

Blake M. Hausman, *Riding the Trail of Tears*, University of Nebraska Press

Reviewed by Tom Gannon

"What truly happened between May 1838 and July 1839," on the Cherokee Trail of Tears? "And more importantly for the TREPP, how could it be transformed into a user-friendly, consumer-driven ride" (174)? The central setting and plot premise of Blake M. Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* (2011), TREPP stands for the Tsalagi Removal Exodus Point Park, a virtual-reality Indian-tourist-trap-Disney-World in Georgia turned near-future paranoid dystopia. Writing knowingly in the wake of such Native literary forebears as Gerald Vizenor and Sherman Alexie, Hausman has crafted a first novel that is an entertainingly hybrid medley of Cherokee cultural history and story, and of a contemporary pop-culture, mass-media milieu in which all discursive and iconographic attempts to represent the truths of the former seem doomed to failure.

What strikes one first is that the novel is just outright and consistently hilarious. Hausman plays all the right syncopated drum beats (*ouch*) in portraying a Native virtual-reality Disneyland (i.e., TREPP)—an "indigenous" version, if you will, of Baudrillard's America as a consumer-fool's-paradise of simulations. The humor is redoubled by the novel's more serious cultural critique, the fact that, as the novel frequently intimates, the contemporary notion of the Native American has itself been so Disneyfied that the very existence of a virtual-reality Trail of Tears seems painfully appropriate. Most of what happens in the story happens in digital—that is, simulated—reality: just as almost everything "Native American" happens for whitestream America on a similar grossly simulated plane of representation.

Beyond Native stereotypes, Hausman's book obviously addresses the more generally human theme of a postmodern world of Kafkaesque paranoia, of Big Brother, and of all discourse gone awry. The digital Trail of Tears may be read as an emblem for the technoclaustrophobia of having to always be living within the matrices of powerful ideologies (which include bogus Native American stereotypes, by the way). TREPP's programmers—the "Suits," of whom we learn very little—are the immediate Big Brothers here, but almost every page is permeated by an underlying uncertainty and angst regarding who's doing what, and who's working for whom. Besides the inscrutable Suits and the mysterious Chef, even "Homeland Security" is somehow involved. Moreover, given the envelope and multi-levelled point(s) of

view, there is even the possibility that the main character (and TREPP tour guide) Tallulah "has simply imagined the whole thing" (351). Towards the end, having had her (virtual?!) world turned upside down by her discovery of the renegade Misfits within the digital program itself, Tallulah has to think a moment before consciously refusing "to believe that Homeland Security had colonized her dreams" (322). (And speaking of Homeland Security's presence here, the novel's several treatments of the equation of "Indians" and "terrorists" in the American popular imagination is another well-done social critique. [After the publication of Hausman's novel, Obama *was* "Geronimo," remember?])

The central character, Tallulah Wilson, is a sympathetic mixed-blood with—of course—a major ethnic identity problem: she is a "modern Cherokee woman living in Jackson County, Georgia," who "has yet to set foot in a place without an ironic name" (22)—like *Jackson County*. During her final questioning by Homeland Security, she thinks back on "the crisis of being an . . . indigenous Southerner at a high school with an Indian mascot in suburban Atlanta" (349). Thus she is the book's main Native mouthpiece for the tragedies and ironies of Euro-American colonialism, both historical and present-day. But this "Indian" point of view is also problematized by the fact that she "is three-quarters white American, and she drives a hybrid[!] Honda sedan, paid for entirely because she works her ass off for the Trail of Tears" (147), giving white tourists the comfortable simulations they expect, and playing up her own Pocahontas-high-cheek-bone good (Indian) looks. To his great credit, Hausman (almost) never succumbs to some easy "authentic Indian" essentialism; the concept of *Indian*-ness within the novel is usually kept firmly in brackets, as evidenced by Tallulah's own troubled "hybrid" psychology.

