

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

(Re)Developing Sovereignty:

Choctaw Reconfigurations of Culture and Politics  
through Economic Development in Oklahoma

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts  
in American Indian Studies

by

Megan Alexandria Baker

2017



ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Jessica R. Cattelino, Chair

To counteract their historical erasure and economic marginalization within American settler society, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma repurposes economic development robustly. Choctaw sovereignty, reinvigorated by economic development, enables the Nation to assert their political presence in ways that have transformed southeastern Oklahoma economically. Ethnographic examination of Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna (School of Choctaw Language) and the history of Chahta anumpa (Choctaw language) in Oklahoma demonstrates how Choctaw Nation has accomplished both of these things. Additionally, this thesis critically examines Choctaw citizens' complex experiences with economic development, which are shaped by a continual process of

Indigenous dispossession. Understanding how these experiences and histories link together in turn opens up alternative possibilities for Choctaw futures grounded in Choctaw ways of life.

The thesis of Megan Alexandria Baker is approved.

Mishuana Goeman

Shannon Speed

Randall Akee

Jessica R. Cattelino, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

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## Acknowledgements

Yakoke

Research for this thesis was generously funded by the UCLA Institute of American Cultures, UCLA American Indian Studies Center, University of Arizona's Native Nations Institute, and UCLA Center for the Study of Women. In particular, I would like to thank Renee White Eyes, Kristina Nyden and (fellow WINS alumna) Yadira Caballero for their coordination efforts on my behalf.

To the friends and family who supported me throughout the past two years, thank you for always putting up with my wild schedule, forgiving me when I bail on or forget our plans. Dana Tinio, Kristen Lu and Vivian Tsai have been gracious last minute editors. Thank you to academic mom Audra Simpson who guided the beginnings of this research in its undergraduate seminar paper form and continues to do so as I work elsewhere. American Indian Studies at UCLA is a special place in which I have been able to grow as a Choctaw scholar and I have learned from everyone who is a part of it. Thank you to the Tongva, whose land I grew up on and learn from and with every day. A special shout out goes to Clementine Bordeaux, Vanessa Cisneros, Robert Fulwider, Pauline Alvarez and Kimia Fatehi for keeping me sane throughout the program. Professor Paul Kroskrity and his class came at a pivot point in writing and he provided great feedback on the language revitalization-focused portions of this thesis. Thank you to my dream team of a committee Mishuana Goeman, Shannon Speed and Randall Akee who were first challenging professors during coursework and then excellent readers who always asked good questions and provided comments that sharpened my research and analysis. Jessica Cattelino is a blessing of a chair, teacher and advisor. I am simultaneously mortified and relieved that she read every draft of this work (and so much more!), which has come a long way because

of our conversations. A special thank you to Lakota Pochedley and Bill Hobia for sharing their home and explaining/theorizing about the crazy place that is Oklahoma with me. To my best friends and partners in crime/decolonization, Craig Merrick and Sara Chase, I promise to get better at finishing my papers before leaving for the revolution. I am grateful for all that they teach me everywhere we go, and I could not do this work without them.

Yakoke to Chief Gary Batton, Assistant Chief Jack Austin, Councilman Tony Ward, Councilman Thomas Williston, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board, Carey Fuller, and Dannielle Branam for their direction, input and encouragement of my research. My advisor Dr. Ian Thompson, with his vast of knowledge of Choctaw culture and history, contributed so much by challenging me and my research to do more for our people. I am so thankful for the many insightful, funny community members who shared their experiences, stories, and time with me for this project and so much more. Not everyone I interviewed is featured in these pages, but their words guide me and the work as a whole. The commitments they demonstrate to Chahta okla in their daily lives inspire and drive me to be the best Chahta ohoyo and scholar I can be for us. With that, any and all mistakes are entirely my own.

I could make dinner and midnight Dandy Donut runs every day and it still would not be enough to thank the Golden Girls of Durant: Joyce Baker, Elsie Hicks and Dora Wickson. Yakoke for answering my language queries, letting me tag along everywhere, and everything else they have done for me. They are my (and our Nation's) ohoyo holiropa. To my sister and parents, who enabled this research in so many ways, I am endlessly grateful for their continued support. My dad made sure we stayed connected to Choctaws and my mom made sure we cared about being Choctaw just as much as being Chinese. To Chahta okla that came before and sacrificed so we could be where we are today, yakoke.

## INTRODUCTION

On January 4, 2014, President Barack Obama declared the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma one of five Promise Zones, a new anti-poverty program aimed at facilitating economic development in impoverished regions over the course of ten years.<sup>1</sup> Responding to the Promise Zone designation, Chief Gary Batton (2014 – present) declared it another tool for bolstering numerous ongoing economic development endeavors throughout southeastern Oklahoma, where Choctaws made home anew since their forced removal from their ancestral homelands in the 1830s. Nevertheless when MSNBC covered Choctaw Nation’s designation with a two-part series and photo essay on poverty in the Nation,<sup>2</sup> its economic development successes were minimized. Instead, the author crafted a narrative in which the legacy of governmental policies of removal, allotment, and assimilation in conjunction with cuts to social-welfare programs were so overwhelming that the author suggested that only federal intervention could possibly enact substantial change.<sup>3</sup> The Promise Zones program was thus framed as a sort of last ditch attempt to alter the future of Choctaw youth. Journalist Trymaine Lee further suggested that the tragedy of poverty was magnified in the face of impending Choctaw cultural decline as elders passed on and Choctaws married non-Choctaws. By playing down Choctaw Nation’s economic and

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than allocating funding to Promise Zone designees, the program aims to enhance relationships between federal agencies by prioritizing Choctaw Nation in grant applications as well as offer tax incentives and breaks for businesses. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma was the only Indian nation in the first round of designees which included Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and southeastern Kentucky.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, Trymaine. “‘Promise Zones’ offer new hope to struggling youth” MSNBC. 3/12/14, updated: 1/15/15. Last accessed: 28 March 2017. <<http://www.msnbc.com/the-reid-report/choctaw-nation-promise-zones>>; Lee, Trymaine. “16 and pregnant in the Choctaw Nation.” MSNBC. 3/24/14, updated: 5/9/14. Last accessed: 28 March 2017. <<http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/16-and-pregnant-the-choctaw-nation>>; Pereira, Amy and Trymaine Lee. “Hope on the horizon for Choctaw Nation” MSNBC. 3/12/14, updated: 3/19/14. Last accessed: 28 March 2017. <<http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/choctaw-nation-hope-on-horizon>>

<sup>3</sup> In the comments section of his Choctaw youth article, Lee poses as some questions for his commentators to consider, an attempt at engaging with his readers. To frame the questions, he notes that while Choctaw Nation is relatively well off and there is potential in the Promise Zones program, “the suffering here, in this rural, isolated stretch of southeastern Oklahoma still suffers deeply.” Thus he asks: “But with so much poverty spread across the country, how much federal help is enough? Does any help do? Or is a more radical allocation of government resources needed to help our most vulnerable citizens?”

political achievements which have actually revitalized the cultural life of the Nation, the MSNBC series reiterates a tired narrative of Choctaw “decline”.

In this thesis, I will demonstrate ethnographically how Choctaws have maintained their lifeways and revitalized them with economic development revenue over the past thirty years to unprecedented levels despite narratives to the contrary. Economic development has financed and enabled Choctaw Nation to assert Choctaw presence and visibility, countering their historical erasure and marginalization in everyday life in Oklahoma. Public relations campaigns via billboards and tv commercials inform people of the Nation’s ability to provide social services, demonstrating the vast resources it has developed as well as asserting their distinctiveness as Choctaw people. Like a positive feedback loop, revitalization efforts have enhanced the sovereignty of Choctaw Nation as negotiations with the state of Oklahoma have allowed for unprecedented inclusion and engagement in Oklahoma decision-making politics (such as education policy and Indian water rights). The ascendancy of Choctaw political power comes against a historical backdrop of Choctaw sovereignty overridden and ignored because their land was desired (and seized), part and parcel of a settler colonial project. Given this context, the assertion of Choctaw sovereignty stands in tension with the state – both Oklahoma and the federal government. Choctaw Nation’s recent political ascendancy in turn has improved everyday life in Choctaw Nation, touching people’s lives (Choctaw and non-Choctaw alike) in a multitude of arenas like healthcare, social services, education and cultural knowledge. In addition to understanding the shifting ability to assert Choctaw sovereignty due to economic development, this thesis examines lived experiences of Choctaw cultural revitalization – as contextualized by Choctaw history.

Part of understanding the context that produces the problems of poverty and “decline” that the MSNBC articles and scholarship focus on requires situating Choctaw Nation within a history of continual land dispossession. While Removal can be seen as singular catastrophic event that Choctaws had to recover from in order to bring them out of poverty, the question of why Choctaws, moved to Indian Territory so they could “exist as a nation”, remains. Instead of being left alone as their removal treaty stipulated, land and resources were seized through various federal policies and legal loopholes – part of a structured land dispossession. Accounting for the basis and aftermath of Removal informs us of the political and economic landscape that the Choctaw Nation is embedded in today, which also provides insight into some of the challenges it still faces. Contextualizing Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma’s formation alongside the state of Oklahoma within the developing United States allows for a better sense of the obstacles that Choctaws had to navigate.

#### CHOCTAW “DECLINE”

Watching President Barack Obama greet a crowd of Choctaws with a ‘halito’ never crossed my mind as being in the realm of possibility, but on July 16, 2015 he did exactly so. Although the third largest nation in the United States with over 200,000 citizens and a tribal service area that spans ten and half counties in southeastern Oklahoma, the Choctaw Nation I knew and grew up with was limited to the small, rural communities of Battiest, Bethel – and if we needed to go to Walmart – Broken Bow and Idabel, all within McCurtain County. The counties of Atoka, Bryan, Choctaw, Coal, Haskell, (part of) Hughes, (part of) Johnston, Latimer, LeFlore, Pittsburg, (part of) Pontotoc, and Pushmataha were all unknown to me. McCurtain County, located in the southeastern-most corner of Oklahoma, did not seem like a remarkable

place to people who were not from there or have family living there. Choctaw Nation, largely rural and covered with swathes of forest, seemed to blend into the rest of the South – fried catfish dinners on the weekend, sausage gravy and biscuits for breakfast, and a firm part of the Bible Belt. When President Obama visited Choctaw Nation, white people welcomed him with Confederate flags flying from trucks lined up across the highway from Durant High School, where he delivered his speech.

Nevertheless, I would soon find that many people including a multitude of scholars along with President Obama were concerned about McCurtain County and the poverty within it. The Promise Zones designation was a momentous opportunity for Choctaw Nation, so I read every article about the Promise Zones, especially the MSNBC articles since it was national news coverage. As I read and realized that Lee had written about the community and people I knew, the place I read about was unrecognizable. The articles struck me as a form of poverty-porn, mainstream media only talking about how poor American Indians were. Simultaneously, as I read the articles in my university-furnished apartment suite in New York City, I also had to confront how far removed I was from my extended family and community with my privileged social position. I asked myself: what could I do about it? Considering there to be no other immediate recourse, I turned to analyzing the article in a Facebook post. My cousin whose grandmother was unflatteringly portrayed in the articles commented, expressing her frustration with the piece. While not much of a sample size for understanding Choctaw Nation's collective reaction to the article, her affirmation nevertheless encouraged the beginnings of this project.

Since anthropologists began writing about Choctaws, decline has figured prominently in their writings. Acculturation and adaptation, which Choctaws excelled at in order to maintain a hold onto their homelands in the face of ongoing settler encroachment, was viewed as a

maddening quality by those concerned with finding a “pure” Indigenous subject to study. In 1931, American ethnologist John R. Swanton declared that Choctaws’ “[a]bsence of pronounced native institutions made it easy for them to take up with foreign customs and usages” and subsequently, Choctaws “became with great rapidity poor subjects for ethnological study but successful members of the American Nation” (Swanton 1931 [1993]: 2) – despite spending very little time with Choctaw people. For Swanton, Choctaw adaptability indicated a weak Choctaw culture that led to its decline and assimilation into American settler society. Historian Angie Debo (1934) declared that the great Choctaw Nation was no more after their arrival in Indian Territory and political dissolution due to federal policy and non-Indian greed for land. Anthropologist Sandra Faiman-Silva (1997) argued that by the late 1990’s, Oklahoma Choctaws had been reduced to an “ethnic minority” and integrated into the world-economy. Swanton’s assertion largely shaped the Choctaw scholarship to follow, leaving Choctaws largely understudied because they were thought to have assimilated fully, especially after their removal to Indian Territory (Akers 2004).

Choctaw designation as one of the “Five Civilized Tribes” contributes to perceptions of complete assimilation into American settler society. The “Five Civilized” moniker was applied to the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole after their removal to Indian Territory and was meant to distinguish their “remarkable social and political progress” from their “wild neighbors of the plains” (Debo 1940: 5). Choctaws converted to Christianity, engaged in farming, and some took up the practice of chattel slavery. While these adaptations took place, the prevalence of these practices often seem to be exaggerated (Coleman 1996). The outward appearance of Choctaw life seemed as though Choctaw assimilation into American society was complete – and many Choctaws themselves came to believe this as overt indices of political and

cultural difference like ceremony fell out of common practice due to Removal. Nevertheless, Choctaws maintained their distinctiveness as a people and nation (Pesantubbee 1994; Kidwell 2007; Lambert 2007). Considering this history in conjunction with ongoing efforts of land dispossession, I aim to take stock of and trace through time the immense disadvantages imposed on Oklahoma Choctaws that go unaccounted for in narratives of poverty and decline (which in turn become “evidence” for Choctaws being shadows of their former selves). I argue that the conflation of Choctaws as assimilated peoples is part of a social project to undermine Choctaw sovereignty in order to gain access to Choctaw land.

This process, which we may call settler colonialism, is about a settler society establishing itself through the seizure of Indigenous land. Because the settler who comes to Indigenous (Choctaw) land builds a new society on it and never leaves, settler colonialism operates as “a structure, not an event” (Wolfe 2006). Settlers lay claim to Indigenous land by any means necessary, summarily requiring the elimination of the Indigenous people of and from the land to legitimate their claims. Land is intimately tied to Indigenous political orders: they are sites for beginnings and making place (Goeman 2015). For settlers to claim land as their own works to dismantle these political orders whose legitimacies are rooted in forms of relationality outside the constructions of the nation-state. Politics and land are inextricable thus the assault on Indigenous sovereignty is a key function of dispossession. Full (or even partial) assimilation into American society functions as an elimination because it means dismantling Choctaws as a separate political order with claims to land that settlers desire. Thusly, we must be attentive to the ways that Choctaw sovereignty is interpolated within the American settler colonial context, as I will track through this account of Choctaw cultural revitalization.

While much of the seminal literature speaks of Choctaw decline and full assimilation into American society, more recent work has proven otherwise. Choctaw historians Clara Sue Kidwell (2007) and Donna Akers (2004) have demonstrated how cohesive Choctaw communities were maintained during and after removal. Sustained ethnographic attention to Oklahoma Choctaw communities throughout the ten and half counties by anthropologists has also demonstrated how these various communities responded to Removal. Most prominently studied are the small communities within McCurtain County, particularly the northern communities of Battiest and Bethel. Home to a concentration of “real” Choctaws (those who are first-language speakers and “know the culture”), a designation and history that I will analyze, anthropologists and linguists have flocked to the area to study Oklahoma Choctaw culture and language (Faiman-Silva 1997; Kickham 2015; Pesantubbee 1993; Williams 1995; Collins 2002). Although there are many Oklahoma Choctaw communities with similar dynamics, McCurtain County seems to be of special interest to scholars due to its relative geographic isolation that limited the circulation of English.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, Choctaw culture is decidedly Christian in these places, as the church served as an institution for maintaining Choctaw lifeways. Thus by examining the movement of culture as it is lived and known in cultural “strongholds” within McCurtain County, as it is shared and moves across the rest of the Choctaw Nation, we can see Choctaw cultural evolution within these geographic spaces has shaped Choctaw Nation’s embrace of Christianity, which some (from within and outside the Nation) have criticized.

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<sup>4</sup> In Robert Scott Williams’ 1995 linguistic anthropology dissertation, “Language obsolescence and structural change: The case of the Oklahoma Choctaw”, he examined a Choctaw speech community of Battiest-Bethel-Smithville. He argues that the area is “one of the most intact speech communities in Oklahoma whose members by and large share the same dialect and was one location in McCurtain County where [he] could find enough young speakers of the language. Any attempt to elicit data from similar groups in Broken Bow, the second largest city in McCurtain County, failed due to [his] inability to find a large enough population of younger people who used Choctaw in their daily lives”. Many of Williams’ consultants are relatives and family friends of the author and many interviewed in this thesis.

