

# Theming the Nation

## Nationalism, Puy du Fou, and the Decolonization of Museums and Heritage Sites

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**Abstract** *Theme parks, museums, and heritage sites play a decisive role in nation and community building, they form key locations for identity politics – the recollection of culture and history and the claiming of social cohesion and political sovereignty. By looking at a specific collaboration project between the private French company Puy du Fou from the Vendée, a successful player in the international theme-park and show business, and the American tribal nation of the EBCI (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), the paper examines the »theming of the nation« in the globally expanding field of cultural heritage industries. The analytical focus is directed at the »Cherokee Rose« project, an immersive walkthrough theme-park attraction on the involvement of members of the Cherokee tribe in WWI, to be opened in 2025 in Sevierville, Tennessee, USA, as an anchor for »The 407: Gateway to Adventure« retail and entertainment complex. The paper provides the first case study to analyze the collaboration between the EBCI and Puy du Fou on depicting the tribal history and heritage of the Cherokee people and its inscription into American national history. Drawing on Bull and Hansen's concepts of antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic memory, the authors argue that the visions and interests of Puy du Fou and EBCI, which at first glance appear to be incompatible partners, productively connect where communal identity building, local patriotism, and resistance towards agendas of colonial modernity are stressed.*

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**Zusammenfassung** *Themenparks, Museen und Kulturerbestätten spielen eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Nationen- und Gemeinschaftsbildung, sie sind Schlüsselorte für Identitätspolitik – die (Rück-)Besinnung auf Kultur und Geschichte sowie die Forderung nach sozialem Zusammenhalt und politischer Souveränität. Anhand eines konkreten Kooperationsprojekts zwischen dem privaten französischen Unternehmen Puy du Fou aus der Vendée, einem erfolgreichen Akteur im internationalen Themenpark- und Show-Business, und der amerikanischen First Nation der EBCI (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) untersucht der Beitrag, wie das Konzept der Nation im global expandierenden Feld der Kulturerbe-Industrie thematisch besetzt und ausgehandelt wird. Der analytische Fokus ist auf das »Cherokee Rose« Projekt gerichtet, eine immersive Themenpark-Attraktion über die aktive Beteiligung von Mitgliedern der Cherokee am Ersten Weltkrieg, die 2025 in Sevierville, Tennessee, USA, als Teil des Entertainmentkomplexes »The 407: Gateway to Adventure« eröffnet werden soll. In der Fallstudie wird erstmalig die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem EBCI und Puy du Fou im Hinblick auf die indigene Geschichtsdarstellung der Cherokee-Nations sowie deren Einschreibung in die amerikanische Nationalgeschichte untersucht. Bulls und Hansens Konzepte des antagonistischen, kosmopolitischen und agonistischen Gedächtnisses aufgreifend, argumentieren die Autor\*innen, dass sich die Visionen und politischen Interessen von Puy du Fou und EBCI, die auf den ersten Blick unvereinbare Partner zu sein scheinen, dort produktiv verbinden, wo sie auf kommunale Identitätsbildung, lokalen Patriotismus und Widerstand gegen Agenden kolonialer Modernität setzen.*

## 1 Introduction

Museums, heritage sites, theme parks, and other historical themed spaces have long been used to shape, stabilize, and reinforce communal identity via references to the past. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, national museums, tribal heritage sites, or theme parks that celebrate a particular region have evoked history and memory to distill and spatialize the sense of community of the group they refer to and make strong offers of identification to their visitors. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, at least two trends in the international museum, heritage, and theme park business have complicated the link between spatialized histories and identities. For one thing, theme parks have for at least a decade increasingly abandoned »cultural,« »historical,« and »metatouristic« themes for fictional ones. Whereas in the past the parks often allowed visitors to imaginatively travel to the past (as well as to foreign or »exotic« cultures and popular tourist destinations), many theme parks, especially in the Global

North, now immerse guests into the fictional universes of popular transmedial franchises or intellectual properties (IPs). For example, most of the major new expansions in global destination parks over the past 15 years have been based on popular movie and video game IPs, including »Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge« at Disney parks in the US (2019), and »Super Nintendo World« at Universal Studio parks in Japan (2020) and in the US (2023). Smaller parks, in turn, have introduced their own fictional characters into their traditional culture- or country-based themed areas, including for example »Madame Freudenreich« at the French section in Europa-Park (Rust, Germany). There are, of course, economic reasons for this development, with larger parks owned by transmedial corporations such as Disney or Universal seeking to realize synergy effects, and smaller, family-owned parks such as Europa-Park trying to emulate this business model by licensing characters or establishing their own IPs (Freitag et al. 2023, 201–204). At the same time, however, IP-based theming also allows the parks to avoid controversies about the use of stereotypes and clichés in the depiction of past and foreign cultures (see, for example, Steinkrüger 2013 on the portrayal of Africa in Phantasialand in Brühl, Germany).

While many theme parks are abandoning culture- and heritage-based themes, museums, which along with ethnographic exhibitions and zoos were among the most important antecedents of the modern theme park (see Freitag et al. 2023, 38–40), increasingly emulate theme parks. Indeed, another recent trend in the global themed attractions industry has been the adoption of theming – and other (re)presentational techniques commonly associated with theme parks – by history and heritage museums. As Freitag et al. report, in the 1970s, »Disneyfication« was a pejorative term used by curators who feared that a popular approach threatened scholarship and was a sign of »dumbing-down.« Attitudes have changed, however, and over the past generation, it has become increasingly harder to say where the line between a theme park and a museum lies (2023, 357).

