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THIS IS MY STORY. THIS IS MY SONG: CHOCTAW STUDENT STORIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND HOME

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a song that says: "*I've learned, I've come to know, there's life at both ends of that red dirt road*." This journey has helped me to see the truth in that sentiment. For all of those, both named and unnamed, on both ends of that dirt road, thank you. Thank you to every teacher and organization leader who told a girl from nowhere that she could go somewhere. Thank you to every person who let me be me – unapologetically. Thank you to those who came before, those who walk alongside, and those who are still to come.

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Thanks to my family. All the good in me came from each one of you. Love y'all all 50-80-40. Thanks for taking this ride with me John Worthington – even when it got a little ranchy. Thanks to all those melodies that turned into memories. Thanks to my faith, family, and culture. Thanks to southeastern Oklahoma and Round Bottom Ranch for raising me. Thanks to the bulls that bucked me off. And, lastly, thanks to the lessons from *both ends of that red dirt road*. Yakoke to you all.

ABSTRACT

Stories tell us who we were, who we are, and who we will be. We live by stories. We also live in them. Looking through the lens of Indigenous paradigms and arts-based educational inquiry, this project seeks to collaboratively learn, record, and share Choctaw students' stories of higher education, home, and identity. First, this study aims to better understand the role higher education has played in Choctaw (Nation of Oklahoma) students' identity. Second, this research attempts to uncover the ways in which higher education has influenced Choctaw students' relationship to home. In the sharing of these student stories and photographs, it is my goal that we all obtain a richer understanding of higher education, Choctaw/Native students, and ourselves. Research is activist. Art is activist. Giving space to Native student voices is activist. As Choctaw students understand that they can, do, and will tell their own stories, it is my hope that higher education will hear them.

The Creation Story: An Introduction, A Genesis – (Chapter 1)

We are clay people.
We are a people of miracles.

We have survived the walking; it is behind us.
We have survived the blankets; they are the tattered cloth of the past.

The dark dirt of Mississippi
The waters of Misha Sopokni
The red clay of Okla Homma
They mingle with our bones.
We are clay people.
We are a people of miracles.

We are not vanishing; we are not going anywhere.
We live here.
We live in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Oklahoma.
We live in California.
We live in Washington D.C.
We are everywhere.

We have been scattered like seeds upon the wind,
But like the good seed that we are,
We found the earth,
We found the water
And we grew….
For like a tree with many branches,
We are nourished by our roots.

We are clay people.
We are a people of miracles.

We are people of this land.
We are Americans.
And from the War of 1812,
We fought alongside the Red, White, and Blue.
We are the Codetalkers of World War One.
We love our frybread and our stickball, and our baseball, too.
We are Americans,
And like all Americans,
We love our freedom.

We love the red brick of our capitol,
The gentle slope of our hillsides,

The fat bellies of our babies,
The green of our graveyards.
We love to sit beside the cool waters of our rivers.
We are a good people.
We are Okla Achukma.
We are a great people.
We are the Choctaw Nation.

We are clay people.
We are a people of miracles.

- *Tim Tingle, Choctaw Storyteller*

This is my story. This is my song.

Stories tell us who we were, who we are, and who we will be. We live in stories – stories we have heard and stories we have created. Stories, storytelling, and storytellers have a rich historical tradition among Native/Indigenous people[1]. My tribe/nation, the Chahta/Choctaw people, are no different. For generations, stories have taught us, entertained us, and become us as we have become them. This project is about stories. The stories that we make and the stories that make us. This work shares Choctaw college students' stories of identity, higher education, and home. It helps us to see that the stories we have been told, the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories we tell about ourselves and others make us who we are. If we listen, these stories will change us.

Stories of particular importance for many tribes are creation stories. There is a sacredness to hearing and telling the stories of our creation (how we came to be). To honor our rich legacy, continued lived realities, and the stories that inhabit this work, I find it only fitting to begin this

[1] Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

offering with two creation stories – the creation story for myself as a scholar and the resulting creation story for this project.

Freckles: My Academic Creation Story

I was seven – maybe eight. I vividly remember sitting in my mama's white Chevy Cheyenne pick-up truck straining to hear the conversation going on outside. With every fiber of my young being, I was listening – waiting – watching for some sign that my mama and the old man in overalls outside had agreed on a price for the 'flea-bitten' gray horse tied to the makeshift fence beside the truck. I guess the sight of me happily riding 'Freckles' around the small pasture a few short minutes before had softened the old man. We left with 'Freckles' and a got a saddle thrown in for free. As my mama was loading her in the trailer, a familiar Travis Tritt song came on the radio.

Bobby played his guitar on the harder side of town,
where it's hard for a poor boy to find the money.
He had dedication.
He had the heart and soul.
Somehow knew he was born to play.

People said, "Get a real job, support your family,
'cause there's no future in the road you're takin'."
He never said a word. The dreamer just kept on.
Later at night you could hear him sing.

He said, "I'm gonna be somebody.
One of these days I'm gonna break these chains.
I'm gonna be somebody someday.
You can bet your hard earned dollar I will."

The road was a struggle, it took him ten years to the top,
but now he's number one on the stage and the radio.
Still he can't believe how people come from miles around,

when it seemed like only yesterday,

He would say, "I'm gonna be somebody.
One of these days I'm gonna break these chains.
I'm gonna be somebody someday.
You can bet your hard earned dollar I will."
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Bobby played his home town one full moon August night,
when he heard a voice in the front row singin'.
It was a sandy haired rebel boy with the same old hungry eyes.
He looked up at Bobby and said,

"I'm gonna be somebody.
One of these days I'm gonna break these chains.
I'm gonna be somebody someday.
You can bet your hard earned dollar I will.
You know I will, Yeah, Yeah."

"I'm gonna be somebody.
One of these days I'm gonna break these chains.
I'm gonna be somebody someday.
You can bet your hard-earned dollar I will.
Oh, yeah. You can bet your hard-earned dollar I will."[2]

From a deep place of knowing, I knew it was mine and 'Freckles' song. I scrambled out of the truck, ignoring my mama's request to stay in and I went to tell 'Freckles' about our song. I petted her and sang it to her in a hushed tone. For years, she was my faithful companion. During every ride, I would whisper the song to her.[3]

So, when people ask about how I got to where I am, the answer is simple. I always knew I was gonna be somebody someday. 'You can bet your hard-earned dollar.' The path to get there, deciding what being 'somebody' looks like, and how I am still working towards the goal outlined in mine and 'Freckles' song is quite a bit more challenging to articulate.

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[2] *I'm Gonna Be Somebody*, Travis Tritt, Warner Brothers Records, 1990

[3] Introduction stories within text are italicized.

One way to be 'somebody,' I learned early and often was to have money. Money would take care of my family. Money would change everything (or so was the meaning making of a young girl). Where I am from, growing up poor, your options are pretty limited when it comes to moving up social classes. I thought the best way to achieve that was college. Almost four degrees later, it looks as though college was my real choice after all. While trying to find a husband, I received an A.A. degree in Speech/Theatre, a B.A. degree in Psychology, a M.A. degree in Communication, a graduate certificate in Women & Gender Studies, did a stint in Anthropology, and am currently in the final stages of completing a PhD in Education (Educational Philosophy). Some would say that my academic journey lacked logic. However, the seemingly varied and eclectic shards of my educational path begin to make sense when I place them together and let in the light to reveal the stained-glass image that was always meant to be there.

That light bounces off of the seemingly misshapen and disparate pieces to create a kaleidoscope of wonder. The reflections can be seen in places, people, the sharing of ideas, stories told, relationships built and deepened, creative solutions, creative or creating culture, and so much more. It can even be found in this very writing. It is organic and formulaic. It is art and it is science. It is spiritual and it is physical. It is me reflecting the world I see and the world I want to see in the same moment. It is shedding light on the other pieced together shards of glass around me so that their reflections may fill our places and spaces. It is all our reflections shining together and it. is. beautiful.

In the collection of my pieces, I did not always know what they would eventually create. I just knew that I had to collect them. I had to be 'somebody,' even if I did not know who that 'somebody' would be. It was hard. There were tears. It may or may not have been a decade of

existential meltdowns that may not may not still be happening – although those questioning angsty episodes are so few and far between now that they almost seem as though that were another person or another lifetime. A lifetime of collecting stories, theories, snapshots, ways of knowing, and ways of being. A lifetime of asking the biggest questions while also questioning everything. I went from not truly 'knowing' anything but my microcosm of a poor White and Native rural existence to critiquing the entire world and myself in it.

Growing up on an original Choctaw allotment in southeastern Oklahoma, I had not really thought about things like race, class, or gender. I had not really understood that I was poor or Native – most of us were both of those things and more. I saw glimpses though. I saw things that were not right or fair. I watched how the world seemed to be an easier place for certain people – people with money, people who were blond, and so forth. None of which, I learned in school or in college. I didn't like college until graduate school. That is the first time I ever had an opportunity to talk about the things that mattered to me. I was pretty good it. Criticizing institutions of power was a wonderful place for deep thinking rebellious young woman to land. A few years later, I started to realize the toll that it takes. The toll that being critical and angry can be. I decided to stop paying the toll.

Several years ago, I started working for my tribe at the university I attend. Until then, my resume was pretty much a list of things I never wanted to do again – not in the ways I was doing them anyway. I knew my PhD work could suffer as a result, but I felt like I had to take the opportunity. I also needed the money. Turns out, those 'options' for monetary success don't really seem to pan out the way they were promised. However, just like everything, it was meant to be. This particular program was developed as a resource to Choctaw students on several campuses within Oklahoma. My background of work with students paired with me being a

Choctaw student myself made this opportunity all the more important to me. I started by creating an organization on OU's campus for Choctaw students. We met weekly, we ate a lot, and we held events and discussions that made us all better people. Many of the students who attended did not know a lot about our culture and history. They came in the first week saying things like: "I think it will be cool to hear about my dad's people." They left taking ownership of 'their' tribe/nation. We had the conversations they had never had the opportunity to have before. By the end, they felt comfortable talking about any subject. It was my mission to make it so. The second week, we talked about identity, blood quantum, and the Dawes Roll. After I explained to some, what that even meant, it got really interesting. I could not wait to teach them all I knew. Turns out, they probably taught me more. A shift happened for me there. In teaching them to take ownership in their identity and critique the systems, they taught me to have grace and compassion. I think when we learn others' stories it becomes more difficult to point out perceived faults or try to change them. I think sometimes the most powerful thing we can do to change systems is to love – love unashamedly. Love can still see what is wrong, but in the same moment works, in some way, great or small, to make it right. I changed my dissertation topic. I now had a story to tell.

Fast-forward to now, I am currently a director of a program for Native high school students. I use the gifts my college students gave me (and a few of my own) to reach the younger versions of themselves. My position allows me access to work across the state with schools, community partners, career and technology centers, higher education institutions, and tribal nations. I'm not sure where these shards will fit into the overall picture. But, I do know that they are pieces that will mean something to somebody someday as I am becoming "somebody someday." I think 'Freckles' would be proud.

Face-Lifts and Heart Transplants: The Creation Story for this Project

Choctaw storyteller Tim Tingle says this about Choctaw people: "We are clay people. We are a people of miracles." I have seen this. I believe it to be true. We came from the clay. We have remained moldable and resilient despite the individual and collective trials, trails, and tears we have faced. We are still clay. We are also still people of miracles. My own personal and professional experiences working with Choctaw people have led me to this work. It is a calling of sorts. A calling I largely silenced for years. It was a self-silencing that echoed the larger systemic silencing of Native/Indigenous people. The ripples of colonization are far-reaching and weaved into every fiber of the American way. We feel the threads of colonization every day. We feel them in lost languages. We feel them in erased cultural ways of knowing and operating. We feel them in our bones and the lost bones of our ancestors. We feel them in our health disparities. We feel them in lost and stolen identity. We feel them in education and educational structures. We feel them in privileged institutions and the owning of knowledge. We feel them in ourselves when we ask the hard questions. We feel them or we accept them and they become a cloak we use to hide ourselves from the world. As a means to uncloak, this work draws from Indigenous paradigms and arts-based educational inquiry in order to collect Choctaw student stories of higher education, home, and identity. This is the purpose of this work. Sharing student stories helps Native students to understand that their voice matters. It also helps illustrate the messiness of Native student identity. This work shows us that there is not a single Native student narrative – but many Native student narratives. To assume that there is just one Native way of knowing, doing, or being is further erasure. This work is important in that it assists in facilitating a better

understanding of the complexities of Native students, their relationship to home and community, and their experiences in higher education. It gives us space for conversation within tribal support communities and for higher educational institutions as they strive to better understand and serve all students. This work is not for everyone. But, it is for those who come along and see themselves (or their students, colleagues, community members) in these stories. Sometimes, that is enough.

Attempting to negotiate what I want, what I think I want, what I really want, and what they want was a frustratingly pivotal period of time for me in this dissertation project. I trudged through the proverbial dark swamp that was my brain. After so many false starts, I finally realized that to tell the stories I wanted to tell, I had to get really honest about what it was that I needed to say. I had seen so many people from my community go to college only to find that they, for so many reasons, could not ever really go back home again. These were the conversations I had had in vehicles, on campus, and in dim-lit living rooms when it would get real. I wanted to know if higher education changes our identities, for better or worse. I wanted to know if higher education made it challenging to return home because we changed or because there were no opportunities for us there. I wanted to know if having spaces to learn and grow in your Choctaw identity within the context of higher education changed the way you interacted in the community. I wanted to know about our formal and informal educational metamorphoses[4] as it related to our identities and relationship with home, family, and community. There was also something else I wanted. I wanted to share the stories of young Choctaw students who were from the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I wanted to give a voice to ways of

[4] Jane Roland Martin, *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006)

knowing and being Native that are not what everyone expects. I wanted to help people see the faces and the snapshots of the lives of real Native young people who have faced enough and who should not have to perform an identity that makes others comfortable at the sacrifice of their own attempts of authenticity and growth. These were the questions, the questions of research, and the questions to ponder.

Like most dissertations, in many ways, this is about me. It is also about the me I see in the students I have known and worked with. It is in the me I see in the stories they tell. It is the me I see in art, songs, and the creative realms. It is also about the me I see in my family members. It is also about the me I will see in the next generations. It is really about us. The people who made us. The people of miracles.

Having decided on some of the pieces of the end game, I set about on the journey to get there. I went to the literature. Below are some snapshots of the works I found that help provide some context for this work. This information is helpful. It also still does not quite fit. It is as follows:

Native Identity

"What is an Indian? Must one be one-sixteenth Osage, one-eighth Cherokee, one-quarter Blackfoot, or full-blooded Sioux to be Indian? Must one be raised in a traditional Indian culture or speak a Native language or be on a tribal roll? To identify as Indian – or mixedblood – and to write about that identity is to confront such questions"[5].

[5] Scott Richard Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

Native identity is complex and multi-faceted. Being Indian can be seen as political distinction, a racial/ethnic category, and/or a set of cultural practices. In his 2005 essay, Horse asks that all of us who work with Native students remember that Native identity is a personal process, influenced by political and legal constructions, socialization, access or proximity to our given culture, and one's individual sensibilities.[6] That is all to say that Native identity is messy and complicated and requires openness to negotiations within, around, and throughout our daily lives – especially when maneuvering the colonized structures and institutions many of us were socialized into.

Throughout history, Native people's identity has been defined by colonial structures and placed on them. Joshua Nelson[7] does a wonderful job of detailing the historical pattern that dismisses Native people through the identity dichotomy of "traditional" or "assimilated" ("assimilated" meaning "not a real Indian"). These are similarly linked to colonial identity measures that claim "progressive" or "assimilated" as "inauthentic" and that "real" Indians are "traditionalist." This situates both groups as irrelevant in the current and present space. Identity must be negotiated in, around, and through this binary. This is especially interesting when thinking about the Native research and what defines an individual or group as Native. It is also something many people within the Choctaw community understand. Being an "authentic" Native, within the current Choctaw Nation socialization for example, might look like learning and participating in traditional social dancing or beading, and so forth. This type of historical legitimizing can be both beneficial and problematic. It can be viewed as positive to participate in

[6] Perry Horse, Native American Identity, *Serving Native American Students*, 2005.
[7] Joshua Nelson, *Progressive Traditions: Identity in Cherokee Literature and Culture*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

learning or reclaiming "stolen" traditions. However, it could also really perpetuate the idea that to be Native one must perform a specific way that keeps the idea of Native people forever stuck in historicized moment. This takes away the opportunity to define or redefine oneself in modernity and delegitimizes the development of modern Native identity and identity practices.

Lyons states: "Indian identities are always historically produced: constituted in writing and laws, on tribal rolls and employment forms, through social relationships and perceptions of phenotype, and of course in the inner recesses of one's sense of self"[8]. This is a fascinating comment in that the aforementioned list discusses both socially constructed documentation of identity and physical appearance, as well as, one's inner knowing and understanding. It begs the question of whether or not it is possible to have one without the other. Can we define ourselves internally without the external markers? This is especially important within certain tribes, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma included, since conversations about history, phenotype, citizenship, blood quantum, Dawes Roll, and so forth are seldom discussed in any formal or informal way. Yet, many would adamantly claim their Choctaw identity and/or ancestry. This is typically never questioned within the Choctaw Nation. When these individuals' identities are questioned, it seems to be outside of that space. Although there is some questioning within tribes, could it be that misunderstandings and misinformation between tribes is one of the very things that keep Native communities from more support and engagement in political and institutional settings?

Lyons goes on to posit that "within reason, all identities can be challenged and redefined; a successful assertion of identity depends mainly on its recognition by someone else. This is because identity is intersubjective, which means I can be whatever I want to be so long as you

[8] Lyons, *Progressive Traditions*, 37.

agree that I am what I say….things become definitive when there are lots of you, or lots of 'us,' weighing in on the matter, because identity is ultimately a communal thing"[9]. If this is the case, it would mean that there are those who have the power to define identity in Native spaces. Who gives them that power? Could this be detrimental in that those who do not conform are ostracized? There are many people, for a myriad of reasons, who are ostracized from their tribe, nation, or Native community for reasons that could be viewed as both legitimate and highly problematic. Are those people no longer Native?

Bringing identity from the individual perspective to the community de-centers notions of individuality. However, this only bolsters the argument that identities are linked to power structures. "While Indian identities may be constructions, they are not just imaginary things playing games in the kingdom of meaning. Identities connect deeply to our material, political world"[10]. That is to say that identities ground and connect us to resources and places us in structures that may or may not be of material benefit. "Indians want to keep their communally constructed, intersubjective identities for the same reasons other people do. Identity orients you in space and time, connects you to the past, helps you develop a vision for the future, and provides you with a story. Indian identity stories can be particularly powerful in this regard"[11]. As a result, it is vital that identity be communally discussed and shared.

Perhaps one of Horse's closing statements only further complicates these complex notions: "Identity, our sense of who we really are, lies in the self-image inherited from our ancestors and passed down along a tribal memory train"[12] This is interesting when thinking about identity as individually constructed or constructed through internal promptings or ways of

[9] Lyons, *Progressive Traditions*, 37.
[10] Lyons, *Progressive Traditions*, 38.
[11] Lyons, *Progressive Traditions*, 39.
[12] Horse, *Native American Identity*, 67.

knowing. In many ways this is both individual and communal. It is both and it is neither. Both individual and collective stories of Native identity can serve Native communities, Native individuals, and the larger public alike. Sharing the stories is the heart of this work. "The truth about stories is that that's all we are"[13].

Home

"The Cherokee, like other Native peoples, are spatially rather than temporally oriented. Their culture, spirituality, and identity are connected to the land – and not just land in a generalized, fungible sense but *their* land. The act of creation is not so much about what happened *then* as it is what happened *here*. Thus when Indian tribes were forcibly removed from their homes, they were robbed of more than land. Taken from them was a numinous landscape where every mountain and lake held meaning. For example, the Cherokee word *eloh'*, sometimes translated as 'religion,' also means knowledge, history, culture, law – and land. And it means all these things all the time at the same time. Because of these intimate interrelationships, relocation was an assault upon Native culture, identity, and personhood." – Jace Weaver, Cherokee Scholar

There is a place, a mound really, in Mississippi called Nunih Waiya. It is said that from that space and in that place that Choctaw people were created. It is a sacred site. It is a part of our creation story. It is a part of us and we are a part of it. For Oklahoma Choctaws, it is a place from which we were removed. We made the journey, the Trail of Tears, from our homeland to our new home(land) in southeastern Oklahoma. It is home now. It had to be.

[13] King, *The Truth About Stories*, 2.

"Land narratives are embedded in Native languages and worldviews"[14]. Our stories and our land are interconnected with every fiber of our being. However, it is never just about the land. This view and this story is very different from the one propagated and perpetuated through settler colonialism. Settler colonialism "trains people to see each other, the land, and knowledge as property, to be in constant insatiable competition for limited resources"[15]. This capitalistic view runs counter to Native relationships to land, place, space, and home. Patel goes on to assert: "Settler colonialism's fulcrum is the land; coloniality more broadly is about the stratification of beingness to serve accumulation of material of land. A text can make visible coloniality but it does not, in and of itself, shift material relations among human beings, including their connections to land (land here meaning land, air, water, and space) and other beings"[16]. When worldviews collide, loss occurs. For Native people who were 'relocated,' it is about so much more than a loss of land (in the sense that land is material good for capitalistic gain and access to resources). It is about a loss of self, community, anchor, and story.

"The Native's identity – his place in the total scheme of things – is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and waterholes he can see and touch. He finds recorded in his land the ancient story of the lives and deeds of immortal beings from he himself is descended, and whom he reveres. The whole countryside is his family tree"[17]. This is especially important to think about in relation to conversations surrounding place, space, and home. It is not simply the taking or stealing of resources (land), it is the taking and stealing of identity, home, personhood, and so forth. "Knowing one's 'place' within 'the land's story' is part of being at

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[14] Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land*, 25.

[15] Leigh Patel, *Decolonizing Indigenous Research*, (New York; Routledge, 2016), 72.

[16] Patel, *Decolonizing Indigenous Research*, 7.

[17] Taun, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 157-158.

home in Indian Country or on Indian land, and this knowledge forms the essence of the land narrative framework. Because of the colonial relationships of Native Nations with the U.S. and Canadian governments, the 'places' within 'the land's stories' have become disrupted by a myriad of factors, including forced removals, relocations, and environmental crises"[18]. These experiences with dispossession weigh heavily on who we are as Native people today. Looking at this through the lens of place and space can be helpful while thinking through our place, the space we occupy, and the home(land) we embrace.

"'Space' and 'place' are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space…. Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one and long for the other. There is no place like home. What is home? Is it the old homestead, the old neighborhood, hometown, or motherland"[19]. Within the first lines of his foundational text, Tuan, implores us to think about our relationship to material reality. It is physical, metaphysical, and spiritual.

For example, Nunih Waiya is a "place." It can give us "space" to connect with who we are, who we were, and who we will be. It is a sacred place and a place of "home" in our "home(land)." "In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place.' What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value"[20]. Do I have to experience Nunih Waiya in "place" for it to occupy "space" and have it be considered "home" or "home(land)" to me? Does a "place" have value or do we give the value to it? Tuan goes on to situate it as a dichotomy: "the idea of 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we

[18] Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land,* 25-26.
[19] Taun, *Place and Space*, 3.
[20] Taun, *Place and Space*, 6.

are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa"[21]. Did we, Choctaw people, leave our "place" for the possibility of "space"? What happens when the space is decided for you (whether it be during a "relocation" or in an educational or other institutional realm)? How does one negotiate new places in the space? If space can imply movement, place can be seen as a stop, pause, or stationary. In that, each movement stop makes it possible for a particular location to become place. Based on this logic, was our forced stop in southeastern Oklahoma what allowed it to become our "place?" By all accounts, the Choctaw roots are deep in southeastern Oklahoma. To so many of us, it is home – so few of us have left. For example, my small rural elementary/middle (K-8) is still around 75-80% Choctaw. Perhaps in that "space," we found a "place" and in that "land," we found a "home."

"Attachment to the homeland can be intense…..human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world"[22]. For Oklahoma Choctaws this begs the question of where our "place" and "home" really are. Based on oral accounts and stories that have been passed down, there had to be an acceptance of southeastern Oklahoma. In the grief of loss, pain, and suffering, there had to be a "place" made in the "space" to survive. One way to do that would be the creation of new stories of new "places" in a new "home(land)." "Native people who are removed to unfamiliar locations must incorporate their original stories into new land narratives, literally re-placing themselves in a new land by creating new stories"[23]. Ultimately, stories play a role in both the survival and the regeneration of people. "Stories are not only *tied* to certain land formations and places, but they form a *part* of the land"[24]. Stories are also a part of

[21] Taun, *Place and Space*, 6.
[22] Taun, *Place and Space*, 149.
[23] Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land*, 26.
[24] Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land*, 37.

us. The old land won't leave us. We carry it with us wherever we go. We are the land. From Nunih Waiya to the rivers and woodlands of southeastern Oklahoma, we are here – and we are home.

Natives in Higher Education

Much of the current research on Native students in education can be linked to the barriers for Native students in higher education and strategies that Native students have employed in order to overcome those hurdles. The following serves as an introduction to the current work with/on/for Native students and creates a foundational platform for further inquiry.