Knowledge production about Choctaws – recent scholarship included – largely leaves Choctaw sovereignty unconfigured in their analyses. Beyond the sovereignty enshrined through treaties with the United States, Choctaw Nation’s political life is largely understood through the work of tribal government. In her 2009 ethnography, Choctaw anthropologist Valerie Lambert demonstrates how Choctaws never stopped being a nation. She argues that since the 1960’s the Nation has developed the infrastructure that aligns it with Western definitions of nationhood, thereby cementing Choctaw nationhood since time immemorial. While important and robustly argued, the definitions of nationhood Lambert takes up consequently limit her engagement with Indigeneity in its cultural/political form. Therefore in this thesis, I wish to expand what is considered “political” for Indigenous nations. Cultural work is political work. Within Choctaw Nation’s organization, culture is framed as apolitical and mostly connected to tribal government as a department or programming that requires tribal council funding. But for Indigenous people, what is cultural is simultaneously political. Indigeneity, although relegated as subcategories of race and ethnicity, signals alternative political orders that pre-date the United States (A. Simpson 2014). Indigenous cultures index political difference, which endanger American settler society’s political legitimacy. Choctaw social organization today is far from what it was during pre-contact life, but this does not render it less of a “legitimate” or “authentic” political entity. What “was” and “is” considered traditional Choctaw culture is constantly shifting. Static notions of culture limit the possibilities for culture as well as endanger the ability to assert Choctaw sovereignty. Colonization required Choctaws to make appeals for their survival using settler frameworks and discourses in order to protect Choctaw ways of life. The erasure of this fraught history reflects the reality of embeddedness within a settler state.

Nevertheless, Choctaw sovereignty still exists and is asserted robustly, albeit restricted and strangled by settler sovereignty. This thesis will demonstrate how Choctaw people have maintained that sovereignty, despite histories and ethnographies that argue to the contrary, and through institutions that seem counterintuitive. Choctaw Nation's economic development is a product of Choctaw sovereignty, and its assertion today has reified the forms it takes. Today, Choctaw sovereignty has enabled the Nation to employ 9,000+ employees, making it the largest employer in southeastern Oklahoma (State of the Nation 2016). The Nation administers social and health services on behalf of the federal government to tribal members. It also provides revenue to Oklahoma via numerous compacts – most significantly its 1994 gaming compact that enabled Choctaw Nation to engage in high stakes gaming.<sup>5</sup> The Nation has taken on responsibilities of the state of Oklahoma and contributed to the wider Oklahoma public by improving public infrastructure and schools, which is particularly crucial against a backdrop of constant state budget cuts that have left Oklahomans struggling.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, economic development has facilitated the Nation's political ascendancy at the federal and state levels.

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<sup>5</sup> As a sovereign nation who signed treaties with the United States, Indians nations interface with the federal government rather than states. States do not have jurisdiction on Indian land, but this has been changing. In 1987, the Supreme Court ruled in *California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians* that states could not regulate gaming on tribal land, an affirmation of Indian nations' sovereignty. States responded by lobbying Congress for greater regulatory power over Indian gaming, resulting in the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) of 1988. This act required Indian nations to develop gaming compacts with states in order for tribal casinos to engage in Class III (high stakes, casino-type) gaming. Meanwhile Class I (traditional Indian gambling) and Class II (games of chance like bingo - but not slot machines) were not subject to IGRA requirements. Compacts usually require share gaming revenue with the state.

<sup>6</sup> For the 2016–2017 fiscal year, Oklahoma's cuts to education lead the nation in greatest cuts in a year, leading for the third year in the row. Since the 2008 recession, Oklahoma has made budget cuts for education and public schools without any increase. As a result of these cuts, many Oklahoma public schools are only open four days a week and schools have closed, putting further strain on remaining schools. Oklahoma public school teachers have not had a raise since 2008 and many are leaving the state for better pay – including the 2016 Oklahoma Teacher of the Year. For more, see: (Brown, Emma. "With state budget in crisis, many Oklahoma schools hold classes four days a week." *The Washington Post*. 27 May 2017. Last accessed: 31 May 2017. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/with-state-budget-in-crisis-many-oklahoma-schools-hold-classes-four-days-a-week/2017/05/27/24f73288-3cb8-11e7-8854-21f359183e8c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/with-state-budget-in-crisis-many-oklahoma-schools-hold-classes-four-days-a-week/2017/05/27/24f73288-3cb8-11e7-8854-21f359183e8c_story.html)>) and (Strauss, Valeri. "I'm sorry it's come to this': Why Oklahoma's 2016 Teacher of the Year is moving to Texas to work." *The Washington Post*. 28 May 2017. Last accessed: 31 May 2017. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/05/28/im-sorry-its-come-to-this-why-oklahomas-2016-teacher-of-the-year-is-moving-to-texas-to-work/>>).

## THESIS PROJECT

Growing up, I spent my summers and holidays between the suburbs of Los Angeles where I grew up and Oklahoma. During high school, those trips became less frequent and it was not until my senior year of college that I returned to Choctaw Nation since graduating high school. The Choctaw Nation I found then was vastly different from the Choctaw Nation of my childhood memories. Hochatown, once a sleepy community that had been relocated due to the construction of the Broken Bow dam in the 1960's, was growing into a tourist destination; the Bethel cutoff road was flattened out and paved so your stomach no longer dropped as though you were on a roller coaster whenever you sped up and down the hilly road; a Head Start and a Battiest/Bethel community center recently broke ground. In four short years, Choctaw Nation's landscape was rapidly changing, the economic development undertaken beginning in the 1980's coming into fruition. When I considered how these changes contrasted against the poverty of the MSNBC articles, I sought to understand how and why Choctaw poverty/decline was the dominant narrative, prompting the genesis of this project.

Throughout Indian Country, economic development takes multiple forms, such as casino gaming and resource development, which produce a wide variety of results with significant intra-community impacts. Rather than understanding sovereignty as a product of economic development, Indigenous sovereignty crucially enables economic development and shapes its direction as I will demonstrate in Chapter One (Cattelino 2008). Indigenous sovereignty is not solely derived from the signing to treaties with the early forms of the United States and it pre-dates the sovereignty tied to forming nation-states and the capitalist economies that sustain them (Alfred 1999). Indigenous scholars have critiqued how engagement with capitalism, an economic system premised on the subjugation and exploitation Indigenous people and land, forces

Indigenous people to contort to a system that continually dispossesses them, thus they call for a turn away from these forms of politicking (Coulthard 2014; Atleo 2015). While the Harvard Development Project on American Indian Economic Development's recommendation of economic development, using assumptions of liberal theories of economics that call for "allowing for free flow of capital into Indigenous communities to market networks, utilizing Indigenous labor resources and contesting communalism" (Sullivan 2006: 8), has worked well for some, tensions between American Indian economic development and dispossession still exist and produce old challenges in new forms. Economic development works through capitalism, it cannot be separated from the ways capitalism has been used to dispossess Indigenous people from land (Coulthard 2014). Nevertheless, these tensions can be navigated in ways that reinvigorate Indigenous sovereignty, as anthropologist Jessica Cattelino (2008) traces in her ethnography of Florida Seminole sovereignty and gaming. With revenue from casino gaming and other projects, facets of Seminole traditional life like housing and craft production have been reinvigorated, asserting the value of Seminole ways of life and pushing back against American society's attempts to suppress them.

Choctaw economic development asserts Choctaw being and survival everyday but is undermined by a persistent tale of poverty. While Choctaws have countered and corrected existing literatures that perpetuate harm within Choctaw communities, unequal power structures still remain when working within them.<sup>7</sup> Disciplines like anthropology produced "scientific" knowledge that created social hierarchies that justified and abetted in colonialism across the

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<sup>7</sup> Some Choctaw anthropologists who have challenged anthropology to account for its effect on Indigenous people include Joe Watkins and Dorothy Lippert. Both push against the archaeologist's power to construction of "artifacts" into objects thereby decontextualizing it from Indigenous lifeways. For more, see: (Lippert, Dorothy. "Building a Bridge to Cross a Thousand Years." *American Indian Quarterly*. 30(3-4): 431-440.; Watkin, Joe. *Indigenous Archaeology: American Indian Values and Scientific Practice*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2001.)

world (Asad 1995). Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. famously lambasted anthropologists, writing “[the academic community] have the Indian field well defined and under control. Their concern is not the ultimate policy that will affect the Indian people, but merely the creation of new slogans and doctrines by which they can climb the university totem pole” (Deloria 1969). Anthropologists studied and theorized about Indians and their ways of life without engaging them in order to develop abstract theories about humanity and civilization. Simultaneously, the knowledge produced about them was used to exert power over them, rendering them more governable (Said 1979). Thusly, Indigenous people have been subjugated by anthropological knowledge that became widely-circulated knowledge that informed public culture. While anthropology as a discipline has changed, early anthropological practices have an afterlife with which Indigenous people still grapple (A. Simpson 2014; Baker 2010). Recent ethnographies have incorporated and highlighted Native voices to produce work that helps the community studied, but theory is largely still circulated within Western epistemologies.

Thus I turn to producing knowledge within Choctaw intellectual frameworks of knowledge to work towards a form of Choctaw (Indigenous) resurgence just as Choctaw ancestors have done since time immemorial. To work towards supporting and revitalizing Indigenous nationhood through new forms of traditional practice and teachings, Michii Sagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson calls on Indigenous scholars to “delve into their own culture’s stories, philosophies, theories and concepts to align themselves with the processes and forces of regeneration, revitalization, remembering, and visioning” (L. Simpson 2011: 148). This entails theorizing from a mode of Choctaw intellectual thought to make sense of the world in accord with Choctaw ways while developing possibilities that centers Choctaw being for the future. Indigenous knowledge is not static; it develops and changes throughout time (Altamirano-

Jimenez & Kermoal 2016; Wohling 2009). Throughout history, Choctaws have learned and adapted to forces that seek to dispossess them of their land. Part of this is incorporating forms and social practices that do not sustain Choctaw lifeways and teachings, instead entrenching a settler way of life that still threatens Choctaw (and other Indian nations') ways of life.

By providing “for all of southeastern Oklahoma” and investing in Choctaw culture, Choctaw Nation’s economic development gestures at creating an inclusive Choctaw-grounded world and space for all people to enter and partake. In developing a new Choctaw order, the Nation asks a lot of its citizens. Part of what I found ethnographically was that the Nation disproportionately asks more of Choctaw women, who are often more than willing to do the work. Considering this in conjunction with the decline of Choctaw matriarchal social organization and continual marginalization of Choctaw women since first contact, this alerts us to the need to examine the gendered dimensions of dispossession and how that operates through Indigenous governance today. It becomes increasingly apparent that writing about the success and challenges of Choctaw economic development cannot be separated from the questions of Choctaw gender relations. Forms of Choctaw women’s power have become limited to “domestic” spheres like the home and church (Pesantubbee 2005). The separation of Choctaw women’s power into public/private spheres is a technique of Indigenous dispossession that has moved Choctaw expressions of sovereignty along (settler) patriarchal norms where men become the face of governance. Critical analysis of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination requires analyzing the gendered forms that the expression of sovereignty takes as to not reproduce or reify colonial forms of domination (Barker 2017). Thus I turn to centering Choctaw women’s knowledge, as they are informed by and gain insight from their experiences with settler colonialism in the various parts of their lives that it touches. Theorizing around Choctaw

women's knowledge provides an opening to envision a Choctaw Nation more aligned with the teachings that Choctaw women, past and present, embody and teach us every day.

Lastly, in considering the possibilities enabled by Choctaw economic development, the particularity of Choctaw history and life in Oklahoma sets the stage for our responsibilities and accountability that Choctaws have to each other and the land we inhabit by consequence of our treaties (Wildcat et al 2014). Theorizing from Oklahoma, not Mississippi, from Caddo traditional territory, within a settler colonial context opens up questions about proper protocol for Choctaw governance for the future and building possibilities outside of the framework of the nation-state, which itself is an unnatural, settler-colonial political project (Anderson 1983). This thesis presents some of the ways that Choctaw have dealt with this historically and aims to begin a conversation and reckoning with Choctaw engagement with land in Oklahoma.

## METHODOLOGY

To be able to demonstrate and understand how economic development changed daily life in Choctaw Nation, I employed formal participant-observation from July to September 2016 and April 2017. I also conducted life history interviews with nineteen tribal citizens and elders, who serving as the bulk of my interviewees. During my first time conducting fieldwork and recognizing that separation between a researcher and her "subjects" can be tenuous (Tallbear 2014; Moreton-Robinson 2014), I began with the place and people that I knew – McCurtain County. From there I moved in the same ways that many of my consultants did: to the city of Durant, an approximately two-hour drive to tribal headquarters. Working at home in Oklahoma came to shape the project in unexpected ways. The stories that my father told me growing up gained a new life, now better contextualized while giving me a "site" to think through the

knowledge I attained in academia and my experiences with Choctaw Nation and our people. Through interviews and experiencing daily life by staying with my aunt during the course of fieldwork, I gained a picture of how people saw and responded to the political, economic, and social changes going on around them. Embedded within particular relationships of kin with their own sets of obligations, I was able to jump into Choctaw life with ease. My responsibilities and relationships informed and shaped my understanding of how to be Choctaw, which I grapple and configure for myself on the pages here.

Subsequently, in producing this text, I place myself firmly within it because the Battiest-Bethel-Broken Bow triangulation is the community in which I am embedded and to which I am related via place and people. People are (and have become) kin to me, even when they are not so formally. Through this project, I have made connections with fellow Choctaws that might not exist otherwise in the same meaningful ways. Physical community placement in northern McCurtain County is also significant for it is where land will be passed on to me, itself an interesting story. Connections and histories with land are particularly important for Choctaws, especially given how Indigenous people are often abstracted away from land in order to sever their claims to it. Through time, Choctaw place-making in Oklahoma has been erased. Therefore by re-centering people's ties to land through stories, I examine how Choctaws make and enact new claims to (Caddo) territory. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's (2003) call "to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction", Black literary scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) argues for bringing in one's personal life to illuminate how social processes operate in people's lives. Similarly, Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million (2009) argues for the need to account for "felt theory" which speaks to the rich, emotional experiences of histories from which Native women produce knowledge. Federal policies aimed at dispossessing

Choctaws of their land sought to disconnect people from land, so through the personal (my own stories and experiences along with others'), I demonstrate how these policies affect people's everyday lives.

As a Chahta ohoyo (Choctaw woman), I use this thesis to critically reflect on Choctaw nationhood and sovereignty in Oklahoma and consider the ways it can move beyond the limits imposed on Choctaws. In doing so, I account for the ways that colonialism has affected this land and all people to create new possibilities. Like other Critical Indigenous Studies scholars, I view producing knowledge engaged in Choctaw intellectual frameworks and pushing against narratives that undermine assertions of Indigenous sovereignty as forms of political work that advances Choctaw sovereignty (A. Simpson 2014; Goeman 2013; Coulthard 2014). This research is an act of "standing with" and speaking in concert with community, as Dakota interdisciplinary scholar Kim Tallbear (2014) terms this Indigenous form of ethical solidarity through research. The process of undertaking this research as well as this particular product aims to contribute to ongoing conversations (and perhaps begin new ones) within Choctaw Nation.

## THESIS ORGANIZATION

To gain a sense of the arc of Choctaw economic development, Chapter One provides an overview of Choctaw Nation political and economic development since its beginnings in the 1980's. Tribal sovereignty crucially enables Choctaw Nation's political and economic accomplishments yet it is not necessarily seen that way. Thus, it is important to examine how the decidedly acultural approach to economic development – as Chief Hollis Roberts conceptualized it – created a divide between "politics" and "culture" within tribal government's organization. Tracking how that approach has shifted since then, I look at Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna (Choctaw

School of Language) as a site of major economic investment to see how that divide has been reconciled to reclaim Choctaw language, culture and lifeways as Choctaw Nation does today. In turn, this shift has further enhanced political gains by requiring negotiations with the state of Oklahoma to make Choctaw cultural revitalization accessible to all people through Oklahoma and a wider Choctaw diaspora. Chapter Two examines the historical processes that produced the need for economic development in Indian Territory-cum-Oklahoma. Sketching out life in the wake of the Nation's political and economic reorganization, this chapter traces the ways that Choctaw life was targeted for elimination through federal policies like allotment, which have major economic consequences. These economic conditions simultaneously affected Choctaw culture (language in particular), which I will also demonstrate. Because the history of places and geography have a significant impact on how these communities functioned and interacted with one another, I also account for place (and the production of it) to situate people and outcomes. Last, Chapter Three considers how place and the history of Choctaw placement in Oklahoma has shaped (and continues to shape) Choctaw cultural revitalization. Placement and displacement both raise questions for the Choctaw Nation's future and explores some of the options that the Nation is considering and working on today that would further bridge the divides between politics and culture as they are tied to Choctaw sovereignty as well as the divides between Chahta okla (Choctaw people) in Oklahoma and Mississippi.