As one of the more clever plot devices, Tallulah's clientele, her non-Indian tourists, experience the Trail as virtual (and darker-skinned) "Cherokees": this renders the Native historical point of view abundantly clear, as painfully evident as the gun-butt jab from an 1830's U.S. soldier. Another useful plot twist is having a Jewish family in the main tourist group; the family matriarch, Irma Rosenberg, becomes the second main point-of-view character when she gets split off from the group as they're beginning the Trail and spends much of the novel among the virtual-Cherokee Misfits. Her various moments of sympathetic recognition often concern how analogous the Jewish and Native American holocausts truly are. Towards the end of her time with the Misfits, she "truly felt like an alien" (245)—as an ethnic Other in the "face of (another) Other." This is not to say that her several momentary epiphanies don't border at times on victim-speak, maudlin didacticism: "She felt terribly for everything she'd ever thought about

Indian people in general, guilty for ever appearing at this digital death house in the first place" (232). Ouch.

As necessary clarification in this rather lengthy review, two other major characters need to be presented. The Chef is the original Misfit, and eventually Irma's rather Zen-like mentor (in his very silence, above all, his refusing to let her—and the frustrated reader—in on the Misfits' origins, or goals). He is part enigmatic Native rebel-demiurge, part utterer of gruff and laconic film-noir/Mickey-Spillane-detective-novel clichés—and the latter trait is no doubt intentional, as an aspect of the enigma that is Chef; and that is the novel. Then we have the mythic-yet-also-digital Little Little Person, a rogue-of-a-narrator who introduces (and ends) the book, who has "gone off the (virtual) reservation," as it were, by lodging himself in Tallulah's forehead. As is (somewhat?) clear from his self-introduction, both his own kind, the Little Little People, and the human-sized Misfits are not only "actual" mythic figures from Cherokee culture, but also digital bits & bytes programmed by the Suits. On the one hand, then, this narrator serves as a convenient spy and spokesperson for a traditional Cherokee point of view; on the other hand, he is the infuriating postmodern unreliable narrator (complete with 2nd-person addresses to the reader) to which English academics, at least, have been long-accustomed.

His introductory narrative is funny, and charming, even, in its very idiosyncrasy, but the real laughs begin with the Tour, with its near-interminable series of dark-humorous takes on Native stereotypes. Tourists can dine, of course, at the obligatory Soaring Eagle Grill. We witness the male Cherokee from the First Cabin—Deer Cooker—die like all Indians stereotypically should, "as if sprung from a Fenimore Cooper novel" (271). There is the hokey Misfit ritual-recitation of "Remember" as an incremental refrain (167), as if straight from a Joy Harjo poem; and the painful hilarity of an Atlanta Braves game (yes, complete with the Tomahawk Chop) on television during the novel's crucial scene in which Tallulah is debriefed after her ill-fated tour. And of course, one of the U of GA students on the tour has a previously developed infatuation with *Plains* Indians, a yearning and half-knowledge that is forever incongruous with the Cherokee history lesson and American Southeast setting: he wants to kill a buffalo (95); he only knows the Lakota word for whites, "wasichu" (99); and towards the end of the first evening, in the First Cabin, it is he who utters the ultimate Indian wanna-be line, "Let's bust out the drums and flutes again" (142). When the earnest fellow finally changes his name to "Wakantanka," Tallulah has to retort: "Just because you read a book about Lakota religion at UGA does not give you the right to go around using Lakota words for everything!" (297-298).

The "Wise Old Medicine Man" is TREPP's favorite (and final) attraction, so much so that tourists sometimes get themselves killed early along the Trail to get to him sooner. He is a bundle of comforting white stereotypes about Indian religiosity, offering "the kind of authentic spiritual information that anthropology students yearn for" (180); he "reaffirms your personal ideology by showering you with the kind of aboriginal spirituality that only [virtual] dead people can exude" (57)! In a more subtle (or at least academic) vein, Hausman's development of Tallulah's educational background allows the reader to learn how much even many modern Natives have relied on James Mooney's old turn of the 20th-century anthropological studies in retrieving their "authentic" religious heritage, and even history: "Even the official tribal information from the Cherokee Heritage Center in Tahlequah reads like a collection of excerpts from the Mooney book [on 19th-century Cherokee culture]" (173). I told you the book was funny.