As a result, industry associations such as the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) address both the theme park and the museum sector, trade magazines such as *Blooloo* report on both, and design companies such as Atelier 41 (Berlin) work for museums and theme attractions alike. For example, Atelier 41 has been involved in the design both of »Rulantica,« Europa-Park's indoor and outdoor water park (opened in 2019 in Rust) and of the Deutschlandmuseum (opened in 2023 Berlin); the latter has also been awarded the 2024 THEA Outstanding Achievement Award by the Themed Entertainment Association.

Against the background of these trends, the case study that we would like to examine in this chapter constitutes and at the same time does not constitute an interesting exception. The »Cherokee Rose« project, a standalone immersive walkthrough attraction on the involvement of members of the Cherokee tribe in WWI, to be opened in 2025 in Sevierville, Tennessee (USA; close to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park), is the result of a collaboration between the government of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) in North Carolina and Puy du Fou International, a subsidiary of the French theme park and design company Puy du Fou. For the EBCI, the »Cherokee Rose« as well as the surrounding »407« shopping and dining complex marks a new step in the presentation and marketing of tribal history and heritage, which started with the opening of the Museum of the Cherokee People in Cherokee (North Carolina) in 1948 and the debut of the outdoor drama *Unto These Hills* in 1950. In addition to relying more on community involvement and fostering an indigenous decolonization of its existing heritage sites (especially the Museum of the Cherokee People), the EBCI seeks to make its heritage tourism offerings more competitive for the national tourism market and therefore chose to work with an experienced and award-winning design company like Puy du Fou. For the latter, in turn, the »Cherokee Rose« project forms a central part of their global expansion strategy, which since the establishment of Puy du Fou International in 2010 has taken the company from Europe to Asia and now North America. But where the EBCI has been attempting to increase community involvement, Puy du Fou has rather been abandoning its original formula of organizing local volunteers in the production of massive outdoor spectacles like the »Cinésécénie« (France, 1978), »Kynren« (England, 2016), or »El Sueño de Toledo« (Spain, 2019), instead exporting their technologically sophisticated and operationally standardized »walkthrough« attractions in their latest non-European projects.

Yet this is not the only aspect that makes the collaboration between the EBCI and Puy du Fou particularly intriguing. Unlike many other theme parks in the Global North, Puy du Fou has resisted the turn to IP-based theming and has, if anything, increased its focus on history- and heritage-based themes, stressing regional and national communal identities and resistance to modernizing agendas, especially in its park in Les Epesses (France), where it celebrates the history and heritage of the French region of the Vendée and its inhabitants. As a result, at least in its native France, the company has been criticized not only for stereotyping and misrepresenting the past (as many other theme parks have), but also for fostering conservative, right-wing, and even reactionary discourses. In fact, as we will argue in our Conclusion, the world-

view and the conception of the past underlying Puy du Fou's spectacles and attractions to date can be associated with what has been referred to as an »antagonistic« rather than a »cosmopolitan« or an »agonistic« memory. Yet as we will likewise show, there are also parallels between the ways the ECBI and Puy du Fou have been depicting the history and heritage of »their« peoples, especially regarding the stress on communal identity, the resistance to modernizing agendas, and the focus on community-centeredness. In the following, we will therefore take a look at how the EBCI and Puy du Fou have been theming their communities in the past and what brought them to the »Cherokee Rose« project in order to better understand how a Native American tribe with a decolonizing agenda of »indigénitude« has come to work with a European theme park and design company that some locate on the far right end of the political spectrum.

## 2 Expanding Globally: Puy du Fou International

The »Cherokee Rose« project constitutes a central element of Puy du Fou's strategy of global expansion, which started 32 years after the premiere of its signature live outdoor spectacle »Cinésécénie« in 1978 and 21 years after the expansion of the »Cinésécénie« into a full-fledged theme park in 1989 with the foundation of Puy du Fou International in 2010. This strategy initially saw the company move from designing and producing adapted versions of the »Cinésécénie« for European competitors to opening its own full-fledged theme park resort in Toledo, Spain. In 2012, for example, renowned Dutch theme park Efteling hired Puy du Fou to revamp and staff its massive outdoor show »Raveleijn«, originally opened only a year before. In 2016, Puy du Fou used the template of its original »Cinésécénie« show to create »Kynren: An Epic Tale of England«, an open-air summer spectacle performed near Auckland Castle in County Durham, England, for the 11Arches charity. The highly controversial decision to partner up with Russian banker K.V. Malofeev to create a theme park in Simferopol in Crimea, announced but a few months after the military annexation of the peninsula by Russia, also falls into this period.