## CHAPTER ONE: Economic Development & Choctaw Political Ascendency

On March 20, 2017, Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna (School of Choctaw Language) premiered Chahta Anumpa Tosholi Himona (New Choctaw Dictionary) at Tribal Headquarters in Durant, Oklahoma. Fourteen years prior, then-Chief Gregory Pyle and Assistant Chief Gary Batton asked themselves: how they could sustain Choctaw traditions for the next 100 years? A new Choctaw dictionary was one of those answers. The first Choctaw dictionaries were credited to Presbyterian missionary Cyrus Byington who learned the language so he could preach in Choctaw.<sup>8</sup> The development of this dictionary is a Choctaw Nation-led effort to contribute to Byington's record of the language as first-language speakers from Oklahoma have known and used it. Developed by a group of Choctaw first-language instructors, community members, and linguists, the new dictionary – and Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna – are the manifestations of Choctaw economic development success. Over the past thirty years, economic development has produced revenue streams that have been reinvested in the Choctaw people and their ways of life. The Nation has provided work, training, and education opportunities for Choctaws to find work beyond the low-wage labor used to assimilate Choctaws into an economic system aimed at dispossessing them of their land. Providing jobs and revenue to empower people, economic development has afforded Choctaws the financial ability to assert Choctaw distinctiveness in state and national arenas. Less mired by poverty, Choctaw Nation has become able to enact their sovereignty in new overt ways. Massive cultural revitalization – language revitalization in particular as I will later discuss – reflects this shift.

Passing on Chahta anumpa (Choctaw language) to the younger generation of Choctaws has transformed from its humble beginnings in a trailer. It has entailed a process of creating a

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<sup>8</sup> Many Choctaws contributed to the creation of Byington's dictionary although they are often uncredited. The New Choctaw dictionary acknowledges this history by drawing attention to Choctaw involvement

space for teaching Choctaw language in Oklahoma public schools, alongside other economic investments in things important to Choctaws, which in turn has expanded Choctaw presence and visibility throughout Oklahoma. As the state of Oklahoma has increasingly cut funding to public school education and social services, many of the thirty-nine Indian nations throughout Oklahoma have come to fill the void left by the state's neoliberal withdrawal of services.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Choctaw Nation and other nations increasingly provide services for tribal citizens and non-citizen living in Choctaw territory.

Choctaw language revitalization takes many forms, enabled by revenue from various economic development projects. While speaking Choctaw declined most prominently during the mid-1900's and onward, set aside to enable economic integration into the world around them, the language has gained renewed importance with the Nation. In McCurtain County, one of the poorest counties in Oklahoma and where the highest concentration of fluent Choctaw speakers live, Choctaw Nation's cultural revitalization has opened new doors for many people by providing job opportunities based on the everyday aspects of life: speaking.

## A HISTORY OF CHOCTAW NATION & ITS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's political and economic ascendancy in southeastern Oklahoma over the past thirty years stands in stark contrast to the Choctaw Nation of the late 1960's. Since their Removal from their ancestral homelands to Oklahoma beginning in 1831, Choctaws faced an uphill battle in establishing themselves in the new land. In 1890 the federal

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<sup>9</sup> April 6, 2017 marked the first meeting of tribal leaders and Oklahoma school districts to develop strategies for tribal consultation that would also support Indian students in public schools. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act limited federal oversight in public schools and expanded state control over education, allowing the state of Oklahoma to require school districts to consult with tribal nations. This is significant in a context of consistent budget cuts to education year after year and indicates a growing reliance on tribal nations to fund schools.

government disrupted Choctaw political organization with the policy of allotment, which broke up communal holding of land into individualized plots in fee simple (and therefore alienable). But most significant to the discussion here was the 1940-1960's era of federal-tribal relations known as Termination, a series of laws and policies developed to break up American Indian nations in order to assimilate them into settler society. By terminating the political-legal status of American Indian nations, the federal government would no longer have to contend with treaty rights nor engage with tribal nations as sovereign governments. Recognizing the political (and arguably, ontological) stakes, Choctaw youth based out of Oklahoma City – many of them coming from families that participated in Relocation<sup>10</sup> – mobilized against Termination. The youth activists lobbied Congressmen with phone calls, telegrams, and letters to at least every member of Congress and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) staff in Muscogee and Washington D.C. (Lambert 2009). This intense effort succeeded by getting Congress to repeal the legislation that authorized Choctaw termination (Lambert 2009). Their activism for and within the Choctaw Nation facilitated reorganization of the Choctaw Nation and speaks to commitment to Choctaw self-determination and sovereignty while also laying down a foundation for conventional nation-building (Lambert 2009; Kidwell 2007).

In 1970, Public Law 91-495 authorized the Five Civilized Tribes to elect their own chiefs, paving the way for the first popular election in Choctaw Nation for chief since Oklahoma became the 46th state to enter the Union in 1906. Advocacy for Choctaw self-determination by the same group of Oklahoma City Choctaws facilitated the passing of this legislation (Kidwell

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<sup>10</sup> Relocation was a federal policy aimed at moving Indians off reservations to urban cities throughout the United States in order to integrate them into American society. Federal officials argued that this would provide more education and opportunities for Indians, but this was not necessarily the case as American Indian marginalization continued in new ways in the city. For more, see: (Fixico, Donald. *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1990). For analysis of reclaiming and remaking urban spaces into Indian spaces, see: (Ramirez, Renya. *Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

2007). In the years prior, the BIA appointed the Choctaw chief, circumventing grassroots community involvement in governance. In 1971, the previously appointed chief, Harry J.W. Belvin was elected into office. Under his direction though, tribal government's structure and involvement in Choctaws' daily lives was minimal (Lambert 2009). Tribal government consisted only of the chief. It was rumored that Belvin could fit all the work of the chief in the top drawer of his desk. The general lack of action on behalf of enhancing Choctaws' lives led to his ousting by David Gardner in 1975 (Lambert 2009).

Chief David Gardner (1975 – 1978) had major plans to revamp the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Under his administration, the Nation established tribal headquarters in Tuskahoma, established Hello Choctaw (which would later become today's tribal newspaper Biskinik), pushed for Choctaw language revitalization, and was a big supporter of Choctaw involvement with Christianity (Milligan 2003). He also supported a Community Health Representative Training Center in Talihina, an Extended Health Care Facility in Antlers, and a community building in Idabel (Milligan 2003). Gardner, with the support of the majority of Choctaws, planned to change the structure of tribal government but his work was cut short after losing his battle with cancer in 1978. Gardner's assistant chief was elected chief in the special election following Gardner's death.

Chief Hollis Roberts (1978-1997) picked up where Gardner left off, transforming the Nation much faster than Gardner's original plans. He first initiated his brand of Choctaw economic development by reorganizing tribal government, whose power was severely undercut by the federal government after Oklahoma became a state in 1907.<sup>11</sup> Roberts began with the passage of a new constitution in 1983, which established a tripartite government with legislative

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<sup>11</sup> This is in part because of Choctaw involvement in the Civil War in which Choctaws sided with the Confederacy (due to geographical and economic constraints) with the Treaty of 1866. See: "Iti Fabvssa: Choctaw Nation and the

(Tribal Council) and judicial branches, formalizing tribal government's structure. He also changed the Nation's membership criteria from blood quantum to lineal descent, meaning anyone who could trace their relationship to someone on the Dawes rolls could be an enrolled citizen. Larger membership meant more federal funds, which was allocated to Choctaw Nation based on the number of enrolled citizens (Milligan 2003). Roberts' expansion of tribal government was unprecedented and asserted tribal sovereignty unlike any time before. Recollecting Roberts' administration, one tribal member stated that when Roberts took office, there were only seven tribal employees, and funding for running tribal government was minimal. He then signaled his belief in Roberts' commitment to nation-building by retelling the rumor that someone once saw Roberts pay those seven employees from his own personal checking account. Today, Choctaw Nation is the largest employer in southeastern Oklahoma.

Once Chief Hollis Roberts had a centralized government established and supportive of his efforts to develop Choctaw Nation, he turned to fashioning the region into a center of commerce and economic vitality. The city of Durant, located near the intersection of U.S. Highways 69 and 75 and only a two-hour-drive from the metropolitan area of Dallas, Texas, played a large role in transforming the economic landscape of the Nation. Taking advantage of Durant's geographic location, Roberts conceived a way to bring Choctaws out of persistent poverty and unemployment. By establishing tribally-owned and -run enterprises like the Choctaw Bingo Palace as well as taking over BIA-contracted programs and services required by the Indian Self-Determination Act, Roberts could provide employment directly to Choctaws

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American Civil War." Biskinik. October 2011. Last accessed: 23 April 2017.  
<<https://www.choctawnation.com/sites/default/files/2011.10%20Choctaw%20Nation%20and%20the%20American%20Civil%20War.pdf>>

(Faiman-Silva 1997). The most significant of Choctaw development projects, which included opening hospitals and factories, was tribal gaming.

Choctaw Nation began its foray into Indian gaming by opening the Choctaw Indian Bingo Palace in December 1987. A travel plaza with a smoke shop and another bingo parlor soon followed. Gaming revenue, in combination with federal funds and grants, were used to create new business endeavors that would diversify the Nation's business portfolio. With some business successes and failures, Choctaw Nation has expanded to travel plazas, defense contracting, manufacturing, and even a grocery store to provide fresh produce. These business ventures have ensured a steady flow of revenue for running tribal government and member services. In 2015, Choctaw Nation's business operating income was \$424 million, 65% of all revenue. \$319 million was reinvested in Choctaw Nation member services like education, hospitals, elder services, etc. (2016 State of the Nation). With these revenue streams, Choctaw Nation has invested in Choctaw people, providing for them and filling in the void left by Oklahoma's neoliberal reductions of social welfare safety nets during the 1980s. Under Chief Gregory Pyle's administration (1997– 2014), there has also been reinvestment in Choctaw cultural life, which was set aside to focus on political reorganization and economic development under Roberts' administration.

Economic success bolstered Choctaw Nation's political power and authority, reinvigorating Choctaw nationhood by giving it in a new business-oriented form. As the Nation became more self-reliant and poverty levels among Choctaws declined, the Nation began shifting some of its revenue and resources towards projects oriented towards revitalizing Choctaw culture. Chief Hollis Roberts crafted Choctaw governance along mainstream American business principles to ensure economic development within the Nation. Roberts was an advocate for the

“pull yourself up by the bootstraps” philosophy and integrated this into his approach to economic development (Faiman-Silva 1997). Eschewing cultural investments, which he saw as “regressive”, which I will discuss further below, Roberts focused on creating and bringing in industry that could provide jobs to the Nation so citizens could become self-sufficient, making them less vulnerable to the federal government (Faiman-Silva 1997).

## SEPARATING POLITICS & CULTURE

The early stages of Choctaw economic development are characterized by a rigid separation of business and culture, setting a particular tone for the directions that economic development would take with different leadership. Chief Hollis Roberts’ set the stage for Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma’s transformation from a seven-person office to a powerful political and economic force with lobbyists in Oklahoma City and Washington D.C. Chief Roberts’ approach was business-oriented, focused on creating a stable economic environment that would attract business investments into Choctaw Nation. In her analysis of Robert’s integral vision for the Choctaw Nation, Faiman-Silva characterized it as: “(1) individual initiative as a key to success; (2) traditional culture as ‘regressive’; (3) an orientation toward the present and future as preferable to ‘cultural sentimentality’; (4) long-term stable but aggressive leadership; and (5) moderate economic risk taking” (Faiman-Silva 1997: 213). Choctaw economic development at its inception was decidedly acultural and disavowed the nation’s cultural dimensions. While the tenor and focus of economic development has shifted with subsequent administrations to raise the prominence of Choctaw culture, this acultural approach continues to manifest itself in the divisions of tribal government.

To understand Hollis Roberts' position of traditional culture being "regressive," we should view it as a product of a history of imposed assimilation that Choctaws have long endured. Interpreting 'regressive' as Faiman-Silva presents her data, I understand Roberts' word choice of regressive to mean that he viewed traditional culture as holding Choctaws back from advancing along linear theories of human development. By situating Roberts' position within a history of dispossession, we can see how the maintenance of Choctaw traditional life was unacceptable for the federal government. Strong and overt adherence to traditional life widened the opportunities for the federal government to intervene in Choctaw life and seize their land. Assimilation can thusly be seen as the means for Choctaws to support themselves and their families. Integral to understanding the conditions that Choctaw Nation found itself requires an accounting for how removal occurred in the first place, which I will chart out in the next chapter. By situating Choctaw Nation within a social process of ongoing structured Choctaw dispossession in which the federal government partakes, we can see how Choctaw cultural and political life come to be seen as separate formations rather than one in the same.

To initiate Choctaw economic development that would bring Choctaws out of poverty, the cultural dimensions of Choctaw nationhood (like language, traditional arts) were set aside. Roberts' vision for the new Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma entailed a strong, centralized government with a strong economic base of educated and employed Choctaws (Faiman-Silva 1997; Lambert 2007). Often, to be educated meant knowing English (and not speaking Choctaw) which contributed to creating a divide between economic stability and culture. While people could learn Choctaw and English, the relationship between speaking Choctaw and class position is important. The ability to speak English provided greater economic opportunity for Choctaws and soon speaking Choctaw became an economic decision. Choctaws were forced to make

decisions about not teaching their children the Choctaw language, citing reasons like boarding school experiences or that speaking Choctaw would not be “economically advantageous” as my father did when I asked why my sister and I did not learn Choctaw as kids.

The “economically advantageous” argument for not speaking or teaching Choctaw language/culture is an important rationalization to note. It demonstrates how aspects of everyday life are transformed into economic decisions that would lead to poverty-free lives that Oklahoma Choctaws like my father did not have growing up. Political scientist Wendy Brown (2015) argues that neoliberalism, which rose in prominence as political-economic system in the United States during the 1970-1980’s, developed into form of economic rationality that became applied to all facets of life, leading individuals to view every decision they make to have economic value to their lives.<sup>12</sup> Taking up this economizing mindset, Roberts’ emphasis on ‘individual initiative’ over ‘cultural sentimentality’ consequently affected Choctaw language transmission. Furthermore, in the settler colonial context, the economization of Indigenous languages in this way places the onus of responsibility on the individual for making decisions to forego speaking their language. To render speaking Choctaw to one’s child an individual’s rationalized, economic choice draws attention away from the structural reality which creates the poverty that compel people to stop speaking their languages in the first place. Individual choices are in fact directed by social conditions. Throughout the 1980’s and onward, Choctaw Nation focused on getting Choctaws out of the poverty, imposed upon them through dispossession, through employment.

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<sup>12</sup> Neoliberalism as it is invoked here, refers to it in its neoliberal rationality form, in which it “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities – even where money is not an issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus” (Brown 2015: 31). Neoliberalism in its political-economic system became prevalent during the Reagan administration. For more on neoliberalism, see: (Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.).

As the Nation became more self-sufficient economically, the move to investing in and revitalizing Choctaw culture is an affirmation of a Choctaw way of life as valid and valuable to Choctaws.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Choctaws throughout history and in the present, have fought to maintain Choctaw ways of life in their myriad of current manifestations.

#### “ELIMINATING” CHAHTA ANUMPA

While tribal government under Chief Hollis Roberts put culture on the backburner, Choctaw communities held onto it, especially Chahta anumpa (Choctaw language). With time and economic success, citizens working in tribal government have gained a greater sense of what Choctaw sovereignty means, particularly in how that sovereignty is tied to being Indigenous people. Choctaws have and continue to reclaim Choctaw ways of life, which were shamed out of many people as they grew up in poverty. This helps to explain the greater emphasis on learning and teaching the Choctaw language with subsequent administrations of Chief Gregory Pyle and current-Chief Gary Batton. Through language reclamation and revitalization, Choctaws have found an avenue for honoring the work of Choctaws that paved the way for them and recovering some what it means to be Indigenous people. Given the successes of economic development for the Choctaw Nation, we see why funding for teaching the Choctaw language has been ample and their budget requests have yet to be turned down.

To further understand the landscape where Choctaw language use has declined, I will now turn to examining the ways that it was targeted for elimination because learning and

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<sup>13</sup> Ostensibly, this shift towards culture can also reflect a multicultural turn that values Indigenous difference that the United States has found new economic value in, especially during the Obama administration. For more on settler governance, multiculturalism and the politics of Indigenous recognition, see: (Povinelli, Elizabeth. *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

teaching Choctaw language as it is done today was not always welcome nor allowed by non-Choctaws, especially the federal government. Although many Choctaws were able to maintain the language because of Choctaws' particular history with missionaries, which I will detail in the next chapter, Oklahoma Choctaws were not immune to the wider national project of assimilating Indians into American society. From allotment to boarding schools, the federal government employed a multitude of ways to enact founder of the Carlisle Indian School Richard H. Pratt's famous words, "Kill the Indian, save the man" (Child 1998; Lomawaima 1994). Choctaws, in both Mississippi and Oklahoma, experienced this largely through the missionaries sent to them and often in the schools that they set up (Kidwell 1995).