Through the lens of ethnographic study, Brayboy's 2005 article explores the experiences of two AI/Native Ivy League graduates and the ways in which they have used their educations to contribute to their tribal communities. The author ultimately asserts that transformational resistance through education is employed and that although beneficial to the community, it results in a high personal cost to the individual. Although, Waterman (2007) claims that students can be formally educated while still maintaining their traditional cultural identities.

In a 2012 article, Waterman, goes on to explore the college experiences of 26 Haudenosaunee graduates in an attempt to understand their "home-going" (staying culturally and spiritually centered by visiting home frequently while in college – oftentimes every weekend) as it relates to their college success and completion. Waterman (2012) found that in order to balance the two "worlds" students had to spend more time "home" than their counterparts. The amount of perceived or experienced sacrifice is unclear.

Finding a "home" on campus is another way students have been "successful." Through Lee's (2009) study of a Native American Studies program on the lives of Native students, it was reported that through an "indigenized education" approach (experiential methods/course activities, community partnerships, critical curriculum, etc.) students found a place to belong, gained awareness on Native/Indigenous issues, and became more committed to their Native communities. This idea further complicates notions of home. Do we "find" a new "home" on campus or just go back to our "original home" more often. Does higher education teach us to find new homes or are we drawn back to our own home even if there is no real place for us there anymore? Do we want to give back to our community by going back or sending resources or a being a resource for them?

Unfortunately, the few studies that have been completed are a small testament to the contextual and varied experiences of Native students, the perceptions of tribal communities, and the perceptions of those working with these students in higher education settings. Guillory's (2009) article outlines a qualitative inquiry through the use of interview data between AI/AN students and those in power in higher education. The comparative analysis shows conflicting perceptions between students and higher education faculty/administration. Thus, highlighting the need for additional research on this topic in order to facilitate better experiences for Native students in higher education. Based on existing research, it is clear that family, faith, culture, and community/home play significant roles in Native students' experiences in higher education.

Family is one of the most foundational and socializing elements in most cultures and societies. For many Native communities, it is also cited as one of the most important factors in

overcoming educational barriers[25]. Essentially, connection with home and family is vitally important to most Native students. It can also be a differentiating factor when attempting to generalize incoming freshman Native students with peers from other cultures. Many Native students seemed more like returning (or non-traditional) adult students than "traditionally" aged students in that their major or primary source of support was from home, community, and family[26].

In order to assist Native students who are away from their families, some campuses have found success with mentoring programs[27]. Pairing Native students with Native upperclassmen or graduate students could be viewed as a way to create an extended family on campus[28]. Additionally, having family on campus could go a long way toward respect, continuity, and completion for Native students[29].

Similarly, faith, religion, and/or spirituality can play a large role in persistence for some Native students. Although the research is scarce, it is still a very relevant factor in many contexts[30]. In one study, Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) cited spirituality, traditions, and ceremonies as an important factor of success among some Native students. It is important to note that some Native students practice traditional spiritual customs, some practice Christianity (or another dominant religion), some practice combinations of the aforementioned traditions, while some do not practice any at all. Ultimately, it is important for colleges and universities to

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[25] Rindon, 1988; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Lin Lin, 1990; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002; Waterman, 2012.

[26] Stephanie Waterman, "A Complex Path to Haudenosaunee," *Journal of American Education,* 2007: 20-40.

[27] Waterman, 2007; Guillory, 2009.

[28] Shotton, Oosahwe, Cintron, Stories of Success: Experience of American Indian Students in Peer-Mentoring Retention Programs, *The Review of Higher Education*, 2007: 81-107.

[29] Lindley, 2009; Shotton, 2008

[30] Tachine, 2015

understand that spirituality and faith plays an integral role in the lives of many of its Native students.

Similar to faith and family, home and community can (and often does) play a pivotal role in the lives, success, and college completion of Native students. As such, the ability to spend time at home in their communities can ultimately ensure the support needed for persistence among Native college students. "Native students often 'go home' to the place where they perceive their greatest support to be"[31]. Home and community are so important that many students choose to attend colleges and universities in close proximity to their home/community of origin. In a study by Tippeconnic & Faircloth (2008), Native recipients of the Gates Millennium Scholarship (a prestigious scholarship that allows students to attend college wherever they would like) chose to attend schools close to home although they had the option of attending anywhere.

Although home/community (and tribe) are instrumental in Native student success, it can still be challenging for many students to negotiate the "two worlds." Essentially, the reason many of these students pursue higher education is for the betterment of their communities/tribes. "Through their willingness to sacrifice aspects of their personal selves for the larger goals of tribal empowerment, these individuals are educationally successful while maintaining strong connections to their home culture"[32]. Even with frequent home-going, it can be challenging for Native students to "go back" upon completing college education. Outside of external factors like poverty and unemployment in many Native reservations, communities, and lands, internal

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[31] Waterman, Homegoing as a Strategy for Success Among Haudenosaunee College and University Students, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 2012: 193-209.

[32] Brayboy, "Transformational Resistance and Social Justice," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 2005: 208.

changes and time away can be an additional burden. This is something colleges and universities should be cognizant of when working with Native students.

> "The future of our Native Nations depends on not only inspiring Native students to commit to their communities and to Native America, but it also depends on creating competent, confident, and creative students who are aware of the difficulties involved in 'going back' and are willing to challenge and overcome them"[33].

One way colleges and universities can assist students in this endeavor is by creating a sense of home and community on campus. From Native American clubs to Native American Centers and Native American Studies, creating a space for Native students has proven to be beneficial in boosting GPAs, morale, and Native identity empowerment on campus[34]. This is especially important to note now since fields such as Native American Studies are growing in numbers, becoming more prevalent, and becoming spaces for Native students to experience a sense of home on campus. "I argue that Native American Studies provides a place to help Native students define themselves within a Western academic institution. It helps students find another indigenous community away from home and engages students in holistic development of their being. NAS is working to make higher education meaningful for Native students"[35]. Lee goes on to posit that these "home away from home" spaces are actually enhancing overall understanding of Native topics, perspectives, and issues, as well as, serving as a motivating factor for Native students to pursue goals that assist and support Native communities.

There are also additional theories outlined in the literature. One such example being Schooler's Native American College Student Transition Theory. Circular in model, this theory

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[33] Lee, *Building Native Nations*, 34.
[34] Lindley, 2009; Shotton, 2008; Lyons, 2000
[35] Lee, *Building Native Nations*, 22.

includes the following: remembering history, learning to navigate, moving toward independence, building trust and relationships, re-establishing trust and reaching out, and developing a vision for the future.[36] Although useful in having some foundational language for identity discussions, this model, and others like it (in more mainstream literature), seem to argue for a single-narrative for all students, in this case Native students. This can erase difference and context and further perpetuates the incorrect notion that all Native students are the same.

Overall, higher education (and education in general) has failed Native students. Lack of research, a dismissal of Native ways of knowing and paradigms, limited Native faculty role models, racism, lack of cultural understanding and support, historical trauma based in education, and favoring quantitative research methods that reduce Native students to "statistically insignificant" asterisks are just a few of the ways Native student voices have been silenced[37]. "The methodology and favoritism toward quantitative research inherently marginalizes Native American data. The word insignificant, as applied to people, is problematic"[38]. It is no wonder why American Indians/Alaskan Natives are the least likely ethnic group to obtain a college degree[39].

Although oftentimes marginalized and oppressed, many Native students have found a resiliency that allows for maneuvering the "two worlds" they inhabit. In many ways, some of these students have been able to use higher education as a weapon or a tool to overcome the very barriers higher education attempts to instill. "Creative individuals from traditionally oppressed

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[36] Schooler, 2014

[37] Lindley, 2009; Shotton, 2008; Lyons, 2000

[38] Willmont, Sands, Raucci, & Waterman, Native American College Students: A Group Forgotten, *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 2015: 89.

[39] Waterman, 2007.

groups who know how to use the educational tools and credentials they have acquired toward liberatory ends unseat the assimilationist influence of Western schooling"[40].

"For Native students to develop a sense of meaning in their education requires that education have relevance in their lives"[41]. In order for this to occur, an overhaul of the educational system might be in order. "The need is to develop a comprehensive a cohesive system of interventions that address barriers to students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school at every stage from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary. Establishment of such a system is a public education, public health, and civil rights imperative"[42].

Imagining a way to achieve this can seem daunting at best. It can be an even more challenging endeavor when there are few spaces for Native student support and even fewer Native faculty. Furthermore, there are very few researchers who are Native and/or focus on Native student populations in their research[43]. Which leads to the importance of this study and more studies like it. "Issues must be identified and heard from the AI/AN student perspective"[44].

I am intrigued by these works. I agree with their points. I think they can be powerful and useful in their own ways. I also do not truly see myself, my story, my co-researchers, or their stories here. Sure, there are some fragments, some slivers of glass, a few real moments of relatability. But, these are not our stories. Scholars like Huffman outline theories for Native students such as cultural discontinuity theory, structural inequality theory, interactionalist theory, and transculturation theory. The assessment of these theories through a Native student lens is important. It also seems to be through the lens of reservation-based tribal students. Although

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[40] Brayboy, 2005, 208.
[41] Lee, 2009, 21.
[42] Adelman, Taylor, & Nelson, 2013, 52.
[43] Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013
[44] Guillory, 2009, 22.

some overlap is inevitable, these are not necessarily our struggles or stories. There is the gap. There is a gap because this all seems to elude to a notion of singular identity among Native students. Although there are some similarities, to continue to deny the complexities of Native identity is to perpetuate erasure. All work on Native people and Native students is important. There is not enough of it. This work is a snapshot – another sliver of glass and piece of the puzzle. It is the stories of Choctaw college students who grew up in the Choctaw Nation territory (the 10.5 counties) in southeastern Oklahoma. Their stories matter.

This is the heart of this project. In many spaces, I see face-lifts (unnecessary cosmetic changes) when what we need is heart transplants (operations required for survival). Superficial changes can be beneficial. They can even create a renewed sense of confidence and identity. Examples of this can be found in conversations around regalia at graduations, land acknowledgement statements, and in increasing representation and diversity initiatives in learning spaces. These can be helpful. These can be important. But, they are face-lifts. Quite often, it is a bureaucratic check-mark that does not really respect agency. For example, it could look like a public statement of endorsement for Native regalia at graduations while denying policies that benefit Native peoples' educational opportunities (tribal involvement with the educational establishment, etc.) or health and well-being (water rights, etc.). They do not fix what is broken. They cannot mend or transplant broken hearts that are still being crushed by oppressive forces. That comes from changing the structures and institutions. That comes from giving up power so everyone can have some. That comes from asking people to tell their own stories and calling them research. That comes from seeing the value in multiple ways of knowing and being. That comes from taking the hierarchies, owning, and privileging out of education. We have so far to go. This is only the beginning.

It is only when the heart is pumping that anything can live and grow. With the heart of the project strongly beating to the beat of generations of drums, it was time to form the project. With the assistance and support of so many creators in their own right, I am setting out to form and build a solid framework for this important piece. Just as an infant grows into a child into an adolescent into an adult, the structure of this work has greatly evolved since its conception. In trying to wrap the oftentimes rigid form around the large beating heart, I found that it did not fit. It was on life support and the heart rejected the body that was artificially placed around it. It was a fight just to stay alive. In a fight for survival, I did all that I could do – I went back and I listened to the heart. I listened to the why.

The Why

The why of a thing can keep the heart of a thing going when all else fails. Why does this project need to live, form, nourish, grow, sustain, and create new life? Let me count the ways: Growing up in the forested mountains of southeastern Oklahoma on an original Choctaw allotment (in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma), I took for granted the unique context of non-reservation based tribal nations and the varied understandings of the Choctaw Nation/People. Although there has been more scholarship in recent years on Native people, tribes within Oklahoma, and even some on non-reservation-based tribes, there is still so much to be explored and understood. The perception of Native people seems to be that of an overly romanticized caricature of the past in a teepee or a brightly colored casino in a desolate wasteland[45]. This is not who we are. We are not the "Indian" many have in mind. We are still

[45] Robbins, 2011.

here. We have been here. Many of us will stay here – in this place – occupying this space. It is important that we contribute to the academic conversation. Not just for the betterment of institutions of higher education, but also for a better national understanding of Native/Choctaw people in their current space of lived reality. Native people, for so long, have been silenced. They have been written about instead of listened to and relegated to the margins of academic discourse[46]. If we ever want to better inform and tease out the full spectrum of Native identity, we have to create space for Native people to contribute, create, and craft their own counter-narratives. Bringing Native identity and Choctaw student voices into the conversation as a current lived reality will also facilitate student experiences that work to empower, inform, and inspire them – unapologetically meeting them where they are. It also allows for a re-imagining of higher education and assists in the journey toward more equitable educational structures and practices. It can help facilitate conversations and contribute to the goal of education as a positive space for Native/Choctaw students instead of a site of continued trauma and erasure. Additionally, it serves as a way to honor Native ways of knowing and contribute to our rich tradition of storytelling and other creative endeavors.

This is the 'why.' For these reasons and so many more, for all the stories that have been told and all those left to tell, for seeing what is wrong and trying to make it right, for our ancestors and for our children, for this moment and for forever, this is why the heart still beats.

In the honoring of the task at hand and the remembering of the why, I read, researched, and reached out to those who are more knowledgeable than myself. I also took what Patel[47] would call a "pause." I had to sit with the information. I had to sit with myself. From a place of

[46] Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013.
[47] Patel, 2016.

knowing, I listened again to the heart and began the journey of creating a form and framework to fit my heart, the heart of my people/community, and the heart of the project. I wrestled with frameworks, theories, and philosophical notions of every variety. I also listened to my family. I listened to my students. I listened to my people in the 10.5 counties (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma). I drew from this foundation and weaved it together until it was something that would fit over the heart. The heart flourished. It was able to pump and filter to every piece of the frame with ease. Now comes the time to nourish for optimal growth. Like good rest and good food are good for the heart and soul of a person, good reflection and good reading are good for the heart and soul of an academic project. I listened to the heart. My heart. My people. I listened to my family. I listened to my students. I listened to the melodies and memories of home. It allowed for the structures and logistics of the project to become viable. It linked systems of understanding and it began to grow.

Growth is not always a quick event. At certain key times, spurts are noticeable. However, usually, it is in the everyday gradual changes that growth allows for a slow ascension into greater and greater levels of size and maturity. This project is one such example. It has not been without the occasional growing pain that this project has developed into a sustainable work that has now sustained me and can serve as sustenance for those who may need it. The heart and form is nourished, it has grown, and it can and will sustain me on this journey. It can and will sustain my participants/co-researchers. It tells another kind of creation story. It has the power and potential to create more stories like it. I know that it will do just that. It will do all that and more – uncloaked. I know that to be true. The heart beats on. Afterall, we are a *people of miracles*.

Drawing from shared stories and existing literature, the following stories (chapters) comprise this project:

The Overview

Farther Along: The Family Research Story (This is for the Matriarchs) – (Chapter 2)

The first story takes us on a journey through the past. Its fundamental purpose lies in situating myself as the researcher and honoring the scholarship, theories, methods, people, ideas, and protocols that serve as guiding pieces to shape and inform the project. It introduces the "Family Research Story" as the guiding conceptual framework for the project and details research as story, research as relationship, and research as creative. It is performative in that it serves as an example for disrupting traditional educational research structures and norms.

Horse Tales/Tails/Tells: The Project Research Story (This is for the Matriarchs to Come) – (Chapter 3)

Drawing from the previous story, the third story provides the details of the research process and methods for gathering the research stories. It outlines the research journey from its inception to its completion and explains the research reach-out, research remarks, and research retreat. Drawing from Indigenous paradigms and arts-based research, this story includes a detailed account and explanation of the project processes and helps us to think through the ways that research methods can also serve as a viable means of interrogating the ways in which education and educational research privileges certain ontologies and epistemologies.

Seek and You Will Find: Research Story Findings – (Chapter 4)

Through the power of story, this fourth story chapter serves as a snapshot of the participants/co-researchers while using their own words to create understandings around Choctaw identity, higher education, and home. The co-researchers self-selected songs that were most in-line with their identities. The songs then served as a guiding metaphor for their individual research story.

The Promised Land: Retreat Nanih Waiya Story – (Chapter 5)

This story chapter begins with an overview of our research retreat on Lake Nanih Waiya. It details our activities and is followed by co-researcher comments organized through the lens of the Choctaw branding statement: *Living out the Chahta Spirit of Faith, Family, and Culture*. This section also layers in a creative element of photography. The photographs and explanations were all taken by the co-researchers on our photo journal walk through the Choctaw Nation Capitol grounds at Tvshka Homma, Oklahoma. It is a snapshot of a nation. It gives a raw, uncut, and unedited version of the cast of characters (participants/co-researchers) contributing to this project. It displays unedited versions of the participants/co-researchers selected photos and comments. The purpose of this chapter is to tell student stories as they are and to then collaboratively build around them as opposed to re-crafting/creating them.

No matter the journey this project takes, the heartbeat remains strong. It is formed, nourished, grown, sustained, and creates from generations of knowledge, hopes, and dreams. It is fed through the insights and passions of the Choctaw student participants/co-researchers. It is inspired and informed through scholars/scholarship, both known and unknown, who have come before. The next story (chapter) speaks to and honors that work. “I speak the heart’s discourse

because the heart is never far from what matters. Without the heart pumping its words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched"[48].

We are clay people. We are a people of miracles.

[48] Pelias, 2004, 7.

Farther Along: The Family Research Story (This is for the Matriarchs) – (Chapter 2)

Research is Storytelling. Research is Relationship. Research is Creative.

Grandmother: Research is Storytelling

> Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen[49].

It is important to understand the power and place of story as a means of research inquiry. From Thomas King to Brene Brown, both Native and non-Native researchers have been using story as a means of reporting, creating, and/or co-creating data in recent years. Although, story has been a tool for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge for centuries. "Story and Indigenous inquiry are grounded within a relationship based approach to research"[50]. Historically and currently, many tribes have a rich history and oral tradition of storytelling. Stories can be seen as a means for passing on knowledge, sharing lessons, providing insight and healing for body and soul. Stories are also where we live. We live in and around them until they become us and we become them. "Stories are who we are. They are both method and meaning. Stories spring forth from a holistic epistemology and are the relational glue in a socially interdependent

[49] Tafoya, 1995, 12.

[50] Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). 98.

knowledge system"[51]. Story is foundational for many Indigenous research approaches. One of the nine tenants of Brayboy's TribalCrit asserts that stories and theory are not separate things. He argues that they are legitimate and real ways of being and sources of data.[52] It is also paramount for this project in particular. Stories are not only imperative for the gaining and sharing of insight with the Chahta/Choctaw student participants/co-researchers, they also have a liberatory quality as we all share them with one another. "Story as methodology is decolonizing research. Stories of resistance inspire generations about the strength of the culture"[53]. In learning and sharing their own strength, they uplift one another.

The inter-generational transmission of Native knowledge and wisdom has traditionally been passed down in the form of storytelling. My grandmother has always imparted wisdom and served as an anchor for my entire family. This is not surprising. By all accounts, Choctaw people were matriarchal pre-contact. It also seems to ring true today, despite some of the outwardly obvious patriarchal structures. One example of her wisdom is through a story she told during a particularly frustrating period in my own life:

She recounted a time in her younger years when she and my grandfather were particularly poor but, by her own admission, it did not really occur to them to mind at the time. They knew they would have some money coming in soon. But, they did not have anything to eat that day. My grandfather went out and picked some wild blackberries. They ate their fill. She then canned the excess and put them away for when they might need them. She told me that whenever times would get hard, they would just open a jar of blackberries. The wisdom she imparted was this:

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[51] Kovach, 2009, 108.
[52] Brayboy, 2006
[53] Kovach, 2009, 103.

hard times are when we need each other most. She reached in her cupboard and handed me a jar of blackberries and then said something I have never forgotten: "We need each other. It takes a whole family to make it in this world, babe."

I learned that life can be challenging for anyone at any time. I learned that sometimes what we need to meet our needs can be just outside our door. I learned that the land can take care of us when systems and structures cannot. I learned that sometimes we just have to give thanks – and occasionally open a jar of blackberries.

Perhaps one of the biggest lessons that day is the realization that it takes a family to make it in this world. Family and community are of paramount importance to Choctaw people. In that spirit, I am drawing from both the literature (formal) and the matriarchs of my own family (informal) to tell the stories of research as storytelling, research as relationship, and research as creative. As an educational philosopher, the end goal for these stories is to help imagine another way of knowing in academic spaces that could provide a better understanding and future for Native people and all people in higher education.

Research is storytelling. Within the aforementioned story lies so many lessons and truths. The beautiful part about the story (and stories more generally) is that different people could take different lessons and meaning from the story based on their backgrounds and current lived realities. Research is like that. It is gathering stories. It is making meaning. It is creating and co-creating. Stories are where we create ourselves. Or, perhaps, where we find ourselves. Research is storytelling.

Mother: Research is Relationship

My mama has always told me "you gotta run your own race" no matter what anyone else says or does. I recently found a picture of my mama from years ago riding her horse 'Hank.' She had 'Hank' longer than she had me. She bought him really cheap off of the track. As a grandson of 'Go Man Go,' he had a lot of promise. Unfortunately, he got hurt as a foal and they weren't sure he would ever be sound to ride, much less race. To them, he was a cull – useless. My mama believed in him. She trained him herself. He had that high-strung race horse spirit about him. In fact, no one else could ever ride him. He especially did not like men. He trusted my mama though – everyone does.

Twenty years later, I had obviously been riding since before I was born and had spent most of my formative years riding, showing, and competing on horses. But it wasn't until my second year of making it onto the top ranked equestrian drill team in the nation at the time that Mama finally suggested I try to ride 'Hank.' Luckily, we got along quite well. I think he knew who I was and that he had to take care of me.

One day at drill team practice a girl on my team, Jennifer, decided she wanted to race everyone during some down time. Her young horse came from her Daddy's race horse breeding and training farm. She was beating everyone – and incessantly bragging – when my mama called me over and told me to go race Jennifer. I couldn't believe she wanted me to race Jennifer on 'Hank.' He was old – and she knows I don't like to lose. She told me to trust her, give him his

head, and let him run his race. Jennifer couldn't believe I wanted to race her. I didn't say anything. I just lined up beside her and when the whistle blew, I gave him his head.

A very short while later, I think we were all in disbelief. That old horse won the race that day. It sure shut Jennifer up. After the figurative and literal dust settled, I asked my mama how she knew 'Hank' could beat that young race horse. With a glimmer in her eye, a knowing smile, and pride in her voice, she replied: "Before you were born, I used to race him out on the old air strip, there wasn't a horse in the tri-county area that could beat him."

We all won that day. We also learned a lot of lessons. It may not seem like a big thing but 'Hank' running his race, in many ways, helped mama run hers and me run mine. My mama trusted his ability to heal. She trusted his ability to take care of me. She trusted his ability to race (do what he loves/was born to do). Her trust gave me the ability to trust him – and myself. When we trust others, we give them what they need to operate out of their giftings and strengths. When we give up control and manipulation we give a gift to others – and to ourselves. You have to give people the tools and resources and then let them do what they were born to do in their own way. You have to let them run their race.

Research is relationship. Allowing that space is vitally important in research. There has to be a sense of trust. A type of trust that can only come from time and from 'giving them their head' and letting them run their race. This is a different type of research. It is about caring about everyone involved in the project. It is about respect, reciprocity, and honor. It is ceremony and it is sacred. Indigenous research paradigms echo these sentiments well:

Situated in the academy alongside other qualitative approaches, Indigenous research paradigms invite contextual understandings, the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing, researcher positionality as an aspect of research, and much more. "To embrace Indigenous methodologies is to accept subjective knowledge"[54]. This can be a challenging notion for some Western researchers and guiding frameworks. However, this is not meant to critique others worldviews as that would not be in line with the underlying tenants of this research paradigm. Ultimately, this framework is another step in decolonizing educational research.

> As we Indigenous scholars have begun to assert our power, we are no longer allowing others to speak in our stead. We are beginning to articulate our own research paradigms and to demand that research conducted in our communities follows our codes of conduct and honors our systems of knowledge and worldviews. Research by and for Indigenous peoples is a ceremony that brings relationships together[55].

An Indigenous research paradigm goes beyond a simply articulated position or worldview. Wilson posits that "research is ceremony. The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves. The research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world"[56]. This implies a level of connection and components of that which is sacred to permeate the work. It is an exchange both internally and externally. "It is the knowing and respectful reinforcement that all things are related and connected. It is the voice from our ancestors that tell us when it is right and when it is not. Indigenous research is a life changing

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[54] Kovach, 2009, 111.

[55] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2008), 8.

[56] Wilson, 2008, 11.

ceremony"[57]. The idea of ceremony allows us to think about care and connection to ourselves and our communities throughout the process. It also helps us to think through the importance of preparation for our research and ourselves as active participants in the ceremonial work. It is at the same time practical and transcendent. Ultimately, it speaks to relationships. The relationships we have with ourselves, our communities, and all things around us. It is about both relating and being a good relative. "Indigenous epistemology and ontology are based on relationality. Our axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining relational accountability"[58]. The ways we achieve these goals are contextual and dependent upon a variety of factors within various tribal/nation spaces. However, some researchers have proposed guiding frameworks, ideologies, or goals. One example of tenets for Indigenous research by Atkinson are as follows:

1.) Aboriginal people themselves approve the research and the research methods;

2.) A knowledge and consideration of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to the community;

3.) Ways of relating and acting within community with an understanding of the principles of reciprocity and responsibility;

4.) Research participants must feel safe and be safe, including respecting issues of confidentiality;

5.) A deep listening and hearing with more than ears;

6.) A reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen and heard;

7.) Having learnt from the listening a purposeful plan to act with actions informed by learning, wisdom, and acquired knowledge;

[57] Wilson, 2008, 61.