For its next European project, Puy du Fou decided to act independently and take full control of design and investment rather than merely serve as creative partner for others. Replicating the development of its original French location in Les Epesses (and, incidentally, that of the 11Arches project in England, which started to expand into a theme park in 2021), Puy du Fou opened an open-air

nighttime spectacular called »El Sueño de Toledo« in Toledo, Spain, in 2019. Two years later, the show was expanded into a full-day theme park called Puy du Fou España with (as of 2023) four daytime shows, one immersive walkthrough, as well as four period villages with crafts demonstrations, shops, and restaurants, many of them patterned on attractions in the French Puy du Fou park (for instance, Puy du Fou España's »El último cantar« show uses the same rotating theatre technology as »Le dernier panache« in Les Epesses). Financially, the Spanish park represented the company's biggest investment in its history, although it also benefited from the »Multi-Regional Operational Program of Spain 2014–2020«, a program co-financed by the European Union.<sup>3</sup>

Spurred by international peer recognition in the shape of such awards as the THEA Classic Award (2012; presented by the Themed Entertainment Association) or the Applause Award (2014; presented by the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions), Puy du Fou eventually decided to move beyond Europe and »conquer the world« (see N.N. 2023a). More specifically, the company chose to target the Chinese and the American markets as the most dynamic and the biggest global market for theme parks, respectively (see Freitag et al. 2023, 143–66; see also Coates 2022). As stated by themselves, Puy du Fou ultimately seeks to own and operate four Puy du Fou parks by 2030 (see N.N. 2023a), but rather than using an adapted version of the Cinéscénie as an anchor which to then expand into a full-day destination (as they had done in Spain), the company decided to proceed differently and instead use their »immersive show« or walkthrough concept – as exemplified by the »Mystère de la Pérouse« and the »Allende la Mar Océana« attractions in Puy du Fou and Puy du Fou España, respectively – as ticketed standalone attractions for urban and tourism markets.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in May 2021, Puy du Fou announced the opening of »SAGA« in a former expo center in downtown Shanghai, an immersive walkthrough set in 1930s Shanghai where visitors »follow a character and the story, from room

3 See <https://www.puydufou.com/espana/en>. Curiously, on its website Puy du Fou prides itself on never having received »a penny of public funding« (see <https://www.puydufou.com/france/en/our-group>).

4 Puy du Fou's strategy of global expansion via ticketed standalone attractions is not uncommon: for example, Europa-Park (Germany) similarly seeks to expand globally by setting up standalone attractions – here: the »Eatrenalin« immersive dining experience – in major cities across the world, including the US and China (see Baskerville 2023). The strategy thus continues the company's general history of measured expansion.

to room« (see N.N. 2021a; Merlin 2021). Co-financed by the local government (as most foreign theme park projects in China), the project distinguishes itself from previous iterations of Puy du Fou's walkthrough concept by offering decision points and different alternative paths, obviously in order to increase the repeatability of the attraction and to give local visitors an incentive to return. As Geoffroy Ladet, CEO of Puy du Fou Asia, notes, »[w]hen you reach the dock on the old Shanghai street, you have to choose whether you will take the boat or the train at the end. And you should experience SAGA if you want to know what your destiny will be in both cases« (Merlin 2021). At the same time, the SAGA Shanghai project (as well as potential future SAGAs in other Chinese cities) are intended to »pave the way towards the first Chinese Puy du Fou theme park« (Merlin 2021), with the first investment agreement for a park in the province of Yunnan in southwestern China having already been signed (see N.N. 2021b).

In the US, the »Cherokee Rose« project will similarly function as a ticketed standalone attraction, though in a roadside rather than an urban location and as part of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park tourism market in Tennessee. Indeed, the attraction will serve as an anchor for »The 407: Gateway to Adventure« retail and entertainment complex, a 200-acre property developed by the EBCI featuring a hotel as well as dining and retail opportunities and targeting tourists en route for the nearby national park and its adjacent attractions (including the Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge, about 25 minutes by car from The 407; see N.N. 2023b). Here, too, one may assume that the »Cherokee Rose« project is ultimately intended to facilitate the development of larger Puy du Fou sites in the US, although no such projects have been announced yet. For the EBCI, in turn, the collaboration with the European company marks a new direction in its strategy of heritage tourism.

### 3 Decolonization and Sovereign Community Building: EBCI Museum and Heritage Tourism

Tribal museums and heritage sites »are places that are imbued with power and authority by the societies that build and authorise them. They are both mirrors and shapers of culture, nations, and peoples. They are key locations where identity politics and efforts to (re)claim culture and history play out« (Onciul 2015, 4). Self-owned, self-managed, and self-curated museums and heritage centers play a pivotal role in shaping Cherokee nation and community build-

ing. This is connected to the Cherokees' self-definition as »a nation of storytellers, artisans, traditions and treasures.«<sup>5</sup> Among the main sites and attractions where the rich history and culture of the Cherokee people is presented, mediated, and marketed are the Museum of the Cherokee People, the Cherokee Heritage Center, the Oconaluftee Indian Village, and *Unto These Hills*, an outdoor drama performance. These heritage sites and institutions share a strong focus on living history, immersive experience, and community engagement.

The Museum of the Cherokee People, formerly named the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, is a non-profit museum showcasing the history, culture, and stories of the Cherokee people spanning over 12.000 years. It is located in Cherokee, North Carolina on the Qualla Boundary, the sovereign land of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and ancestral homelands of all Cherokees. Founded in 1948, it is the longest-operating tribal museum in the US. In 2022 it received the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums' Guardians of Culture and Lifeways International Award and was voted a Top Ten Best Native American Experiences by USA TODAY. With an estimated 83.000 visitors per year, it is one of the main tourist destinations of the federally recognized Native American tribe of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). The Cherokee Heritage Center, established in 1966 by the Cherokee Historical Society, comprises a permanent exhibition on the *Trail of Tears*,<sup>6</sup> history exhibits in Indian villages, art shows, and the Cherokee Family Research Center where visitors can explore Cherokee ancestry. Staffed with living history interpreters, the visitors are taken on a time journey through two Cherokee Indian villages on 44-acre grounds — the 19<sup>th</sup> century Adams Corner Rural Village and the 1710 Diligwa Cherokee Village. The Oconaluftee Indian Village, a replica of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Cherokee village, is a comparable heritage site for tourist attraction where guides and artisans convey the history and culture of the tribe as living experiences, demonstrating that »Cherokee history isn't just the past.«<sup>7</sup> The outdoor drama *Unto These Hills* had

5 <https://www.visitcherokeeanation.com/> (accessed 3 February 2024).