While missionaries to Choctaws like Alfred Wright and Cyrus Byington were relatively more open to the usage of Choctaw language than their counterparts in Indigenous communities elsewhere, they still sought to get Choctaws to give up their language and ways of life (Coleman 1996; Akers 2004). When asked what constitutes "being traditional" for Choctaw, one tribal member cited speaking Choctaw as a major component because it signals a mode of thinking and set of values distinct from dominant society. Language can be tied to the wider category of culture, but is also important to Indigenous politics itself. In her examination of the relationship between language and Indigenous nationhood within a settler state, Hupa and Shinnecock education scholar Sara Chase argues that language has the power for "the revival of philosophies, economic systems, histories, healing and ecological knowledge, as well as political and social orders that conflict with those of the broader settler nation state" (Chase 2014: 14). Entwined with Indigenous languages are the political knowledges of Indigenous people and without them, those can be lost (Littlebear 1999; Kipp 2000). Language can provide Indigenous people a linkage to their political power, which is also tied to the land that is desired by settlers.

The political power of language is in part why Indigenous language were targeted in the assimilation efforts of boarding schools.

Through a critical reading of nineteenth century European nationalist literatures that draws a link between them and American language policies for newly-arrived European settlers, education scholar Malathi Iyengar (2014) illustrates how language ideologies operated as part of the settler project of eliminating Indigenous languages. Iyengar demonstrates how European settlers were encouraged to come to the United States with an open-language policy. These settlers were allowed to open their own schools, teaching their children in languages like German or Polish rather than English. She argues that if the American settler state was really invested in English, then these newly arrived settlers would have also been forced to learn English as Indigenous children were forced to in the boarding schools. These opposing language policies for new settlers and Indigenous people thusly illuminates how settler colonialism's logic of Indigenous elimination is at work. These policies were developed with the aim of eradicating Indigenous life through language. Iyengar demonstrates this further by highlighting the link between language and discipline within the boarding schools. Arguing that language resides in the body, the physical abuse of Indian children's bodies for speaking their language was meant to beat out the language through the body. Nevertheless, Indigenous children refused this attempt at multiple instances and ensure the survival of the language through conscious decisions to keep their ability to speak the language. Throughout Choctaw Nation, people refused this assimilatory process to take away their language that signaled their distinctness and belonging to a polity outside and alternative to the United States.

Chatting in rapid Choctaw with her sisters at a weekly elders lunch, one such woman's fluency demonstrates a clear refusal of the boarding school mission to eradicate the Choctaw

language. Virginia grew up speaking Choctaw and did not learn English until her brother sent her to boarding school when she was eight years old. Until her graduation from eighth grade, Virginia attended Wheelock Academy in Millerton, approximately 60 miles from her home in Bethel, where she grew up and now lives. Wheelock was an all-girls boarding school established in 1832 by missionary Alfred Wright. The school operated until 1955 (although it closed from 1861-1865 due to the Civil War). Choctaw girls were sent to Wheelock to learn domestic skills like cooking and cleaning house. This imposed labor was simultaneously productive for the maintenance of the school and pedagogical by teaching these Choctaw girls how women were supposed to be members of society. By instructing Choctaw girls' bodies through gendered forms of labor that limited them to the domestic sphere, the boarding schools used labor to assimilate them into the molds created for Indigenous women by the rest of American society (Lomawaima 1993).

While Wheelock Academy also sought to excise the language from Virginia from her body, she withstood the punishments and defied the institutions' disciplining of her in that way. Recalling her schooling experience, Virginia stated, "When I was at government school, they wouldn't let me speak my language. But I made up my mind that I would not forget my language so I still got it". Despite being explicitly forbidden from speaking Choctaw and being punished when she did so, she still spoke Choctaw with her sister who also attended the school. After leaving Wheelock, Virginia returned to her parents' home, got married, and started her own family, raising them to speak Choctaw. Today, her family has three generations of Choctaw speakers despite the very clear attempt to keep her from speaking Choctaw as a child in boarding school. Refusing to reject the language she grew up in, she defied attempts to force her forget her language and ensured the language's survival within her own family. These decisive moments in

which people reject the colonial project to assimilate Choctaws through language are manifold and multiplied across the Nation. Like other Indians at different boarding schools, attending boarding school entrenched and reminded Virginia of the importance of speaking and being Choctaw (Lomawaima 1994). Subsequently, these individual decisions to keep speaking the language despite personal consequences to keep it alive has facilitated the revitalization of the language for all Choctaws.

#### CHAHTA ANUMPA AIIKHVNA & CHAHTA LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna (School of Choctaw Language) began as a language program in 2002 in trailers with only three instructors. The school is responsible for educating a new generation of Choctaw language speakers. It takes a multi-prong approach to teaching the language, offering classes in Head Starts, high schools, colleges, over the Internet, and at community centers. The bulk of the school's language instructors teach various levels of Choctaw. All of these classes are taught via satellite from the school building in Durant. In each instructor's office, there is a video camera that projects their lessons into the many high schools that Choctaw is taught. Sitting at their desks, students appear on the video screen as the instructor can teach their lessons. A facilitator at the high school handles the students in the classroom, taking care of any misbehaving students on behalf of the instructor who is usually miles away. The languages instructors all teach the same curriculum, which was developed by a committee headed by the school's current assistant director. Chahta anumpa (Choctaw language) is alive, and these instructors work hard to maintain and pass it on to young Choctaws.

Walking into Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna, a building with a tempered glass roof that allows natural sunlight to come in, the double doors open to a wide lobby. To the left of the expansive

front desk are display cases filled with Choctaw regalia, beadwork, and baskets. Large portraits of Choctaw language instructors fill the walls in the corner with the display cases and the conference room is on the other side of the front desk. Directly to the left of the front desk, a display case is filled with the different Choctaw language textbooks, dictionaries, and other teaching materials used over the years. If you walk across the front lobby, past the waiting area and through the door, you will find where the work of Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna is done.

Cubicles cluster in the far end of the expansive room that has an open conference room as well as a sitting area. Meanwhile the edges of the room are lined with office/classrooms. Entering one of these offices is akin to entering a teacher's classroom. Every office/classroom is equipped with a camera and projector on the wall facing the teacher's desk. On the desk, there is a camera that feeds lesson worksheets into the screen in the high school classroom. Facing the camera attached the TV mounted on the wall across from their desks, Choctaw language instructors are able to see their students, who are proctored by a staff member at the high school. When there are tests or language-learning games like bingo, the proctor administers them on behalf of the instructor. Offices are decorated to reflect the teacher's personality and interests. Choctaw art, family photos, OU football fangear and such decorate rooms. One instructor's office/classroom has a mannequin with an antique child-size Choctaw dress. It is clear that high school students are not simply learning Choctaw language, but also its cultural components to give a sense of Choctaw life. Through the satellite, these instructors are able to transverse various geographies and are able to enter distinct communities, taking space and time to assert the Choctawness that boarding schools banned.

Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna's biggest program is the high school language classes. Via satellite, Choctaw language instructors teach the language to high school students throughout

Choctaw Nation's ten and half counties. Each teacher is assigned a list of schools with corresponding times for when each one of these classes start. Classes are taught back to back with ten or fifteen minutes between classes in which the teacher can reset her/his classroom. Every day, the schedule is the same unless there are days off. 9:00 Hugo, 10:50 Broken Bow, 1:00pm Antlers. 2:10 Panola.<sup>14</sup> During the 2016-2017 school year, Choctaw language was taught in forty-one public high schools. These classes were developed in part to provide Choctaw students a way to learn the language outside of the home. While there are many Choctaw students taking these classes, there is also a sizable amount of non-Choctaws learning the language since it is just one of many languages that high school students have the option to take as part of state-mandated curriculum.

To teach Choctaw language in public high schools, Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna worked with the state of Oklahoma to add Native American languages to the list of world language options alongside Spanish and French. Within the Oklahoma State Department of Education's policy guideline for teaching foreign languages, Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna Assistant Director Teri Billy wrote the standards for Native American language learning objectives herself. According to the World Languages academic standard, all school districts are required to implement at least one sequential program of study for a language other than English. From there, the purpose of learning a non-English language is to ensure that student attain "levels of language proficiency that are required to function in a variety of occupations and careers in the

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<sup>14</sup> Choctaw Nation will no longer be teaching Choctaw in Panola Schools because they shut down in May 2017 due to Oklahoma budget cuts. For more, see: <<http://www.rockinrosco.com/panola.html>>

culturally diverse modern workplace.”<sup>15</sup> For the state of Oklahoma, home to thirty-nine tribal nations, Native American languages are important part of life in the state.

Choctaw Nation’s political clout, developed by working with Oklahoma, has increased Choctaw visibility and presence by putting them in classrooms across southeastern Oklahoma. To teach Choctaw language in public schools, Choctaw Nation worked with the state to ensure all language instructors had teaching credentials necessary to teach in public schools thereby ensuring that the state mandate for having qualified teachers in classrooms was met. Former teachers with their teaching credentials go right through in being able to teach. Those without a credential gain theirs by providing a portfolio and taking a test. Because Choctaw Nation’s working relationship with Oklahoma grew and developed as the Nation accrued more political and economic clout, this enabled them to work with Oklahoma’s department of education to provide Choctaw language classes in Oklahoma public schools.

While developing fluent speakers comes to mind as a goal for teaching Chahta anumpa in public schools, it also makes an important statement about Choctaw Nation’s political positioning within the state. Given the state guidelines that the Chahta Anumpa Aikkhvna abides by in order to teach the language in public schools, high school classes are not expected to produce fluent speakers. Choctaw language instructors know this but are not necessarily disheartened by the fact. For Choctaw students that take Choctaw language in high school, it is an opportunity to learn about and connect with Choctaw history and culture. Teaching the language in public schools also reminds non-Choctaws living in Choctaw territory that Choctaw people are alive and well in Oklahoma. Despite Removal and attempts to assimilate them, they

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<sup>15</sup> “World Languages.” Oklahoma State Department of Education Oklahoma Academic Standards. 3/16/15. Last accessed: 23 March 2017.  
<<http://sde.ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/2015%20World%20Languages%20Standards.pdf>>

still have their language and culture. It asserts to those living within the boundaries of Choctaw treaty territory that they are on Choctaw land. Language instructor Elsie Hicks noted that many of the non-Choctaw students taking the classes might one day work for Choctaw Nation, so it was good that they could learn about the Nation beforehand. While fluency might not be achieved in high school, there is hope that high school students will continue learning Choctaw in college should they attend Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Carl Albert College or the University of Oklahoma.

At the end of every school year, Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna hosts Itafama Chitto (Big Gathering) also known as the ‘Choctaw Language Finale,’ bussing in the high school students taking Choctaw language from across the ten and half counties. The 2016–2017 Finale hosted 615 students from the thirty schools able to attend the rainy Wednesday morning gathering at the Choctaw Nation Events Center across the road from Choctaw Casino and Resort. The program featured a keynote speech by Lisa Johnson Billy, a Chickasaw-Choctaw former state representative,<sup>16</sup> appearances by Chief Batton, Assistant Chief Austin, and members of Tribal Council, a pizza buffet, and Choctaw social dancing. While Chief, Assistant Chief, and the younger generation of Choctaw language instructors demonstrated the dances in their regalia, Choctaw historian and language instructor Curtis Billy detailed the history and purposes of the dances to the students. During a dance practice a couple of days prior to the Finale and to the students, Billy stressed the need to share the dances with the students so they could know Choctaw culture and ensure its survival. Through this itafama chitto (big gathering), where these

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<sup>16</sup> During her ‘termed-out’ twelve years in the state House of Representatives, Billy legislated the inclusion of Native American languages to Oklahoma’s core curriculum for language, an effort lead by her mother-in-law, Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna Assistant Director Teri Billy. For more on Lisa Billy, see: (Bolitho, Tom. “GOP Floor Leader; Lisa Billy completes Oklahoma House term.” Chickasaw Times. May 2017. Last accessed: 12 May 2017. <<http://www.chickasawtimes.net/Web-Exclusives/Archive/2016/May/GOP-floor-leader;-Lisa-Billy-completing-Oklahoma-H.aspx>>).

Choctaw and non-Choctaw students, school administrators, and instructors came together, Choctaw Nation asserted the vibrant and enduring state of the Choctaw language and the Nation's existence and importance to everyone living on their land.

Community classes are also a major program within Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna that allows Choctaw Nation to engage in Choctaw communities as well as strengthen them. Unlike the high school language classes, community classes are not limited to the ten and half counties. They span the United States and are available in major cities like Oklahoma City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. In total, there are thirty-two classes in twenty-two cities. Some of the more experienced first-language instructors who teach at Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna in Durant also teach community classes in nearby communities like Ada (a two-hour drive from Durant), Antlers (one-hour drive) and Hugo (hour-and-a-half drive). For the places a bit further away, individual community members are trained by the school to teach community classes. These classes are provided to Choctaw tribal members free of charge. Books and other materials for the class are also provided to students. Typically, once a week, Choctaw communities gather at a central location where a teacher meets them to complete a lesson together for two hours. Usually, these community gathering places are churches, an important social institution for Choctaw communities. In some of the evening classes, classes bring food and have dinner together before beginning their weekly lesson. In the space of the community class, people work towards cohering as a community by learning Chahta anumpa together, all while sharing stories from growing up and joking with each other.

The community classes tackle a different dimension of Choctaw language revitalization that contrasts starkly to the high school language classes beamed into them from Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna. While language revitalization often focuses on producing language speakers, language

revitalization is not necessarily only about producing fluent speakers but might also be about ensuring environments that facilitate the transmission of knowledge and modes of conduct that might be embedded in language learning (Meek 2011). Linguist Barbra Meek argues “language revitalization is ultimately a process of language socialization because it involves the intentional socialization of new language speakers (including community-external researchers such as the author)—grammatically, interactionally, materially, politically, and so forth. It is also a process involving both continuity and change, maintaining (consistently or not) various elements, practices, or interpretations while transforming others” (2011: 48). In the Choctaw churches that so many Choctaws are a part of, they maintained the Choctaw language, relations to kin, and embodied Choctaw rules of conduct. It is fitting that many community class take place in Choctaw churches today.

For the youngest generation of Choctaws, Head Starts are developing as spaces of language revitalization. Choctaw Nation runs fourteen Head Starts across the Choctaw Nation service area. Directed towards economically disadvantaged families with children ages three to five years old, the Head Start program is a means to providing programming that enhances the wellness of the entire family. This includes services related to Education/Literacy, Health, Parent Involvement, Family Services and Nutrition. Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna provides material that would facilitate Choctaw language learning within the family. The opportunities for Choctaw families to learn Choctaw are available at basically any level.

In addition to high school and community classes, the Internet is an important for teaching Chahta anumpa. The school provides college-level classes online and also offer an online class open to all community members. This class is taught by Lillie Roberts, one of the more experienced Choctaw language instructors at the school. Roberts often travels with a

representative group of Choctaw tribal government officials from various departments to Choctaw community meetings throughout the United States. At those meetings, Roberts' students have the opportunity to meet and connect with their teacher who they see three times a week via video call. Teaching the Choctaw language in a myriad of ways and using available technologies demonstrates how the Choctaw Nation is using the language to foster a greater sense of Choctaw community. Although many Choctaws no longer live in the ten and half counties, there are still ways for Choctaws to stay connected to the nation in which they belong. Raising the prominence of the Choctaw language throughout the Choctaw Nation through their new facilities and using the language in broadcasts like Biskinik TV boldly declares 'Chahta sia hoke' (I am Choctaw) to Oklahoma and the wider American public. It combats the erasure of Indigenous people that is so pervasive in a place like Oklahoma.<sup>17</sup> Although the federal government removed Choctaws from their ancestral homelands, took their land through policies like allotment, and attempted to assimilate Choctaws into American society, Choctaws still persist and maintain their way of life, adapting and reconfiguring the world around them as they go. Tribal leaders, honoring the sacrifices made to ensure the survival of the Nation, often invoke and reflect on this history when addressing constituents. Although Choctaws will comment that they are proud of their heritage every day, the Nation also celebrates Choctaw heritage and history with Heritage Day on the first Monday of every month. On this day, workshops like language classes, storytelling, and basket-making classes are available at the Choctaw Tribal

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<sup>17</sup> One would think that Oklahoma's particular history as Indian Territory would mean greater inclusion of American Indians in the telling of Oklahoma history, but this is not the case. At the Oklahoma State Capitol in Oklahoma City, which serves as a state museum that schoolchildren visit, American Indian history is minimized. While American Indians are included in some of the artwork throughout the Capitol building, Indian contributions to the state are minimized. Some of the most prominent Oklahomans like Jim Thorpe and Will Rogers have no mention of their tribal affiliations. As a result, the contributions of prominent Indians become associated with Oklahoma exceptionalism rather than the Indigenous nations in which they belong. While this may seem like a small point, it is nevertheless a symbolic erasure of American Indian presence throughout the history of the state.