[58] Wilson, 2008, 11.

8.) Responsibility to act with fidelity in relationship to what has been heard, observed, and learnt.

9.) An awareness and connection between logic of the mind and the feelings of the heart;

10.) Listening and observing the self as well as in relationship to others;

11.) Acknowledgement that the researcher brings to the research his or her subjective self[59].

Research is relationship.

Sister: Research is Creative

I have referred to her as 'Hannah 2.0, The New & Improved Version' since I can remember. Seven years younger than me, it was almost like my mama had me over again. There were just enough years between my baby sister and me for us to always get along – and to be very similar. She is that built-in best friend I'm sad others don't have. We finish each other's thoughts and intuitively know when to tap in to give the other a break in social interactions. Together we have opened a side hustle design business and 'saved the farm' both literally and figuratively. But, those are stories for another day.

For a few short years my little sister and I attended the same small K-8th grade school. On Mondays, we had a 'Rise and Shine' assembly. At certain assemblies, mostly around holidays,

[59] Atkinson, 2001, 10.

we were asked to dress-up. There was a best costume 'winner' for each class. Those 'winners' would be called to old gym floor and then one winner would be selected overall. It was for the Valentines' day assembly that I first decided to dress myself and my sister exactly the same. I got up extra early that morning (which was against everything I believe) in order to dress us both and cover us from head to toe in carefully planned and selected adornments. What seemed like hours later, and might have been, we were ready to go – we were ready to win.

I was delighted that morning to see that my sister had also been selected as the individual 'winner' from her class. My excitement gave way to panic when I realized she had removed the heart stickers I had carefully placed on her face. In fact, she had messed up the placement on most of my wonderful creation. I rushed over to try to fix it before the voting could commence. She told me in whispered tones that she was sorry but the stickers had fallen off. She looked down as she told me that they also itched her face. Her big brown eyes looked up at me – waiting to see how I would react – to see if I was mad that we no longer 'perfectly matched.' In that split-second moment, I had a decision to make. Without missing a beat, I started moving my own stickers so that they matched hers. A few minutes later, for the first time in assembly history, there were two winners selected at the school-wide assembly – me and my sister.

We actually won a lot of assemblies together after that. (We are both pretty creative – we get it from our mama.) I'll never forget that first one though. I'll never forget the praise I received for my creativity. I'll never forget the praise I received for being 'such a good sister.' But mostly, I'll never forget that sometimes creativity means creatively finding the solution that helps your little sister smile and feel smart and special in a gym full of people regardless of whether or not it

messes up your perfect design. I also learned that creativity can bond you. Over the years, my sister and I have creatively problem-solved, designed, decorated, and created our way into party and event planning, design work, decorating and interior design, and so much more. We find connection through art and music – especially music. She taught me that when given the resources, even a small child can create and teach and show us their view of the world in a way their words never could. And what a brighter world it is when we let that light in.

Arts-Based Research (ABR)

Research is creative. From music and painting to theatre and dance, the creative mediums have been increasingly finding their place in academic research – and rightfully so. Arts-based research (ABR) has been increasingly visible and utilized in recent years[60]. There are many reasons this could be. One such reason lies in the fact that "educational research continues to be dominated by discourses that extol postpositivist and constructivist assumptions of data, analysis, representation, and knowledge production"[61]. This way of thinking, knowing, and researching is problematic for many scholars and does not lend itself well to the multi-layered and contextually lived realities of many research projects and communities. The ever-present push for educational research rooted in positivism only "serves to constrain methodological imagination and perpetuate the inequitable status quo in our schools and communities"[62]. When working with

[60] Leavy, 2015.
[61] Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012
[62] Brown, Carducci, & Kuby, 2014

underrepresented groups and respecting alternative ways of knowing, these frameworks can be challenging at best and detrimental at worst.

Arts-based research is one way engage in a more equitable manner. "Arts-based researchers are not "discovering" new research tools, they are *carving* them. And with the tools they sculpt, so too a space opens within the research community where passion and rigor boldly intersect *out in the open*"[63] (p. 3). This is an important distinction with this work. Arts-based research allows for passion, drive, and commitment to relationship, unapologetically, take "center stage" with academic rigor. Sometimes it is necessary for the project while other times it speaks to those being researched or the researcher themselves. "Some researchers have come to these methods as a way of better addressing research questions while others quite explicitly long to merge their scholar-self with their artist-self. In all cases, whether in the particular arts-based project or in the researcher who routinely engages with these practices, a *holistic, integrated perspective* is followed". In this space there is science and there is art. Weaving together feeling and embodied emotion with data and analysis creates the space for the creation and co-creation of meaning. "The writing of research, as with the works of artists, is ultimately about (re)presenting a set of meanings to an audience"[64]. Adding in the tools and perspectives of an artist (or researcher as artist) allows for a more holistic and nuanced experience with meaning making, information collection, and (re)presentation. "The arts simply provide researchers a broader palette of investigative and communication tools with which to garner and relay a range of social meanings. Moreover, the artist's palette provides tools that can serve and expand the promise of traditional qualitative research"[65]

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[63] Leavy, 2015, 3.
[64] Leavy, 2012, 19.
[65] Leavy, 2012, 19.

Arts-based research opens up space for a variety of mediums of expression. It, in many ways, speaks to social justice and allows researchers to fully express their projects while giving voice in ways that matter to people and communities of study. Philosophically speaking, Gerber states that arts-based research (ABR): recognizes art has always been able to convey truth(s) or bring about awareness (both knowledge of the self and knowledge of others), recognizes the use of the arts is critical in achieving self/other knowledge, values preverbal ways of knowing, includes multiple ways of knowing such as sensory, kinesthetic, and imaginary."[66].

The beauty of ABR is that it can be loosely defined and allows for creativity within research situations. However, in order to layer some concrete notions in this vast space of possibility, Leavy, 2015 offers this grounding: "Arts-based research practices are a set of methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation". This definition outlines ABR as tools for any researcher at any time in the research process. "These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined"[67]. Fusing theory and practice through creative arts is perhaps one of the most common ways ABR is utilized. Some examples of the possibilities with ABR are as follows: "literary writing, music, dance, performance, visual art, film, and other mediums. Representational forms include but are not limited to short stories, novels, experimental writing forms, graphic novels, comics, poems, parables, collages, paintings, drawings, sculpture, 3-D art, quilts and needlework, performance scripts, theatrical performances, dances, films, and songs and musical scores"[68]. This is not an exhaustive list.

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[66] Gerber, 2012, 41.
[67] Leavy, 2012, 4.
[68] Leavy, 2012, 5.

However, it gives some idea to the ways in which ABR can be carried out successfully. Other examples of ABR and/or disruptive qualitative work are as follows:

In her work, Claudine Taffy (2014), used visual ethnography to understand how photography can be used as site for counter-narrative documentation. She also employed collective data analysis to further interrogate representation in her work with black girls.

Similarly, Ruth Nicole Brown (2014) works from a methodology of "wreckless theatrics." In this piece, she uses theatrical performances to investigate black girl/women expressive cultures and to better interrogate rebelliousness and possibilities of politically resistant deviance. Sara Childers (2014) case study of a high poverty and high achieving school in Ohio allows us to see the way inter or cross methodological critique (feminist policy analysis, policy ethnography through poststructural and critical race theories) can allow space for researchers to engage among and through theoretical tensions as opposed to opting for a more streamlined analysis.

In their critique of traditional research concepts such as objectivity, validity, and measurability, Pourchier & Holbrook (2014) turn to the idea of a/r/tography as a means to rethink traditional notions of research. Drawing from a/r/tography's underpinnings of embodiment, relationality, and contingency the authors attempt to provoke and un-do meaning. An example of this can be found in Kuby's (2014) work as it "demonstrates how multiple genres can be used for analysis and (re)presentation (e.g., multi-voice poetry, pro/epilogues of narrative vignettes, images and embodied conversation)". In illustrating and explaining the way the "crystallization method" disrupts traditional research processes, Kuby (2014), uses autoethnography, practitioner inquiry, and critical performative emotion analysis in her early childhood classroom study.

Another example, Hughes' & Vagle's (2014) phenomenological work around Hughes' dissertation (written in the form of a teen magazine) allows space to think through the tension of doctoral training, what constitutes research, and the creation of something new. Hill (2012) draws from her experiences in K-12 schooling to interrogate the ways that black girls' bodies and minds are disciplined in schools, Isoke (2012) draws from her three years of experience teaching "Visual and Popular Culture" to "know" and "be" Hip-Hop and better educate students on the interconnected worlds of race, sexuality, gender, and political economy, and Kwakye's (2012) oral history project on Dr. Theresa Bayarea (black women dance professor who grew up on Hip-Hop) compares her journey to those who grew up on Jazz, Blues, and Spirituals in a way that speaks to owning and "spinning" ones story. Ultimately, through poetry, play, and prose, Brown & Kwakye's (2012) "Wish to Live: Hip-Hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader" takes us on a journey through the embodied lyrics and performed lines of Hip-Hop feminist scholars as they explore everything from violence to representation. This work gives us all an example of the ways in which we can reclaim spaces and reclaim ourselves (both inside and outside of the academy).

These works, and so many more, have used tenets of arts-based research to push the academy, academic research expectations, and what constitutes as meaning making data. Since its conception in the United States, formal (western white) education has demanded exact, measurable, disembodied "facts." The "nation" has since moved away from this model (or never adopted it at all in many spaces and in many people groups). Shifting paradigms and shifting realities have resulted in many questioning the procedures of the academy. ABR can really be a space to bridge the gap. With no less "work" or "rigor," ABR can meet people where they are. It can change minds. It can change hearts. It can change policy. According to Finley (2008): "Arts-

based inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research that can be used to advance a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequality"[69]. This is the potential power of this work. Examples of this can already be seen in underrepresented people groups. In discussing the merits of conducting arts-based research with marginalized populations, Finley articulates that it:

1.) Makes use of emotive, affective, experiences, senses, and bodies, and imagination and emotion as well as intellect, as ways of knowing and responding to the world;

2.) Gives interpretive license to the researcher to create meaning from experience;

3.) Attend to the role of form in shaping meaning by representing research in many different arrangements appropriated from the arts;

4.) Exists in the tensions of blurred boundaries[70].

It is in these spaces and tensions that many of us reside. In this space and for the purpose of this work, Native students have a place to record their stories and change the narrative while also changing the image and "photograph" that has been placed for them.

Photovoice

Photovoice is another method growing in popularity. Caroline Wang is most noted as developing the term and methodology of "Photovoice." "Photovoice is an innovative participatory action research (PAR) method based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and nontraditional

[69] Finley, 2008, 71.
[70] Finley, 2008, 72.

approaches to documentary photography"[71]. Photovoice methods are the selection and/or recruitment of influential community leaders or policy-makers, the recruitment of volunteer community participants, the introduction of the protocol and facilitation of a group discussion with participants, obtaining the necessary informed consent documentation, facilitating a discussion about the initial theme or concept for taking the photos, distributing cameras and educating the participants on their use, providing adequate time for participants to complete the photography task, facilitating a discussion of the photographs as a group, and planning the most appropriate way to share pictures and discussion points with policy-makers or influential leaders in the community. Said another way: "Photovoice is a participatory research method that uses a grassroots approach and photography to bring about social action."[72]

Gathering some attention and traction, Wang went on to highlight the goals of photovoice as a way to help individuals within the community assess and then record issues faced by that particular community, to assist in group collaborations and discussions about the issues, and to use that information to better educate, inform, and influence various stakeholders and policy-makers. Photovoice can be situated within several theoretical constructs. The first construct is the idea that giving camera access empowers communities to make change[73]. Second, the theory of critical consciousness assists communities and individuals in the exploration of their social histories and current situations[74]. Third, feminist theory lends itself in that photovoice empowers "vulnerable" populations due to its value on grounded experience, different ways of knowing, and contextual/local expertise.

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[71] Wang, 1995, 185.
[72] Goodhart, Hsu, Baek, Coleman, Maresca, & Miller, 2006, 53.
[73] Rose, 1970.
[74] Freire, 1970.

"Photovoice has been primarily used in a wide range of health research to empower marginalized recipients of health systems in an effort to create positive change, and the data suggests Photovoice is an effective way of communicating with people in power"[75]. In a study by Castleden and Garvin, they explain the participants' satisfaction in the Photovoice method as being a direct result of "balancing power, creating a sense of ownership in the research, fostering trust, building capacity, and implementing a culturally appropriate research project in the community"[76]. As a result, Photovoice has expanded to disciplines and project outside of the health realm. Photovoice can lend itself well to projects involving students and in higher education more generally. "Photovoice is valuable because it empowers students to become more aware of their surroundings. Students see themselves as researchers collecting data, analyzing those data, and doing something with them to help solve problems. It provides a process and resources for students to amplify their voices in order to influence and gain power to shape the university policies"[77].

Beyond students, other scholars have seen the value in expanding photovoice to meet the needs of a variety of populations. "Photovoice extended the observational aspect of Indigenous Knowledge by coupling photographs with participants' stories, which is in line with oral traditions"[78]. Partnering traditional ways of knowing with the tenets of photovoice can be liberatory and highly political in nature. "Arts-based inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research that can be used to advance a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequality"[79]. This sentiment was

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[75] Castleden & Garvin, 2008, 1396.
[76] Castleden & Garvin, 2008, 1398.
[77] Goodhart et al., 2006, 55.
[78] Castleden & Garvin, 2008, 1402.
[79] Finley, 2008, 71.

echoed by Minthorn & Marsh in their study: "While we do not feel that asking Native American students how they experience and perceive higher education is subversive, the overall exclusion of Native American student voices in higher education, and education research, positions this work as highly political, particularly given the fact that the majority of land grant and research extensive universities are located on lands appropriated or stolen from Native peoples"[80]. This is an important point for projects with Indigenous college students. The politicized nature of higher education, research about Native students, allowing flexibility in ways of knowing, and drawing from/partnering with traditional Native storytelling, photovoice (and methods like it) can really be a space for Native student research that is decolonizing both the research, as well as, the institution.

Creative and Imaginative Ethnography

Writing is powerful. It can change a person and it can change the world. Writing, whether it be a text message or an academic journal article (hierarchy), can be a small thing that changes everything. I believe that we can seek information. I also believe information can seek us. It can find us – when/if we are ready. During the final construction of this dissertation writing, I found a book that did a relatively fair job of describing some crucial elements of what I had already done. In their 2017 text, *A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*, Denielle Elliot and Dara Culhane, beautifully illustrate what research can, and possibly should, look like. "We take imaginative and creative ethnography as points of departure

[80] Minthorn & Marsh, 2016, 5.

– an invitation to live differently, to animate spaces, classrooms, and stages, to listen carefully to the lives of others, to use humor and imagination to write, picture, and perform the world alive"[81]. This is the space where my projects thrive. It is embodied. It is relational. It is "entangled." Elliot and Culhane go on to explain that this methodology stems from "theoretical approaches that assume that ethnographic knowledge emerges not through detached observations but through conversations and exchanges of many kinds among people interacting in diverse zones of entanglement….ethnography is a methodology of inquiry into 'collaborative' or 'co-creative' knowledge making"[82]. Knowledge is indeed power. Those who get to say that they own it define it as such. Understanding, on the other hand, is messy. It is also worth it. "One cannot reduce understanding to a method, because the researcher and object of inquiry are always historically situated and historically related….The fusion at the center of understanding means that we must see knowledge production as a flexible, creatively, historically infused process"[83]. This work aims to understand. In that understanding is the co-creation of meaning and knowledge, regardless of whether or not the 'powers that be' see it as so.

"The most transformational critiques that shape contemporary anthropology were initiated by spokespeople for Indigenous decolonization movements in settler colonies like Canada, the United States of America, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand"[84]. They go on to argue that in this space, it is feminist and Indigenous scholars who are oftentimes re-creating methodology and theory. My project is one such example. In speaking to relationship Elliot and Culhane offer: "We join with others across the arts, humanities, and social sciences who are

[81] Elliot & Culhane, 2016, 2.
[82] Elliot & Culhane, 2016, 3.
[83] Cerwonka, 2007, 23.
[84] Elliot & Culhane, 2016, 5.

challenging convention and developing relational theories of epistemology that focus on intersubjectivity and subscribe to the idea that human beings are most productively understood as social beings who come to know what we know, about both ourselves and others, in and through relationship. We make each other up"[85]. You can count me in. Research is relationship.

Spear-heading a narrative driven movement in ethnography, Clifford and Marcus (1986), were followed with works by Behar (1993 and 1996), Abu-Loghod (1993), Brown (2001), among others. These "remind us that storytelling is a powerful means to theorize the world in which we live and that there are many ways to tell a story"[86]. Unfortuntaly, once again "Positivist and conservative strategies, preferred by the academy and by scholarly journals that shy away from unorthodox, unconventional, or genre-bending papers, have found favor. Such accounts are often alienating to the general reader, appealing only to a small, elite cadre of academics – and they fail to capture the messy, sensorial experiences of everyday life"[87]. Indigenous scholars, such as Millon have argued that stories are a form of theory and can take the form of affective or ethnographic narratives. As feminist and anti-colonial scholars clearly illustrate, "creative writing and ethnography have transformative potential to shift relations of power….they can give voice to those who are denied forums for speaking or are silenced altogether. They can be factual, based on historical realities, and yet evoke imaginaries that we might only dream of"[88]. Research is storytelling. It always has been. It always will be.

Poetry is one such example. Ethnographic poetry allows for the enormity and complexity of human emotions, while also remaining critical and theoretical[89]. "The poetic voice can be used

[85] Elliot & Culhane, 2016, 17-18.
[86] Elliot & Culhane, 2017, 5.
[87] Elliot & Culhane, 2017, 25.
[88] Elliot & Culhane, 2017, 26.
[89] Maynard, 2009.

to challenge the hegemony of academic and colonial language and can privilege affect as central to the human condition"[90]. Some examples of this work are as follows: Million (2014), Anzaldua (1987), McLean (2009), Daniel (2013), Rosaldo (2013), among many others, both known and unknown.

Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) 'process-based writing' opens ups space to "free the writer to challenge disciplinary and institutional regimes of writing, which can constrain or even prevent us from telling the types of stories that matter to our interlocuters and that have transformative potential to unsettle; it undisciplines our writing"[91]. Elliot and Culhane state that "process-based writing also encourages partial, fragmented, stories and acknowledges unfinished products as being representative of life itself. Such writing challenges neoliberal, conservative, colonial, and academic structures that impose particular logics on and of knowledge"[92]. This is particularly useful for my project. In it, I have provided a snapshot of time that is both as brief as the blink of an eye and spans the centuries and cosmos.

Elliot and Culhane sum up their chapter on writing in the following way:
"Imagine your writing as being both research and documentation, method and theory, dialogue and monologue, poetry and prose, objective and subjective. An imaginative ethnography hopes to reinspire and reignite a form of ethnographic writing that challenges, opens up, disassembles, and shifts how we understand the social, political, economic, cultural, historical, and personal processes that shape and constrain our everyday lives. It sees the process of writing ethnography as an artistic, embodied practice as much as a form of academic 'knowledge translation' (Elliot

[90] Elliot & Culhane, 2017, 30.
[91] Elliot & Culhane, 2017, 34.
[92] Elliot & Culhane, 2017, 35.

and Culhane, 2017, p. 37). I could not have said it better myself. I agree with these tenants. Research is Creative.

Horse Tales/Tails/Tells: The Project Research Story (This is for the Matriarchs to Come) – (Chapter 3)

Research is Storytelling. Research is Relationship. Research is Creative.

Research Reach-Out. Research Remarks. Research Retreat.

Just like stories and family, many animals are important and/or sacred to Native tribes. For example, in historical Native writing, the symbol for "journey" was a drawing of a horse. This is important and poignant on many levels. Horses were introduced to Choctaw people by the Spanish. Once acquiring the horse, Choctaw people were able to care for and cultivate the breed. Called "issuba" by Choctaw people, a term developed from the Choctaw word for deer ("issi"), horses became companions, a source of travel, a way to find sustenance, improved mobility for trade, and a necessary part of the Choctaw community. When my people, the Chahta/Choctaw people, traveled what would become known as the "Trail of Tears" during forced relocation by the United States government from our homelands in Mississippi to the southeastern portion of what is now Oklahoma, it was the horses or "Choctaw ponies" as they have become known, who ensured the survival of many Choctaw people and many Oklahoma Choctaw bloodlines today. The Trail of Tears "journey" was arduous at best. Elderly people and children were able to ride the Choctaw ponies when necessary. Without them, many would have perished. Because of the ways in which the Choctaw pony has assisted in the survival of the Choctaw people, they are still revered and protected today. Pure bloodline Choctaw ponies can be found on several large ranches in Oklahoma. They have been studied extensively and shown to be the most purebred link to the Spanish colonial horse and have now been named the horse of Oklahoma. This is due in part to the Choctaw people's exclusive breeding program, lack of contact with other horses, and the hiding of herds by Choctaw people in the mountains of

southeastern Oklahoma around the time of statehood. Research can be similarly conceptualized and paralleled. Like the Choctaw ponies were cultivated and proven as important partners for Choctaw people, research can also be a cultivated partner to Choctaw/Native voices and people. Similarly, just like the Choctaw ponies help preserve Choctaw people and Choctaw people then assisted in preserving Choctaw ponies, Choctaw research can preserve knowledge for future generations of Choctaws and scholars alike while preserving Choctaw ways of knowing and adding to the preservation of a research for Native people in the academy and beyond. Stories go in circles. They are where we find ourselves. In caring for the Choctaw ponies and the preservation of Choctaw research stories, we are honoring those who came before. It is in them both that we can find ourselves. It is through this parallel lens that this story (chapter) aims to explore and outline a Native/Choctaw research methodology that lends itself to a more Indigenous version of educational research and that honors our past and our people.

Horse and Human Relationship as Research Relationship Analogy

For some people, horses (issuba) are sacred. For some people, horses (issuba) are family. For some people, horses (issuba) are used for entertainment and recreation. For some people, horses (issuba) are a source of food. For the purpose of this work and story chapter, issuba (horses) are partners, issuba are sacred, and issuba are family. This is just as true in a research relationship. Some people see other humans as sacred or a part of the family/community. Some people see other humans as sport or recreation (or a means to their end). Historically, researchers have done great harm to individuals and entire people groups alike. Although there are parameters in place and safety in research has greatly improved, I fear we may have missed some

very fundamental pieces of understanding in our oftentimes rightful and required quest for unbiased absolute truth. It seems that the pendulum has swung in the exact opposite direction for many people. This work is important and helpful in creating a project that honors my people and my participants/co-researchers. However, once carefully considering my participants and my project, I felt it was best to create and co-create something that informs, honors, and pushes forth ways of knowing that have been silenced in academia. I need this project to perform what it is. That is to say, I need it to be an example of what Indigenous research could look like. I need the project to act towards a more decolonized version of education and educational research while also detailing one way to carry that out. The tools and protocols and ways of knowing, doing, and being, can be one way to give voice. It can also be a platform for many voices.

A Brief Anchoring Note on Background:

Using art-based research (photovoice, creative ethnography, etc.) with Indigenous paradigms has proven to be very useful in building this work. I also agree with many critical perspectives. There are some very fixed notions (racism, sexism, colonization, etc.) that are based on a long history of inequality or colonization (depending on who you ask). It is important to critique these institutions, viewpoints, and behaviors. This can be a means of decolonizing. It is also important to respect, understand, and build relationship with your participants/co-researchers in a way that is in-line with their (and possibly your) ways of knowing and being. Similarly, arts-based research and methodologies expand the conversation. They can take us further toward creativity and innovation. Understanding, creating, and living your identity within and without structures and institutions is decolonizing. Paired together these ideas speak to larger

philosophical questions. One being, does life imitate art or does art imitate life? Ultimately, I believe we must not just critique, but also create. Critique can sometimes keep us in something in which creating could get us out.

Ultimately, the hope of this project is to step beyond the critique and to realize that life CAN imitate art. And as such, the participants/co-researchers in this project can create and co-create art that could then imitate life while allowing their lives be art. Once they can acknowledge, understand, and then see past the critique to create a new vision for themselves (and their people), they can then be truly seen as they work toward being truly represented. This allows them to work within structures and outside of structures. This is decolonizing.

Drawing from the Indigenous paradigms and arts-based research, another step and example in reimagining education and educational research is detailed below in the form of a research methodology for this project (and potentially others like it). Following the tenants of research as storytelling, research as relationship, and research as creative, the research method unfolded in the following way: research reach-out, research remarks, and research retreat. To further explain, we return to the horse human relationship story analogy

Issuba Journey: A Method

Like working with horses, it is important to have a plan when doing research. One important element for both scenarios is to plan for the potential to go off the beaten path (or off the plan). Like horses, humans have a mind of their own. They can be unpredictable. They carry history and experiences we do not understand. They have so much to contribute and when they

are not fenced in, they can take you to places you would have never expected. This is the research journey.