But Hausman also does many things that demonstrate that he does know a lot about traditional Cherokee culture/Native cultures, beyond the fact that there is a hell of a lot of drumming going on in the novel. On several levels, the book is all about *story*—as the envelope narrator immediately tells us—and it's also all about *vision*, in a specifically Native sense. For one thing, Tallulah is a pretty good storyteller herself (as a tour guide, it's her job, after all), and her telling of the traditional Cherokee "First Man and First Woman" tale (101-102) is truly one of the highlights of the book. (But I almost immediately want to satirize myself here by quoting from the Alexie movie *Smoke Signals*: "It's a fine example of the oral tradition"!) A good background in Native folklore also defines the characters Fish and Ish, Chef's sidekick-helpers and probable sons. (Also, "Ish" begs one to think of Ishi, the last Yana Indian; and it allows for the great one-liner, "Call me Ish.") Here are the archetypal mythic twins of many a Native cosmology, and Hausman handles them, moreover, with great self-reflexivity: "Of course" they're twins, Tallulah concludes at one point; "It's all part of the mythology" (308).

The novel's most earnest "Native" component is Tallulah's vision of her "bear-father" (322-328). As her psychic coming-to-terms with her dead father, it is also fittingly the book's emotional climax, no doubt. But what an odd vision quest it is. Has the father/bear come to tell her that "I'm a poseur and a hack, a tourist bullshit artist who sold her fucking soul to Coca-Cola for my air-conditioning, who's so fucked up she can't even have a real vision? I can't even have a fucking vision in a computer game filled with big fucking visions. Oh, God!" (324). But the subsequent reconciliation with the rather lugubrious "bear" of a father works, emotionally; and,

"crying for a vision," she can finally *cry*, and transcend the repressive hard-mindedness that has been her long-term adult persona. Tallulah has been "desperate for a new metaphor" (325), and this dream/vision apparently provides her with one, given her change of behavior in the rest of the novel.

But there's a fine line between critiquing stereotypes and trying to salvage whatever recuperative "authentic" Cherokee or Native that remains. Hausman's refrain appeals to such traditional Indianisms as the Lakota-now-pan-Indian "it's a good day to die" ("Today is not a good day to die Today is a good day to go to North Carolina" [277]), and of Indians living and dying "tragically," in "tragic" ways, and of Tallulah's clichéd self-hair-shearing—all can of course only be read, in the wake of Vizenor and Alexie, as always-already dripping with irony and satire; but there are points in the novel in which the line blurs between the obvious stereotypical simulations of *Indian*-ness discussed above and the author's (apparently) serious invocations of authentic (Cherokee) indigeneity that I've also already tried to indicate. There is some salvation here, in terms of the fiction, in Tallulah's interminable self-consciousness of *performing* such clichés as part of her very job. And maybe Hausman is in actual agreement with me that "authenticity," if there is such a thing, cannot be represented in (at least English-language) discourse. But there still seem to be at least two levels of "Indian" going on in the book, one more positively privileged than the other.

While the press blurb includes the intriguing attention-getter, "Sherman Alexie meets William Gibson. . . . Leslie Marmon Silko meets Philip K. Dick," it is certainly Sherman Alexie who is the closer Native American analogue here. (Another instance of hilarity: Tallulah's boyfriend has "never read a book by Sherman Alexie that didn't make him cry at least once every ten pages" [326]!) Indeed, the opening mixed-mythic-and-pomo-sci-fi narration reminds one very much of Alexie's haunting short story "Distances," unreliable and psychically wounded narrator included. One might even claim that the almost compulsive attention to popular culture is Alexie-an, too, but this is much more obviously the new *de rigeur* of "Native American" novels, this combination of the miraculous/mythic and the mundane/techno, an "Indian" subject matter combined with the digital age, a postmodern style, and an ambiguity of narrative levels. The mythic/digital envelope narrator combines his explications of Cherokee mythology with tropes involving iTunes and MS Word documents. Powwow drums are juxtaposed with Tallulah's reflections on indie rock and Radiohead. The seven (*oh, mystical number*) Misfit