Complex in Durant. Recognition of Choctaw history and experiences are important to Choctaws. This is in part why language work is so important to first-language speakers like Dora Wickson, a translation specialist whose work takes her across Choctaw Nation. During her language lesson at the August Heritage Day, Dora emphasized the need to speak Choctaw to the mostly tribal employee audience. She recalled how leaders before did not speak Choctaw but now she often encourages them to speak because it makes Choctaws look good – especially around other Indian peoples. It is important the people know that they are proud of being Choctaw with all of its history of perseverance and resilience.

Dora’s call to speak Choctaw in public spaces echoes the kind of community building discussed by linguist Jocelyn Ahlers (2006). In her examination of how Native American space is constituted through language usage, she finds that Native Americans speak their language even if other people cannot understand them because it demonstrates a connectedness to culture and history. Ahlers argues that the endangered status of American Indian languages gives those language-speakers a particular cultural capital that people tap into to make assertions about not only themselves but also the communities in which they come. Ahlers finds that “this speech style adds to the body of evidence that language use is not indexical with culture, social, et cetera, identity, but rather performative of it” (Ahlers 2006: 72). In a landscape where there are few distinguishing features of Choctaw difference, language is particularly important. Dora articulates that/how speaking Choctaw as an important means to maintain connection, but we can also understand her call for people to speak the language around people who might not know it and around other Indians to also be a way to assert the vibrant presence of Choctaw people and their tenacity to survive in a place where they were supposed to assimilate. In a way, it calls for

recognition of Choctaw people outside of the framework of the state, demanding that other recognize Choctaw political difference and distinctiveness through the language.

The spread of Chahta anumpa in the myriad of ways that Chahta Anumpa Aikkhvna has undertaken has reasserted Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma as a distinct nation within the larger United States. It has spread Choctaw culture and language into spaces where Choctaw was not welcome: public schools. Ironically Oklahoma's financial constraints which were created by an ideological adherence to neoliberal individualism has contributed to Choctaw language's resurgence. Teaching Choctaw goes against the logic of Indian boarding schools, created to rid Choctaws of their language and assimilate them. Now a (non-imposed) reversal of federal policy, non-Choctaw students can learn the language and become acquainted with the Nation that many will have the opportunity to work for in the future given that the Nation's overwhelming presence in the region.

## CHAPTER TWO: Choctaw Nation & Removal's Lasting Legacy

On a typical Friday afternoon, Dora takes off from Chahta Anumpa Aiiikhvna (School of Choctaw Language) where she works as a translation specialist, car packed with the clothes worn during the week along with used bedsheets, pillowcases, and blankets. From Sunday night to Friday afternoon, Dora stays at her friends' place so she can make it to work early and on time. At the end of the week, she makes the two-hour drive back to Sobel where she spends her weekend taking care of tasks around her house. After transferring from the Choctaw Nation Indian Hospital in Talihina where she translated doctor visits for non-English speaking Choctaw elders to tribal headquarters in Durant, Dora used to commute from Sobel every day.<sup>18</sup> But when two of her co-workers began renting a house in Durant two years ago because they did not want to make the same commute from their homes in McCurtain County (approximately a two-and-a-half hour drive east of Durant) every day, they offered their place to Dora so she would not have to commute during the week. Dora took them up on their offer. During the work week, the three live together and on Friday afternoons, they return to their respective homes straight from work. Come Monday morning, the three are reunited at the office to begin the week again.

The movement of these first-language instructors is indicative of multiple things: their commitment and willingness to provide invisibilized labor for the sake of the language, their commitment to their home communities and Choctaw way of life, and a very particular shaping of Chahta anumpa within the southeastern-most corner of Oklahoma that is rooted in the history and process of Removal. Furthermore, the way that Choctaw women take up this work also touches on women's disempowerment due to the shifting and acculturation necessary to combat

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<sup>18</sup> Technically, Sobel and Fort Towson, where Dora grew up, are located within the contemporary boundaries Choctaw County, the county west of McCurtain County. Nevertheless, I place her within McCurtain County because her church involvement led her to travel and interact with Choctaws from McCurtain County.

Choctaw dispossession. This effect on Choctaw women illustrates how Indigenous dispossession is a gendered process, which I will explore further in this chapter. By linking Removal, the decline of Choctaw language, and gendered techniques of land dispossession in Oklahoma together, we begin to see how these are intimately tied to the poverty that became structured into Choctaw life in southeastern Oklahoma. Holding on to their sovereignty throughout this process, Choctaw cultural distinctiveness simultaneously signals their political status with its strong claims to territory desired by American settlers. Thus, it becomes more clear as to why Choctaw distinctiveness – language most important here – was targeted for eradication. Last, I examine this history within the specific geography of McCurtain because of its significance to the maintenance of Choctaw language.

#### CHAHTA ANUMPA & LIFE IN MCCURTAIN COUNTY

When introduced to a new Choctaw, the first question I am often asked is “where are you from?”. Appearance and home community within Choctaw Nation index people so they can become knowable. This particular question is an important one to make sense of people and their belonging within Choctaw Nation. In one particular meeting with an elder living in Ada (Chickasaw Territory), I replied that I was from California. Smiling, she commented that I was “one of those Choctaws.” My cousin, listening to the conversation, replied that my dad was from Battiest. In an instant, her face softened. She laughed and followed up with “so you’re a real Choctaw then!”. For those more acquainted with McCurtain County families, I offered my grandparents’ name, Juanita and Aaron Baker. Variations of this interaction occurred throughout my time with Oklahoma Choctaws and the end result, more often than not, seemed to be a sense of acceptance of me doing this research on the basis of where my family was from. As I became

more acquainted with the geographies and the histories of those geographies within the Nation, I found myself asking the same question whenever I met new people. Throughout the Choctaw Nation, McCurtain County is known for having a high concentration of first-language speakers and full-blooded Choctaws.<sup>19</sup> One tribal government employee estimates that 30-40% of the full-blood population resides in McCurtain County. Language usage is prominent in McCurtain County, and this is largely a product of geography and history.

In the rural woodlands of northern McCurtain County, the small communities like Battiest, Bethel, Honobia, and Smithville, are known as predominantly Choctaw. Although non-Choctaws have moved into the area, Choctaws have a deep history in this corner of Choctaw treaty territory. Throughout this corner of what is now southeastern Oklahoma, Choctaws established the first settlements for full-blood families. In this area, social life largely revolves around the Choctaw churches where families are members. Before English took over as the dominant language in the area, church services were delivered in Choctaw. In this region, Christianity has become integrated and tied to Choctaw life to the degree that Christianity and Choctaw tradition are understood as one and the same. Church services in Choctaw, translated hymn books and Bibles originated from a history with Presbyterian missionaries that dates back to interactions when Choctaws remained in their homelands.

Before detailing the history of Choctaws in southeastern Oklahoma and their strong ties and commitments to Christianity, it is crucial to understand Choctaw life prior to Removal. Contact and sustained interaction with European settlers introduced Christianity to Choctaws. Hernando de Soto and Spanish conquistadors first arrived in 1540 to Choctaw homelands.

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<sup>19</sup> Despite critiques of the racialized biological essentialism tied to terms like full-blood, mixed-blood within Native Studies scholarship, they are regularly employed in discourse across the Choctaw Nation. For further understand the complexities of such terms, see: (TallBear, Kim. 2013. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.).

French and English traders soon followed. As the American settler state developed, this meant an increasing demand for land, especially for Choctaw land and its fertile soil throughout the region. Choctaws, like other Indians, were said to be using land improperly, making them uncivilized and incapable of being owners of the land (Debo 1934, 1940). In order to stave off dispossession premised upon these logics, some Choctaws learned “civilized ways” like agriculture in its propertied form and converting to Christianity (Akers 2004). For some, becoming “civilized” enabled them to stay in their territory and avoid being forced out of their homelands. Others who did not convert to Christianity nor left Choctaw homelands, were pushed to the margins of American settler society and were often imprisoned, beaten and killed (Osburn 2014). Throughout this particular period of acculturation to “civilized” ways, Choctaws maintained their lifeways, including their language, although it was not immune to change.

As Christianity became more entrenched among Choctaws, the language became so intertwined with Christianity to the degree that the two are thought of together. Missionaries that came to the Choctaw had to learn their ways to fashion a Choctaw Christianity (Coleman 1996). To make conceptualizing Christianity to Choctaws easier, missionaries translated Christianity in Choctaw religious terms. This application and reconstitution of Choctaw ideas and teachings to accommodate Christianity thusly became entwined with Choctaw thought processes and tied to Choctaw experiences. Choctaws sang hymns (some of which were written by Choctaw ministers) in Choctaw as they walked the Trail of Tears during Removal (Caldwell 2012: 59). When Choctaw hymns are sung in church or after community language classes today, the slow cadence and low tenor of the hymns invoke a solemnity that one can imagine as being sung as ancestors were forced to leave their homes. Churches were and continue to be the cornerstone of Choctaw communities as they were the one place that people could gather and socialize in way

that was acceptable to the Indian agents that looked after Choctaws in Indian Territory. Today, Choctaw Nation's motto is "Faith, Family, Culture," illustrating how integral Christianity has become as a part of Choctaw identity in Oklahoma.

With the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, the federal government promised Choctaws the southeastern portion of an area west of the Mississippi called Indian Territory. What is now McCurtain County is the southeastern-most portion of the treaty territory and as so, it was the first stopping point on the southern route to Indian Territory during Removal (the northern route's first stop was in Skullyville). This easternmost region is where many full-blood families who only spoke Choctaw settled immediately after arriving in Indian Territory from Choctaw homelands (Akers 2004). While stopping in Eagletown since it was the first stop first in Indian Territory, mixed-blood (and some full-blood) families continued on and eventually settled in the more western parts of Choctaw territory.

In addition to being home to many fluent, full-blood Choctaws, the southeastern corner of Indian Territory that became McCurtain County was also the area that famed Presbyterian missionary and Choctaw linguist Cyrus Byington settled and established a new Choctaw mission. Originally from Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Byington trained to be lawyer before receiving the calling to minister (Coleman 1996). Prior to moving to Indian Territory, Byington and fellow missionary Alfred Wright established the Choctaw Mission in Mississippi on behalf of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. To increase the number of converted Choctaws, Byington was instructed to learn the Choctaw language so he would be able to preach in Choctaw. Dedicated to the learning the language, Byington developed seven grammar books, a dictionary, and Choctaw hymn books throughout his time with Choctaws until his death in 1868. Byington began his studies in 1822 by working with Chief David Folsom, a

mixed-blood who had converted to Christianity, and his brothers Israel and McKee Folsom. By 1824, Byington was preaching full sermons in Choctaw while translating the Bible and hymn books (Coleman 1996). Enthralled by his work with Choctaws, Byington felt compelled to relocate from Mississippi to Indian Territory to continue ministering to his “beloved” Choctaws. Arriving in the settlement of Eagletown in 1835, Cyrus Byington established his family in the new mission and left a lasting legacy on the area and language.

Although Byington’s legacy today – particularly in regards to the written Choctaw language – is sizable, his missionary work was arguably unsuccessful in getting Choctaws to forego their Indian ways altogether. From 1810-early 1820’s, missionaries were allowed into Choctaw communities largely so Choctaw children could learn English. Missionaries were generally mistrusted and even more so immediately following Choctaw Removal (Akers 2004). For some Choctaws, adaptation of Christianity demonstrated to Americans their ability to govern themselves and their land. Thus, they went to whatever lengths they needed, such as the adaptation of Christianity and settler farming practices (Coleman 1996; Akers 2004). Above all, Choctaws did all they could to maintain their distinctiveness as nationals and their actions throughout time have reflected a refusal to disappear as such (Kidwell 2008).

While churches were initially not desired by Choctaws (and for the most part were not desired while the Choctaw were still in Mississippi), they became an important social institution. Like other Oklahoma Indian communities, Choctaws transformed the church into a conduit for maintaining their lifeways (c.f. Schultz 1999). Because Byington had translated the Bible and hymns into Choctaw, people did not have to know English and they could continue to do things as they used to, with adjustments for the incorporation of Christianity. Soon, churches became the bedrock of community gathering and Choctaws developed their social networks through

churches. After establishing a home near Eagletown, Cyrus Byington developed a 100-mile preaching circuit in which he would deliver services as well as provide medical services. When Byington would arrive, Choctaws would construct brush arbors for the services that would be delivered in Choctaw for the full-bloods (Coleman 1996: 70). Byington's work translating the Bible and hymns to Choctaw have become cornerstones of these communities. Activities like Choctaw hymn singing have been adapted as Choctaw cultural practices, as traditions change over time, and are a source of pride. Today, Choctaw Nation Princess pageant contestants often sing Choctaw hymns or perform the Lord's Prayer for the talent portion. Adapting to changing social conditions, Choctaw cultural practices have integrated the things around them while maintaining their distinctiveness as Choctaw nationals.

Choctaw churches were often the center of Choctaw community life although they are no longer to the same degree today. Melissa Bohanan, a full-blood<sup>20</sup> first-language speaker who has lived in Bethel all her life, recalled how families would come from all over and how people would spend time together during campouts. Some churches had camp houses on church grounds that would house visitors or particular families that owned camp house on the property during weekend-long events. A member of Kulli Chito, a Presbyterian church in Bethel, Melissa recalled how during summer vacation bible school, her family would come and they would all camp out of their camp house and tents on church grounds. Kids would run around everywhere and families would visit with each other. Back then, people spoke Choctaw all the time, but that

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<sup>20</sup> The discourse of 'full-blood' refers to Choctaws with all Indian ancestry. Often, full-bloodedness connotes a sense of being a "traditional" Choctaw although what constitutes "traditional" differs from person-to-person. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma enrolls citizens based on lineal-descent but also uses blood quantum for elected positions within tribal government like Chief. Full-blooded or proximity to it is often invoked to denote a sense of Choctaw authenticity although many challenge the usage of bloodedness to index authenticity. Simultaneously, this construction of bloodedness is also used to eliminate Indigenous people. To understand this more fully and in a similar social dimensions exist, see: (Sturm, Circe. 2002. *Blood Politics; Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. Berkeley: University of California Press.).

was less the case nowadays. Like her sister Virginia, Melissa raised her children speaking Choctaw; for most of her life Melissa did not know English. Matriarch of her family, Melissa has sustained Choctaw lifeways, which the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has recognized in honoring her throughout her life.

As institutional pillars for the community, Choctaws worked hard to maintain and sustain Choctaw life through the churches for subsequent generations. When Bethel Hill, a Choctaw Methodist church in Battiest five miles from Kulli Chito, burned down in 1964, the church community got together to build a new one. The church, built in the 1860's, was the center of the "Old Bethel" community which was composed of the Tonihka, Willis, Noah, Baker, Winship, Loman, and Colbert families. Together, these families worked together to get a new church built. Juanita Baker wrote proposals, requests for donations, and grants from the wider Methodist church organization. Other community members enlisted the help of English teachers at Battiest High School to proofread and help with rewriting their letters. Because most of these people worked factory jobs, much of the letter writing was done at night. By 1965, Bethel Hill's letter-writing campaigns found success and a new church was built. Although the community has changed over time, with people leaving the area for greater economic opportunity elsewhere, Bethel Hill is still an important place for the people from this area and they return for big holidays like Easter and Christmas. Stories like this one are just a sample of the community-building stories shared by community members like my father and aunts. Communities throughout McCurtain County have similar of stories that echo their determination and commitment to maintaining their autonomy and ability to provide for themselves and those around them.

As a form of protecting and maintaining Choctaw lifeways and culture, these acts can also be seen as assertions of sovereignty. Although not articulated as such, the emphasis on maintaining Choctaw distinctiveness infers as much. Speaking the language, going to church with other Choctaws, building community in their everyday lives, are just a few of things that “being Choctaw” entails in McCurtain County. These acts of daily living simultaneously signal Choctaw difference as Indigenous people. Despite relocation to a new land where they were to “exist as a nation” (Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek), “being Choctaw” in daily life maintains Choctaw sovereignty. Subsequently, it becomes clear that Choctaw communities are political communities mobilizing to protect Choctaw practices that developed since time immemorial. Although not involved with tribal government, which is often described as the sphere of tribal politics by citizens and scholars alike, this history helps to conceptualize these rural communities as political communities fighting for their survival and sovereignty in a society seeking to eliminate them to acquire their land.