Drawing from the tenants of research as storytelling, research as relationship, and research as creative, I employed the following processes: Research Reach-Out, Research Remarks, and Research Retreat.

Research Reach-Out

Reach up. Reach down. Reach out. This is about using your reach to reach others. First is the selection process and the initial explanation of the research. Just like with horse human relationships, it is easy to wonder if you pick the research participants/co-researchers or if they pick you. For online surveys, medical trials, and many other research types and methodologies, this question is not as poignant or as relevant. However, when doing qualitative research within a Native community, especially one's own Native community, it is important to understand the relationship and connection that must be had and/or made in order to engage in the level of sharing required for this work. My participants/co-researchers are familiar to me from my community. This level of familiarity can be very important in gleaning actual insight into lived realities. Although my participants are familiar to me at varying levels, trust and respect must be cultivated soon after and alongside the familiarity. Although it takes a bit more time, this can also be achieved with individuals who are unknown to the researcher. First, I will illustrate this step through two stories. I will then detail the way this step is carried out in my own research.

It is told that traditional Native horsemanship looks like this: A human would approach a herd of horses and sit with them. This process could last a long while or a short while. When a

horse would approach the person, that individual would '*reach out'* a hand to the horse's nose. Once the horse smelled the hand, the person would then turn and walk away. If the horse did not follow, the individual would return to sit with the herd and the process would be repeated. If the horse followed the human, it was said that the two were connected. They had chosen one another and the horse would follow that person for life.

This strategy, in varying levels of exactness, has since been broadly used in the equestrian world. It has also been reported in human interactions with other animal species as well. This is important to consider when thinking about the relationship with research participants. There must be a common ground and a connection made before real communication can occur and real relationship can be built. Gaining the trust of a horse while you learn to trust the horse is a vital step in horse human interactions. Similarly, choosing to engage with one another in a research relationship takes a mutual trust. Like the story goes – this could take a long while or this could take a short while. It cannot be forced. It cannot be pushed. It must happen organically when both parties are ready.

The next story is the real life tale of four young men in their early twenties who graduated from Texas A&M University and decided to show themselves and the world (in the documentary about their journey, *Unbranded*) the strength, courage, and utility of wild mustangs. Drawing from the contentious debate over the "management" of mustangs and that young bravado many of us seem to lose over time, these four horsemen decided to adopt and train mustangs to carry them on a country-wide journey starting in Mexico, going through the United States, and ending in Canada. This had reportedly never been done, much less solely on mustangs. Not without much hardship, the men and the mustangs each succeeded in their own way and much needed awareness and information about mustangs/wild horse management was

disseminated through the documentary project. Ultimately, most would argue that ONLY mustangs could have made that journey. The men had to be very selective in the horses they picked for the trip. They had to get to know them well enough and trust them well enough to know they had what it took to make it to the end. In our research, it is important to assess if the participant is suited to make it to the end of the journey. It is our job as researchers to assess the terrain and understand the exact type of people who are up for the journey. We have to create parameters that match the needs of our trip and we have to ensure that there are no imminent threats to our participants.

From planning to making the connection, we must put the work in on the front end of the trip, because on a research journey, it will take all our energy and some trusted companions to accomplish something that has never been done. With horses and in research, we must remember: They make the decision. They pick you. Mutual respect and understanding is a must. We must meet them where they are and learn to communicate.

For my project, I had to come up with the parameters for my research and identify the participant that best fits the scope of the research. Since I am looking at Choctaw college students, identity, higher education, and home, I decided the ideal participant would be a 20-30 year old (millennial) Choctaw tribal member from the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma territory who was or had been involved in Choctaw programming and who had attended one or more of the following schools: Carl Albert State College (CASC), Eastern Oklahoma State College (EOSC), Northeastern Oklahoma State University (NSU), Southeastern Oklahoma State University (SE), Oklahoma State University (OSU), and/or the University of Oklahoma (OU). The aforementioned schools are of importance because two are community colleges, two are regional universities, and two are state schools. Additionally, three of the

institutions are located within the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation while three are not. This adds valuable insight to our larger research questions. Once the parameters were in place, I made a list of potential participants I know from the community. I then 'reached out' to the potential participants to assess their level of interest in the project, detail what would be requested of them, and then gave them time to decide if they were willing to participate. Once the participants had confirmed with me (via phone, email, text, or in person) I met with them individually to help acclimate them to the research process, gain consent, answer questions, address the entirety of the project, and introduce them to their first step in this journey. To put it simply, the 'Research Reach-Out' is as follows:

Research is Storytelling – In order to ask for their stories, I had to tell them mine. I mindfully crafted the goals and hopes of my research project into a verbal narrative. I tried to anticipate all of the terrain. I attempted to map out what it would look like and what I would be asking of them. I told them my research story. More importantly, I listened to their questions and queries. I invited their stories. And I waited.

Research is Relationship – I honored the relationship from the beginning. Some of the participants/co-researchers were familiar to me, while I had only a passing knowledge of others. Depending on the status of our current relationship, I 'reached out' to them in a way seemed the most appropriate based on how I know them. I spoke with them directly, face-to-face when possible and then followed-up with details written in the form of email or text message. I nurtured the relationship with the hope of creating a fruitful and 'successful' experience for all parties.

Research is Creative – During the 'reach out' process, I had to think very creatively on how to approach each individual person. I used my networks and loose connections, reached out through social media, and made unique connections with each individual while helping them to feel comfortable and connected. I will say that I had been cultivating some of these relationships for years without knowing I would ever be doing research in my community. Getting people on-board and excited about a project is not always easy. Think creatively.

Tell the Story. Honor the Relationship. Create the Change.

Research Remarks

Just like with horses, people need space. They need space to think, reflect, and just be. When working with a horse, it is best to start slow. Learn to communicate with them. When a horse is licking its lips, it typically indicates that it is thinking. This is a good time to slow down and make sure you are both on the same page with the task at hand. Like with horses learning new tasks, research or the particular topics within the research may be very new to the participant. Stepping back, in both scenarios, can be beneficial. Always stay available but give them time to think and reflect. Let them start to understand and do things on their own. You serve as a guide, but you don't push them in any way. They have to figure out what makes sense to them.

You have to work together and flow as one for any type of horse and human training program. Similarly, you have to come together and work as one to create new revelations and

new ideas. It has to flow. So there has to be mutual understanding and mutual reflection on the parts of horses, researchers, and participants/co-researchers.

This next step asks participants/co-researchers to think through a list of prompts and questions (Choctaw, Community, Education, etc.). I provided the list and explanation to the co-researchers and let them know that I would be setting up a time to visit with them about these topics. They were given time to ask any questions. Being mindful of the relationship with each individual, I reassured them that I was not looking for any particular response and that any answer they gave or story they shared was the right one. I encouraged them to contact me with any further thoughts or questions (phone, text, email, in-person, etc.).

Watching for cues of understanding is important here. Like watching for a horse to lick its lips, there are cues that humans give when they really start to think and "get" or understand a thing, project, or phenomenon. For some, it is nonverbal and may include things such as nodding or a confident expression. Others may provide examples or talk through the project until it makes sense to them. I also made myself available to answer any questions or receive any comments through text or call. It is also important during this time to make the participant aware that I am not looking for any particular answer or any particular skill. I am also letting them know that this is their project just as much as it is mine. I want them to understand that they can contribute in any way they deem appropriate. I want them to understand that what they say and do is valuable and that their voice is important and the entire point of the project.

When you are both ready, you come together for the dance and dialogue. You are both comfortable at this point. It is time to show what you have and express yourselves. It is not about asking questions. It is about creating a comfortable space, inviting ceremony and inviting relationship. It is about laying out information and options and allowing for an organic flow of

thoughts, movements, and ideas. It is in these spaces that you are bonded to one another. There is no space for fear, confusion, or misunderstanding. There is only the moment. You must be present and you must be open. Horses can sense and oftentimes mirror your emotions. That is a great way to think about the 'research remarks' portion of this process. You have to be open and present for the participant/co-researcher to feel open and willing to share/dialogue. It is in this space that unedited natural interaction gives way to information that transcends surface level 'canned answers.' The defenses are down. (Note: because you have created a space to true sharing, it is vitally important to be clear that a participant can request that certain disclosures be omitted with not fear of recourse or judgement. One way to do this is to make any information you share in writing etc. be viewed and approved by the participant/co-researcher before anyone else sees it. More information will be provided on this later.) Similar to working with horses, this is the time when you begin to work and move as one. Each brings their own gifts and contributions to the shared space and something new is created.

Once my participant/co-researcher had some time to sit with their thoughts and ideas, we agreed upon a location and meet to dialogue, the platform for a deeper conversation unfolded organically. Although I had a list of concepts or ideas I wanted to be sure and cover, the goal was that the conversation would naturally lead to most of the points or larger/deeper questions I had. Thankfully, it did. If it had not, my plan was to talk about the particular topic in a neutral manner and then let the participant/co-researcher step in with their experiences or thoughts. Typically, in my experience, participants/co-researchers responded to many inquiries and topics with a story. For example, if I brought up the idea of community or Choctaw community. Most participants told a story about a time or place that they felt a sense of community. This is important. Research is not just facts. It is also feelings. It is situations. It is struggles. Those are the crevices and

spaces we must find as researchers. These are the shards of glass. It is in and through those that light can shine. When both parties agreed that as much information as possible has been shared in that space and time, I felt it was important to check in before departing. Similar to the ritual that develops after working with a horse, care must be exhibited at this point of the interaction as well. For example, after a session of working with a horse, many people may brush the horse, check for any potential injuries, settle the horse in a barn or stall, feed the horse, depending on the weather either bathe the horse or blanket the horse (place a blanket on the horse), and so forth. At this point in the research relationship, it is important to clarify any questions, check-in on how they participant/co-researcher feels about the research process, ask for any feedback or additional contributions or suggestions the co-researcher might have, make sure the participant is comfortable with everything discussed, ensure that they are comfortable with all of the information they disclosed being shared (in an anonymous manner of course), and offer gratitude and thanks for the time, presence and experience in a manner that would be most comfortable to the participant/co-researcher. It is also important to make the participant/co-researcher aware that you are available for any follow-up conversations they would like. Some of the things that are discussed in research may not be things that the participants have consciously sat with or spent time thinking about. Some participants may find it useful to talk through what they might be thinking and feeling. It is important to be available. It is also important to address whether or not the co-researcher is comfortable with any follow-up conversations being included in the work. The relationship is first. The research is second. This was not the only time I checked in.

'Sit a spell' is a colloquial phrase that commonly refers to a time of resting, reflecting, and relaxing. It can involve conversation or no words at all. Usually stated when talking to or about humans, this is also an important part of horse human interaction. In order for the horse

human relationship to really work, the horse must understand that you are not just there for work. You care for them, you care about them, and you enjoy their company. Spending time in a pasture, paddock, barn, or other area where a horse or horse herd resides is important to the process. Reading a book, listening to music, or simply getting lost in thought as the nearby horse (or horses) grazes, eats, or plays is vital. They need to understand that you are a part of their herd – their community. It is also in those times that you may learn the most about the horse and yourself. Similar to this, is the time needed for the meaning making, processing, and reflection required in a research project. This is important for both the researcher and the participant/co-researcher. Like horses and humans need rest and recovery when working together, mental and emotional tolls can also be taken with research. Rest and reflection are one of the most valuable parts of any research or horse/human relationship. None of us want to be overwhelmed. During this time, it is also vital to reach out and check-in on participants. It is important that they know that you care about their well-being and you are available to them for anything they might need. Your relationship with the participants/co-researchers may last long after the project with some and maybe a lifetime with others, or maybe not at all. But knowing that you are there with them is important.

It was during this time that I felt ready to share the research stories. I had asked each participant/co-researcher for a song that described their life. Using that information, paired with their comments, my understandings, and our shared meaning making experience, I crafted the pieces into a cohesive story of the research. A story of them. A story of Choctaw people. A story for us all.

It is also important to prepare for the next step in the process. After sitting a spell with the information and drawing similarities, parallels, and looking for themes alongside incongruent

experiences and information, I made a list of topics for discussion and dialogue with the entire group of participants at the next step on our journey – the research retreat.

Research is Storytelling – I gave space for them to tell their stories. The stories that many did not know they had to tell. There is something magical when we have a conversation and let what needs to come out come out. Too many times, structured interviews can stunt exploration and storytelling. Opening up a topic and allowing the insights to emerge through disjointed thoughts, un-ended musings, and the stories in the words and where there are no words allows for an interaction that is co-created and meets us in a place where social scripts have given way to the ponderings of the heart.

Research is Relationship – I honored the relationship by creating the safe environment for the flow of ideas, shared understanding, and the strengthening of a bond. These conversations helped me to connect in new ways with these co-researchers in a way that was mutually beneficial and supportive. Making them aware of how important their stories and experiences are is a beautiful way to solidify a relationship and help the participants to develop a relationship with education and research that they may have never before know existed.

Research is Creative – The writing and sharing of these stories required some element of creativity. Paired with the self-identified songs that described their lives, these research stories illustrate the ways in which we all create meaning. Their comments, emotion, and stories collided with my understandings, our shared understandings, and my interpretations through writing to piece together a mosaic of light. It is theirs. It is mine. It is ours. It is yours.

Tell the Story. Honor the Relationship. Create the Change.

Research Retreat

Bringing people together to learn and grow is an amazing gift. Just like the trust that is built in a horse/human relationship, the research retreat is a way to solidify the bonds, honor the shared stories, and create new meanings from one another. When riding a horse, working with a horse, or competing with a horse who loves to compete, there is a relationship forged and a trust that comes from listening where there are no words. When you function as one unit – giving and helping and moving as one, you understand true connection and true communication. This is just as vital in human researcher relationships with participants. The ideas and the stories have to flow together. You have to learn to listen between the stories. You have to hear the breathing. You have to hear the pauses. You have to hear what is not being said. You have to move with the group and take each other's lead. A group research setting can be much like that of a herd. Horses typically travel in herd (or harems as they are called) or they create one in the domestic sphere. Within the herd, horses each have a role and those roles can be negotiated and re-negotiated for a variety of reasons. Human group dynamics are not much different.

The purpose of the research retreat in the research process is to bring the participants together (if they so choose) and further explore the topics that have been addressed and the learn from one another. In a way, the group interactions honor one another, our tribe/nation, and get to the heart of a decolonized version of research. The research retreat was held at an agreed upon time and location. There was a story circle, collaborative art projects, a photo journal walk at the

Tvshka Homma capitol grounds, shared activities, and varied opportunities for self-selected experiences for sharing. The story circle is where ground rules can be beneficial while also having and developing a shared trust. Being vulnerable and taking the lead as a researcher might be necessary depending on the participants involved. Luckily, you should have a good working knowledge of the temperaments of the participants/co-researchers at this point. Setting ground rules in a collaborative and suggestive way is best for most participants, in my experience. Having a written copy of the guidelines for the participants at the beginning of the retreat may be appropriate. However, it is not necessary. The purpose is to ensure equity and safety among the participants if they are not accustomed to participating in such practices. Again, depending on the group, this may not be necessary. For this project, there was no need to formalize the process. Organic conversation was safe and useful for our story-circle. Having a list of suggested topics or simply starting with a question such as "tell me about a time you….." can be fruitful in encouraging directed yet meaningful dialogue. In the speaking of a thing, it becomes a reality. In that space and time, it will be important to deal with that reality for the individual and the collective. This experience should be one of shared healing and shared hope. In know it certainly was for us. We continued the collaborations with art projects that helped us all to see who we were, who we are, and who we will be.

There were also plenty of group activities and experiences that allowed for a self-selected way to share and create (writing, art, media, etc.). One example of this can be found in our photo journal walk on our Choctaw Nation capitol grounds at Tvshka Homma (Tuskahoma). Participants/co-researchers were asked to spend less than an hour walking around the capitol grounds taking pictures (with their phones) of what being Choctaw means/looks like. Participants/Co-researchers were also asked to write a short 1-5 sentence (or longer if they

choose) narrative to describe the photo response. This was a time for them to 'have a meeting with themselves' and to think and reflect. I was available to provide guidance. However, this was largely done by the participant alone. Once complete, I asked each co-researcher to share some selected photographs and explanations with the group. It is important to note that this should be a fun and easy process. It mirrors what many (or all) of the participants/co-researchers do on a daily basis. Similar to social media processes, they take a picture that represents themselves with the knowledge that they will, in some way, be sharing it to a larger audience. It represents their views, the way they see the world, the way they may want to see the world, and so much more. (A more detailed glimpse into the specificities of the retreat can be found in chapter five.)

Like horses have different temperaments with humans and within herds, it is important to create spaces and opportunities that speak to different participants/co-researchers. The first goal of the retreat was to help encourage and inspire the Choctaw participants/co-researchers. The second goal of the retreat was to glean insight and gain a better understanding in order to collaboratively contribute to the larger research conversation in the academic community and beyond.

Research is Storytelling – It is important to create retreats when there are retreat-inducing topics. Sometimes, difficult and messy things like race, class, identity, and so forth can be challenging. When sharing these types of stories, it is important to create a safe and welcoming environment. This is true of the physical space, as well as, the mental, emotional, and spiritual space. Candles and non-judgmental supportive comments can go a long way in encouraging others to share their stories with one another. It was also important for me to tell the story of the retreat (please see chapter five for more details).

Research is Relationship – In a group setting, it is vital to honor ALL relationships. This can be challenging. Do not sacrifice one relationship for another. Remaining open yet neutral is so important. Lucky for us, although the group members did not all know one another, they were all socialized in very similar ways. Therefore, although there were some vast differences, every person was understood, respected, and honored. Real talk.

Research is Creative – The retreat itself was a creative endeavor. Invented to connect us. Invented to share our stories. Invented to build support, community, and relationship. Invented to create new spaces, new knowledge, and new understandings. Invented to create. Is life about finding ourselves or creating ourselves?

Tell the Story. Honor the Relationship. Create the Change.

Continue to honor the relationship once the research is over. Give plenty of time for follow-up. Be open to your growing relationships and keeping the conversations going. Allow participants to review all materials before submission/publication. Honor the relationship by being open to any and all questions and concerns. Share the stories. Create new spaces for support and encouragement. Know that the research never truly ends. Know that the stories never really end. Know that the relationship never truly ends. Know that what we create never really ends. In the following chapters, you will find that I told the stories of our relationships, I honored our relationships in the past, present, and future, and I creatively shared our time and contributions so that others may see themselves in our stories

Seek and You Will Find: Research Story Findings – (Chapter 4)

These are the stories that make us. There is a saying in communication: 'we don't know what we think until we see what we say.' I both agree and disagree with this statement. We know things deep down. We know things in our bones, from our past, from those who came before. We know things from the filtered information that inundates our lives. We know things from what we create. And, yes, we know things from what we say. This chapter details the 'research remarks' between myself and the co-researchers. It tells the stories of our conversations. It also tells so much more. These individuals are referred to as my co-researchers because this work is a reflection of them, of me, of us, and of a people. A brief initial introduction is as follows:

Jenna's Story: Dirt – Jenna is a Carl Albert State College and University of Oklahoma graduate. She currently works in communication and marketing.

Shawna's Story: Natural Disaster – Shawna is a Carl Albert State College and Connors State College graduate. She is currently a RN pursuing a BSN.

Wes' Story: Keeper of the Flame – Wes is a Carl Albert State College and University of Oklahoma graduate. He currently works in marketing and communication for a start-up and recently received a Fulbright.

Madeline's Story: Different Day – Madeline is a Carl Albert State College graduate. She graduates from Northeastern State University in May 2019.

Kandace's Story: The Housefire – Kandace is completing her senior year at Southeastern Oklahoma State University. She recently accepted a competitive paid summer internship in Oklahoma City.

Sarah's Story: Broken – Sarah is a University of Oklahoma graduate. She is currently attending law school.

Sophie's Story: 9 to 5 – Sophie is an Oklahoma State University graduate. She works in state government.

Without saying too much and possibly breaking the anonymity of the co-researchers, I think it is important to outline that they are all college students or college graduates who would be considered millennials who grew up in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in southeastern Oklahoma. They come from differing towns that vary in size, although all of southeastern Oklahoma is considered rural by most standards. It is what most would consider the "country." The vast majority of southeastern Oklahoma falls under the poverty line. One of the major sources of commerce is Choctaw Nation. It is all rather blue-collar. Small farms and ranches are very common. With its forested mountains and clear running rivers, the landscape is considered the best in the state by most "objective" observers. These are the places and spaces that made the co-researchers. These are their stories.

Jenna's Story: Dirt

"You know you came from it, and some day you'll return to it…" – Dirt, Florida Georgia Line

Sitting across from me is a pretty Choctaw woman named Jenna. She has that mid-twenties professional look with generations of soul in her eyes. She is sharp and well-spoken, unless she knows you. She wears lipstick like armor. If it is on, you know she is ready for battle.

Rushing from work, she discloses to me her busyness. The tension rolls past her tongue through her mauve lipstick and fills the room with a discomfort that can only be sensed if you

really know her. She knows people die on their self-prescribed cross of busyness. She does not want to be one of those people. She also believes that to maneuver the foreign spaces that she inhabits, she must become one of those people – while trying to keep a piece of herself.

Things are looking up she says. She got a new job and is moving closer to her homeland, her people, her roots. She is looking for herself and creating herself in the same breath. Existential angst has given way to polished soundbites as we move into conversation about my research and the interview that is already taking place. Her responses float between confident points and hesitant unsure musings.

To understand her present responses and the blooming promises of her future, you have to understand her past. Not just her past. The past that she, and many like her, carry. It is found in dresses and suits that don't ever fit quite right. It is in board rooms and offices where she never quite has the say. It is in her internal fight against the poverty where she was raised and the poverty of soul and humanity that currently surrounds her. It is in the fight for who she was and the fight for who she is becoming. Today, it is just in her timid and reflective answers when the questions get too real and her head gives way to her heart.

She grew up in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation on an original Choctaw allotment.[93] "Home is the rolling hills and forested mountains of southeastern Oklahoma," she declares with a defiantly proud grin. When asked about her "homeland" she replies: "My homeland is the current territory of the Choctaw Nation. If I'm in the 10.5 counties, that's home to me and my family…"[94]. There is a wistfulness in her voice when she talks about "home." She feels a connection to the land for many reasons. She knows the traditional Choctaw "homeland"

[93] An allotment is a 160 acre track of land that was given to tribal members upon the dispersal of reservations.
[94] The Choctaw Nation territory is comprised of 10 and a half counties in southeastern Oklahoma.

is in Mississippi[95]. But her family line came here to this place long ago. Her people fought for a place and space in this world. Her family, in many ways, fought with, for, and alongside this land she calls home. She brought up her family in her responses, as if to create a collective voice and spirit, a united front. The importance of family can be seen in the sparkle in her eye and a peace that envelops the room when she speaks of them. There is almost a reverence, a sacredness. Her voice changes. It is softer. It sounds more like her. "My grandma is the best representation of my family…it's pretty matriarchal and she is the cornerstone….family is being together, having purpose, and taking care of each other." She wants to say more but seems unsure how to convey the interwoven connectedness of family, land, and self. They are in many ways all the same. And they fight for each other.

The conversation shifted to Native/cultural identity, but a piece of her was still mulling over our previous exchange. "Our ancestors had so many challenges and it's a big part of me. I want to make it better. Maybe that is why I am so attached to the land and have such an appreciation for where I am from." I let the wheels spin. To her, Choctaw identity is linked to land. Land that was "given" when we were "relocated" by the US Government.[96] Living on an original Choctaw allotment adds an element of respecting and caring for what our Choctaw ancestors left us. It is about taking what has been dealt and making the best of it.

I have heard a Choctaw story about a woman who walked the trail of tears. She was sad and missed her Mississippi homeland very much. She missed her sacred places. She mourned all that she lost along the way. But then she realized that she was alive. Many of her children were still alive. She decided to make a new homeland in the place where she was, for herself and her

[95] According to all accounts, Choctaw people originally inhabited what is now Mississippi.
[96] forced removal of Native people to Oklahoma known as "The Trail of Tears"

children. Because of her and many like her, we are here today. Because of her, we are still making a way. Because of her, we have graduate degrees, babies, and opportunities. She is why we are connected. She is why we can leave if we need to and take who and what we are to every new space. In our land, we honor her. In our life, we honor her. In this moment of confusion, where the English language (the language of our colonizers or of survival) fails us, we sit in this space and we honor her. Because there is a piece of us that know her and, in these moments, we feel her.

When the flicker of time had passed and the knowing look of shared understanding was replaced with an energetic curiosity and anticipation of what question may come next, I asked her to tell me about her journey, the pivotal points of learning about being Choctaw. "Indian club at my elementary school was the first time it was differentiated that some of us were Choctaw and others weren't. I think we made crafts. YAB[97] was a big part after that – we did cultural things like stickball, dancing, and storytelling. My family knew some of the language but I didn't really learn any until college."