6 *Trail of Tears* refers to the forced displacement of around 60.000 Native Americans between 1830 and 1850. The removal of American Indians who belonged to the so-called »Five Civilized Tribes«, among them the Cherokees, was part of the US government's colonial settler policy. On their mass migration route to the newly designated Indian reserves, the native people suffered from disease and starvation.

7 »As you enter the soft trails of the village, it's no longer the 21<sup>st</sup> century: you're immediately transported to the 1760s. You won't need your robotic-voiced GPS here. The faint tang of wood smoke wafts by as you are led by a Cherokee cultural expert on an in-



its debut on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1950. Until today, it is performed under the stars at Mountain-side Amphitheatre each summer. The piece tells the »triumphant story of the formation of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians from first contact with Europeans through the years following the infamous Trail of Tears.«<sup>8</sup> To keep the unique history, art, and culture attractions of the Cherokee people updated and translate Cherokee heritage into contemporary indigeneity, the Cherokee Heritage Center and the Museum of the Cherokee Indian underwent a reconstruction process that started around 2022.<sup>9</sup> The future plans of both EBCI heritage institutions are aimed at revisioning and revitalizing the representation of the history and culture of the Cherokee people by demanding more indigenous sovereignty, inclusiveness, and community participation.

Tribal sovereignty of the EBCI is recognized as a main strength of the Cherokee heritage industry. According to the EBCI's *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2018–2022*, it allows »to provide business incentives that are unique in the region, including accelerated depreciation, Native American employment tax credit, and no county property tax« (EBCI 2018). Heritage tourism has developed into a well-established economic base.<sup>10</sup> The Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Oconaluftee Indian Village, and the outdoor performance *Unto These Hills* are listed as important sources of cultural heritage tourism in the strategy paper. They are praised as creators of a common culture, history, and values, and as agents of social cohesion for the Cherokee people. However, according to the strategy paper, the heritage tourism sites are »lagging competitiveness in the regional tourism industry« (ibid.). For this

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teractive journey through Cherokee lifestyle and history. [...] As you wander, interact with villagers as they hull canoes, sculpt pottery and masks, weave baskets, and fashion beadwork. Watch as a village prepares for war. Be amazed by a blowgun demonstration. Oconaluftee Indian Village is much more than just a place; it's living history.« (<https://visitcherokeenc.com/play/attractions/oconaluftee-indian-village/>, accessed 3 February 2024).

8 <https://visitcherokeenc.com/play/attractions/unto-these-hills-outdoor-drama/>, (accessed 3 February 2024).

9 Due to the multiyear renovation process, the Cherokee Heritage Center as well as the main exhibit of the Museum of the Cherokee People are currently closed to the public. From 15 March 2024 until 28 February 2025, the Museum of the Cherokee People will host the temporary exhibition on *sovereignty. Expressions in Sovereignty of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians*.

10 The Cherokee tourist economy was founded in the late 1940s and 1950s. It was enabled by the opening of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park 1940 by US president Franklin D. Roosevelt.

reason, the Economic Development Analysis of 2018 proposed vital strategic projects, among them the development of a Cultural District Master Plan to improve the attractiveness of EBCI's cultural heritage sites and institutions (museum, outdoor drama, village etc.) and the construction of an Adventure Park that should include an indoor waterpark and a hotel complex.<sup>11</sup> It is this development plan for an Adventure Park that, along some detours and reorganizations, found its implementation in the master planning of the entertainment and retail complex of »The 407: Gateway to Adventure«, where Puy de Fou plans the opening of a theme park on the history of the Cherokee during WWI. The expansion of the Cherokee Museum, together with the opening of a new facility for the tribal archives, is considered to »add a critical mass of consumer tourists to the Cultural District« (ibid.). Due to the cultural-economic significance of this renovation project, the reconceptualization of the Cherokee Museum, in particular its strengthening of cultural sovereignty, will be examined in more detail.

#### **4 Rebranding the Tribal Future: From the Museum of the Cherokee Indian to the Museum of the Cherokee People**

Within contemporary indigenous communities, museums play a key role in encouraging self-determination and cultural sovereignty. Exhibition-making is based on shared authority through community involvement. As Amy Lonetree has stated in *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, a change in museum-curatorial practice has taken place over the last decade on the American continent: »Native Americans have witnessed a shift from curator-controlled presentations of American Indian past to a more inclusive collaborative process, with Native people often actively involved in determining the exhibition content. It is now commonplace and expected that museum professionals will seek the input of contemporary communities when developing exhibitions focusing on American Indian content« (Lonetree 2012, 1) .