When anthropologist Sandra Faiman-Silva (1997) worked with McCurtain County Choctaw communities to understand Indigenous people’s marginalization within the world economy, she did not recognize the sovereignty inherent to these communities. Limited by a Marxist analysis, considerations of sovereignty fall by the wayside. In her ethnography, Faiman-Silva outlines how she understands sovereignty and politics to only occur within the realm of formal tribal government whose sovereignty was derived from signing treaties with the federal government. Rather than understanding Indigenous people as polities that have been ethnicized and racialized in order to undermine sovereignty and ties to territory, she engages in the settler colonial project of eliminating Indigenous people by arguing that Choctaws in southeastern Oklahoma have been transformed into an ethnic minority. While exposing the exploitation of

Choctaws and the ways Choctaws have been dispossessed of their lands in this region by multinational corporations, Faiman-Silva ultimately undermines Choctaw sovereignty and their claims to their treaty territory. Choctaws that live in these church communities configure Indigenous sovereignty differently than expectations for them and they find ways to ensure the survival of the community.

To use tribal government to stand in for all forms of Choctaw sovereignty reifies the colonial form of centralized governance that was imposed upon Choctaws with the forced adaptation of the constitutional governmental. When Choctaws arrived in Indian Territory, Choctaws attempted to replicate their traditional governing system. This involved the division of the territory in three districts, which were headed by three district chiefs: Pushmataha, Apukshunnubbee, and Moshulatubbee, which all had a 27-member Tribal Council (Milligan 2003; Debo 1934). When Choctaws crafted the first constitution themselves, their attempts to differentiate the clan system from the more centralized organization with three district government were undermined by the federal government that wanted a centralized government. If Choctaws did not abide by this, the federal government threatened to take over the Nation's management and thus Choctaws were forced to give up the clan system (Akers 2004: 113). The governing power of clans eroded as a set of formal powers but I would argue that the clan systems found a new form in the families and small communities throughout northern McCurtain County. They have maintained the spirit of these systems into the present, adapting to their circumstances as they saw fit.

## CHOCTAW NATION, A CHRISTIAN NATION

Across the many plots of land owned by Choctaw Nation, lawn signs and banners with the Nation's official seal and the motto 'Faith. Family. Culture.' announce the Nation's presence throughout southeastern Oklahoma. The motto is meant to be representative of all the things that matter most to Choctaws. Faith's placement first signals a significant history between Choctaws and Christianity. Whether a person is Christian or not, that is ultimately an individual personal decision, but that does not make it apolitical and set apart from how it has informed ideologies of conquest. Christianity, used to justify colonization throughout the world as European empires sought to establish and entrench their political power, cannot be separated from this history and social function (Grande 2015). Christianity played a role in Choctaw dispossession thus it is important to use this history to contextualize Choctaw conversion and how it occurred, particularly on the eve and in the aftermath of Removal. Considering how Choctaw conversions to Christianity occurred in relationship to land dispossession demonstrates how they are intimately tied up with one another.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABC) first sent Presbyterian missionaries to Mississippi in 1818 (Kidwell 1995). At first, their efforts to convert Choctaws to Christianity were minimal. The in-roads that they made were largely with mixed-blood families in which white fathers raised their families as Christians. Cyrus Byington's instruction to learn Choctaw language was aimed at increasing the number of Christian converts, which the ABC found particularly difficult when there was no pressure on Choctaws to convert (Coleman 1996). Discourses of 'Indians as uncivilized' were largely premised on Choctaws not being Christian. With time, these discourses materialized as ideological fodder that gained traction as legitimate reasons for American settlers to seize Choctaw land as they moved more

Westward (Kidwell 1995; Akers 2004). As dispossession premised on these arguments became actualized increasingly, Choctaws recognized the need for Western education to prevent land seizures. Choctaw leaders turned to the missionaries to provide their children with a Western education that would allow Choctaws to navigate negotiations with American settlers better (Akers 2004; Pesantubbee 2005, 1993). This period of acculturation reflects how Choctaws adapted Christianity to stave off these incursions by American settlers.<sup>21</sup> Conversions to Christianity increased when rumors of Choctaw Removal began circulating in the early 1800's. When President Andrew Jackson declared that the Choctaw would be removed to Indian Territory in 1830, Cyrus Byington and Alfred Wright of the Mississippi Mission received a surge of Choctaws willing to convert in a last attempt to prevent Removal from happening (Coleman 1996). These conversations were unsuccessful as the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was signed and the first wave of Choctaws started off on the Trail of Tears in the winter of 1831.

Removal to Indian Territory was traumatic for Choctaws arriving in a new, unfamiliar place in the east - the direction of death as Choctaw teachings tell (Akers 2004). Elders and young children were particularly vulnerable to disease and starvation. Many of them died during the journey on the Trail of Tears as well as in the early years of Removal. This was particularly devastating for maintaining traditional Choctaw religion and practices because both generations were crucial to their transmission. Luak Falaya (Green Corn Ceremony), a pillar for Choctaw women's social position and authority within Choctaw society, declined in part because Removal was so devastating to Choctaw social organization (Pesantubbee 2005). Although some maintained the ceremony prior to and after removal, practitioners made a concerted effort to

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<sup>21</sup> While many Choctaws adapted to Christianity to stay in their homelands, many Choctaws were also sincere converts and these are not mutually exclusive categories. The meaningfulness of Christianity among Choctaws is powerful and undeniable and I do not intend to undermine that in any way.

keep the ceremonies secret from outside intervention, leading many Choctaws to be unacquainted with them (Bushnell 1909).<sup>22</sup> Disease was rampant in the early years of Choctaw settlement in Oklahoma (as well as prior to removal which killed a large enough segment of the Choctaw population to enable removal in the first place) and one of the few people able to provide medical services in the region were the missionaries. When Cyrus Byington would run his preaching circuit through the area that would become McCurtain County, he spent the majority of his time tending to the sick and leading services for those that passed away (Coleman 1996). Choctaws depended on the missionaries for their survival, which helps to understand how Christianity became so integrated into Choctaw life in this region.

While Christianity provided for Choctaw people that they adapted and nativized to make it their own, Christianity was still a tool to assimilate people into American society. American Indian assimilation by the federal government was fundamentally aimed at dismantling Choctaw political organization which signaled Choctaw sovereignty outside and in non-relation to the United States. A major component to assimilation was aimed at remaking Choctaw society like American settler society with its patriarchal, racialized social hierarchies (Rifkin 2011). Positioning American Indians on lower tiers would ensure their continued subjugation and maintain their dispossession.

## REORGANIZING CHOCTAW GOVERNANCE

After Removal, the most devastating federal policy towards assimilating Choctaws was allotment. Aimed at remaking Choctaws into land owners, whose land was alienable and thusly

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<sup>22</sup> Luak Falaya (Green Corn Ceremony) has maintained some continuity into today. In 2007, Choctaw Nation opened a Choctaw Dance Ground. For more, see: ("Iti Fabvssa: Green Corn Ceremony." Biskinik. March 2010. Last accessed 31 May 2017. <<http://www.choctawnationculture.com/media/27429/2010.03%20Green%20Corn%20Ceremony.pdf>>).

easier to buy off them. Furthermore, allotment instituted the structure of nuclear families with men as the head of families as the unit of recognition. This circumvented the authority of Choctaw women and dismantled the matriarchal organization of Choctaw society (Pesantubbee 2005). Choctaw allotment was outside the scope of the Dawes Act because of the terms of their Removal treaties, thus Congress passed the Curtis Act in 1898 to allot Choctaw land while accounting for the specific advantages Choctaws had because their treaties allowed for greater provisions given that Americans sought to induce Choctaws to leave their ancestral homelands.

The Curtis Act dismantled Choctaw Nation's traditional government structure through the abolition of tribal courts and subjected all people in the territory to federal law. Effectively, Choctaw people came under the jurisdiction of settler law, a way of incorporating them into the United States. The Curtis Act also authorized the United States to determine Choctaw citizenship via the Dawes Commission, which would have major consequences for the amount of Choctaw land would be allotted to Choctaws. Both of these tenets within the Curtis Act violated the terms of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit which stipulated that they would be one sovereign over Choctaw people and their new territory. By disassembling Choctaw government, Choctaws had no choice but to go along with the structure provided to them. Choctaws also knew that it would be futile to resist allotment given that Indian land throughout the United States had already been allotted by the 1887 Dawes Act. With this immense pressure, the federal government forced Choctaws to take up individualized land holding.

The Dawes Commission was responsible for determining Choctaw membership which had devastating consequences when it was time to allot land. The process was marked with corruption with the commission refusing to register Choctaws to the membership rolls, using whatever pretext they could find to not put people on the rolls (Carter 1999). The terms of the

Removal treaty stipulated that the Choctaws who stayed in Mississippi were to be registered as members, yet most were left off the rolls. Because there were far fewer people on the membership rolls than the actual number of Choctaws, the amount of land that would be allotted it was a lot smaller than it should have been if every Choctaw was allocated their due allotments. Choctaws with African ancestors were often left off of rolls (even despite a “high” blood quantum of  $\frac{3}{4}$ ).<sup>23</sup> Once all land was allotted to the Choctaws on the Dawes membership rolls, leftover land was considered surplus, which was made available for non-Indians to claim and settle. Considering that the Curtis Act came into fruition because of lobbying by American settlers, this demonstrates how the desire for Indian land is constant and that the drive for it disregards the settler state’s own legal system which should have prevented settler encroachment if their own laws were followed.

In addition to individualizing land ownership, allotment had a significant gendered dimension meant to undermine Choctaw women’s authority within their communities. Allotment through the nuclear family relegated women’s role to the realm of the domestic. By making men the head of the household who would be the only one to deal with the Indian agent, women’s political power in dealing with outside political entities was cut off. Unable to access the state in this way, this move circumvented the power of women and placed men above women in a social hierarchy. Over time, this particular set of social relations was seen as the natural order of things. Many American Indians came to believe this logic, reproducing this subjugation of women within their communities and thereby demonstrating the lasting effects of allotment.

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<sup>23</sup> For more on how African-Choctaws enrollment and its effect on allotment, see: (Osburn, Katherine. 2010. “Any Sane Person”: Race, Rights, and Tribal Sovereignty in the Construction of the Dawes Rolls for the Choctaw Nation.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no 4: 451-471.).

Despite land acquisitions in Choctaw treaty territory through the taking of “surplus” allotted land, settlers dispossessed Choctaws of more land by squatting. The selling of surplus land lead to major land loss, but more was to be lost through the process of land squatting that operated on a wider time frame. Teri Billy, retelling a story from her grandmother’s lifetime, said this process would begin with a white family approaching a Choctaw family about leasing part of their allotment. The white family would ask if they could use a part of the Choctaw family’s allotment to live and grow their own food, which they would share with the Choctaw family. Over time, Choctaws would work the land less because settler families provided them food. In turn, these settler families would then lay claim to the land, arguing the Choctaws were not using (farming) the land as they did. Subsequently these settler families would be awarded title to Choctaw land given the necessity of working the land in order to transform it into property.<sup>24</sup> Another hurdle for Choctaws was that the start-up cost for farming is immense, and if crops failed this would put people behind on their bills. Often, Choctaws in this position were targeted by lumber companies interested in purchasing the land so they could clear cut the forest on it, particularly in McCurtain County where pristine forest cover the land. To pay off their debts, Choctaws would sign away their land titles. In the county property records kept in Idabel, the county seat, land title transfers to lumber companies like the (non-Choctaw) Choctaw Lumber Company fill the pages in the years immediately following Choctaw allotment. These two situations are just a sample of the ways that Choctaw land was transferred to non-Indians and they happened throughout the Choctaw Nation. This helps to explain the vast decline in the land base after allotment.

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<sup>24</sup> Land squatters still pose a threat to Choctaw land today. During a meeting with a lawyer to discuss Choctaw restricted property owned by my father, he suggested fencing off the plot of land to prevent squatters from coming on and developing it because then they would have grounds to claim the land for themselves.

Allotment's impact not only had major political ramifications but also lasting economic ones. Southeastern Oklahoma's land was resource rich both above and underground. Oil, coal, and other minerals sat in the subsurface and lands containing them were set aside. The Curtis Act authorized leasing these unallotted, resource-rich lands to private companies. The leases and their accompanying royalties were paid to the federal government and the money was supposed to be held in trust for the Choctaw Nation. Choctaws later realized that the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)'s accounting failed to reflect the actual amount, costing the Nation in lost royalty revenue as well as a lost land base. The failures in this financial accounting lead the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations to file a joint lawsuit against the BIA and eventually resulted in the fifth-largest tribal trust settlement by federal government in 2015.<sup>25</sup> Lost revenue and a diminished land base presented the Nation with little money or resources to work with once the Choctaw Nation regained the capacity to operate as a sovereign government and provide for themselves.

Lumber companies in particular benefited from allotment. Intense lobbying by timber companies convinced the federal government to sell Choctaw timber lands from between 1912–1937. Individuals also found ways around Choctaw land sale regulations. One examples includes entrepreneur Jack Gordon who established a hunting corporation. The corporation instructed individual members to apply for plots of land and deed the land to the hunting corporation, thereby circumventing the Curtis Act's 640 acre lease limit for individuals purchasing the land. Through this corporation, huge swathes of Choctaw land were sold off (Miner 1976). These corporations would later be sold to timber companies like the Weyerhaeuser Company, a

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<sup>25</sup> "Secretary Jewell Announces Historic \$186 Million Settlement of Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations' Tribal Trust Lawsuit." Press release. Department of the Interior. Last accessed: 6 October 2015. <<https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-jewell-announces-historic-186-million-settlement-chickasaw-and-choctaw>>

multinational corporation that continues to operate in southeastern Oklahoma. As a resource extraction company in a poor, rural area, Weyerhaeuser capitalized on the poverty of the region to exploit Choctaw labor (Faiman-Silva 1997). Allotment turned out to benefit American settlers far more than Choctaws (and the rest of Indian Country) given how it facilitated land dispossession and fundamentally altered community dynamics.

Last, the allotment of land reorganized the space of the Choctaw Nation into a rural area. Meant to break up the political organization of the Choctaw Nation, it also physically broke up communities by placing families on large parcels of land that spread people across the land. Allotment effectually enforced geographic distances that required concerted effort for large gatherings to occur, not to say that Choctaw gatherings did not exist. While families maintained Choctaw community and the Choctaw language, large-scale community organizing was still challenging. By making Choctaw Nation a rural area through allotment, the federal government made tribal government's task of governing the region more difficult, particularly in the realm of economic development. When the success of development is contingent on having the right combination of conditions like a culturally relevant tribal government and existing physical infrastructure (Harvard Development Project 2008), rurality presents a challenge. Rural areas often have less sophisticated infrastructure, particularly the areas deep in the dense mountain forests. In the Battiest/Bethel area, "development" is focused on improving infrastructure such as paving roads and school parking lots. Meanwhile in the realm of job creation, which is greatly needed in this area, that is a much less viable endeavor because it would entail building a complete industry in the area, a far off possibility given the plethora of existing viable needs.

As federal policy, allotment was meant to integrate sovereign American Indians nations like the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma into American society. This incorporation has had major

political and economic ramifications. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's traditional government was effectually eliminated, the Nation's land base was greatly reduced, and Choctaw women disempowered politically by relegating and limiting their work to the domestic realm. Therefore, when tribal government was reinstated in 1971, they had to start anew and were limited by the cookie-cutter Indian Reorganization Act's government model. All of these factors contributed to Choctaw Nation's initial hurdles for economic development, but allotment disproportionately affected Choctaw women, who posed the greatest threat to the legitimacy of settler sovereignty as well as the project of elimination.

The combined effects of allotment manifest in the lives of today's Choctaw women from McCurtain County with limited opportunities for work within their home communities. Looking for jobs outside of the two major employers of the immediate region – Weyerhaeuser and Tyson Foods – uneven development of the rural area helps explaining how they might have been compelled to take jobs in the tribal capital of Durant, where Choctaw cultural-related jobs are concentrated. Furthermore, by being largely limited to the sphere of the domestic through the institution of the heteronormative nuclear family, Choctaw women were also limited in the types of acceptable work, which may play a part in the fact that many Choctaw language instructors today are women.

This chapter aimed to alert us to the ways that Choctaw women in particular became marginalized within Choctaw society, pushed to the side so Choctaws could be rendered more governable by the federal government. Dora and her fellow instructors at Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna, who travel back and forth between their homes two hours away from their workplace in Durant, provide a particular labor to the Nation that is not necessarily seen as such. While the long weekly drives from McCurtain County are not a majority experience since first-language

instructors also come from other parts of the Nation, the phenomenon raises questions. Many of these women do not mind the long drives (and in fact some enjoy them), but they do take their toll. Whether the wear and tear on their cars, the time lost in making these long drives, or time away from their homes and family, this is a labor that requires sacrifice for the longevity of Choctaw language and lifeways. Recognizing these acts as sacrifice in order to teach and revitalize the Choctaw language for a new generation of Choctaws, their determination to do the work regardless of extra labor speaks to a tradition of Choctaw women maintaining Choctaw nationhood, despite ongoing attempts to eliminate Indigenous people. Examining these women's labor in this way opens a space to examine settler colonialism as a gendered process that fundamentally altered Choctaw women's lives and how it continues to do so today. In considering this history, we are also informed of the challenges that women's disempowerment has created for the Nation as a whole.