This story has, in many ways, been echoed by every person I have interviewed. They did not realize everyone wasn't Choctaw until some event, typically in the public-school or higher education setting, differentiated them in some way. Beyond that, it was a Choctaw Nation run program that shared historical information and/or traditional cultural events or practices. What it means to be Choctaw by many is knowing and/or engaging in historical practices (dancing, storytelling, beading, weaving, stickball, etc.). For some this is trying to recapture a time before colonization for the sake of remembering, honor, and understanding. For others, it is a way to gain cultural capital. Unfortunately, some could argue that this practice keeps Native/Choctaw

[97] Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is a Choctaw Nation run program for middle and high school students.

people as a historical figure and archetype and undermines the contextuality and modernity of current Native/Choctaw identity. It can also be confusing for many who have preconceived notions of Native behavior and phenotype.

Probing deeper, I inquired about any other stories she might want to share. I sensed she might want to say more. "I don't think I ever told you this story," she stated almost hesitantly. With some non-verbal encouragement she recounted a time in 8th or 9th grade when she went to an "intensive 3-day cultural camp at Jones Academy with YAB." She said there was a Choctaw elder there who probably changed her life when it came to her Native/Choctaw identity. He told Choctaw stories and then he "told a bunch of kids who mostly looked White that it doesn't matter what you look like, you are a Choctaw and will always be Choctaw. Your ancestors fought for your survival. You have their Choctaw heart. You are Choctaw. Chahta sia hoke."

We both sat with the emotions. She remembers the elders words even now. They wrap her in a blanket of comfort and security. Some say that identity is what other people see you as. Although highly problematic for a variety of reasons, this concept seems to speak to this story and to this moment. She felt seen. She felt validated. She felt pride. In a place where shame is rampant and the historical trauma runs deep, she accepted the gift from the elder. The gift of herself.

We pressed on to discuss the Native community and experiences in college. She recounted stories of time spent with Native friends and mentoring the YAB community while at CASC. She was not that far from home and many of her newfound friends had a similar upbringing. The conversations were not that different than high school. There was almost an unspoken knowing and uncertainty, a tightrope they all walked, and after the years of practice, walked well.

In southeastern Oklahoma, many people feel a sense of jealousy if they "do not have a card."[98] People typically react in one of several ways. The first is to promptly disclose that their *insert relative name here* was "an Indian" but they just can't prove it. In some cases, this could very well be correct.[99] Another response is to say something to the effect of "well aren't you lucky getting all the free stuff." This phrase is laced with the nonverbal subtext of accusation. It, in many ways, posits that they are the same and thus shame and guilt is placed on the Native person by an outsider/insider who does not feel as though the person should have that distinction. It is another strategy of erasure, although many do not realize they are actively participating in such a thing. Some take it even further by unashamedly asking "how much are you?" This inquiry alludes to the blood quantum amount on their CDIB card.[100] This is highly problematic for a variety of reasons. One being that Native people are the only people group asked to prove their affiliation through perceived (and largely incorrect) blood quantum numbers on their CDIB cards[101]. The quantum comes from the Dawes Roll. It is a historically inaccurate account of Native people and to what degree they were Native (by blood). It has been argued that it was a tool to eradicate the Native race. The gathering of this information is also highly questioned. Most of the Native/Choctaw people in southeastern Oklahoma were never taught how to respond to such a question or given an understanding of the history that led to it in the first place. In

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[98] A "card" refers to a Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) card which makes carriers eligible for citizenship within the tribal nation. In order to obtain a card, one must be a direct descendent of someone on the Dawes Roll (a government document of self-reported Natives).

[99] Many Native people, for valid reasons, did not trust the United States government. Many would not disclose their Native status out of fear. Similarly, if a Native woman was married to a White or White-passing man, they would not report Native identity.

[100] CDIB cards report the amount of tribal "blood" an individual has. For example, someone may have a card that reads: "1/2 Choctaw."

[101] These numbers were gathered by government officials. It is widely reported that, for a variety of reasons, some people claimed only partial Native ancestry while others claimed more than they were. Many also refused (or were not permitted) by a spouse to be recorded, while others' distrust kept them from reporting.

many families there is a general inter-generational distrust for the government, without much explanation as to why.

In another way, so many people in small communities are Choctaw that no one feels the need to think about who they are and how they appear to others until they leave those places and spaces. "It's important to learn your Native culture…but I hadn't thought too much about it until college. At OU it became more important and it still is." Although she did not feel a sense of Native community on campus at OU, she understood the unique need to further grapple with her Native identity and identify as such. While at CASC, she was a part of a group of people, at OU she felt a sense of community while taking Choctaw classes. She did not connect with many of the students (most of whom were not Choctaw), but she got to hear the language and study and learn. She felt a sense of place. She felt more herself. "At OU taking Choctaw set me apart from other people. It was never really discussed in the Choctaw Nation (southeastern Oklahoma) but being different or Native was something that was really discussed at OU."

I understood her perception of OU. Outside of your home, many times people have a compulsion to understand where you fit. Some call it human nature. Others call it something else entirely. It seemed that in that space she went from representing herself to representing a population. At OU she "became" a minority. Her friends were minorities. The world became more complex and she was faced with choices in her identity and identity representation. Her phenotype allowed her to move through both spaces. That had not been such a problem – until now. "In some places it is romanticized to be Native or the image of Native people. I like to show how different tribes are and be a representative in places people don't know about it. Knowing things (like language) helped other people see it as a part of my identity more so." As part of. She explains being Choctaw as "part of" her identity. This is an important distinction for

so many reasons. Many argue intersectionality[102]. Some argue assemblage theory, among others. All would probably agree that identity is messy. It is a part of her story though. It is a part of the Choctaw story. It is my story. It is your story. Let's begin to tell them.

She shifted in her seat, her eyes betraying her self-reflection and inner conflict. She straightened her dress and crossed her legs, physically settling in for a shift in questioning. Gender is an easier topic for her. "I've never felt inferior based on my gender." She happily voices tales about the strong women in her family. She pridefully shares that there was never anything she felt she could not do because she was female. Although she grew up in a very traditional household with siblings and parents who are still married, she never felt like she had to be a "certain way." She tells a story of dressing up as Rosie the Riveter for Halloween. She even dusts off a picture from her Instagram archives of her in the famous Rosie "we can do it" pose. She hands me the phone. She looks powerful. She looks like someone who believes in herself and someone who was believed in by those closest to her. I still see a piece of that girl in the woman sitting across from me. As if on cue, she pulls up a more recent picture. "This is me going from pretend to real life." She shows me a picture of her and a (hijab-clad Middle-Eastern Muslim female) friend standing on the steps of the capitol building. I could not help but notice the Rosie-like strong-arm emoji in the Instagram caption. We both laughed. "Rosie the Riveter was revolutionary in her time. Women weren't supposed to be doing that kind of work. Here in 2019 it is still revolutionary for people like us to be at the capitol. I think I went from mimicking powerful images of women to being one."

Speaking of dress-up and pretending, she laughingly showed me a post of her at CASC. She and two friends were dressed up for the "white-trash redneck" night at the community

[102] Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016).

college. She readily admits to playing up the stereotype. Most of the people came from working-class backgrounds or more dire situations than that, herself included. "At CASC, I thought it was fun to play up the 'first class white trash if you can't tell'[103] thing – now I would NEVER put that on an insta post." After the knowing smiles and laughter subsided with a bit more fun commentary about the Casey Donahew Band song reference, she more somberly stated that she felt like she had moved up a class or two…."or at least I pretend to." We talked about how that looks and the role social media plays in identity development or representation. I talked about social media as personal branding. She wisely took it a step further: "it is really a means of creating an ideal identity." It can be really interesting how this medium is used to create perceptions and perhaps create people.

Creating who we are during college is a notion agreed upon by many people I interviewed and even more people I know. One thing that did not change for many of my co-researchers was religion/spirituality. "Before college I was raised Southern Baptist in a King James Version[104] 'one way is the only way' kind of mentality." We share a knowing grin. We are both fundamentally aware of that worldview as it is prevalent in the Choctaw Nation. We shared some comments, some knowing smiles, and briefly discussed the historical paradox of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and Christianity[105]. Bringing it back to the personal, she explains that after college her religion did not change but that she understood there were differences and began

[103] This is a popular line in the Casey Donahew Band song "First Class White Trash." CDB is a popular Red Dirt/Texas country band. References to these types of songs are common in southeastern Oklahoma.

[104] This refers to a traditional version of the bible still popular in very traditional and dogmatic Southern Baptist churches (among others).

[105] The Choctaw Nation, from a government stance, is highly Christian. Missionaries were said to have walked the Trail of Tears alongside our ancestors. Missionaries were also the first to write down our language for hymns and the bible. Many argue that Christianity is the root of our erasure and assimilation. To many, being Christian (following in the ways of the colonizer/oppressor) and being Native are in direct conflict.

making decisions for herself. It is "more of a spiritual thing and not because I have to. It's more personal choice and there is emotion tied to it…if that makes sense?" It did. It still does.

When our conversation shifted to community and belonging on campus, the "Instagram as a tool for explanation" trend continued. Clearly on a self-guided tour down memory lane with me riding shotgun, she showed me an adorable group selfie. They all looked genuinely happy in that life unfiltered kind of way. There was a shine, a happiness, an unashamedly being yourself kind of vibe that floated from the picture and made you nostalgic for another space and time. "At CASC I felt like I belonged at the BCM[106]. The SWAT Team[107] was like my family and the place I belonged was the BCM because of the people. We all just understood each other. We all had a purpose. They are just really GOOD people – every last one them." She recounted this with passion and conviction. Her mind left the current space for a moment. The quote "we take pictures as a return ticket to a moment otherwise gone" found its way to my remembrance. I was watching that. In the telling of that story and the gaze at that picture, she was reliving the moment. She was remembering who she was. She was anchored by the story. She was grateful for the memory.

Once the moment was ruptured by the swipe of her smartphone, I inquired about her experience of belonging and community at OU. Finding the Instagram game to be particularly useful she spent a moment before mindfully selecting a picture of herself alone peering at the water and the woods at the Sutton Wilderness Trail in Norman, OK. "The Sutton Wilderness Trail is where I felt like I belonged in Norman (at OU). The water and the trees made me feel

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[106] Baptist Collegiate Ministries (BCM) is a network of spaces across college campuses. They are funded through the Southern Baptist Convention, area churches, and so forth. They have a director who acts as a mentor and host lunches and weekly worship services for college students, among a myriad of other things.

[107] Students With A Testimony (SWAT) is a student-led organization run through the BCM. There is a skit and song routine that is cast, learned, and performed at area churches throughout the year.

like I was at home." Her face squished up upon her realization that her CASC time was filled with people while her time at OU was pretty solitary. "I still felt like an outsider at OU even though I tried to participate. I was even on Exec for The Big Event[108]. I also did not feel like I belonged in my program (until maybe my capstone)." The photo caption read: "The closest thing I've found to happiness in Norman."

Shifting from the college experience to the academics. I probed into what she learned and what she didn't. "There are so many things I wish I had learned in college but didn't. For example, taxes, how to buy a house, learn about other people….I'm sure there are many more things. Until grad school I never really knew anything about privilege and biases. I feel like college does not teach you how to actually be successful. I still don't have a lot of soft skills or know how to maneuver and negotiate at all really." I sensed the overall frustration in her tone. It was clear that she had given that speech before. It is a speech I have heard from pretty much everyone I have interviewed. It is a sentiment that encompasses all college students and is a reality we all must face. I felt and sympathized with her disillusionment in her illusion of college. I, too, did not even like college until graduate school. We spent a few much-needed moments connecting on our shared commiseration over failed expectations, incorrect perceptions, and really good PR. This led to more musings about graduate school. "I started grad school for my job…but changing programs and finishing grad school is for myself" she stated matter-of-factly. "I thought it was just to help with my promotion and raises in the future. Now I see it as something else entirely." Intrigued, I probed further into her thoughts of graduate school. "I think grad school helps you take steps to become more educated and informed and have a better

[108] The Big Event is one of the most popular community service projects at the University of Oklahoma. To be an executive requires a tedious interview process and comes with a lot of responsibility.

understanding of what's going on in the world….and how to change it." It would seem that she sees graduate school as a way to move from dressing up as Rosie the Riveter to being her own version of Rosie. WE certainly CAN DO IT.

As the interview drew to a close, she apologized for being tired and adamantly expressed a hope and a desire to talk again. It was clear, as it had been in all of the other interviews, that these conversations are helpful, useful, and need to be had. There are so few spaces where these topics are discussed. Maybe in the telling of their stories, they are creating their reality and helping shape others. That is education. That is transformative. This is one story. It is also all of our stories. May you have found yourself in the truth. May you now tell your story.

"You know you came from it, and some day you'll return to it…"

Shawna's Story: Natural Disaster

"She's a natural disaster, she'll tear the land in two, she's running to be running, cause it's all she knows to do…" – Natural Disaster, Zac Brown Band

Shawna is a happy person with a little too ready smile. She seems genuine and genuinely happy. The smattering of freckles on her face seem to dance with her expressions. Her exuberance it contagious. Her unapologetic realness is always such a nice surprise. She is a new friend and an old friend in the same complex moment. Clad in scrubs after just getting off her nursing shift at the hospital, she greets me with a comfort that only comes from age, caring for

people, and saving lives. There is something else in her energy. It bubbles just under the surface. There's a power there. She is a force of nature.

Her journey through life has moved like a river, forging a path that is all her own. She grew up in a small town in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation (southeastern Oklahoma). To her, home and family are the same thing. "Home is wherever my family is and my family is where my home is." She pondered for a moment and thoughtfully added "family is your blood family and also the people who are there with you who love you without end." There was a sincerity in her voice. I could see her thinking about the people in her life. I could see the appreciation. I could feel the love. When asked about her homeland, her first words were "red dirt" and "mountains." She went on to quip "you know, good ole small town America surrounded by mountains and family." There is an ease to her confidence. An assurance in who she is and what she believes in. There are insecurities, of course. But, there are certain things she just seems to know. Her homeland is where her people are. Where her family has lived for generations. It is where she belongs. Her idea of belonging is "having a place to be accepted and having a task that helps your people. You want to be able to contribute something," she explains with a trace of uncertainty in her explanation. She is one of almost all of the co-researchers/interviewees who mentioned the importance of reciprocity when it comes to community and belonging. They have almost all struggled to articulate the importance of contributing. This is a lesson in the history of Choctaw people. This is a lesson in the south/country[109]. This is a lesson among poor and working-class people in southeastern

[109] Most southeastern Oklahoma residents consider themselves to be Southern. As in identifying with the ideologies of those in the region of the United States known as the South.

Oklahoma/the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. The reasons why are many and a story for another day.

She sits up a little straighter in her seat and smiles. I tell her the interview is shifting gears to all of the things our mamas taught us to never talk about in mixed company…or ever. Actually, they never really said that. We all just somehow knew. She laughed a knowing laugh, we both felt the truth and the inherent conflict in the statement. I started with politics. "Before college I pretty much only knew who the president was" she stated unapologetically. "After college, I had a bigger grasp. I realized politics does not just mean government. There is politics in everything. I understood why decisions are made. You live through that in college." Her laugh encouraged me to further inquire. Without hesitation to recounted a story that happened that very day at her nursing job. "A man walked in, looked straight at me, and said 'you look like a Republican, but I'm going to love you anyway,'" She told me she laughed and replied that she wasn't sure what she was but, even if she was, she wouldn't talk about it at work. He laughed and said "we are going to get along just fine." Nurse life.

Akin to politics in ways beyond its taboo nature, Religion was the next topic of conversation. "Before college I felt like Christianity was it. It was all I knew. That is how it was where I grew up. It was about your 'walk with Jesus,' ya' know. After college I realized there are other religions. There is way more than just Christianity. I haven't changed. I just understand better and more." This sentiment was echoed throughout almost all of the interviews. College seemed to be a place for awareness. It helped open minds and broaden horizons. But no matter how far they could see, college never really caused them to lose sight of the Sun/Son. Growing up singing Choctaw hymns with Choctaw elders, it never occurred to her to see any contradiction

in Christianity and Choctaw identity (historically or currently). To be Choctaw is to be Christian. Period.

Her optimism and certainty waned some when the conversation shifted to race. Her hands clasped together as her brain struggled to express her thoughts and feelings. Her eyes narrowed and her brown hair fell across her face as she slightly tilted her head, almost as if she wanted to shake loose a thought. Granted, it is an interesting time in history to talk about race[110]. When she finally spoke, there was a slight hesitancy before she stated: "I grew up Choctaw and German. I didn't ever see race in high school. We were all the same. I thought we were all the same. Now, I realize race is a really big deal and people get really offended by it…even if you just say one thing wrong." I nodded as we talked about not really understanding race because we were all kind of the same growing up. The second part of her comment is one that has many perplexed. The fear of saying something "wrong" has made many people recoil for fear of reprisal, both personally and professionally. From social media posts to lawsuits in places of business, some people feel that the policing of public commentary has gone too far. While others think it is finally beginning to shed light on the racial atrocities carried out in this country daily. The US has a sordid history with race. Native, Black, and Latina/o communities (among others) are struggling, in many ways, for rights, reparations, and respect. The pendulum swings far both ways. May we all find our center.

"I'm a product of my raising," she declares as our conversation meanders into socioeconomic class. "Growing up, I thought people who had more land than us were rich but we were all pretty poor. I never really thought about class a lot growing up. In college I started to

[110] The current political and cultural zeitgeist of the time in the United States lends itself to potentially volatile interactions.

realize where I stand on the class scale but it all still confuses the snot out of me. How I could be considered 'middle-class' with my current job or whatever and still not have very much money is….disappointing." I disclosed my shared frustration. We shared common struggles and were left with more questions than answers. Tying things like race to class struggles was challenging to articulate. In the place that raised us both, being Choctaw (and a minority by the world's standard – for the most part) meant you had MORE opportunities for employment, more grants and scholarships for college, and access to more tribal and US government programs such as housing. Trying to explain how race could play a role in maneuvering the current class system in the US seemed difficult given her context. It is a conversation to be had. In spaces across the nation, in small towns and urban areas, with friend groups and in public forums. If gender and race are the joke, class is the punchline.

From messy topics to messy identity, neither of us skipped a beat as our exchange moved to Native culture and identity. "Being Choctaw means being a part of a bigger culture. It gives you a sense of belonging….and just a bigger family really." The explanation is as simple as it is complex. By her own admission (among many others), belonging to a community means sharing in the responsibility while being cared for and supported. Her words: "having a place to be accepted and having a task that helps your people. You want to be able to contribute something." Similarly, family is the people who love you without end and where your home is. It would seem that along the Choctaw community trail is an exchange of sorts. Because you belong to it, you will work with, in, and for it. Sounds a lot like organized religion. Sounds a lot like Christianity.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and settled in her chair. I asked about her Native community. "Home, Hannah. A lot of fun and a lot of learning. I also think 'colorful' for some reason, like bright and unique. I'm not sure why," she notes with a nervous giggle. Upon further

reflection, she states: "Being at home in the Native American community would be getting together with full-bloods….and not so full-bloods and singing Choctaw hymns or beading or listening to stories. I think all Native groups are interested in telling stories." The "full-bloods and not so full-bloods" reference caught my attention. There is a difference. Real or imagined, there is a difference. There is a difference to her as well. She makes the distinction again. "I learned about being Choctaw from my nana and her siblings. Also, just a lot of the full-bloods around. We would go to church singings and would sing and tell stories." Singing Choctaw hymns. Beading. Storytelling. This is the Choctaw that she knows. This is the Choctaw many know and that no one knows. The Choctaw stories anchor her. They tie her to our place. They tie her to our people. The stories tell her who we are and who we will be. "Full-blood….or not so full-blood."

Beyond home, finding your place in Native communities can be challenging. College is one space that can allow for a shift in Native identity for many of my co-researchers. "Being in the program at EOSC[111] gave me a sense of pride. I feel like I can identify more as Choctaw because of my education." Time and again where phenotype is ambiguous, knowledge and education can create a sense of legitimacy to others. In an ironic twist, legitimacy through cultural or historical education capital seems to only be a concern outside of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Her unique path through education became even more clear as we bobbed down the babbling brook that was her higher ed journey. Higher education is to "go farther than the average person and increase your knowledge. It's putting in the extra effort to go a step above just living." Her short stint at Connors State College made the decision to transfer to Carl Albert

[111] EOSC stands for Eastern Oklahoma State College. It is a community college located in southeast Oklahoma.

State College (CASC) an easy one. She then made her rounds to the third community college on her path, Eastern Oklahoma State College (EOSC or Eastern). “I have two associate’s degrees, Hannah. I would’ve totally done some things differently,” she reports with a wistful laugh. “Oh, and I’m at Oklahoma Panhandle State University Online getting my BSN,” she blurted out, almost as an afterthought. Somewhere in there, she slipped in acquiring her CNA at a career tech. “I think career techs provide adequate skills when you are looking for a job.” We chatted about her trajectory and academic plans. The academic social worker in me could not leave this portion of the program uninvestigated. “I’m thinking of grad school once I finish my BSN. It would allow me to teach in the classroom. I think I would really like that.” I respect her passion. I respect her never give up and never back down approach. I respect her roots and her tumbleweed spirit.

As if right on cue, our slight shift in conversation resulted in more dialogue about her family. “College is important to my family but it is not really their cup of tea.” We shared some kindred looks and nods. Neither of our families really understanding what we are doing. Our visit weaved into the pivotal people who have helped her make decisions about school. Her family. Her college Choctaw organization leader. Her BCM Director. My notes stopped dead. I looked up at her as an incredulous chuckle escaped my lips and bounced around the room. Eager to hear what she might have said to cause such a disruption, her eyes widened as she hurriedly inquired about her statements. I showed her that her mentors mimic the Choctaw motto and branding. I could not have scripted that better. She mentioned her family, her college cultural advisor, and her college minister. Just those three people. “Faith. Family. Culture.” We shared a chuckle and a touch of amazement. It is the Choctaw way, after all.

As the amusement subsided, she talked about the shortcomings of college. “I wish college would have taught me how to do things like interviews and had a realistic version of dealing with people” she disclosed. Her disappointment was shared among the other co-researchers who wanted more “practical life skills” in their college experiences. There seems to be a need for more life in the college than just life in the living. She also expressed regret for not knowing how to go on trips and travel like many in college do. Of course, that is a socioeconomic conversation for another time and place. Similarly, she disclosed a desire that she had come “out of her shell” quicker. When prompted to talk about where she felt she belonged on campus, she unhesitatingly stated: “At CASC I felt most at home at the BCM. It was home, man. There was worship. The BCM Director (Name Omitted). It was like having a dad figure who made you feel secure and welcome and wanted to help you do the right thing. I also met a lot of new old friends. The people were the BEST. It was home.” Having had a very similar experience at the exact same place some years before her, I understood her conviction and passion for a place, space, and people. It was a ‘faces may change but last names never do’ kind of place. We both went back there in the recesses of our mind, if only for a moment. Although we inhabited that space at different times, we shared the same emotion. One we neither have ever really experienced again.

“After all of this, has it been worth it, this higher education stuff,” I asked with an air of open reflection. “Higher education is important. It gives you experiences on your own with people who are doing the same things. You meet your lifelong people in college.” I actually could not have agreed more. Instead, I inquired about what the future might hold for her. “It’s like I tell my grandpa, one of these days when I’ve learned enough to be useful and I’m all done with school, I would love to go back and give back to the people who gave so much to me. I

would love to work for Choctaw Nation." – Give back. Contribute. – Faith. Family. Culture. – It's the Choctaw way.

As we shared a hug and a shared trip of understanding, I was better for having visited with her. She is one of many. She is family. She is community. She is belonging. We are Choctaw.

"She's a natural disaster, she'll tear the land in two, she's running to be running, cause it's all she knows to do…"

Wes' Story: Keeper of the Flame

"I'm the keeper of the flame, the teller of the story, keeper of the flame for the ones who came before me. It's that little pilot light waiting to ignite, like fireflies in the rain, keeper of the flame…." – Keeper of the Flame, Miranda Lambert

We met up at a coffee shop not far from Wes' hometown. It was a snapshot of a former life. For both of us, in multiple ways. He had been away from Norman (and The University of Oklahoma) for almost a year, but I could still see it on him. I saw it in his eyes and in the ways his eyes saw the world. Running the marketing and communications for a local start-up suited him well. It is a good step for him – for now anyway. He is a finalist for Fulbright, he explains somewhere between sheepish humility and hopeful optimism. This helps sum him up. His past is swirling into his current realities and colliding with a future he both never dreamed and always knew.

He grew up in a tiny town in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation (southeastern Oklahoma). A church, sports, and agriculture kind of town – a town that looks like a slice of Americana – to outsiders anyway. With the support of his community and all the small town academic and civic accolades in his knapsack, he set off to be educated higher. He started at Eastern Oklahoma State College. "I went to Eastern for financial reasons. It was cheaper and there were greater opportunities for involvement and hands-on education." This is his justification. This is the speech we give – all of us who started at a community college. We feel the need to justify our decision. There is a slight glimmer of shame that comes with our 'discount knowledge from the junior college.' Save money. Good transition place. Closer to home. Smaller class sizes. Better GPA through 'the basics.' These are the rationalizations we are given by those who educate us. This is their encouragement. It is something. It is also not enough. "OU was always a dream of mine and I knew there would be more enriching professional opportunities there." He did his time at Eastern. He enjoyed it. It allowed him to shove more academic and civic accolades into a knapsack that was becoming more and more difficult to carry. "I don't regret starting at Eastern because my academics may have suffered if I had went straight to OU." He may not be wrong. But, he will never know. There was some reflection in his features. His jaw clenched, then relaxed. His eyes left so that they might see what his mind was thinking and his heart was feeling. He took a breath and started speaking. The kind of speaking that is not quite ready – the kind that slips from a place of pondering and escapes the lips in spaces that have a heart big enough to hold them. "I feel like I took the consolation prize. I made most of my decisions based on money. Having a chance to grow was important too. I went to Eastern and OU. It was the best way to have both." His certainty mounted with every word. Perhaps sometimes, the only one we need to convince, is ourselves.