This shift is also reflected in the Cherokee Museum of the EBCI, its community-committed redefinition and reconceptualization. The renaming and rebranding of the museum was carried out in public in 2023, it was included

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11 In the scoring of the proposed projects, the Adventure Park received the highest score, followed in the third place by the Cultural District Master Plan.

in indigenous events and celebrations. The new name was first shared with the members of the tribal community on October 3 during the 111<sup>th</sup> Annual Cherokee Indian Fair Parade, before it was publicly announced on October 9, the worldwide Indigenous Peoples' Day. The name change from *Museum of the Cherokee Indian* to *Museum of the Cherokee People* signaled a deep desire for decolonization from American settler colonialism.<sup>12</sup> It meant abandoning the ethnological category and colonial term *Indian*, loaded with a long-standing historical burden of discriminating representation, and replacing it by a commoning, inclusive and pluralistic term, that of the Cherokee people. A main argument put forward in favor of the renaming was that some members of the Cherokee community were not feeling comfortable with the term *Indian*, or even excluded by it. In Cherokee language, the new denomination of the museum more explicitly highlights the commonizing aspect of shared heritage ownership and responsibility. It approximately translates into: »All of us are Cherokee people. It is all of ours, where the old things are stored« (cit. in Chandler 2023). Even the term »Cherokee Nation« is avoided because it is the official name of just one of the three federally recognized tribes of the Cherokee and thus would not be representative of all Cherokee tribes.<sup>13</sup>

In a concerted design strategy, the renaming took place in parallel with a visual rebranding of the museum's corporate identity. The design of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian was held in earth tones such as browns, ochers, and reds, symbolizing the »Red Power« and earth-connectedness of the American »Indian«.<sup>14</sup> In-house designer Tyra Maney intended to encourage the Cherokee people and the museum audience »to rethink what they think of when they hear the word »earth tones« and reflect who we are and where we come from« (cit. in *ibid.*). The new design draws on pink, green, and sunny yellow, it is inspired by the vibrant colors of the flora and fauna in the Cherokee ancestral homelands: »blackberries, evergreens, rhododendron

12 Shana Bushyhead Condill (ECBI), Executive Director of the museum, commented the renaming process: »The name change wasn't quick—it was something that was very intentional and very thoughtful« (cit. in Chandler 2023).

13 The three federally recognized Tribes of Cherokee include the Cherokee Nation, the United Keetoowah Band, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

14 It can still be seen in the color design of the »old« museum's web presentation on the Cherokee tourism homepage: <https://visitcherokeenc.com/play/attractions/museum-of-the-cherokee-people/> (accessed 3 February 2024).

trees, the mountains' blue haze, touch-me-not flowers.«<sup>15</sup> Even the former logo, an upside-down water spider motif taken from a Mississippi gorget design, received a refreshing color update in pink, green, and sunny yellow, and its circular structure was supplemented by the new brand name of the museum in Cherokee language.

The removal of funerary and sacred objects from the permanent exhibition of the museum was another important agenda point for advancing the indigenous decolonization of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. Strategically and organizationally, it coincided with the museum's expansion plans to build an off-site collections and tribal archives facility and to update the permanent exhibition. With the appointment of the new Director of Collections and Exhibitions, Evan Mathis, a new collections care policy was implemented in 2022, conforming to the American Alliance of Museums' core standards and ethics<sup>16</sup> as well as prioritizing Cherokee cultural protocols. It was agreed upon to guarantee a secure place for the material culture and ceremonial objects of the museum collection and provide a separate welcoming space for tribal members where sensitive collection objects, such as sacred items and human remains, can be viewed. In collaboration with community members and the EBCI Tribal Historic Preservation Office's Lead Archaeologist Beau Carroll, an inventory of the museum collections was created, enabling the identification of funerary and sacred objects for removal, and of those objects that required conservation.

The display of sacred objects in museums has long been a controversial issue among native people. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), passed in the US in 1990, marked a turning point. »[L]ineal descendants, Indian Tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations may request the return of Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony«<sup>17</sup> from American museums and heritage institutions. This gave the American Native communities back ownership and control over the handling of the remains of their ancestors and cult objects. The profane desecration of sacred ancestral objects through their storage and display in museums could be brought to an end. To justify the removal of sacred

15 See the new homepage of the Museum of the Cherokee People under <https://motcp.org/> (accessed 3 February 2024).

16 See <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/core-standards-for-museums/> (accessed 4 February 2024).

17 Cit. under <https://www.bia.gov/service/nagpra/how-to> (accessed 4 February 2024).

ancestral objects in the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Director of Education Dakota Brown directly refers to NAGPRA as an important »first step in the right direction«, but emphasizes the special moral duty of indigenous museums: »As a tribal museum, we have even more of an obligation and responsibility to the objects, because we consider them as ancestors, and not artifacts. The people who made these, who put their energy and creativity into those objects, use them, wore them – we're being respectful of them« (cit. in Chandler 2022).