Despite the complex history that Christianity has with Choctaw Nation as it is tied to land dispossession, Christianity is still a powerful force in Choctaw communities. The ways that Choctaws have adapted it, nativizing it to make it relevant and useful for their own lives are natural (Keane 1997; Schieffelin 2007). It demonstrates how Choctaws made their situation bearable and ultimately accomplish their goal of ensuring the survival of their way of life. The consequences for this history though still remain today and individuals continue to grapple with them. Nevertheless, Choctaw language and lifeways were maintained within the institution of the church, where practices became integrated into church life. The strength of the Choctaw language today comes in large part from these northern McCurtain County communities, where elders still have conversations in Choctaw as they gather together every Wednesday for the weekly senior citizens' dinner.

McCurtain County's history uniquely positions it within the cultural resurgence within Choctaw Nation. Individuals and families that grew up immersed in "the culture", although many did not necessarily grow up with every Choctaw cultural practices. This absence of culture has led some Choctaws to visit Mississippi Choctaws during the 1960-1970's, as some people in the next chapter did. While some cultural practices and Choctaw lifeways found new forms in institutions like Choctaw churches, Choctaws maintained a connection to their ancestral homelands, recognizing that even though some Choctaw finds themselves in new place and speak different dialects of Choctaw anumpa, they are still the same people.

### CHAPTER THREE: “What I do is for the sake of the language”

In an underanalyzed account of the tribal council meeting that ended with the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Judge Antony Dillard’s writings of Colonel George S. Gaines’ recollection of the meeting detailed how seven elder Choctaw women were present at the meeting and how they responded to the negotiations. Before the meeting began, the interpreter told the women that he would faithfully interpret the proceedings and concluded by saying “and if I tell you a lie, you may cut off my neck” (Halbert 1902: 382). During the meeting, when councilman Killihota declared that he was willing to sell all that the Choctaws owned and move westward, his comments were met with anger and righteous indignation from fellow councilmen and the women. One woman threatened to cut him open with the butcher knife that she waved at him, accusing him of having divided loyalties that would lead to the ruin of the Choctaw Nation. A shamed Killihota paused for a few moments and responded “You may hang me up and cut my bosom open and you will see that I have only one heart and that for my people” (Halbert 1902: 384-385).

Within this interaction, the respect and deference to Choctaw women’s authority is clear. Choctaw religious studies scholar Michelene Pesantubbee (1999) argues that the presence of Choctaw women at this big political meeting indicated the authority they commanded prior to Removal. She further elaborates that this reality of Choctaw women’s political power and roles in situations like this often did not make it into the historical record because those who wrote the accounts saw women as inconsequential and unworthy of being noted (Pesantubbee 1999). Archives are subjective, shaped by the ideologies of those who created them. Pesantubbee understood this reality all too well. She elaborates this more thoroughly in her book on the role of Choctaw women in pre-Removal Choctaw society, where she recovers a historical narrative

by using a combination of archeology, oral history, and drawing from the histories of the other Five Civilized Tribes, which have similar ceremonies as Choctaws (Pesantubbee 2005).

Pesantubbee's scholarship on Choctaw women illustrates how the actions and contributions that many Choctaw women have made go unaccounted for in historical records.

Today is not so different. The previous chapter accounted for the ways that settler colonial processes of land dispossession undermined Choctaw political institutions. Choctaw women have fought for the survival of Choctaw people, culture, and continue to do so today. Language work in particular is especially important given the attempts to eliminate it through boarding schools and economic integration, as the Chapter One argued. Therefore in thinking about the future of Chahta anumpa (Choctaw language), we must also consider the role that land in language-learning because Choctaw placement in Oklahoma affects the work in important ways. Place and location have shaped how economic development has played out in Choctaws' lives with all the gendered, colonial baggage it has inherited over time, there critical examination of it is required here.

While challenging Choctaws to think more critically about the legacies of the past on the present, the stories in this chapter serve to illustrate how individual Choctaws, with their myriad of experiences living in and out of the boundaries of Choctaw territory, work together and contribute to the building of Choctaw Nation's cultural and political revitalization and resurgence. The stories shared with me and the happenings that occurred during my time in Choctaw Nation, which I imagine will become the stories that I retell to others, are testaments to Choctaw survival and tenacity despite overwhelming forces trying to keep Choctaws from living their lives. Choctaw economic development cannot be understood without the people who live it every day, who still grapple with the effects of it as well as the ongoing dispossession that

present themselves in forms like water rights disputes and convoluted bureaucratic processes with the federal government. Choctaw Nation, like all other Indian nations, has been shaped by settler colonialism and has grappled with it in their own way, which Chapter Two detailed. Therefore in considering the multitude of paths that the Nation can take, Choctaws must consider the the consequences of colonialism on Choctaw people, land and their way of life, which this chapter aims to illustrate.

## UNDERTAKING CHOCTAW RESURGENCE

The Billy family has been teaching the Choctaw knowledge and language they grew up with all their lives to their fellow Choctaws for a long time. Teri and Curtis Billy, married in 1970, both worked as credentialed teachers in Broken Bow public schools. Teri was a kindergarten teacher until retiring in 2002 while Curtis taught Indian arts and crafts to Choctaw students after the passing of the Indian Education Act that enabled Indian students to learn about their culture in public school. While attending Northeastern Oklahoma State University, Curtis studied Choctaw history and culture. This encouraged him to travel to Mississippi with other Choctaws like Gene Wilson to learn Choctaw social dances and games like kapucha (stickball). He then reintroduced dances to Choctaws in Broken Bow and neighboring communities. Teri and Curtis raised their children with Choctaw. They learned Choctaw songs and dances, becoming the first members of the dancing groups and kapucha team that Curtis and his brothers established and coached. These groups often performed at events hosted by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, especially as economic development provided revenue that enabled new levels of investment in cultural activities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both Teri and Curtis grew up in McCurtain County.

Teri Billy's experiences growing up and knowledge of the Choctaw language would have a far-reaching impact on the Choctaw Nation as a whole. She grew up in Wright City with her grandmother who only spoke Choctaw. For her, speaking Choctaw kept her connected to her family and being Choctaw. Immersed in Choctaw at home, she only happened to learn English because of her siblings who were in school and later, at school when she was old enough to attend. Reflecting on the state of the language when she was younger, Teri cites the growing influence of pop culture for pushing people to stop speaking Choctaw. As teenagers living at the era of Elvis Presley, only speaking English was the cool thing to do. She recalls her peers refusing to speak Choctaw even though she knew they understood it because their parents spoke to them in Choctaw. But for Teri, whose grandmother could only speak Choctaw, she never felt like she had that choice. More than just the practicality of communicating with her grandmother, Teri stated, "I didn't want to dishonor her. That was the language that she was comfortable in, our home and it was everything to her and I never would have turned my back and no, there's no way." Recognizing that giving up the language would be a repudiation of her grandmother's way of life, Teri knew that she could not give up on that kinship and sense of belonging. She continued on, "I think I did make that determination at an early age. I'll never act like I don't know it. I'll always speak it, I'll always listen to her and so I could see at fourteen, fifteen years old, I could see my peers making those decisions". Maintaining this connection to her grandmother was also in some ways, maintaining a relationship to what it means to be Choctaw because it also maintained a connection to the history that her grandmother embodied as a Choctaw woman. Her grandmother held histories of land, government policy, and Choctaws and through language, Teri was able to access and share these histories at a later time.

While moving away to Lawton with her grandmother for a short period, Teri returned to Wright City and later married Curtis Billy from Broken Bow, eighteen miles east. Billy's grandfather was a Presbyterian circuit preacher based out of Oka Chukma, a church on Cyrus Byington's preaching circuit. Both fluent Choctaw speakers, Teri and Curtis worked as teachers in Broken Bow public schools after graduating college at Northeastern State and moving back to McCurtain County. Today, her family has made important contributions to the cultural department, teaching social dances, basket-weaving, and other cultural practices so they can be spread among Choctaws and a wider public. The effect of Teri's choice as a teenager enabled a future grounded in Choctaw knowledge, affecting the practices of Choctaw Nation today, particularly given that she is Chahta Anumpa Aiihvna's Assistant Director as well as her family's roles and participation in Choctaw Nation's language and cultural departments.

At Chahta Anumpa Aiihvna, there are a handful of second-language instructors (Choctaw language instructors that learned Choctaw as a second language) working hard to attain fluency comparable to first-language speakers. Curtis, one of the more experienced language instructors, runs a mini Choctaw immersion workshop to improve their fluency. In the workshop, Billy and another first-language speaker have a short conversation on any topic that they wish. When the two finish speaking, Billy turns to the class and asks questions about the conversation. Together, the students break down the conversation, only speaking Choctaw so they can improve their fluency. Increasingly, the sense of need for creating new generations of fluent speakers is growing.

One particular Choctaw language teacher is a firm advocate for the development of a language immersion school. Although he has made suggestions with Chahta Anumpa Aiihvna about developing a school, recalling the school's vast amount of programming that Chapter One

detailed, that is a hurdle for developing an immersion school. Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna provides a lot of programming inside and outside of Choctaw Nation and it has to stay on top of those programs. Establishing a language immersion school would require instructors to reallocate their work in programs like the high school language classes towards the more intensive immersion form. Given that there are a limited number of instructors, an immersion school is not a possibility at the moment for Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna. This has yet to stop second-language speaker Nicholas Charleston.

Nicholas has a reputation that precedes him. As a student of the Los Angeles Choctaw community class, my language teacher would talk about how one Choctaw language instructor in Durant was known by the rest of the instructors as the “grammar Nazi.” Recollecting her recent attendance at the annual community language teacher training session at Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna, she met and interacted with all of the Choctaw language instructors. Among the instructors, Nicholas and his drive to learn the Choctaw language stood out to her. In conversations about learning the Choctaw language with elders from Bethel, they told me about a “nahullo who speaks Choctaw real well”. An enrolled Choctaw citizen, Nicholas appears to be nahullo (white) but speaks near-fluent Choctaw, which often elicits surprise. Although most people who grew up hearing Choctaw can tell that he is a second-language speaker due to a certain “unnaturalness” in his speaking, he nevertheless knows the words and speaks rapidly. When Nicholas served as the Master of Ceremonies at the 2016 Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Princess Pageant during the Nation’s Annual Labor Day Festival, elders like Melissa Bohanan marveled at his fluency. Although speaking fast, they were proud of his ability to speak Choctaw.

To retell how he learned the Choctaw language, Nicholas described a scene where he had locked himself in his Boston apartment's bathroom with a Choctaw dictionary and grammar book. Chain-smoking to stay focused, he sat on the bathroom floor memorizing Choctaw words and grammar structures. Given his method of learning Choctaw on his own, Nicholas advocates for learning the language through grammar and rote memorization. Using this method, becoming a fluent speaker is very tangible and he is a testament to that. Whenever he can, Nicholas practices speaking and writing in Choctaw. On Facebook, he is an active participant within the 'Learning Choctaw' Facebook group where people inquire how to say something or have others verify the accuracy of something they wrote. To gain further experience speaking Choctaw with people, one elder said that Nicholas would call their family on the phone so he could practice speaking Choctaw with first-language speakers.

Through self-direction, Nicholas practices much of what linguist Leanne Hinton suggests in *How to Keep Your Language Alive* (2002). Nicholas immerses himself in the Choctaw language, using every resource available to him and taking every advantage he can to speak. Speaking with elder and fellow first-language instructors in only Choctaw 98% of the time, he has his own version of the master-apprentice program. With the first-language speakers around him, Nicholas has developed "habits of speaking to each other in their language for everything they do together" (Hinton 2002: 10). While still working to finesse his Choctaw speaking abilities, Nicholas also serves as a language-master for those in his Choctaw language community classes in Hugo, an hour away from Durant.

In addition to his Chahta Anumpa Aii khvna commitments, Nicholas has partnered with the Jena Band of Choctaws in Louisiana to run a pilot, small-scale Choctaw immersion class that he teaches in his free time. Teaching over Skype, the class conference calls with Nicholas in

Durant. One family lives in New Orleans and the rest of his students gather together at a Jena Band office building. Nicholas and his students who run the gamut of ages try to only speak Choctaw (as much as they can) within this sphere. Twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays for one hour, Nicholas and his students review simple grammar structures and practices drills. Reflecting on his teaching of the class, Nicholas often tells people that it is his goal for his students to surpass him.

In this approach to learning and teaching Choctaw language, Nicholas exemplifies how important it is to develop teachings methods as opposed to creating more tools for language learning. He demonstrates “how to use existing materials and adapt them to one’s own teaching style, personality, community setting and grade level” (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 71). As someone who learned through grammar structures, a vastly different approach to the Chahta Anumpa AiiKhvna that works to build vocabulary, Nicholas provides his students with an alternative learning method. Fiercely committed to the immersion method of teaching, he facilitates that environment for his students and he seems to be having success. He is particularly proud of the young people in his class who have picked up the language and have demonstrated beginner fluency. Through desire and sheer willpower, Nicholas exemplifies the possibilities when one has the ability to commit to learning the language as he has.

#### CHAHTA ANUMPA IN OKLAHOMA AND ELSEWHERE

Despite the distance between Choctaw communities, Oklahoma Choctaws have demonstrated a desire and will to learn from Choctaws elsewhere. Going to Mississippi to learn dances and ishtoboli (stickball) to bring back to Oklahoma Choctaw communities and teaching Chahta anumpa to the Jena Band of Choctaws show the circulation of Choctaw knowledge

despite placement outside of their ancestral homelands. Choctaws are committed to each other as people of the same nation – as Chahta okla (Choctaw people). As cultural revitalization has been supported by economic development, Oklahoma Choctaws are reclaiming the parts of them that were marginalized by boarding schools, churches, and even in living in areas that non-Choctaws settled increasingly. Language has been a particularly fruitful source for collaboration.

To re-envision what further language revitalization might look like in the Choctaw Nation, we should first revisit what language revitalization even means. On the surface level, it seems like language revitalizations is exactly that: reviving languages that are no longer used as much as they used to be. But there is so much more to language than just being a mode of communication. Languages often contain a distinct world view with their own logics and ordering of the world. Indigenous people in particular develop their political systems through a relationship with the land and from there, their sovereignty is derived (Alfred 1999). Thinking and centering sovereignty in this way redirects attention to the ways that Choctaw people have been undermined by settler society in its drive to acquire Choctaw land.

Considering that a major factor in language decline stemmed from Removal and its fracturing effect on Choctaw communities, one can understand a desire to learn about Choctaw life prior to Removal. Linguist Melissa Rinehart's (2011) comparison of Miami language camps in Oklahoma and their homelands in Indiana is a helpful frame to think about Choctaw language revitalization. She offers this: "I often left these camps feeling that Indiana students found the language more applicable to their daily lives, because they were able to make important connections with the language and their ancestral landscape firsthand. Most of them lived in the region and were therefore surrounded by traditional flora and fauna, sacred locations, and important waterways; in other words, the language held a different or perhaps deeper meaning

for them” (Rinehart 2011: 107). The language camps in Miami homelands made learning the language relevant to Miami living in Oklahoma. It allowed them to engage in practices that they and their ancestors had engaged in since time immemorial. Through interaction with the land, the language became more pronounced.

In many ways, the contrast in the situations for Oklahoma and Indiana Miami speaks to the importance of Leanne’s Simpson (2014) call to reconceptualize the role of land in people’s education. Theorizing about Nishnaabeg resurgence, Simpson emphasizes the need to be able to think and act according to an Nishnaabeg way and tradition. Part of this is reconceptualizing the ways in which knowledge is learned. Simpson begins by telling the story of Kwezens, who learns to gather tree sap to later make maple syrup by learning from the land. Following the model of the squirrel, Kwezens finds the sweet water that she takes to her mother who values the knowledge that she gained. Through Kwezens’ story, Simpson demonstrates how different the learning context that is rooted in Nishnaabeg values that value Kwezens as a person, never marginalizing her as she would be in a Western education system. Thus she calls for raising a new generation of Indigenous youth who are strongly connected to the land rather than pushing them through Western systems of education that are about domination and coercion to become part of settler society.

