.S. to acquire more land, thus following the logic expressed by William Byrd 170 years before.

The Cherokee laws mentioned above show that the Cherokees were aware that lands could be at stake in intermarriage and they made sure to protect them. In general, many laws in the 1820s aimed at protecting Cherokee property. They were written and passed to resist the pressure that Georgians increasingly exerted on Cherokee territory. So from the Cherokees' perspective, intermarriage was clearly not a door to the abandonment of territorial sovereignty, although they were aware of that risk.

In their compiled laws of 1881, the Cherokees reasserted their sovereignty "over all persons whatever, who may from time to time be privileged to reside within the territorial limits of this Nation, therefore, every white man, or citizen of the United States, or of any foreign state or government, desiring to marry a Cherokee" (*Compiled Laws 275*). Such men had to apply to Cherokee authorities for a license to marry a Cherokee woman and to present "a certificate of good moral character, signed by at least ten respectable citizens of the Cherokee Nation who are Cherokees [...] by blood, and who shall have been acquainted with him at least six months immediately preceding the signing of such certificate" (*Compiled Laws 275*). The applicants had to pledge never to betray the Cherokee Nation:

"I do solemnly swear, that I will honor, defend and submit to the constitution and laws of the Cherokee Nation, and will neither claim, nor seek, from the United

States, or any other government, or from the judicial tribunals thereof, any protection, privilege or redress incompatible with the same, as guaranteed to the Cherokee Nation by the United States in treaty stipulations entered into between them. So help me God.” (*Compiled Laws* 276)

A Euro-American person married to a Cherokee one remained a citizen of the Cherokee Nation as long as they remained married (*Compiled Laws* 277-278). If a Cherokee wife was abandoned by her non-Cherokee husband, her property was protected (*Compiled Laws* 278). This measure, of course, protected Cherokee women, but again, it also put land at the heart of Cherokee preoccupations. Just like the Georgians had put a lot of pressure on Cherokee territory in the 1820s, the Cherokee Nation witnessed massive Euro-American encroachment on their territory after the Civil War, in the wake of the building of the railroad.

Conclusion

In the limited span allowed by the format of this study, a focused look at one well-documented marriage on the one hand, and at Cherokee laws contemporary to that marriage on the other hand, allows us to understand in what ways the intimate was necessarily political in the case of intermarriages between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. This is not to say, however, that love, tenderness, and affection were not paramount motivations for the individuals to get married. Contrary to what the 17th-century marriage of “Princess” Pocahontas to John Rolfe may have us believe, marriages between Native Americans and Euro-Americans were not political in the same way that European royal marriages were political, even though the former may sometimes present territorial or geopolitical advantages which may liken them to the latter.

If one can presume, as we have shown, that Harriett Gold felt her marriage to Elias Boudinot contributed to a greater mission than her own happiness, she also wrote of her husband – “who not only professes, but is truly worthy of my warmest affections” (Harriett Gold Boudinot to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, 7 January 1831; Gaul 173) – in affectionate and loving terms.

Nevertheless, the religious mindset of Harriett Gold, especially as regarded her marriage – “I still have the consolation of feeling that I have not acted contrary to duty & that what I have done as respects forming a connexion is not adverse to divine approbation”

(Harriett Gold to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill and Catharine Gold, 25 June 1825; Gaul 83) – and the missionary spirit that animated her, encourage us to look beyond what she made accessible of the intimacy of her marriage, by examining her marriage in the light of the public reaction to it, of how intermarriage in a colonial context was theorized (for example by William Byrd), and of other similar marriages (like Elaine Goodale and Charles Alexander Eastman’s).

Because religious conversion, assimilation, and overall “civilization” seemed to be at stake in these marriages, it is necessary, before jumping to conclusions based only on viewpoints from the colonizers’ side (Byrd’s, Gold’s, and Goodale’s), to consider the colonized as agents of their history and examine their take on intermarriage (for example, by closely reading what Cherokee laws had to say about the topic).

The laws passed by the Cherokees as soon as they started to pass written laws show that they were very well aware that lands could be at stake in intermarriage. Especially in contexts – in the 1820s and at the end of the 19th century – where the Cherokee Nation was under a lot of pressure from Euro-American territorial encroachment, the Cherokees were wary of land loss. As I have analyzed, the Cherokees were careful enough to pass laws so as a Cherokee woman’s property stays in the nation in case of divorce or death of the wife. This wariness, however, was never in the way of intermarriage, which was seen as a way to strengthen the community. This objective had always presided over Cherokee marriage rules, like the obligation to marry outside the clan. Contrary to Euro-Americans, the Cherokees never expressed, as far as the sources available show, fear of miscegenation. Neither did they intend, of course, to “wash” or “blanch” away, in William Byrd’s terms, whatever made them Cherokee.

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