elders wear baseball caps, one even sporting a Cleveland Indians hat, replete with the "classic bucktooth smiling idiot face" (112). The Misfits' dancing is accompanied by drums and shakers—and fuzz-pedal electric guitars. But what is most specifically Alexie-an is Hausman's ability to make the reader laugh out loud, often several times a page.

And yet in some ways the more central Native-writer precursor here is Gerald Vizenor. My own introductory reference to the "Native American" as a bogus set of false signifiers is borrowed from Vizenor, and it's pretty safe to assume that Hausman is also very familiar with the Father of postmodern Native American critical theory. In fact, Tallulah—and maybe even the Misfits—can perhaps be most profitably read as "postindians" (to use Vizenor's term), doing their best to craft some semblance of ontological "survivance" (another Vizenorian word) in a culturally hybrid world of Baudrillardian simulacra. . . . And, oh, by the way, when one Misfit elder quips, "Some of those Italians are better Indians than us" (123), he is echoing a similar statement that Vizenor has uttered regarding modern Germans, and their fastidious attention to the material details in simulating Native American powwows.

The novel's greatest weakness may also be its greatest strength. As a mixed-blood myself and an academic Native Americanist, I felt the various "history lessons" regarding the actual Trail of Tears to be, at times, belabored; however, I'm certain that many other readers will feel just the opposite, and appreciate the historical background. I would still assert that the didacticism at work here—which might be unkindly caricatured as "let me teach you about the Cherokee experience from 1834 on"—feels heavy-handed at times. Yes, the fact that Tallulah is a tour guide allows her greater fictional pretense to preach, and to (rather) naturally ask her white tourists, after another lesson on territorial conquest, "So what do we learn from De Soto?" (67). But this still made me wince. Yes, Tallulah knows so many painful truths about U.S./Cherokee history, she "would like to teach" her tourist groups all of it, she thinks, given the time and tourist interest and empathy (218); and for better or worse, the author has the same impulse? Speaking as a Native Americanist scholar and critic, I don't think that a great work of art needs to wear its Indian agenda on its sleeve; that should be worked into the narrative more seamlessly, as in—well, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*? (And maybe even that is a bad example.)

For instance, the Jeep Cherokee discussion (143-148) is one of the funnier episodes in the book, as evidenced in the following: "Tallulah imagines an Oklahoma Cherokee man driving a big red Jeep Cherokee with multiple American-flag bumper stickers, driving to Kansas City to

watch a Chiefs-Redskins game, listening to the song 'Indian Outlaw' on repeat, and howling along with the lyrics as he swerves between highway lanes, absolutely loving every minute of it" (144). Simply hilarious. But by page 146, the banter gets rather old, and one wonders if it would work better in a Native Studies classroom than in a novel. At last, the "conversation *trudges* onward with self-ridicule and caustic irony, *exhausting* potential combinations of automobile manufacturers with religious or tribal identities" (148; emphases mine). Yes. Yes, it has.

The novel sometimes reads, in fact, like an "academic" novel that only Native Americanists in their ivory tower can fully appreciate—where one character "can talk . . . about California [Native] writers like" Wendy Rose and Louis Owens (72). Then there is the statement that "the Cherokee round-up [in 1838] was absolutely like the invasion of Baghdad back at the turn of the [21st] century" (80). As much as I applaud the sentiment, I'd prefer to encounter it in a Liz Cook-Lynn essay than in a novel. Also, at least one of Tallulah's "lessons" is just plain wrong: *kinnikinnick* is not a "Lakota" word (140), but a Delaware (Lenape) one.