Home is "southeastern Oklahoma," he stated with assured confidence. It is also his homeland. It is the place that raised him just like it did generations before. He considers his family to be "Choctaw people." He feels tied to this place and pulled from it with every hard-won decision he has made. He loves his community because community means "small town, local, and staying together," but belonging for him "is the friends I made in college." He wants to be here and he wants to leave. The future work he sees for himself "can't be summed up…it enriches the Native American community and connects members with opportunities to enrich their lives. Maybe I could work for Choctaw Nation." Working for Choctaw Nation is far from an isolated goal[112]. Almost all of the co-researchers voiced their desire to work for "the Nation" one day. Many might ponder the logistics of this "someday or one day." The most common justifications for such a goal are to "give back to those who gave so much to me/give back to my people" and "they really run the commerce in southeastern Oklahoma, they have good benefits, and it is one of the only ways to get paid well." Whatever the reason, he shares it, while also adding "I would like to live in southeastern Oklahoma," but "I may start in OKC or Tulsa or Dallas – maybe even California." His journey is not done. He has flights to take and miles ahead. I see it in his eagerness to explore. I see it in his selection of the 'meet-up place.'[113] I see it in the fight with who he always thought he would be and who he fears he may become. I see it in the visible tension he wears on his face. With a final shrug to shake away the compulsion to give a carefully scripted soundbite, he stated: "I think being at OU made me more ambitious."

[112] Working for Choctaw Nation is a popular goal in southeastern Oklahoma as they are one of the largest employers.

[113] He elected to meet up in the only coffee shop, a place very much like the establishments he frequented while in Norman.

OU may have also have helped inform his Native identity. "College definitely made me woke about being Native. I was around people who influenced me to dive further, especially once I started OU. I didn't want to lose my core." Learning and growing in Native identity is another common thread in the tapestry of this project. Identity, as messy as it is, is more than just a buzzword for academic circles. It is a real-life reality that can, in large part, be seen unfurling in new and complicated ways across college campuses world-wide. College is not just about socially prescribed learning. It is also about learning what is (and is not) socially prescribed. It is a symbolic flag of individual representation that can be handed-down or created. It is freedom and it is oppression. It would only follow that this 'traditional' age group would be uniquely susceptible to both flying their flags and planting their flags.

"I learned a little about being Native at home. I knew my heritage was important but not really what it meant. I didn't realize how special is was or how it set me apart until college." This is an interesting time in history. With heightened awareness of various intersections such as race and gender on college campuses and the larger public forum, formal study and informal social processes have created an ecosystem of self-awareness. Out of this petri dish have grown movements and social media campaigns and questions – so many questions. This is much more apparent in the larger state schools[114]. Maneuvering these spaces for many of my co-researchers assisted in some important healing work linked to the historical trauma that has ached and echoed for generations. Reclaiming identity has not only been healing and helpful for many students, it is also a catalyst of change and empowerment for both the generation before and the generation after. What was meant to be erased has been written back down. What was meant for

[114] The students attending community colleges and regional universities have shown to be very insulated from these larger systemic college movements.

our harm (education) is being used for our good[115]. May we all be receptive to the reclaiming and restorative elements of education – for Native people – for all people.

What does it mean to be Native? What does it look like? How does it feel? I give him a minute. He has thought about these things before. The answer never get easier – for any of us. "Being Native means being resilient, standing up in the face of adversity, being proud of who we are – remembering to love every aspect of what it means – culture, language, practices – whatever separates us from other groups on the planet." Hmmm. What is it that separates us? We neither really know the answer. But, who could know. And who would check their work? This is a problem. These questions and lines of inquiry are a problem. Using systems, we inherited from men who were not our fathers lead many of us to falter. We will never be as good at it as them. Their game. Their rules. Or is it? When the deck is stacked against us, can we play a different game. So. Many. Questions.

"My Native American community is Choctaw Nation. It is coming together over a shared past, history, and lineage." His comment intrigues me. I inquire further. I give him space to think – space to see what he says – a space to feel his truth. He has thought of this before. He has fought with this before. In the grappling, wresting, education, and policing, he has found some solid ground in which to plant his flag.[116] "Native American culture is being Indigenous of this place. It's celebrating our unchanged culture and rediscovering who we once were since colonization." His perspective perplexes and excites me. We both sit up straighter. It would not be the first time we chased each other down rabbit trails that somehow landed us in wonderland.

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[115] Through boarding schools and forced assimilation, educational institutions have historically been a site of erasure.

[116] This is a purposefully ironic reference to land and land ownership. It was also a popular saying and football reference at the University of Oklahoma during the time the student attended the university.

"Since colonization" and "our unchanged culture" are as hopeful as they are problematic to me. Is "who we are" tied to 're-capturing' systems, ideologies, and practices of another time and space. For my tribe, is learning the language and dances and beading and playing stickball the required cultural capital. Is learning what was 'stolen' the way to honor those who came before and reclaim who we are, and rebuild what could have been? Is it continuing to place us in a historically fixed place and space? Is it keeping us from developing and understanding ourselves in modernity? Will reclaiming the past, save the future – for ourselves and our people? We both smile. We have been to crossroads like these before. We still don't have the answers. But, it never stops us from asking the questions.

These are the things we do in higher education. We question. We pursue knowledge and insight. We make each other better. "The purpose of higher education, when done properly, is self-actualization. Just acquiring a skill-set is the wrong reason. It is about change, helping your community, and solving problems." Although many might disagree, he gets no argument from me. I nod as my poker face gives way to knowing smirk. It is a message we have both articulated before, in different audiences, of people who were not ready to hear it. The 'good graduate student' in me can see most sides of any given issue. But it is nice to be among those who think similarly. My acknowledging smile was all he needed to continue: "Higher education is breaking stereotypes. It is representing your culture and tribe – showing people your talent and showing no matter your background, you can succeed." His voice grew with each syllable. His passion evident. "It is the Native American dream. We, as a people, have more to overcome. It takes a lot more to get to that point."

It also took a lot for him to get to that place of awareness. "College does not really occupy a place of importance in my family and where I am from – it's not on par with having

children….it's like a consolation prize." Being from the 10.5 counties myself, I completely understand his statement. As does Kacey Musgraves: "If you ain't got two kids by 21, you're probably gonna die alone, at least that's what tradition taught you…on this broken merry go-round…"[117] Education is one of the only excuses for not following the traditional pattern of unplanned pregnancy, shotgun wedding[118], another kid to 'save the marriage,' divorce, rinse and repeat. (Or the only slightly lesser followed: marriage by 20, three kids, stay in the marriage no matter what.) Although I understood his statement, I could not help to push it further. "I wonder why that is" I asked almost rhetorically. "I think having kids is important because people care about continuing the lineage" was his response. I wonder in what other ways we are trying to "continue the lineage?"

He went on to say: "Education is not where it needs to be and it's an impoverished area without a lot of role models or people doing different things." We talked about repeating the same cycles – the insanity of it and the poetry in it. Something about that repeated cycle acts as your favorite home uniform. The raggedy worn-out garments that you wear when no one is watching. They have far passed their usefulness but you can't throw them out. They fit. They are familiar. They were there for every break-up and there when no one else is. They are a part of you. But, they also keep you hidden from the world. "I think we are much better suited to see and fix problems after having an education." Education can give us a new wardrobe – if we let it.

But is college for everyone? It is a question asked by parents, community stakeholders, and K-12 educators regularly. With student debt rising and economic instability, many are questioning the future of higher education and the viability of our current economic structures. "I

[117] Kacey Musgraves, *Merry Go Round*, 2013.

[118] This colloquial phrase refers to the decision to quickly marry due to an unintended pregnancy.

think college is important for certain people, for the people who don't feel obligated. It can be a lifeline for some people. We got our money's worth and came out changed people." Higher education can change you. It should. I would agree. That is precisely what scares many people. Where I am from people do not put 'a lot of stock in book learnin'.' There is also a legitimate fear spouted from the Sunday morning pulpit that "our kids are going away to college and getting all liberal." We shared a laugh – that knowing laugh – the one that is a little anxious and the one that knows they may have some valid points. "If you didn't change at least a little by going to college, you may have passed classes, but you failed the experience."

Failure. It is an interesting topic. As our conversation shifted, he leaned forward with a seemingly recent observation. "I wish college would have taught me how to fail. Failure is an excellent opportunity for growth." My initial reaction was one of shock about his obvious arrogance. I knew him better than that so I let his words swirl in my head before I said anything. He finished OU with a 4.0. He was hard on himself about grades. He obsessed over every assignment. He struggled with imposter syndrome. He could sense my uncertainty. "I wish there was less pressure to succeed – it would've made me a better thinker and doer. It would've helped me to be more of a risk-taker." It clicked. Loudly. Life is messy. College does not teach us about failure. He is absolutely correct. Our archaic grading system is hopelessly flawed. Grades are no indication of intelligence. They are an indication of obedience. Obedience is something that highly regarded in factory production top-down models rooted in colonization and patriarchal power structures that are still highly prevalent in this country (USA) today. His words collided with my thoughts in near perfect unison. "I feel like, in higher ed, you have to get the right answer the right way instead of asking 'why.' It's because of colonization and patriarchy." How

can we change the system if we are always punished for trying? How can we create spaces to try things and be 'wrong' if being 'wrong' is never okay?

Our conversation was a grad school one. He would probably love grad school. He might even learn a new and different way to 'excel." I asked him about any graduate school plans. He replied: "I do want to go to grad school but I want to go for more personal fulfillment. I'm not doing it for anyone but myself…for my own growth and self-actualization." I have a feeling he won't ever stop learning. That is perhaps the best gift higher education can give us.

"I'm the keeper of the flame, the teller of the story, keeper of the flame for the ones who came before me. It's that little pilot light waiting to ignite, like fireflies in the rain, keeper of the flame…." – Keeper of the Flame, Miranda Lambert

Madeline's Story: Different Day

"I wish I'd been born in a different day, with cowboys like old Gus McCrae. I'd saddle up and ride away. I wish I'd been born in a different day." – Different Day, Cody Johnson

Madeline walked into the familiar coffee shop, her mane of black wavy hair floating around her like a cloak. There is a shyness about her. A self-professed introvert and "homebody," she would rather be alone or with those with whom she is close. Her coffee ordered, she anxiously awaits our conversation. I compliment her ensemble. She has that casual put together country look. It intertwines effortlessly with her college student lifestyle. She is still a little young, wild, and free – if only in her mind. She is a 'good Christian girl'. She likes going

to country music concerts with her friends and family and riding horses with her dad. She is in her final semester at NSU. “Finally.” Her eyes betray her uneasiness. Crowds. The thought of school. It is a lot to take in. The little coffee shop is brimming with people today. Bodies are moving about, voices are echoing off the concrete floor and encircling us with chaos. Our once isolated corner is now being flooded. There is a man who walks in with his three kids – three very loud kids. I know him from another life. The kids are singing loudly. She and I are both annoyed and bewildered. We smile at one another. Neither of us will say anything. It is not our way – not here anyway.

We both visibly shift and move closer to one another. Perhaps to hear one another better – perhaps for protection from the assault on our senses. I check in with her about school. She does not like it. She just wants to finish. There is a desperation there that is almost visceral. I feel it. I’ve experienced it. I’ve been there. I may be there now.

We talk about being from southeastern Oklahoma. I understand her path well. It is similar to mine – well the beginning anyway. I asked her to talk about home. In more unguarded moments, her eyes would soften and her voice would become clear, mostly when she talked about her family. “Home is where you feel safe.” Safety. That is important to her. It is like your family. “They have your back no matter what.” She is close to her family. Leaving them to go to NSU was difficult. Leaving her twin brother was the hardest part. He was with her at CASC. Like every journey, it was a journey they took together. They are close – as close as fraternal twins can be. She does not feel like she belongs at NSU. It is written on her expressions. It is in the flash of annoyance and the anxiousness to graduate. It permeates her very core. She wants to be back home in her homeland. “Homeland is your roots. It is where you come from. For me it is southeast Oklahoma, Choctaw Nation.” They have all answered this way. I am not surprised. I

ask about what it would be like to belong there. “Belonging is feeling welcome,” she replies. I wait – that teacher and counselor wait. “For me it is at church, being at home, at Choctaw stuff, or like at BCM when I was at CASC.” I knew that was all I would get. I understood her though. She is the type that says very little. But, her silences speak volumes. She communicates between her words – in her own ways. I was not surprised that she mentioned the BCM at CASC. Every co-researcher who attended there did. I did. And I agree. I wonder if some institutions of higher education have failed to foster the growth of spirit. Where do our emotional and spiritual wells get filled? Has higher education lost its soul? Perhaps in the diversity, we have lost the community. “Community is a group of people who share the same beliefs and ways.” What happens when you can’t find your community?

Speaking of spirituality, we must have both been praying. The screaming children, and the parents they are raising, finally left. We both took a deep breath. We shared a smile. One that said we were ‘so glad we were raised better’ than that. We briefly spoke about how our parents would have never allowed those antics. We followed it up with a discussion about what is and is not appropriate and how we will raise our currently fictional and hypothetical children – further bonding us. Basically, all the things that people without kids say. We both play along. It is a script we know well.

She shuffled in her seat. Finally settling in. She pulled her southwest patterned sweater tighter on her slight frame. She laughed and her dark eyes danced when I made a joke about the ‘not so green’ windows to our left. I asked her to think back to when she learned about being Native. “I learned about being Choctaw from my parents and grandparents.” I waited. Her eyes lit up as a memory filled them. “There was also an art class in my elementary school. You know

name omitted He is a councilman[119]. I am pretty sure it was his wife. She would come in and talk to us about being Choctaw and I think we made baskets." We talked more as she rifled through the old filing cabinet in the recesses of her mind. "Did she talk to the whole class or just the Choctaw students," I inquired. "It was the whole class," she replied without much thought. I silently thought about all of the Title 6 money and tribal programming dollars our schools got. I have a slight better understanding about why we thought everyone was Choctaw growing up. "They don't have that at my school anymore. It's sad." As she concluded her story, I could not help but think about all the potential reasons a councilman's wife would be in the schools.

The next time she remembers learning about Choctaw traditions and history was in college. "I learned a lot at CASC. I learned about Choctaw Nation history and different stuff I had never thought about. It makes me so sad that that program is no more." In her experience, sustainability seems to be lacking all around. I wonder what these disjointed snapshots do to students. I guess time will tell.

"Native American culture is who you are and where you come from. It can look really different. It is so much more than 'oh, you get the free stuff'." I understand what she is saying. In southeast Oklahoma, there is a jealous tension between those who have tribal citizenship and those who do not. "Oh, you get free stuff," is a phrase uttered more times than any of us can count. Even now, she is unsure how to combat those words and ideologies. Maybe we could add that to the basket-weaving classes. "Being Native gives me a sense of pride. I learned more about my culture while in college. It's really cool to be Choctaw. It's not just about free stuff." That is a start.

[119] Each district in Choctaw Nation has an elected council member who represents their district in Choctaw Nation government matters and decision-making processes.

I shift the conversation into higher education. She visibly bristles some. I can almost see the cortisol rise up in her body to the point of overflowing. “I wanted to go to OSU, but I ended up going to CASC and then NSU. It was really about cost. It is hard for my parents with two of us at the same time.” It makes sense. CASC is largely a feeder school into NSU. “I’m glad I went to CASC though,” she reflectively asserts. “I really enjoyed CASC. I have no regrets there at all. I felt really at home in the Choctaw Nation program building. I’m not really involved at all at NSU. I wish I was. I tried to go to their Native organization stuff but it is just all Cherokees and they are rude.” I understood what she meant, having maneuvered many of those spaces myself. She recounted going to the first Native organization meeting and feeling ostracized when she said she was Choctaw. She never went back. I shared some of my own stories. She seemed to feel understood. I told her about how my friend (a blond Choctaw) was not invited to hang-out with myself and a mutual Native (Cherokee and Choctaw) friend when all the full-blood Cherokees were around. When I inquired about why she was never invited, I was told plainly: “She is not Indian enough.” She sat there stunned. It was as if the last year and a half of her life started to make sense. I had hoped there was a change. I guess not.

“I wish college would have given me more life skills and been more practical.” This is not the first time I have heard this statement. Perhaps worth exploring more deeply. I thought of career techs. I wondered if that had been an option for her. “I never considered going to a career tech. *Career Tech Name Omitted* was right across the street from my high school but it was kind of a joke. It never crossed my mind to go there. I think it is for people who want to work right away.” I was not surprised by her statement. I was also blown away. Five minutes before she had told me that all she ever wanted to do was be a hair stylist.

After many questions and a little bit of maneuvering, I was able to get a better picture of her college experience and what she wanted. “I think college is important for a job. My family thinks it is important because it was difficult for them to be successful. But, I don’t think you have to go to college in order to have a successful life.” She went on to talk about how important going to college was to her parents. She did it for them.

I spent a moment walking with her through what could have been and what will be. I asked her what her future could look like. “I think it would be cool to work for Choctaw Nation someday. You get a lot of benefits and have more opportunities to be involved. The less you’re involved, the less you know about your culture. It is important.” Another popular response – for so many reasons. “I want to end up somewhere in southeast Oklahoma for sure. I’m a homebody and I want to be close to my family.” I asked her about cosmetology school. She said her parents told her that they would not pay for it, not then, not ever. “I think I could work awhile and save up and go. We will see.”

“I wish I’d been born in a different day, with cowboys like old Gus McCrae. I’d saddle up and ride away. I wish I’d been born in a different day.” – Different Day, Cody Johnson

Kandace’s Story: The Housefire

“Lord knows that I've been blessed. I can stand up to the test. I can live on so much less. This much I've been learning…” – The Housefire, Turnpike Troubadours

Kandace has a way about her. A wisdom that hides her youth. You forget that she is so young. Unless you listen, that is. The youthful pieces in her slip out if you watch for them. There is a playfulness around her as well – a carefully polished way of being, for the world's benefit. Acting out who she is 'supposed' to be with sprinkles of who she wants to be is not an easy task. It is a burden placed on those who have to maneuver the spaces in this world not designed for us – the people in the margins.

She rolls into the only real coffee shop in the county. It is the place to gather – for meetings, for gossip, for an 'exotic' coffee experience. It is not fancy – but it is all there is. She walks in with a ready smile across her face, her long dark hair windblown – it may be southeast Oklahoma, but we still have wind. Her younger sister follows close behind - she is crashing the party – but so is my little sister. We are some matriarchal bunches. We also would rather do things together – especially 'back home.' There is power in numbers. It is a power we carry with us wherever we wander. We have to build up our reserves while we can. After the drinks are ordered and the small talk subsides, she and I shift to more serious matters. Leaving our sisters to their own devices, literally and figuratively, we carved out a space, in the already well-lit coffee shop, to shed some more light.

We talked about where we are from – our upbringings were not too far apart – geographically anyway. She followed her older sister to Southeastern Oklahoma State University. It is the only university in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation. There, among the magnolia trees, is her educational community. She lives there, in Durant, with her sister. Durant is the undeclared hotspot of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. It hosts the largest of CNO's casino/resorts and serves as headquarters for both government and commerce. It is a new home that is all too familiar. Home to her is "stability and a place to land." "It can be anywhere" she

muses with a shrug. I push further, inquiring about the idea of 'homeland.' "Homeland is your identity. It's where you come from, not where you are now." It is also a place to belong or "be accepted by people with similar interests." "But you can 'belong' to multiple places," she surmises with some thought. Her ideas jumble together in a beautiful kaleidoscope of external 'internal' dialogue. She speaks and she thinks, in different order depending on the topic. She ponders through her commentary. Perhaps a tool of her higher education – or maybe just a fun element of a simple complex woman.

The conversation shifts and so does her responses. She can easily navigate between polished scripted answers and more organic musings. Her background in student organizations, leadership, and internships have served her well - paired with the communication degree she is currently completing. I tell her we are about to dive off into things she may not have thought about before. I assure her that any response she has to offer is the right response. "I wish my professors thought that," she said between laughs and sips of her iced coffee. I wish that as well.

As we waded through the murky waters of politics, religion, race, class, and gender, I was surprised to hear that college had not really changed her stances. "I feel like I was exposed to this all more so I am not as 'ignorant' and I am more open. But, I am strong in my beliefs. I think some things might have been different if I had lived on campus." She let the sentence trail off. It seemed like a new idea to her. One she might tuck away and think about again. "I feel like class has not really changed for me. Where I came from and where I am everyone's bottom of the barrel." This is a common, almost prideful, boast in southeast Oklahoma. It is that scrappy, I' got it honest,' kind of mentality. This mentality permeated the lives of all co-researchers in some

capacity. "That small town pride, that raised up right"[120] is strong in these parts. You may leave, but I do not think it ever really does.

Speaking of religion, she was quick to link faith and family. Similar to the "Faith, Family, Culture" motto of the Choctaw Nation, her first inclination was to talk about faith (Christianity) in relation to her family. With a toss of her hair and a flash of thought, she quickly added her involvement with the Choctaw community on social media. She cited that online forum as a space to talk about God and Christianity. Because of her experiences with Native youth from all over the country (due to her extensive involvement in student groups and Choctaw Nation events), she understands the conflict and dissonance between Christianity and Native spirituality. Many of the other co-researchers are not even aware of such a tension. Her level of understanding can be linked to the friendships she has built with Native youth outside of her community. "I think it is about us being modern. I understand there were different ways in the past. But, when I hear some of my friends talk about "Creator," I just replace it with God in my head. It is like the same thing to me. I mean we can't change what was done in the past." She let her answer trail off. She was not quite sure how to continue. One of the concepts she was articulating was colonization. A concept familiar to her but removed from her perceived lived experience. An external concept without the internal weight. Or is it?

Letting the heaviness of her comments settle into the room, I paused. She pondered a few moments more before easily delivering a short quip and a quick laugh. The tension dissolved but the questions remained. I easily guided the conversation to her "online Native community." She happily chatted about the "empowering and encouraging" Native group she has online. "There is no hate in my age group – we talk about generational differences a lot. It is about helping and

[120] Granger Smith, *Reppin' My Roots*, 2017.

encouraging each other. It's like positive ya' know." I do know. She lives in the heart of the Choctaw Nation infrastructure and attends the only university within the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Yet, her Native community is online. Yep.

Like many of the co-researchers, she "thought everyone was Choctaw growing up." It is an isolated place. The majority of people are White or Native and White. The small smattering of differing races and ethnicities were so few that they seamlessly meld into the, somewhat homogenous, quilt of community territory. "You know about this submerged world. No one ever grouped up. It was like we were all the same. No one even talked about it…or thought about it even. In other places, I see people in groups based on their race and stuff. It was not like that for us. It probably doesn't happen like that anywhere else." She let her explanation trail off. She knew. I knew.

Digging into the roots of culture, she sat poised. "Native American culture is the distinguishing characteristics that makes you different than someone else." I let her thoughts roll. "It can be actions like beading or dancing." I waited. "But it is really about why we do it. That is what makes us different. It is our roots." I gave her a minute. She seemed satisfied with her comments. This is such a difficult question. It is also simple. Sometimes simplicity only makes for confusion.

This type of place can make being Native a challenging thing to articulate. Maybe it is why people don't. Maybe it is why we go away to college to learn more. Maybe it is why the uncomfortable tension around the topic chokes out all conversation. To her, being Native is "finding something that makes you yourself. It's who you are." She goes on to recount stories of jealousy by White friends. "They say things like 'I'm just White. I wish I was something.'" This phrase hit me. It is one I have heard so many people say. It exoticizes. It further complicates an

already precarious ideology. It is as encouraging as it is devastating. It makes 'passing'[121] a problem and a solution. It is colonization. It is a perpetuation of the inter-generational transmission of shame and fear. It is an outward assault and a self-imposed dark tunnel. It can also be brought to the light.

The college community is also a bit challenging. There is "very little college engagement. There is a Native group but it is so small…6 members small." She exhales deeply and adjusts in her chair. A few differing emotions seem to flash across her dark eyes. "It's sad really. It's the only four-year university in Choctaw Nation. I needed people to draw strength from." I am familiar with the school and the programs. I talked to her a little more about her experiences. I listened. I took note. Digging deeper, I know she has no problem with the school. It is just a very obvious disappointment in the Native community and spaces. The reasons why are many and complex. They are a story for another day.

"Education is the most powerful tool we have. An elder once told me that it's the only thing that can't be taken from you. That has always stuck with me. Education is where my heart is." I sat in wonder. Elders have been pivotal figures for many of the co-researchers. The words that left her lips next only further solidified the ideology of education as a means to a better life as opposed to a site of trauma and erasure. I know it is both. I also know Choctaw people have used education as a way to "level the playing field" for generations. It is a space, even still, for Native identity growth, healing, and connection – well some colleges anyway. She stated: "Higher education is a powerful privilege tool of the elite. Our ancestors didn't have opportunities so we should take advantage." We both realized the importance of the moment. We

[121] Passing refers to being phenotypically ambiguous to the degree that one can be identified as one race while identifying as another (or multiple) races.

sat in the tension between 'playing the game' to 'make a better way' for ourselves and wondering about what our ancestors might have actually wanted for us. What is honoring them? How can we know?