To fill the empty displays left after the removal of the funerary and sacred objects in the permanent exhibition, the curatorial team of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian invited contemporary Cherokee artists, among them international renowned artists, emerging artists, and first-time exhibiting artists and artisans, to create site-specific substitute works as interventions and unique contemporary interpretations of Cherokee culture and history. The contemporary art and craft pieces comprised ceramics, paintings, carvings and sculpture, works on paper, weavings and multimedia works. Entitled *Disruption*, the artistic update of and intervention into the permanent exhibition not only reflected the significance gap between museum artifacts and sensitive ancestral objects, but also put forward the breaking open of the timeline of the permanent exhibition, presented as a chronological flow in the exhibition setup of 1998. By the involvement of contemporary Cherokee artists, the archaeological timeline of the permanent exhibition, ending around 1920, was extended into the present. At the same time, a disruption, even rejection of a time-based chronological narrative was intended. The timeline approach was replaced by a storytelling approach centered on common culture and cohesion: »Rather than define objects by a time period, we want to define them by a culture and show how it's all tied together« (Mathis cit. in Chandler 2022). For this aim, the museum leadership requested community input from the Cherokee people. Organizing listening sessions in the second half of 2023, it encouraged all EBCI citizens to share the stories they wished to be represented in the new permanent exhibition. Executive Director Shana Bushyhead Condill stressed this community-centered mission for indigenous exhibition storytelling: »We have the power and the responsibility in our tribal museum to tell our own story, and the only way we can do this is with our community« (cit. in Chandler 2023). Due to the multiyear renovation and reconceptualization project, only the future can tell what kind of community-based consensus on the main narrative(s) of the permanent exhibit will be reached. The title of the temporary exhibit *sovereignty: Expressions in Sovereignty of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians*, open-

ing on March 15, 2024, can already be read as a clear mission statement for the museum's pathway to its self-determined tribal future.

In conclusion, the reconceptualization and rebranding project of the Museum of the Cherokee People highlights the reinforcement of indigenous contemporaneity and indigenous museum methodology. Tribal sovereignty in self-defining and self-designing the history, present, and future of the Cherokee people is a central component and driving factor of community building within and beyond the walls of the museum. As a first nation among other native nations within the US nation state, the EBCI avoids any explicit identification with the notion of the nation in the new design(ation) of its museum and turns to strengthening tribal identity and heritage survivance (cp. Vizenor 1999) that goes »beyond mere survival to include resistance, revival and living vibrancy« of contemporary pasts (Onciul 2015, 3). By this move, the museum's revision and redefinition confirms Clifford's observation that »[i]ndigènitè is a vision of liberation and cultural difference that challenges, or at least redirects, the modernizing agendas of nation-states and transnational capitalism« (Clifford 2013, 16).

## 5 Local identity and Heritage Survivance à la Puy du Fou

However, the notion of the nation did come up in the context of the collaboration between the EBCI and Puy du Fou on the »Cherokee Rose.« In a 2022 interview with the attractions industry magazine *Bloolooop*, Nicolas de Villiers, the son of Puy du Fou's founder Philippe de Villiers and the current president of the company, described the first visit of EBCI Principal Chief Richard Sneed to the Puy du Fou parks in France and Spain as »far more important than just a meeting between business partners. It was an encounter between the Cherokee nation and the Puy du Fou nation« (see Coates 2022). De Villiers thus stylized the visit as an act of (cultural) diplomacy as he referred not only to the Cherokee people but also to his company as a »nation«, the community of the

»Puyfolais«.<sup>18</sup> In fact, there are striking parallels between the way the EBCI has been portraying the history and heritage of the Cherokee people in its various heritage sites and the ways in which Puy du Fou has been depicting the story of the »Vendéens« (the inhabitants of the French region of the Vendée) in its park and its individual spectacles, including stressing communal identity, resisting modernizing agendas, and highlighting community-centeredness. However, it is precisely this approach to the history of the Vendée and its people that at least since the 1990s has earned Puy du Fou severe criticism from professional historians and journalists, who have accused the company of fostering traditionalist, ultra-conservative, and even reactionary discourses.

More precisely, two arguments have been leveled against Puy du Fou in scholarly criticism and journalism: (1) that of oversimplifying, misrepresenting and trivializing history in general; and (2) that of presenting an ideologically slanted version of history. Both discussions have been further complicated by the fact that the critical discourse on Puy du Fou has been led in comparative isolation, with scholars taking little or no account of similar and related debates about the use of history and ideology in theme parks outside of France.<sup>19</sup> The first argument is a case in point: as early as the mid-1980s and the early 1990s critics such as Mike Wallace or Stephen Fjellman used terms like »Mickey Mouse history« or »Distory« to point to the generally selective, teleological, and affective manner in which history and historical themes have been depicted in the (American) Disney theme parks (see Wallace 1985 and Fjellman 1992, 59). More recently, however, even professional historians have acknowledged that a »complete appraisal of what heritage, cultural memory, and uses of the past

18 The term »Puyfolais« serves as the title of the internal quarterly magazine of the volunteers involved in the »Cinéscénie« and also refers to everyone who contributes to the spectacle (Martin and Suaud 1992, 21). By extension, it has also come to denote the idealized image of the region of the Vendée, as created by Puy du Fou. Martin and Suaud speak of »une articulation entre la scène et les coulisses, entre le pays rêvé, idéal, et le pays réel, que le mot *Puyfolais* réalise pleinement« (1992, 33).

19 Indeed, from Jean-Clément Martin and Charles Suaud's *Le Puy du Fou, en Vendée: L'histoire mise en scène* (1996) to Florian Besson, Pauline Ducret, Guillaume Lancereau, and Mathilde Larrère's *Le Puy du Faux: Enquête sur un parc qui déforme l'histoire* (2022), the major critical works on Puy du Fou have all been published in French and have only rarely drawn on international theme park criticism. Theme park scholarship outside of France, in turn, has paid little attention to Puy du Fou except to highlight the park's focus on shows and spectacles rather than rides and its reliance on volunteer work (see, for example, Freitag et al. 2023, 169).

mean »is only possible if historians understand something of how museums, theme parks, and so on function, the discussions in which those who work in them engage, and the frameworks that are being developed under the umbrellas of museum studies« as well as theme park studies (Carlà 2016, 26). For example, the use of a certain amount of visual and other stereotypes in theme parks has been identified as necessary in order to ensure the recognizability of depictions of historical and other themes for a broad public (see Freitag et al. 2023, 285–88).