Maybe my only real point here is that it's unfortunate that such "history lessons" may still be necessary in the so-called "Native American novel." (And maybe Hausman intended to write no such thing, but this is certainly how it has been marketed.) It is indeed symptomatic that the publisher's supplied collection of reviewer blurbs is heavy on the *history*: one reviewer emphasizes the fact that the novel is "about a traumatic episode in U.S. history," and then promises the reader "that you will become a participant in the Cherokee removal and not simply a witness." Unless I'm an especially poor or unsympathetic reader, this is blatant hyperbole. Another review excerpt notes, "Histories of the Trail of Tears have been published, but Blake Hausman's telling of it is unique." Huh. Unfortunately, this has been the common fate of many a fine novel marketed as "Native American": the "tragic (and real) (his)story of the Red Man" becomes the important thing, not fictional craft. Genres—and *raison d'être*s for writers and readers—get blurred.

Again, I may well be tilting at windmills here, and ultimately complaining about the marketing, not the product. My final verdict is that this is an important first novel, and that Hausman has the potential to follow in the Native-trickster-humorist footsteps of such luminaries as Thomas King and Sherman Alexie. At last, without revealing the specifics of the novel's end, I'd just add that a good discussion question regarding this book would run as follows: does this "Indian" novel perform the seemingly "archetypal" Indian-novel theme of "Going Home"—in

however an unexpected way?! (I'm *virtually* and *really* sure that the answer is yes, and in more ways than one.)

===XTRAS===

[**where?/omit?:**] **Misfits?!**—*why* created by the Suits/their *purpose?*! [ah: Suits want to replicate Cherokee cult. entire—incl. myths!?] ... and *who* is afraid of water (the Misfits!? [and the narrator, of course!])—and does it have anything to do, plot-wise, with the shower finale?? [N.B. 332!?!]

—this aspect of the plot intended to remain fairly (pomo-)inscrutable?

—water/shower finale: ≈*Waterworld!* Atom X!

[more under **humor?**:] Misfit elders & Chef keep speaking of Irma as an "omen" of "deliverance." And given the fact that the James Dickey novel is glossed early on (62), the use of the word *deliverance* as a mantra throughout the second half of the book strikes this reader as intertextually hilarious, whether Hausman was conscious of the "joke" or not.

—Ish = Ishi!? (with "deliverance," as subliminal wordplay?)

[where?:]—though flippant 2nd-person addressing of the reader in the novel's beginning rather a pomo fiction cliché that quickly grows old....

[where?:] The Francophile in me would have liked Hausman's clever phrase "nouveau savage" spelled "nouveau *sauvage*," especially when a big deal is made of the French pronunciation (129); but perhaps I am just missing the joke there.

[where??:] "like" when it should be "as if"?! [e.g., 131, 139]

[where/**omit**??:] —LOTS of pretty awful "like" similes, which H. spits out like nervous tics

—Vision Quest?! (323-): Cherokee ~?! [*yes, okay—I guess!—*] (Lakota! [≈Spencer!?!])

—Irma: (However, she does wonder at one point "if she had gone to hell" [125]?!...)

—** the word *Cherokee* as "linguistic colonialism" (52)

— —plot = *dual* return to North Carolina/the "homeland" —both on the mythic/virtual plane and the "real" one [N.B. 313]

"discarded" P#'s:

- an underlying uncertainty and angst regarding who's doing what, and who's working for whom [e.g., 347]
- part utterer of gruff and laconic film-noir/Mickey-Spillane-detective-novel clichés [e.g., 164]
- WOMM: he "reaffirms your personal ideology by showering you with the kind of aboriginal spirituality that only [virtual] dead people can exude" (57)! [cf. 335]
- —climactic vision of her "bear-father" (322-; epiph/crying: 326-327; reconcil.: 328) [(but/also) NB: 31, 251-252]
- [more "history lessons": ** [e.g., 49, 63 . . .]
- Indians living and dying ["tragically,"] in "tragic" ways [e.g., 253, 259]
- —Tallulah's self-hair-shearing (357)!?