I looked around the room and voiced a reflective inquiry about the possibility of "ending up back here someday." She talked about settling in Oklahoma. Always. "Youth leadership opportunities always taught me to go and do what you need but always come back. Oklahoma needs good people." We do. Does she need it?

When I asked how she learned about college and what led her to the decisions that she made, she, like all of the co-researchers, talked about specific individuals who took the torch and led her through the night. She talked about a high school teacher who maneuvered all the systems to help her see a college campus. She talked about her older sister who did the hard stuff first. She talked about her Choctaw Nation youth organization leader who told her the way and showed her the way. She talked about a professor and a dean who let her cry in their offices. They appeared when she needed them. They are the glimmer of angels among us. They are that one person who made a difference. Be that person.

I am acutely aware that she is still in it. College can have that toll. These questions are answered differently when you have not yet had the luxury of time and space. Reflection is vital. We also tend to forget. We gloss over how difficult it is. The crockpot of pressure, mostly self-imposed, has been washed dried and is collecting dust for most of the co-researchers. I encourage her the best I can. My words sounding like hollow platitudes, even to me. I wondered about what might have helped. "I wish I would've written down my goals so that during low times I could've remembered that because I am a first-generation college student that I am the

feet for this family." She lets out a sigh. I sigh too. In the silence, we hear one another. She knows I know where she has been. Sometimes that is enough.

I ask her for the purpose of it all. I think we both wanted to hear her answer. "The reason for higher education is to create a more educated and competitive generation. You learn in college what you don't learn anywhere else. I also think it is a neat tool and people take you more seriously….in this society we have created." Did we create a monster?

"Lord knows that I've been blessed. I can stand up to the test. I can live on so much less. This much I've been learning…" – The Housefire, Turnpike Troubadours

Sarah's Story: Broken

"Broken like mine, or some peace of mind. I'll be happy when I find, a love less unkind. Broken like mine." – Broken, Cross Canadian Ragweed

Sarah is like a tornado. She is fierce. She is also delicate. She has that kind of scrappy tough mentality with hurt vulnerability bubbling just under the surface. She is never afraid to speak up and ask for what she wants. She appears to be naive. But, she is deceptively intelligent. She knows she deserves a better life. She also believes that 'she' is the only way to get it.

She blew in like a windstorm. Part down home. Part budding law student. She tries to hide her southeastern Oklahoma accent. Even after six years away, it slips out from time to time. Gone is the girl in jeans and a t-shirt. She has an air of trendy about her. She seems to be changing identities with the changing of her clothes. She also seems happy – with a touch of

something else underneath. We catch up. She tells me about her new friends and new jobs and law school. She seems to be in a different space and time from the last time we visited. I ask her about what homeland means to her. I eagerly anticipate her answer. “Homeland is where I am from. Southeastern Oklahoma. I can’t shoo it away. It will always be a part of me.” I think we all feel that way, most for the better, some for the worse. I listen. “Home is different for me now.” She sighs. There is a fire of sadness that has crept up from her heart and settled into her vocal cords sending flames into her eyes. “There is more opportunity for me here in the city. My family is not educated. They are all country and they don’t want to go anywhere. I’m different from them,” she continues. I feel her sadness. It fills the room. I ask about family more generally, hoping to assess her support system, if nothing else. “Family is the people you feel the most comfortable with. It does not have to be a blood relative.” We talk more about picking your family. I tell her to always choose wisely. We tend to become those people. We also discuss the places she feels she belongs. To her, “belonging is not fitting in but where you are wanted and where you contribute.” I really hope where she is wanted is where she wants to be. Contribute. There that is again. Relationships certainly are tricky. I know her story. I am rooting for her.

We chat easily. Between inquiries and commentary, she is telling me everything about her life. I am looking at her perfectly applied makeup. It is a far cry from her old beauty routine. Her dark hair is styled. She looks grown up. She seems to think she might be. I easily guide the visit to her thoughts on being Native. “I think Native American culture is a lot of things. It is songs and story-telling and gathering around to be one people. For me, it is being Choctaw and everything that encompasses. It is something that is yours that you can share with other people. Being Native means getting to be a part of something other people can’t. It separates you. It’s just yours.” I pondered for a moment. I find her answer fascinating. It is something that is just

hers, but it is also to be shared. Interesting. “I grew up doing powwows but college taught me so much more about being Native. The program we were in and taking Choctaw classes helped me learn and grow and take more pride in who I am.” I listened to the echo of the other co-researchers as she explained the role OU played in her Choctaw identity. She found friends there. She felt community in the Choctaw language classes. It was the piece of home that she missed – or maybe that she had always wanted but never had.

The conversation naturally turned to higher education. She left her small town in deep southeast Oklahoma and went straight to the University of Oklahoma. “I went to OU because I wanted to get away from home. People encouraged me but I pretty much did it on my own.” She is like that. She talked some about a high school counselor who helped. She mentioned pivotal people along the way. But, she was the driving force. There are many reasons why. But, those are stories for another day.

“I was the first in my family to go to college so it was not a big deal to them. My grandma would tell me ‘you don’t have to keep doing this.’ They were proud but they just didn’t get it.” I understand. It is one of the prices we pay to do things differently. It is one of the tolls to moving up a class or two in a single generation. “Higher education is not for everybody. It is for those who thirst for more and want to see what else is out and don’t want to be stuck.” She is one of those people. “It is important to have an education and know what is going on so that you don’t believe everything you have been spoon-fed growing up. But, college is not for everyone. Going into debt for it may not be the best thing for every person. And we need jobs at every level.” I let the statement hang.

I playfully wonder aloud about what she wants to be when she grows up. “I think I want to be a criminal prosecutor because I don’t want to go against my morals.” There is hesitation in

her voice. It is clear that she has been giving it a lot of thought. The first year of law school can do that to you, or so I hear. "I think living in a small town would be hard for me again," she continues, almost to herself. "There are less opportunities. I also have a really big heart and I would not want to really know people and practice law because that would be so hard for me." I asked her why going to law school was so important. "A lot of things. I am good at arguing. I always have been," she quips with a laugh. "Plus, the situation with my mom. I have a big spot in my heart for this stuff. I want to make the system better and give people fair chances. I eventually want to do stuff with substance abuse treatment, especially in Oklahoma and work with women who have non-violent drug offenses." I heard that. I felt that. I know her story. I am rooting for her.

"Broken like mine, or some peace of mind. I'll be happy when I find, a love less unkind. Broken like mine." – Broken, Cross Canadian Ragweed

Sophie's Story: 9 to 5

"Tumble outta bed and stumble to the kitchen, pour myself a cup of ambition, yawn and stretch and try to come to life. Jump in the shower and the blood starts pumping, out on the streets the traffic starts jumping, with folks like me on the job from 9 to 5. Working 9 to 5, what a way to make a living. Barely getting by, it's all taking and no giving. They just use your mind and they never give you credit. It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it." – 9 to 5, Dolly Parton

Sitting across the brunch table from me sits a spunky Choctaw woman named Sophie. With a ready smile that makes it to her eyes, she is both welcoming and sassy. Her short blond hair is just long enough to tuck behind her ears. She adjusts her fun quirky glasses and immediately reaches for the coffee pot. There is an ease with us. An ease that comes from being a little bit older and a little bit wiser. We have lived some life – some good life. The conversation easily meanders its way through life and work updates. She is very well-connected. She has what most would consider a very powerful job. She rubs elbows with the 'not so' movers and shakers – and the ones who wish they could be. There is also a genuineness around her. Her passion for the work she does hits you with an almost undeniable authenticity. Her willingness to use her resources and giftings to help her people and her friends is a blazing fire in the political tundra landscape. I have seen her in action. Her own personality paired with that five-year stint in Washington DC, have served her well in the places and spaces she frequents. She works really hard – and she does it with sparkle.

I'm not surprised that she dressed up as Dolly[122] every year for Halloween growing up. "9 to 5 is the theme song for my life – especially now." We both laugh hysterically as she recounts singing the tune for 'Share the Fun'[123]. We happily took the rabbit trail down deep into all of the songs sang and all of the speeches given in our 4-H days. "That is probably why we are as successful as we are," she comments once the laughter and trip to our similar childhoods subsides. She is probably correct. "Also, my birthday is September 25," she blurts with enthusiasm. "It is 9/25. My birthday is 9 2 5. Get it." I did. I was almost as excited as her. We

[122] Dolly Parton, Actress/Singer/Songwriter/Businesswomen/All Around Hero

[123] Share the Fun is a popular 4-H event that can be equated to a talent show.

both love it when things seem meant to be. We would also both like to know how it would be to ONLY work from 9 until 5.

Like almost everyone, in order to understand how she became who she is, you have to understand where she came from. "Home is southeast Oklahoma. Push County."[124] "My homeland is also southeast Oklahoma. It is mountains, trees, rivers, lakes. It is the country." When asked where we are from or where home is, I love that we all say southeast Oklahoma. To so many of us, it is like its own state. To people who aren't from there, it is the land of too many trees and mountains, too much meth, too many guns, too many 'bigfoot' sightings, too many mountain people who might do you harm, too much poverty, and way too big of a risk to be there without a local. We may or may not be some of those things. We may or may not even be proud of our faults. We are also a place of good people, good food, good scenery, and good grit. It would also be a mistake to count us out.

Moving from place to people makes it abundantly clear how intimately the two are intertwined. "Family is everything to me. We spend way too much time together….even though we live a couple of hours apart right now," she adds with a laugh. "They are there for anything and everything with no questions asked." Family, one of the tenants of the Choctaw Nation's 'Faith. Family. Culture.' motto, is a driving force that propels all of my co-researchers forward – for one reason or another. Much like family, "community is your support system. It is feeling plugged in. It is also a way to give back. You support the people that support you. That is how it works." Just like the other co-researchers, she is quick to mention the power and importance of

[124] Push County refers to Pushmataha County in southeastern Oklahoma.

reciprocity in communities. It is an interplay of give and take. But, when done right, there is no 'keeping score' or recording of 'services' rendered. There is only love – that Corinthians kind[125].

She pulls up the sleeves of her long sleeve tee-shirt. The hot syrup and pancakes have made their way to our table and we are both about to 'get country.' At our age, we are keenly aware of the carb and sugar crash that will follow. We also don't care. It is our 'soul food.' We both have a lot of soul. As the pancakes disappear, we shift our conversation to all things Native. "Being Native is just who you are. It means you are part of something bigger than yourself and it relates back to your ancestors. You must recognize that and let it inform where you are going." She says a lot. She says it quickly. Probably a hazard of her job – or maybe the sugar.

"I don't think I ever learned about being Native. I always knew I was Choctaw. I thought everyone was Choctaw." She is one of many with that story to tell. She goes on to speak about her family and community. Popular topics with us 'southeast Okies' (SEOKIES). "As I was growing up, being where I'm from, I got to watch Choctaw Nation grow. It was such a big deal. I remember getting the new hospital built. It was really something, for all of us." Our stories intertwined as we recounted tales of the 'old hospital' or the 'asbestos hospital,' as my younger sister calls it. The stories are vague. We were so young. Maybe some of them are second-hand. It is hard to say. The piece that intrigued me was the realization that Choctaw Nation, as it is today[126], grew up with us. We are really the first generation to really experience the full benefits and services now offered. We are an experiment. We are all still testing. We are all still growing.

"I learned way more in college about being Native because there were different people. It was diverse. I think I'm still learning." Yes, we are still learning. We easily chatted about the

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[125] The Corinthians kind of love refers to 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 in the bible. It is a popular passage of scripture at weddings.

[126] Today the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is a beacon of commerce and services.

differences among tribal nations – a confidence that has come from years of work in diverse Native spaces. Like almost all of the co-researchers, college was a time for exponential growth in Native understanding and identity, especially (and almost exclusively) outside of the Choctaw Nation territory. "The first club I joined in college was the Native American Student Association. It was kind of a shock. Choctaws come in every size, shape, and color. Not every tribe is like that. Also, media has a romanticized image of what being Native is. I'd never had that exposure until college. I got involved and learned so much." Wow. There is no hesitation in what she says. There is also so much truth. Phenotype is no indication of Choctaw citizenship in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation. To some this is a problem. In the state of Oklahoma, it can be a problem. It is also a divisive factor in the 'east and west of I-35' divide. Tribes in eastern Oklahoma, or more specifically, the 'five tribes' (historically 'five civilized tribes'), were 'relocated' to Oklahoma from the southeastern United States. Most western Oklahoma tribes are plains tribes who acquired or were allotted land in Oklahoma. The histories are very different. The customs, traditions, and languages are very different. We all landed here, for whatever reason, and have attempted to make it our home. We have done that in different ways. There is not a lot of 'coming together' where east meets west in the land of the red man[127].

Her days of making Indian tacos and organizing powwows with her college NASA (Native American Student Association) organization aside, our chat bounces to her more current understandings. "My Native American community is a sisterhood[128]. It is another way to support each other. It is fun to learn about others' traditions and history, especially in Oklahoma. I was naive growing up. I thought everyone was Choctaw. In college, I learned about other tribes and

[127] Oklahoma literally means red man in Choctaw. Okla means man. Homma means red.

[128] This can be linked to the matriarchal structures in many Native communities, historically and today.

how diverse all the tribes in Oklahoma are. We are a very unique state." Indeed, we are. "Native American culture is part of the fabric of Oklahoma. It is who we are. It is misunderstood a lot, especially in this state. With young people, there is a resurgence and a getting back to our roots. They are really dispelling misconceptions and sharing the beauty." I hear what she is saying. I see it in the co-researchers. I see it in community gatherings and Native women banding together across the state divide to support battles that affect some of us and those that affect us all. I sit back in my seat. We share a knowing look. We both know we are a part of this. We both know we have a responsibility. I could not help but think about how young we are as a state, as a people, and as a (Choctaw) Nation operating in our current state. We have ancient wisdom to offer. We have youthful optimism to inspire us. This is our moment. What will we do?

Her background is in ag (agriculture) com (communication), 'American Indian Studies,' and public affairs (policy). Oklahoma State University is her undergrad. "Go Pokes." Her masters came from Indiana University. "I probably wouldn't have changed where I went to school but it is hard to say. I just didn't know my options. Maybe I could've gone to Harvard but to a kid from southeastern Oklahoma, OSU is basically Harvard. It's what we would shoot for, the highest aspiration, at that time anyway." I completely understood. State schools are something for rich people. They are not for us.

With the satisfaction of a good meal and a good chat, we visited about college experiences. Grateful for both being in yoga pants, we made ourselves comfortable and settled in for a good talk. "I wish I could have learned about tribes as employers in college. I wish I would have known about all the jobs you could do that could help your tribe. I always knew I wanted to come back to Choctaw Nation, but my current CNO job did not even exist when I graduated." She makes an excellent point. We talk about how quickly tribal nations, as well as the world in

general, is changing. We question the way colleges prepare us for life. “I also wish I could’ve traveled internationally in college. I always knew I wanted to go back to southeastern Oklahoma and Choctaw Nation so I focused on domestic opportunities. I had eight internships during college. I wish I would’ve expanded my focus,” she ended with a laugh. She was one of several who mentioned international travel as something they wish they had experienced in college. International travel, or travel in general, is not something most people in southeastern Oklahoma have ever experienced. I, personally, was the first person to ever get on a plane in my entire family. I flew to China. During college.

Like many large social movements, perhaps one of the biggest catalysts for change can be found in higher education. It is a space for exploration – a space to questions – a space for change. “Education is the key to everything we do. Knowledge is literally power. College is so very important. It should be about learning to take risks, becoming independent, and getting out of your bubble and having new experiences.” She tells me she does not ever remember college not being in the plan. “College is very important in my family. Both of my parents and both sets of grandparents went to college. That is highly unusual for where I am from.” I could have not agreed more. Most of the millennials in southeast Oklahoma are first-generation college students. With a bit of pride and a lot of love in her eyes, she talked about her parents being teachers. “My family has always tried to help kids from ‘back home’ go to college.” Although I have never met her parents, I could picture them. In my mind, I saw the teachers in my high school who filled out our community college paperwork with us, who got us scholarships, who left us care packages on our college dorm beds. My thoughts were interrupted as she continued: “I think because higher education was instilled in me from a very young age, I also have a passion to help

give access and break down barriers for kids from small schools. I think we have some of the best and brightest kids in rural southeast Oklahoma, and rural Oklahoma in general." Amen.

"Speaking of that," she paused, pulling out her phone. "Give me just a second," she stated as her fingers flurried across her smart phone with expert-like precision. "So, I'm texting this girl from 'back home.' She scored a 35 on her ACT. I am trying so hard to convince her to at least come look at OSU or OU." There is a frustration in her voice. "She thinks she can't afford it. I keep trying to tell her that she could probably go anywhere she wanted for free. I have told her I would help her. I keep telling her that I will come pick her up and take her to tour OSU. I even told her I would take her to OU." At that point, I interjected my desire to help. "I would be happy to show her around OU as well," I offer casually. She laughs. "I already told her that actually. I knew you would." I laugh. Sounds like something she would do. "She just keeps talking about how far away it would be. It is not that far, Hannah. You know." I do know. "It is also a different world though," I cautiously offer. She agrees. "She just keeps telling me that she may go to Eastern"[129]. I sigh. She sighs. We talk about how challenging mentoring can be. I am reminded of something my mama always says: "you gotta run your own race, babe." We can give the opportunities and the support. We never know what impact that can have, regardless of the initial outcome. We can do what we can do. Give it our best. Then we have to let them run. It's hard work. But, we were made for it.

"In the same boat with a lot of your friends waiting for the day your ship will come in. And the tides gonna turn an it's all gonna roll you away."

[129] Eastern or EOSC refers to Eastern Oklahoma State College. It is a community college in Wilburton, OK.

The Promised Land: Retreat Nanih Waiya Story – (Chapter 5)

Our creation story begins with Nanih (Nunih) Waiya. Nestled in our original homeland, Mississippi, sits our mother mound. We are said to have emerged from her. It is our birthplace. It could only follow that, many generations later, we would gather together in a cabin on the banks of Lake Nanih Waiya in our Oklahoma homeland to experience a different kind of (re)birth.

"Rebirth."- Kandace

Figure 1

My loaded-up pick-up truck weaved through the small towns littered with dollar stores and the decay of small town dreams with every run-down boarded-up relic of the past. I glided along the ribbon of old two-lane until the flat prairie land turned into forested mountains that begged to be explored. With every pocket of woodlands, I visibly relaxed more. The tension in my shoulders released as waves of comfort and a symphony of nostalgia filled my bones and

found its outpouring in my eyes. There is a knowing here. It is buried in my DNA. It is in my nerve endings. It is in my soul. This is my homeland.

Hours passed, but it could have been days. The stretches of two-lane that turn to gravel that turn to dirt haphazardly connect the past to the present and people to a society that they are not sure they want. I see Lake Nanih Waiya and I know to watch for the metal panel gate that will lead me to my home for the weekend. Nestled on the banks of the lake by a small feeder stream and stretch of timbers, sits a little cabin in the woods. It is down the road from our Tvshka Homma (Tuskahoma) capitol grounds. There is history here. There is soul here. This feels right.

I let my truck careen through the mud and quickly replaced my 'city boots' for muck boots. Throwing my more fashionable footwear into the floorboard, I opened my door, ready to do work. (When my muck boots go on, I am a different person. It is my version of Cinderella's slipper. But, in this story, I change my own life.) Thirty-five squeaky screen door slams later, I had successfully unloaded all of my materials for a weekend with some very special Chahta souls. These materials were the tools for expression – for creating – for the development of modern Choctaw material culture. There was also a lot of food to unload – two tubs full. I hesitatingly opened the tubs to see how the food and drinks had fared as I had slung them across the bed of a truck for five counties and four hours. They'd still eat – and eat we did. I knew we would manically inhale all things edible until we felt "fry-bread" size. I was not wrong.

Food unpacked and supplies laid out, I lit some candles and got acquainted with the space. I needed this place to honor what we were doing. I needed it to support us and envelop us in ways that cannot be articulated. I thought about the locations that would aid in our comfort – in our ceremony. I sit in them and with them. I wandered and wondered the stream, the forest, the lake. I accepted and appreciated the energy. I accepted and appreciated the same mountains

and trees that my ancestors saw when the trail of their tears supposedly ended. I was not surprised that this lake is named Nanih Waiya. It gave us life then. It still is. I breathed it in – then I returned to the cozy cabin to drift off to dream.

The morning sun shot through the room like a kaleidoscope of warmth. My feet grabbed for the wood floor while my mind raced with hopeful anticipation (i.e. manic anxious thoughts) of what more light and warmth the day might bring. Clad in yoga pants and my "Halito Y'all" t-shirt, I mindfully set the stage for the arrival of my guests. I was a little nervous. Long work days and long work nights had taken their toll. With my tank on low, I was delighted to see my mama and sister weave through the gate and up the muddy path. They traveled the hour and a half northwest from "back home" to visit before my participants/co-researchers arrived. I don't get to see them much these days between dissertation research and writing, full-time work in Native student program building, and my business side hustle. My eyes sting when I see them. I rally so as to not mess up my eyeliner – it's the expensive kind. Hugs and manic overlapping dialogue fills the once quiet serene setting. We have so much to catch up on – but words are also never needed. We are a matriarchal family. The men in my family are amazing – don't get me wrong. They don't make them like that anymore. Nevertheless, we almost always look like a girl gang. I stop the catching up long enough to ask for help. I needed them to help me think through these very telling and artistic material culture projects. I had the pieces. I needed them weaved together. I needed them to meet me in my thoughts and inspire me to continue the journey. Like only family can do, in half thoughts and disjointed words and gestures, they immediately worked out logistics, brainstormed ideas, and pieced together something beautiful. They spun the yarn that would become my blanket to protect me from the cold. Long after they left, their ideas and their warmth remained – just like our ancestors, on this very patch of earth.

"Our roots run deep and we aren't afraid to show them."- Kandace
"Like Chevy." Haha - Jenna
"Yea, like Chevy." Haha - Kandace

Figure 2

As my first participant/co-researcher arrived, my family bid their farewell and I rallied for a day of negotiating introductions, emotions, and all the feels. Some of the co-researchers knew one another while others had only vague understandings or awareness of their counter-parts. I was the common factor between them all – energetically I could already feel that. Although all grew up in the 10.5 counties of the Choctaw Nation in southeastern Oklahoma, they were from different schools, institutions of higher education, and age groups. A couple were in their final semesters of college – stuck between angsty complacency and the wide-open dreaming of a whole future to realize. A couple were established in their careers and had some more miles and memories from which to draw. The rest were somewhere in between – that space rife with quarter-life crises and existential meltdowns. The wisdom of the elder millennials

somehow weaved beautifully with the youthful exuberance of the younger versions of themselves. They were all as vastly different as they were the same. With some careful guidance to get us started, they quickly and seamlessly crossed the divide from socialized southern pleasantries to the heart of what matters. It is a soulful lot. A proud bunch. They are southeastern Oklahoma. They are a snapshot of a Nation. They are Choctaw. Chahta sia.

When the projects were completed and the massively overflowing piles of healthy and 'not-so-healthy' snacks had somehow dwindled to almost nothing, we took the short journey to our capitol. Tvshka Homma (Tuskahoma) means 'red warrior' in Choctaw. I have always loved that. Perhaps more well known for our diplomatic heritage and less than exotic background, I always love being reminded that we, too, were and are warriors – in a variety of forms. What we are doing now is a little Tvshka. In that spirit, we piled way too many people in a jeep, slid through the mud, and took the two-mile stretch of blacktop to a place that dotted every one of our summer memories. Nestled in a series of cow pastures, our Choctaw capitol grounds boast a council house, a museum with a small gift shop, a village of what some of our original structures are rumored to resemble, a church, a stickball field, an amphitheater, cabins, huge cafeteria and conference space, and countless structures and outbuildings that only truly come alive one time a year – the Choctaw Nation Labor Day Festival. From stickball tournaments to craft fairs to a midway of free carnival rides and nightly concerts by top tier musical artists (country and Christian), this place took us by the memories the second the tires touched the grounds. We happily recounted our stories of the one time a year that we all come together. It is a big family reunion for our Choctaw family – as well as the larger community. Gone are the lines of traffic and pastures of cars. There are no tractors or trailers to take us to our destination. Other than

some stickball players, we had the place to ourselves. I'll just say that we forged our own path – we left some tattoos on that town.

"This reminds me of the story about our seal. If the bow is tight, we are in war time. If it is loose, we are at peace. But really, aren't we always having to fight?" - Wes

Figure 3

With food on our hearts and minds, we ambled our way to Pam's Hateful Hussy Diner for some greasy food and a different kind of cultural experience. As the heavy food gave way to heavy eye-lids, we ventured back to the cabin. Unscathed but not unchanged, we settled into our story circle. The flickers of bonfire flames danced as smoke billowed into the night sky. Bonfires are a place for fun. They are a place for memories. They are a place for reflection and questions. We had it all. We still do.