None of these developments in the discussion on the popular uses of history in immersive spaces appear to have entered the debate on Puy du Fou, however: as late as 2022 – and despite the fact that they claim to be aware of the »nécessaire vulgarisation« of historical knowledge in popular contexts (2022, 7) – Besson, Ducret, Lancereau, and Larrère have accused the French park in their monograph *Le Puy du Faux* of drawing on »des images déjà vues des dizaines de fois dans des manuels scolaires plus ou moins anciens, dans des tableaux, dans des films« (35), of »conforter et renforcer ces imaginaires du passé, hérités des films, des romans, des bandes dessinées« (151), and of thus taking up and reinforcing »tous les stéréotypes sur les époques passées« (66).<sup>20</sup> Puy du Fou itself, meanwhile, claims that its presentations are not to be categorized as »historical« in the first place: responding to a 2019 article by French historian Guillaume Mazeau for the website *The Conversation*, the park maintains that they »n'ont jamais prétendu faire un travail d'historien [...]. Le Puy du Fou emprunte à l'imaginaire collectif des images parfois inspirées de la grande Histoire, sans autre prétention que de mettre en scène des poèmes divertissants, mêlant légendes et réalité« (see Mazeau 2019).<sup>21</sup> At the same time, in its communication with the public Puy du Fou very much identifies as a historical park,<sup>22</sup> inviting

20 »images already seen dozens of times in more or less old school textbooks, in paintings, in movies«; »comfort and reinforce these imaginations of the past, inherited from the movies, novels, comics«; »all the stereotypes about past eras« (our translations).

21 »have never claimed to do the work of the historian. [...] Puy du Fou borrows from the collective imagination images inspired by history with a capital H, with no other pretension than to stage entertaining poems, mixing legend and reality« (our translation).

22 In general, Carlà defines historical themed spaces as »themed spaces whose themes are not completely the product of fantasy (they must refer to societies and civilizations which did exist, even if they are remediatized, and not to fantasy worlds as Harry Potter's) and whose themes portray these societies and civilizations in a particular phase which is chronologically placed before the possible extension of memory of a



visitors in its 2022 brochure to »Step back in time and discover worlds that you thought had been lost forever« or informing them – to quote the claim with which Mazeau opens his article – that »L'histoire n'attend que vous« (Mazeau 2019).<sup>23</sup>

Puy du Fou has been accused not only of misrepresenting history, however, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, of using the park to propagate the ultra-conservative political views of its founder, Philippe de Villiers, who wrote the scenarios of the original »Cinéscénie« and of most of the subsequent shows in the park. Again, this is an issue that is by no means restricted to Puy du Fou: as Freitag et al. point out in their chapter on »Worldviews and Ideologies: Nationalism, Regionalism, Capitalism, Religion, and Other Weltanschauungen in Theme Parks«, »theme parks always reflect, represent, and even implement a certain series of values and worldviews, both on the representational level (reflected in the choice of themes and how they are depicted) as well as on the practical level (through rules of behavior inside the park)« (2023, 341). Yet what distinguishes Puy du Fou is the fact that its founder and creator has been particularly outspoken about his political views and has been an active politician himself,<sup>24</sup> which together with the strong identification between him and the park all but invites comparisons between de Villiers' personal views and those underlying Puy du Fou. At the same time, the Puy du Fou worldview also shows parallels with that of the EBCI, as conveyed in their heritage sites.

Drawing on Wolfgang Hochbruck and Judith Schlehe, Carlà has noted that historical themed spaces can be located on a spectrum between depicting »the creation of a history of a nation, region, or ethnic group, as an offer to the visitor for imaginative identification, [and] the creation of a seemingly timeless exotic Other, juxtaposed to the Self and serving to stabilize and position it in the global world« (2016, 19). On this spectrum, Puy du Fou clearly occupies the former extreme end, consistently appealing to visitors' »geopiety« (Tuan

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living being in the moment of the construction of the park« (2016, 19–20). With the exception of the never realized theme park in Simferopol, which was supposed to also feature a section on the »promising future« of Crimea (see Zavadski 2014), all of Puy du Fou's projects to date are exclusively located at least a century in the past, with the SAGA Shanghai project's 1930s setting constituting the »youngest« setting so far.

23 »history is waiting just for you« (our translation).

24 Amongst other positions, Philippe de Villiers was president of the nationalist, Eurosceptic party Mouvement pour la France from 1994 to 2018.