Contrasting Western schooling with Nishnaabeg methods of learning, it becomes increasingly clear that schools are sites of colonization, which Indian boarding schools have illustrated. This is also something that Choctaws who were sent to Indian boarding schools know personally. In boarding schools like Wheelock Academy, where many Choctaw girls were sent, they were forbidden from speaking Choctaw. Boarding schools were also used to break children’s ties to their families and take them off the land from which they came. In terms of

learning, schools abstracted and decontextualize knowledge. They devalued the embodied knowledges that Indigenous people had and forced them to learn the way of the settler (L. Simpson 2012). Choctaws recognized the way that Western schooling did this but at the same time, they saw the growing number of settlers and began experiencing land dispossession that prompted them to learn how to understand how settlers saw the world in order to combat it.

Choctaws came to understand the world through and with the land and since De Soto's arrival in 1540, settlers have devalued that land-based knowledge. From Nanih Waiya, Choctaws learned and embodied what an ethical relationship looks like and they fought hard to protect that relationship. Thus, when Choctaw ancestors came to interact with American settlers and to avoid being dispossessed of their land, they recognized the value of their schools. Minkos (chiefs) sent their children to schools so they could learn English and the law so they would know how to interact with the federal government that constantly worked to dispossess Choctaws of their land. Choctaws understood that Western knowledge could be a tool that would help stay in their lands and be left alone and they sought to use it as such (Akers 2004). If Choctaws could demonstrate that they could be civilized by sending their children to school and church; if they could take up agriculture, then they could prove they were civilized and be left alone to govern themselves (Debo 1934; Akers 2004). Choctaw Removal demonstrates that they could use all the available tools but it is not enough when settler colonialism's imperative is to claim territory by eliminating Indigenous people.

In many ways, Choctaws have developed new relationships with the land in Oklahoma. But more and more, youth are pushed to go through Western institutions of learning, allowing land-based education to go by the wayside. Not to say that people have all given up on their relationships to land, the search for economic opportunity often takes people elsewhere – moving

them to larger cities or taking up jobs with long commutes. In some ways, this demonstrates how pervasive settler disruption of Choctaw relations to land has been. Pushed to forego full engagement in Choctaw economies in order to survive, Choctaw lifeways that have been maintained within social institutions like the church have been challenged. Economic development and the push to integrate the Nation into the wider American economy share in this effect. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Choctaws are committed to the land in which they find themselves now. As the recent water compact with the state of Oklahoma has demonstrated, Choctaws are committed to ensuring that all people can live in southeastern Oklahoma comfortably.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that Chahta okla (Choctaw people) came from Nanih Waiya and it was integral for Choctaws to maintain a relationship with it as Indigenous people whose sovereignty comes from the land. Removal to Oklahoma disrupted that fundamental relationship and there is no overemphasizing its negative impact. This relationship is integral to understand where Choctaw sovereignty comes from. Poverty created a lot of challenges and kept the majority of Choctaws in Oklahoma from visiting Nanih Waiya. But now economic development has changed the possibilities for Choctaw people. Already, Choctaw Nation has taken up the responsibility for caring for the land that makes up southeastern Oklahoma. Whether spearheading programs like land buy-back or taking up the monumental task of securing a water compact that allows Choctaw Nation to dictate the terms of water-sharing with the state of Oklahoma, Choctaw Nation has found ways to care for the land they are now. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians are the stewards of Nanih Waiya and there has been partnership between the two nations. While processes of federal recognition see them as separate

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<sup>26</sup> Hutto, Stacy. "Settlement reached in Sardis Lake Water Lawsuit." Biskinik. September 2016. Last accessed: 24 March 2017. <[https://www.choctawnation.com/sites/default/files/%5B/Biskinik\\_September\\_2016\\_Original.pdf](https://www.choctawnation.com/sites/default/files/%5B/Biskinik_September_2016_Original.pdf)>

nations, they are the same people. Both nations have not forgotten this and there has been substantial shared work.

Within Nanih Waiya and the ancestral landscapes of what is now Mississippi, there is much that Oklahoma Choctaws can learn and do to reclaim what it means to be Choctaw, despite being removed from home. Keith Basso's (1996) analysis of place-names for the Western Apache demonstrates the fruitful possibilities for reclaiming a relationship to Choctaw territory. Place-names are loaded with meaning and tied to stories that instruct on proper behavior. Those who know the names and the stories are thus reminded of them when they travel in their home territories. Choctaw Nation's Historic Preservation Department regularly employs its own Choctaw place names database, which it has been building for years, for community education as well as consultation with the federal government to protect Choctaw sacred and historical sites. From the land, people come to know themselves and how they should act as people of the land.

Taking Oklahoma Choctaws back to Nanih Waiya can have these instructional abilities as well as connect people to the history of Choctaw struggle and perseverance. Some who visit Mississippi experience this and it comes to inform their conduct, which Oklahoma Choctaw Jared Tom felt during a visit he took to Mississippi while working for Choctaw Nation Cultural Events. Being at Nanih Waiya, he stated, "[b]eing back home I get an emotional feeling because of what happened in the past. This is where we belong, this is our homeland too."<sup>27</sup> For language revitalization that also connects Choctaw people to the lands from which they were dispossessed and to rebuild relations between peoples, land-based Choctaw language-immersion programs with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, who have a standing language immersion camp,

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<sup>27</sup> 27 Firquin, Tina. "Mother Mound is a Heritage Home for All Choctaw People." Biskinik. September 2016. Last accessed: 24 March 2017.  
<[https://www.choctawnation.com/sites/default/files/%5B/Biskinik\\_September\\_2016\\_Original.pdf](https://www.choctawnation.com/sites/default/files/%5B/Biskinik_September_2016_Original.pdf)>

can be a fruitful place for Choctaw resurgence that theorizes and operates from Indigenous intellectual frameworks (L. Simpson 2011). This would mean working with the Mississippi Band of Choctaws who are the protectors of Nanih Waiya, which is listed in the National Historic Register of Historic Places. The Mississippi Band is already engaging in land based programs like the Choctaw Youth Conservation Corps. Although programs like this are limited to Mississippi Choctaw tribal members, Oklahoma Choctaws can learn a lot from such a program. Like the Indiana Miami language immersion camps, people would learn about the plants in the area, tapping into and connecting people to ancestral knowledge. Languages can be their own knowledge systems and to learn from the land in this way could teach Choctaws that knowledge (Barnhardt & Kawagley 2005). Knowledge of the land and language would not be abstract in the way that it is when taught in the classroom. Learning the Choctaw language from the land in this way would anchor people in tangible things and actions. It is possible to learn about greater interaction with the land, from which people can learn to embody over time if they are allowed to be out on the land. This is knowledge that could be applied in Oklahoma so that greater responsible and ethical relationships with the land can be added to the ways that Choctaws steward over southeastern Oklahoma for all people living there.

While separated by distance and federal recognition processes, Oklahoma and Mississippi Choctaw are one Chahta okla (Choctaw people). Together they came out of Nanih Waiya and that connects them as a people. Settler colonialism disrupted their lives in vastly different ways after Removal, which has subsequently widened the gulf of shared history and experience, but nevertheless, they are still the same people. Colonialism renders them as different and continues to divide them in order to gain access to their land. Nevertheless, Choctaws can challenge this process and reclaim what it means to be Choctaw for everyone

regardless of territorial bounding— as the Choctaw Nation and Mississippi Band of Choctaws have done with cultural exchanges.<sup>28</sup> Land-based language revitalization camps might be a fruitful way of further developing Choctaw language speakers who are engaged with Choctaw homelands as existing culture exchanges do. These inter-Choctaw communities can be part of dismantling the settler colonial project, working towards rebuilding important relationships to not only between people but also land.

Land is what is at stake when it comes to living in a settler colonial society like the United States. The work of settler colonialism is to separate Indigenous people from the land in order for settlers to claim it for their own. Disrupting Indigenous peoples' relationship to land is a function of settler colonialism, aimed at legitimating settler claims to Indigenous land (Wolfe 2006). Indigenous peoples' relationships and sovereignty that stems from the land threatens the perceived permanency of the settler state. Thus, in it becomes clear that "land-based education, in resurging and sustaining Indigenous life and knowledge, acts in direct contestation to settler colonialism and its drive to eliminate Indigenous life and Indigenous claims to land" (Wildcat et al 2014). All the work that the Choctaw Nation is doing today – sending Choctaws to college so they can gain knowledge that they can help the Nation when they return to work for it, training people in variety of fields – is invaluable and necessary for Oklahoma Choctaws to thrive today. These are important decisions for tribal government to make; but decisions should come to reflect on the past and present for a form of governance that honors the work and service of those that came before. In undertaking this work, we can further expand the presence of land-based

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<sup>28</sup> Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Director of Historic Preservation, Dr. Ian Thompson, worked to revitalize Choctaw pottery, which was endeavor undertaken with Oklahoma Choctaw community as well as Mississippi Band of Choctaws community members for his dissertation. He has continued that work by teaching pottery classes for Choctaw Nation. For more, see: (Thompson, Ian. 2008. "Chahta Intikba Im Aiikhvna (Learning from the Choctaw Ancestors): Integrating Indigenous and Experimental Approaches in the Study of Mississippian Technologies." PhD diss., University of New Mexico.).

education within Choctaw Nation,<sup>29</sup> or what we might consider the “call to consider how we foster cooperation in service of furthering land-based education” as “a call to consider how we practice forms of governance between communities” (Wildcat et al 2014). The form that Choctaw governance takes today is one that should be reflected upon in relation to land and understanding what it means to be Choctaw today.

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<sup>29</sup> According to Dr. Ian Thompson, “[a] number of land-based cultural classes are offered through Historic Preservation. In partnership, the Tribal Agricultural Business Department has obtained a USDA grant that will help us stabilize seeds for Choctaw heritage plants, distribute them to Choctaw families, teach those who are interested about their cultural and linguistic aspects, and then make the healthy produce from those Choctaw heritage plants available to the community. The Tribe is also in the process of publishing a book entitled, "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge". It's all about the Indigenous Choctaw relationship with the land, traditional ecological knowledge, and the place names and Choctaw language terms for the land that have fallen out of use, as we have becomes less connected with it.” (Thompson, Ian. 2017. Personal communication, May 27).

## CONCLUSION: Futures for Chahta Okla

*“Sleep not longer, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, in false security and delusive hopes. Our broad domains are fast escaping from our grasp. Every year our white intruders become more greedy, exacting, oppressive and overbearing. Every year contentions spring up between them and our people and when blood is shed we have to make atonement whether right or wrong, at the cost of the lives of our greatest chiefs, and the yielding up of large tracts of our lands. Before the palefaces came among us, we enjoyed the happiness of unbounded freedom, and were acquainted with neither riches, wants nor oppression. How is it now? Wants and oppression are our lot; for are we not controlled in everything, and dare we move without asking, by your leave? Are we not being stripped day by day of the little that remains of our ancient liberty? Do they not even kick and strike us as they do their blackfaces? How long will it be before they will tie us to a post and whip us, and make us work for them in their cornfields as they do them? Shall we wait for that moment or shall we die fighting before submitting to such ignominy?”*

– Tkamse, 1811

In the years leading up to the War of 1812, Shawnee leader Tkamse (Tecumseh) visited Choctaws and Chickasaws in their homelands and called upon them to join him and others in an Indian confederation to fight American encroachment on their lands. Renowned Choctaw leader and Mingo of Okla Hannali (Chief of the Six Districts) Pushmataha and a joint council of Choctaws and Chickasaws rejected Tkamse’s offer, trusting Americans to uphold their end of the treaties they signed together. Eventually the events that Tkamse forewarned came to pass. President Andrew Jackson, who Pushmataha fought alongside during the War of 1812, turned his back on his former Choctaw allies, forcing their removal from their ancestral homelands. Despite treaty terms that indicted that removed Choctaws in Indian Territory would be left alone by Americans and that Indian Territory would never become a state within the Union, American settlers seeking Indian land claimed Indian Territory for themselves and Oklahoma was established in 1907. While Tkamse’s speech to Choctaws were meant for one particular turning point in Choctaw history, his message echoes as Choctaws face another today.

Tkamse's practice of visiting and sharing of words was an important mode of mobilizing Native nations for an alternative future and visiting as a process offers a perspective on Choctaw political practices today. Neshnabe education scholar Lakota Pochedley (2016), who works as an educator in Shawnee, Oklahoma, draws from Tkamse's practice to consider the education possibilities for Native students. Theorizing from Neshnabe understandings of treaty-making, Pochedley argues that visiting enacts a form of treaty-making with political communities that go beyond the nation-state form. With this work, she reminds us that the treaty-making is continual and has never ended – even though treaty-making with the United States ended formally in 1871. Political communities are also the racialized and marginalized communities that push against a settler nation-state that subjugates them. Turning to analyze a call-to-action meeting and water ceremony between Indigenous and Black communities in Flint, Michigan, Pochedley argues that the meeting was visiting in its political form.<sup>30</sup> Visiting, as it entails listening and discussing with community members (within and outside one's nation), is political practice that enacts traditional teachings and lifeways.

Today Chahta okla (Choctaw people), leaders in tribal government and community members alike, engage in the political process of visiting. Whether Chief and Assistant Chief visiting elders at their homes, working with the Intertribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes, or Choctaws working with non-Choctaw communities living in Choctaw territory to oppose the ongoing construction of the Diamond Pipeline at Oka Lawa camp,<sup>31</sup> Choctaws draw from their

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<sup>30</sup> For further analysis of the water ceremony that Pochedley draws on for her argument, see: (Mays, Kyle. "Song 'Let's Meet by the Water' Invites Support at Indigenous Water Ceremony in Flint." Indian Country Today Media Network. 14 April 2016. Last accessed: 27 May 2017. <<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/native-news/song-lets-meet-by-the-water-invites-support-at-indigenous-water-ceremony-in-flint/>>)

<sup>31</sup> In April 2017, Oka Lawa Camp opened to education and inform people about the pending Diamond Pipeline. The pipeline is planned to cross the Trail of Tears, which is lined with graves of Choctaw (among many other nations') ancestors. For more, see: <<https://www.facebook.com/OkaLawaCamp/>>

teachings and enact Choctaw sovereignty. Like the Choctaws who fill these pages, fighting for Chahta anumpa and lifeways by teaching and visiting with students and fellow Choctaws to emphasize their importance, I found that this research enabled me to also visit with people. Whether abiding by a cousin's beckoning to "come visit with your cousin [her son]" as we accompanied her mother demonstrating basket weaving at the Labor Day Festival or chatting with elders during weekly senior dinners, I listened and learned from the experiences of Choctaws around me – many of whom I would have been too shy to talk to if not for this research. Over lunches at Olive Garden, during interviews in McDonald's and offices, I responded to queries about my thoughts on blood quantum, Standing Rock, and how to allocate seniors' trip fundraising money fairly. On numerous occasions, my visits with Choctaws have challenged, humbled, and pushed me to find a better way to represent and commit myself to Choctaw people and our lifeways.

To understand Choctaw economic development as Choctaws have lived it and to consider its potential for Choctaw sovereignty onward, this research took on a form of politics that thought through and within Choctaw frameworks of knowledge and history to push against the false choices that the United States presents Indigenous people within its "borders". Analytically centering land and how Choctaws were dispossessed of theirs – thinking through the framework of settler colonialism – enabled me to engage with Choctaw thought and history in ways not done by previous Choctaw scholars and scholars of Choctaws. This allowed me to illustrate the structural processes by which Chahta okla (Choctaw people) became separated into different nations/bands and how the processes operated in places like McCurtain County. This thesis has drawn on history to illustrate how structural processes of dispossession have created the need for Choctaw economic development – but also creating a false divide between Choctaw culture and

politics in the process. In a settler colonial context in which Indigenous difference/political distinctiveness is obscured, this illustrates a need to see Choctaw cultural work as political work. The cultural aspects of Choctaw life are the things that Choctaw sovereignty is derived; Choctaw political power is enabled by the “cultural”. Critical readings of Choctaw history, as they have been examined and told here, further inform us of how and why economic development was undertaken and its impact on the Nation today.

There is still so much space for further elaboration, as many parts of Choctaw life in Oklahoma require critical engagement. “Bloodedness”, the specific functions of Oklahoma Choctaw racialization, the formation of Oklahoma, Oklahoma racial dynamics, Choctaw freedmen, and intercommunity interactions are just a few sites needing examination as settler colonialism’s “logic of elimination” works through them. My focus on a particular geographic space and its history can (and should) be done in the rest of the counties that constitute Choctaw Nation. The work and scholarship of Choctaw Nation is far from done, but I join the many generations of Choctaws undertaking this work every day.

Choctaw Nation’s future (along with other Indian nations’) is uncertain within American politics today, but that reality is no different to the challenges that Choctaw ancestors faced. A Choctaw-centered future is still possible and Chahta okla are working towards it every day. By being attentive to how colonial processes continue to operate within the Nation, we ensure the endurance of a Choctaw Nation that our ancestors can see and recognize our Choctaw core values. Only then will they know Chahta sia hoke (I am Choctaw).

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