1976) by referring to the respective location of each park or attraction and celebrating its national, regional, or even local history. With respect to the »original« Puy du Fou in Les Epesses, France, for example, the focus is on the region of the Vendée, which is presented as a stable, rural, and devoutly Catholic community whose traditional and happy lifestyle has been under constant attack by external enemies at least since the brutally suppressed counter-revolution of 1793–95. Thus »privée de ses contradictions internes« (Martin and Suaud 1992, 29),<sup>25</sup> the Vendée and the park that represents it are depicted as »un lieu de résistance à la modernité et à ses maux mondialisés, métissés et migratoires« (Mazeau 2019).<sup>26</sup> Hence, more than simply nostalgic – alluding to another French theme park, the technology- and progress-oriented Futuroscope (near Poitiers), historian Michel Vovelle has referred to Puy du Fou as a »Passéoscope« (1994) – Puy du Fou depicts its idealized Vendée, as Martin and Suaud have argued, as a »communauté idéale posée en alternative à la France moderne« (1996, 7).<sup>27</sup>

The website for »The 407: Gateway to Adventure« quotes EBCI Principal Chief Richard Sneer, who stresses that Puy du Fou »is known around the world for transporting guests back in time to feel firsthand the excitement and drama of historical moments« (see N.N. 2023c). Yet Puy du Fou's understanding and portrayal of the Vendée and its people as a distinct, anti-modern community that, moreover, relies on community engagement to tell its own story – the »Cinécscénie« spectacle is still largely carried by thousands of volunteers from the region – may not only explain de Villiers' reference to both groups, the EBCI and the »Puyfolais,« as »nations« (see above) but may also offer an additional reason why, despite their radically different political positionings in their respective (French and American) local contexts, the two chose to collaborate on the »Cherokee Rose« project. Of course, the »Cherokee Rose« will also heavily rely on the idea of the nation, although in a somewhat different fashion: located on the homeland of the EBCI yet simultaneously catering to a national audience in a popular tourism corridor, the »Cherokee Rose« project will depict the history of the Cherokees *as* Americans: »The show itself will tell [...] a true story about the Cherokee participating in WWI on behalf of the allies, even though at the time the USA did not count them as citizens themselves«

25 »deprived of its internal contradictions« (our translation).

26 »as a place of resistance to modernity and its globalized, mixed, and migratory evils« (our translation).

27 »ideal community positioned as an alternative to modern France« (our translation).

(Coates 2022). Relatability for a national audience is thus achieved, according to director of international affairs at Puy du Fou, Guillaume Allaire, not only by »touch[ing] the universal feelings of courage, bravery, friendship, and love«, but also by »tell[ing] a beautiful story about the Cherokee heritage in a way that engages every visitor« (Coates 2022). Whether this appeal to visitors' patriotism *through* the local (and ethnic) heritage of the Cherokees – one of the first design concepts of the project shows the »Cherokee Rose« façade dominated by a giant sculpture of a WWI soldier carrying a huge American flag (see Coates 2022) – will take the shape of a presentation of the Cherokees as a »communauté idéelle posée en alternative à [l'Amérique] moderne«, as in the case of Puy du Fou, or whether it will merge the two extreme ends of the spectrum of identification in historical themed environments – presentation of the Self vs. representation of the Other – remains to be seen. What is clear is that the »Cherokee Rose« project will, in one way or another, uphold and continue the strong traditional link between museums, heritage sites, theme parks, and other historical themed spaces and communal identity via references to the past.

## 6 Conclusion

In their 2016 article »On Agonistic Memory«, Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen identify three modes of remembering: antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic memory. The first, they argue, not only relies on a dualistic »us vs. them« rhetoric in which »us« and »them« are invariably associated with »good« and »evil« as well as »victim« and »perpetrator«, respectively (400); they also note the heavy use of passions and emotions as »one of the various affective forces which are at the origin of collective forms of identification« (398)<sup>28</sup> and generally situate this mode within a context where »historical events [are] turned into myths« (400). As described by Bull and Hansen, the antagonistic mode perfectly fits the representation of history in Puy du Fou's existing spectacles and shows in France; the latter's growing success also confirms Bull and Hansen's observations that antagonistic memory has transcended the historical period of the territorial nation-state and »constitutes

28 Bull and Hansen quote from Mouffe (2005, 30), on whose critique of cosmopolitanism (see also Mouffe 2012) their own critique of cosmopolitan memory and, as a consequence, their development of the concept of agonistic memory is based.

a prominent feature of present-day society« (393) and that, at the same time, antagonistic memory is no longer exclusively tied to the nation-state but also engages other scales of identification (in the case of Puy du Fou France, the subnational or regional in the shape of the Vendée).<sup>29</sup>

Will the »Cherokee Rose« experience, once it opens to the public, rely on a »cosmopolitanized« (in the sense of internationalized) version of antagonistic memory, as Puy du Fou's first international ventures in the Netherlands, England, or Spain have done, or will it rather constitute an example of cosmopolitan memory, seeking to elicit »compassion for human suffering« rather than the »passion of belonging« and solely focus on the »victims' perspective« (Bull and Hansen 2016, 400; here: compassion for and focus on the Cherokee people) – or will it perhaps, given the goal to »engage every visitor« (Coates 2022), orient emotions and passions »towards collective solidarity« via a presentation of the »perspectives of victims, perpetrators and third party witnesses« (here: Cherokee people and other Americans), as Bull and Hansen's new concept of agonistic memory invites agents of memory to do? »Les émotions sont éternelles,«<sup>30</sup> the 2022 brochure for the French Puy du Fou park postulates, but it could be that the cooperation with the EBCI in general and the need to speak to a broader (Cherokee and non-Cherokee) audience in particular has encouraged or even forced Puy du Fou to abandon its traditional focus on an antagonistic memory.

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29 The fact that memory studies have rarely been engaged in the study of Puy du Fou once again confirms that the critical discourse on Puy du Fou has been led in comparative scholarly isolation, not only with respect to (international) theme park studies but also to history and memory studies.

30 »Emotions are eternal« (our translation).

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