"This represents how we are all intertwined together. It is a beautiful thing." - Jenna

Figure 4

As our night was drawing to a close, we loaded up too many people in that jeep again and did a little backroading. It was not planned. The 'Spring Break 2011' mixed CD someone dusted off from a long-forgotten console was also not planned. There was laughter. There were tears. There was turn up and there was turn down.

Music tells a story. It also creates stories. Melodies turn into memories and speaks where language fails us. We all connected in different ways that night. I should not have been surprised that the only song every single person sang along to was "Sick and Tired" by Cross Canadian Ragweed. Ragweed is a legendary red dirt band. In rural Oklahoma, they are the soundtrack to at least a decade of high school and college memories. Before the drugs got them and they broke up, they were a group of Okies who sang about, for, and to other Okies. We resonated with their songs because we lived them. That night, they brought us all together again. With the first chord, the chatter stopped. As if we were in a religious order, we each settled into our seat. The mournful pieces of the ballad could be felt throughout the vehicle. I looked around. We were

ALL singing – full voice singing. There was a reverence. Some of us looked around but everyone was lost in their own thoughts and feelings. I would posit that, if only for a moment, we went to a place in our memories and reconnected to another version of ourselves while also recording this memory and shared connection. I started thinking about the words. I had not really consciously done so before – not all of them anyway. It hit me hard. It hit them hard. It hit us where we live. Home.

Got your bag on your shoulder,
Never thought once about thinkin' it over.
Feel like you're the only one,
Who's ever been in a bad situation.
Now you need to take yourself a love vacation,
'Cause after all, what's done is done.

Sick and tired of being sick and tired.
Everything around you's growin' old.
The days drag on, the nights last forever,
Every day's tougher just to keep it together.
Forget everything you've ever known,
Except for home.

He made a promise he couldn't keep.
I bet he's not losing a bit of sleep,

Over how you're getting down the line.

Now don't you fret, now don't you worry,

Don't get in too much of a hurry,

'Cause up ahead's that city limit sign.

Sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Everything around you's growin' old.

The days drag on, the nights last forever,

Every day's tougher just to keep it together.

Forget everything you've ever known,

Except for home.

Home is where the heart is:

That's what somebody once said. (Yeah.)

I think your heart is where your love is:

All the rest baby, the rest it's all in your head.

Well, memories, they're over-rated:

All they do is get you down an' frustrated,

And who needs that on their back?

Starting over, cold turkey,

Washin' your soul of everything that's dirty.

Seal your heart of every crack.

You're no longer sick and tired.

Everything around you feels brand new.

Yeah. the days fly by, the nights could be longer:

Every day you're just a little bit stronger,

Now that you've spread your wings and flown,

Back to home.

Back to home.

Back to home. (Home.)

Yeah, back to home.

(Back to home.)

Sick and Tired – Cross Canadian Ragweed

After all of our connections made, we had no problem seamlessly maneuvering from sleep to a morning of yesterday's clothes and messy buns as we delved deeper into the stories that make us and the stories we make. If roots and wings are our memories and legacies, growth and learning is our current story. We created art. The material culture of our current culture. We also spent a lot of time talking about nature, specifically about trees. In many ways, we are like trees. We are the new branches from the strong Choctaw roots. We are planted in this land. We are the prayers the old ones prayed. We weather the storms and seasons because we can draw strength from those who came before. We are nourished by their depth. Their strain was not in vain. Because of them, we have hopes for our own future and the future of many more

generations to come who will one day see our growth. Like us, they will reach for the sky, but always stay connected to the earth – to our homeland. I wonder if the prayers we pray for them were the same prayers prayed for us? I wonder about those who first stepped foot in this new 'homeland' and looked at the same body of water we each were watching. Did they commemorate what they left behind so as to not forget or were they trying to connect here? Either way, they made it work. They survived. They gave us a history. They gave us a legacy. They gave us a home. In that moment, each and every one of us, were so glad to have *'spread our wings and flown, back to home'*.

First to arrive and last to leave, I had spent most of the final morning loading my truck. It had rained again the night before. My muck boots were treating me right as I took one last look around. I touched the water. The lingering raindrops cascaded throughout the vastness in perfectly circular ripples. I thought about the saying "that's just a drop in the ocean" (or "drop in the bucket," depending on where you call home). All of our recent conversations echoed in my head. This weekend. This moment in time is just a drop – but the ripples can last for generations. Every interaction with these co-researchers is a drop. Every drop matters.

"This represents a spring of water. It celebrates life from the ground, our natural resources. Oka is sacred. Oka is life." - Jenna

Figure 5

"This is the great juxtaposition with the Spring. It is a modern water source because oka is sacred both then and now."- Jenna

Figure 6

There had apparently been too many drops of rain because as I tried to pull out of the cabin and head back to the city, the unthinkable happened. I got stuck. I have never gotten stuck in. my. life. I don't know if I wasn't paying attention or if I've been in the city too long, but the longer I tried to get unstuck the worse off I was. The rain was really coming down again. I was fighting not to let my face look like my windshield – covered in water raining from my eyes. My pride was hurt but as I was rallying to handle my situation, I could not help but laugh. I did not want to leave. I did not want to drive to the city even one more time. I am drawn to southeastern Oklahoma in more ways than I can articulate. It was solidified in that moment, that it did not want to let me go either. Speaking aloud, I made a promise that I would be back – for good someday. Within ten minutes a rigged-up ratchet strap and a big truck had gotten me unstuck. Then, I was gone – but not forever.

You're no longer sick and tired.
Everything around you feels brand new.
Yeah. the days fly by, the nights could be longer:
Every day you're just a little bit stronger,
Now that you've spread your wings and flown,
Back to home.
Back to home.
Back to home. (Home.)

FAITH. Family. Culture.

Faith. It can mean so many different things to so many different people. Most agree that there is an intangible quality to it. There is an implied strength and powerful inward knowing. Whether it is a faith in a person, a situation, something larger than yourself or something more mystical or spiritual, faith is a powerful motivator. It is there in the hospital room, in the foxholes, and in the funerals. It is also questioned in those spaces and in every sleepless worry filled night in between. It is in the big things and the little things. It is in socialized church attendance and church attendance because you need it. In Christian circles, it is the most powerful thing you have. It is taught to be the most important thing there is. Your faith, your relationship with God, is more important than your family, your culture, your community. It is bigger. It transcends. It. Is. Sovereign.

It is no surprise to me that it is the first tenant in the current Choctaw Nation branding statement: "Faith. Family. Culture." There it is. Strategically placed before our family and our culture. This is not surprising as the Choctaw Nation, rather publicly, holds traditional Christian beliefs and practices. There is a church on our capitol grounds. There is a monument of the Ten Commandments in both English and Choctaw perched prominently outside our council house. There is a chaplain on staff who sends Christian emails and verses to all Choctaw Nation employees weekly. All important event and staff meetings alike are to open in prayer. The list of Christian guideposts in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is vast. It also does not tell the whole story.

"I love that this sits outside our council building. We have the right to display this if we choose. This represents our code outside of the building where decisions are made. I also wanted to make sure and have the Choctaw translation as closest. It represents the progression from Choctaw to English."- Madeline

Figure 7

To imply that all Choctaw people are a Christian people is problematic. However, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has a long history of Christian beliefs. Christian missionaries are said to have walked the Trail of Tears with our ancestors. Many of the co-researchers reported being told that we (as Choctaw people) had always believed in God, but when missionaries came, we adopted their stories and language around what we already believed. The only differing account reported was that when the missionaries' medicine healed our people, it was decided to collectively convert to Christianity. Is there truth to either of these stories? Perhaps so. Perhaps not. Either way, they are the stories we have been given and never asked to really question. If they are true to us, then perhaps that is all the 'truth' we need.

Choctaw hymn books were one of the first printed documents in our language. Their melodies and words dance through our childhood memories. Choctaw churches were once very

active – some still are. Most Choctaw Christians now attend mainstream Christian churches. Within the 10.5 counties, (Southern) Baptist, Presbyterian, and non-denominational are the most popular. As evidenced by a story relayed by a co-researcher, this can be challenging. He recounts: "There was a kid in my youth group who, let's be honest, I still don't like. He used to make fun of the Jones Academy[130] kids and he always acted like he was better than everybody else. Anyway, we were on a mission trip to Alabama with the youth group. While we were at a women's shelter there was this black woman who was so interested in me talking about being Native and my tribe and culture. I was excited. I was telling her all about being Choctaw. She was really invested and interested in hearing what I had to say. While we were talking, this guy jumps into the conversation and said: 'he is only saying that because he gets benefits and free stuff. That is the only reason he cares.'"

That is where the story ended for the group. After we processed all of the implications, I pushed the conversation a step further. I asked how the woman reacted. The co-researcher, albeit a little caught off guard, continued with the following: "Ya' know, she pretty much dismissed him. She asked me to keep going, to tell her more." The response struck us all. We let the silence envelop us we allowed our thoughts to settle. I eventually offered that she might know what it felt like to be questioned and to have people speak for you. I wondered if in that story lied the answer. I wondered if the best thing we can do when faced with judgment, criticism, pain, fear, scarcity mentality, and the policing of our identities, is to "keep going." I think the people that need to hear our stories are out there. The people who are not ready cannot and should not distract us. This could be a case of faith and culture colliding, but I think it is more about how the differing intersections of our identities can manifest lessons and teach us who we are and what

[130] The Jones Academy is a residential (boarding) school for Native youth operated through Choctaw Nation.

we believe. Perhaps we cannot rely on people as the tenants of our faith and culture. Humans are fallible. Maybe, we should be internally guided – by God or Creator or…

Being Christian and Native (or a part of a tribe that claims Christianity on a governmental level) can be very challenging. To be Choctaw and not Christian can result in a sense of alienation from the government and/or cultural community. Being a Christian Choctaw can result in alienation from other Native groups who, perhaps rightfully so, see Christianity as a tool of power and control used by the colonizer. One co-researcher put it like this: "I get backlash about being Christian and Choctaw or Native. Like the Oklahoma Choctaw Facebook group has called Christianity a 'cancer to the group.' It gets so crazy. I never say anything. I just watch the conversations happen." Another co-researcher jumped in: "It's that pan-Nativism. I mean I think it can be good on some things like Standing Rock for example but I also think that embracing being Native instead of being Choctaw takes away from our Choctaw-ness. I don't know. Like I don't use headdress images and stuff because we don't and didn't have those. I mean, like I said, on some things it is good. But, we need to embrace our unique things that make us who we are even if they aren't like other Native groups." Only two or three of the co-researchers understood that there is a tension between being Christian and being Native. They know now.

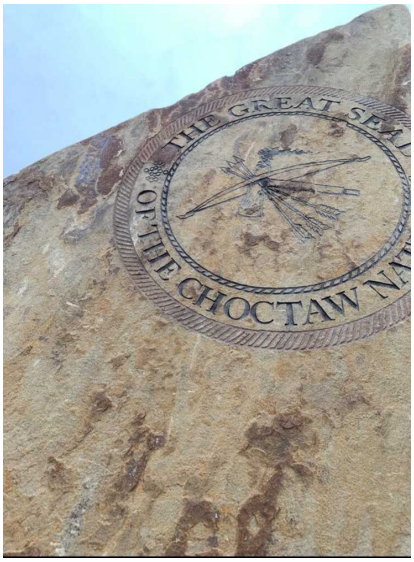
The education of our faith and our faith in education can, at times, be tumultuous. This is especially true in the forested hills of southeast Oklahoma – Choctaw Country – God's Country. "There is a stigma. If you leave for education, you will come back different. Changed – and not in a good way." The co-researcher stopped to join the laughter of the rest of the group. It was a knowing laughter, a shared understanding kind of connection. She continued, "I literally heard this in a sermon from back home recently: 'our kids are going off to that college and getting that liberal agenda.'" The chuckles turned to full-on laughing as each person recounted similar tales.

Riding out the laughter, another co-researcher stated: "A couple of weeks ago me and my family were 'nourishing our bodies' at the Friday night fish fry at the Hontubby Store." We were all laughing hysterically by this time. Tears were streaming down our faces. Between the popular prayer reference and the collective understanding of the Hontubby Store[131], we were as one. "Like my dad says: 'I believe that bible.'" The laughing quieted down a bit as she recounted telling her grandparents that she became an ordained minister so she could perform weddings for people. We mostly could not believe that she told them. Something like that would be more than frowned upon in our backwoods traditional patriarchal communities. Most of us laughed as we told her that certain things were on a 'need to know' basis where family and 'back home' people are concerned. Her 'liberal education and agenda' was probably one of them. One of the youngest in the group, perhaps she is one of the bravest. As the stories and laughter settled, I said 'family is family.' Another co-researcher continued: 'in church or in prison.' The chuckles arose again as we talked about the Kacey Musgraves song. "This conversation is so woke," a co-researcher proclaimed. A chorus of "agreeds," "amens," and "retweets" followed. I think 'real' might have been the word they were looking for.

Family is family, in church or in prison. You get what you get, and you don't get to pick 'em
They might smoke like chimneys, but give you their kidneys. Yeah, friends come in handy, but family is family. You might look just like 'em, that don't mean you're like 'em but you love 'em
-Family Is Family, Kacey Musgraves

[131] The Hontubby Store is a small community general store. It is a very small community gathering place for coffee, food, and fellowship.

With every conversation with every co-researcher, it has become abundantly clear that it just takes one person to change everything. Their faith was no exception. They recounted stories of members of their family. “I think my dad showed me the good and the bad. When we questioned his consistency, it taught us how difficult carrying out faith can be. It taught us to seek consistency in our own lives and faith.” Another co-researcher said it like this: “My mom is the spiritual leader in our family. She influenced me the most and she is the bedrock. But she also taught me to think for myself. I know I am here because she said prayers for me.”



“This is made of stone. It’s our solid rock. It is eternal and forever, like us. It shows that we are moving forward and looking upward. It is spiritual, Jesus, all the things.”- Shawna

Figure 8

Another popular response lied in spiritual youth leaders within the church. One co-researcher talked about a youth leader who was very open about her past. “It was the first time I had ever heard a testimony of someone who was not seemingly perfect. You know, growing up where we all did, every ‘testimony’ is: ‘I grew up in church and got saved at six and I love

Jesus.' It was really great to hear how people's faith and God helped them overcome challenges. Another mentioned a youth minister who took the groups to camps that helped them to find their own way in their faith. This would've been a decade ago for most of the co-researchers. Yet, these individuals carved a spot in their hearts and filled it with love and light – a light that pointed them to faith.

The last response was to mention the more progressive people in college with whom they could relate. "College ministries were like a cool version of church with people like me." The co-researchers agreed that college ministry had played a huge role in their journey of faith as adults. It was a way to bring a piece of the comfort of home with them while allowing it to present progressive and different ideas that ultimately played into their adult identity construction around faith, spirituality, and Christianity.

The most notable person, by far, was the BCM Director at Carl Albert State College. He was mentioned in individual research conversations by every single person who attended the community college. He was also brought up again in our group conversations and story circles. He was a dad to those who did not have one and a mentor to all those with whom he came into contact. He was always there. His booming voice and big personality entered rooms before he did. He facilitated free food once a week, a church service once a week, a revival once a semester, drove the SWAT[132] team to all the area churches, and was there for all the college events as well. He was also there when one of our classmates lost his life in a car accident. He was there when people fell away and when they found their way again. He is a special person. That BCM is a special place. It is where we hung out at all hours of the night. It holds our memories and our hearts. For most of us, it is sacred ground.

[132] SWAT stands for Students With A Testimony

It just takes one person. Be that person.

Faith. Family. Culture. – 'Living out the Chahta Spirit of Faith, Family, and Culture'

Faith. FAMILY. Culture.

Interwoven into both faith and culture is family. Family could be said to be the glue that holds us together or the meat of our socialization. For better or worse, our family plays a huge role in what we know, what we don't know, who we are, and what we believe. They inform our faith. They inform our culture. They are us. We are them.

Although Choctaw people were historically matriarchal, erasure of culture, socialization, Christianity, and a myriad of other factors resulted in a more 'assimilated' American patriarchal structure. This is especially apparent in our policies, practices, and governmental structures. However, when discussing the one person in our families who changed everything for us, every single individual's story was that of a woman. In fact, every single person talked about their grandmother with the exception of one. He talked about his mother.

"This is a monument to our Code Talkers. They weren't even citizens when they helped this country remain free. It shows how giving we are to this place, to the Irish, to so many people today. I wonder if it is because we were traditionally matriarchal?" - Sarah

Figure 9

"My grandmother is everyone's grandmother. You could go to her house today and would make you food. She is known across four counties for her biscuits and gravy." Everyone smiled knowingly. Her voice tightened with a serious vulnerability. "I always loved and admired her so much. But, when my grandfather got cancer, just watching her and how she handled everything, she showed me how strong women can be." Every person got a tear in their eye as they recounted more stories about their own experiences about cancer, grandmas, and the matriarchs who made us. "Ya' know my grandma has always made us feel so welcome but has also always done her own thing. We all gravitate to her. It is weird because I did not realize until I was way older than I should have been that she was not our biological grandma. Our grandpa married her. Granted, we knew her our whole lives. It did not matter at all. She treated us like we were her own. I guess we are. Bless her. Bless her and her chocolate gravy and biscuits."

Sitting in a deep appreciation for our living breathing (s)heroes, another co-researcher spoke up. “My mom has always been the one. She has taught me a lot. I want to know more, though. I know that because of generational trauma that we have forgotten and assimilated. But now, we have an obligation and responsibility to honor what they did. They walked here for us. I feel like I need to know them more. I’ve been doing family history. It seems like our generation is really into that. Maybe because of our education, I don’t know. Anyway, doing some research and learning that my three times great grandmother’s name was mahli homma (red wind) really puts a fire in me to learn and grow and know more. Maybe it’s a fire from them….” This response resulted in a lengthy discussion about family research and heritage in general. The energy shifted as everyone agreed to do their own family digging to see what could be unearthed.

In our past, future, or present, it just takes one person. Be that person.

According to all known documentation, our original Choctaw homeland is in Mississippi. Although some of the co-researchers were aware of this fact, every single person noted southeastern Oklahoma as their homeland. I am not surprised. I see it that way too.

“I take value in Choctaw Nation and my family. I don’t want to leave. I have to help make Oklahoma better. If we are going to make it better for 7 generations, we have a moral obligation that ties us to our Faith, Family, and Culture.” Her comment was greeted nods and verbal agreements. The desire is there for many of them. The logistics, well, they will get there.

“I feel drawn to the land in general. In a one with nature, steward of the land as a resource kind of way.” She nervously giggled. There was some agreement to her statement. It seemed to be enough encouragement to propel her further – further into a place she was not quite

sure about. “I sometimes wonder about like on a cellular level if we are connected to land.” She paused. “Like epigenetic…” another co-researcher offered. She continued, “Like is it in us to cling to land and distrust government because of all that was taken from us. Is our ancestors’ DNA coming through with like generational trauma?” Her comment started a whirlwind of questions, stories, and comments. The stories started weaving together into a narrative we could all believe – if we wanted.

“This represents how we are one with nature. It is teaching lessons and passing stories and knowledge. It also shows how we can all learn from one another no matter the species.” - Sophie

Figure 10

In southeastern Oklahoma, Choctaw Nation Territory, many people have mixed ancestry. The most common mixture, by far, is Native (typically Choctaw) and White. This creates an interesting dynamic where the socialization of race is concerned. One co-researcher recounts a story of confusion: “I remember being young and having to fill out my race on some test form. I asked my dad which I should pick. He asked if being White would be a benefit, if being Mexican

would be a benefit, and if being Native would be a benefit. By that time, I knew the right answer. I picked Native. I guess I have been picking it ever since." No one else had any specific stories about 'picking' how we would identify. However, many of us had gone to a school that had told us to pick Native as our identity marker on forms and tests if we were an enrolled tribal member. As adults we understand the monetary gains of that for the school. As kids, we genuinely thought we were all the same. We never had to pretend or 'play Indian' in any way. It is just who we were and who we are. It is all we knew. It was not until we left that many of us were told how we should be – how 'good' Natives should be – how we were to perform, for Native and non-Native gazes.

"This little girl reminds me that we are always learning. It also represents to me how mindful and respectful we are. It is almost as if she is listening to lessons or stories from an elder."- Kandace

Figure 11

Many recounted getting older and gaining awareness about the multiple identities held within them. They talked about embracing different identities at different times, code-switching,

and learning, for the first time, that they were a 'minority.' We laughed as we talked about the part in the movie *Selena* when Selena and her father were talking on the tour bus about being Mexican-American, and how that required that they be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans. I excitedly started quoting that part of the movie. It has always struck me. "I am pretty sure I used that part of the movie in a paper I wrote once," I said with a laugh. We all understood it too well. Identity performance can indeed be exhausting. A few of the oldest people in the group have all but let that go. It is a lifelong situation, though. The key is to find the people who don't make you pick it back up. If you are lucky, that can be your family.

Family plays an interesting role in education. They are our first teachers and our last teachers. They teach us to speak and then how and what to speak. They teach us to eat and then how and what to eat. They teach us to love and then how and what to love. They teach us to believe in what we cannot see and then how and what to believe. They teach us our faith. They teach us our culture. They send us to school and then tell us if our teacher is wrong. We are a manifestation of all that they know. Sometimes that is good, other times it is not.

"I wanted to show the hands. We do so much with our hands – from working to worshiping. We encourage, love, and support one another with our hands. I also love the little girl. She is reaching for something more." - Shawna

Figure 12

When it comes to good people, I think the families represented by all the co-researchers are some of the best there is. But, we are all also the result of what our parents and families did not do and/or know. Most of us are first generation college students. This means that we did higher education on our own. We have the scars, debt, and poor choices to prove it. The two most prevalent concerns voiced by the co-researcher's families were the finances of college and the proximity to home. Based on their paradigms and life experiences, this is not surprising. It is also not surprising that this impacted our decisions about college in potentially negative ways. Another interesting finding to note: the only person who was told that they had to go to college by family members is the only person who does/did not like it. Our family is in us. For better or

worse, *family is family, in church or in prison. You might look just like 'em, that don't mean you're like 'em. But you love 'em.*[133]

Faith. **Family.** Culture. – 'Living out the Chahta Spirit of Faith, Family, and Culture'

Faith. Family. CULTURE.

Culture. It is a complex word. It can be associated with so many different things. Seemingly everything has a "culture." It is in the workplace, in hobbies, online, and so forth. When used in southeastern Oklahoma, however, it typically means your racial or ethnic heritage, practices, and/or bloodline. It oftentimes means being Choctaw (as if southeastern Oklahoma does not have any other culture or a culture all its own). What is our Choctaw culture though? What does it look like?

"People want a show in Durant. It is what is expected. If you don't you are not a 'good Indian.' I feel like you don't have to know the social dances. I can be me and still be Indian." I think she is at a point many get to. We start to question the performances of our culture as a means of cultural capital and justification to Natives and non-Natives alike. Powwows are a great example. We were always taught that Choctaw people did not originally have powwows. Yet, powwow attendance and understanding powwow culture is something most Native people in Oklahoma recognize as a means of legitimizing a person as a "cultural Native." A "cultural Native/Indian" is one who practices traditions, customs, languages, and so forth. This contrasts

[133] Kasey Musgraves, *Family is Family*, 2014.

what can be referred to as a "heritage Native/Indian." A "heritage Native" is someone who is enrolled in a tribe based on blood quantum but may not identify as Native or practice Native culture.

I have often pondered how attending Choctaw Nation cultural events, participating in Choctaw Nation employee encouraged social dances, and learning to bead while wearing a traditional European dress with Choctaw diamonds[134] sewn on made one "culturally" Choctaw. There were spans of decades when these practices were not ever formally offered or, to most people's knowledge, practiced in any consistent way by Choctaw people in Oklahoma. The monetary growth in the past several decades has provided ample opportunities for a reclaiming of cultural practices through Choctaw Nation programs and services. Although this is one of the many benefits to an economically growing tribe, some still argue that there is a lack of authenticity. Is there internalized meaning in these new (to many) practices? Is this a way to reclaim some of what was lost? Is this something that allows our nation to continue to operate in its current state? Is this a way for other tribes within our state, nation, and world to see us as the Native construction they recognize? Does this step in when phenotype and language may not be there? Does this reclaim? Does this honor?

Like most identity performance, I am left with more questions than answers. Beautifully articulated by a co-researcher who represented Choctaw Nation in Washington DC as a youth: "I feel like they (Choctaw Nation) felt like they had to teach me how to *be* Choctaw instead of me qualifying to speak on it since I am Choctaw, I am from here, and I have the same issues. That was hard for a fourteen-year old. It made me question myself and my identity as a Choctaw for a long time after that." Many of our group agreed. She went on to say that she "got more flak from

[134] The diamond is a popular symbol in Choctaw culture. It represents the diamond-back rattlesnake.

Natives than non-Natives. After I got back from DC, people back home were like 'she's advocating for Choctaw Nation and she's not even a princess." We all laugh at this comment. It sounds about right. It also sounds so wrong.

Another co-researcher had this to say: "I am moving towards being more genuine and authentic. I no longer feel a sense of connection when I see things like moccasins. I am moving toward more relevant things." She was one of most who talked about moving from grasping at symbols from the past to delving into more relevant issues in Indian country. Although there is nothing wrong with reclaiming practices, language, and customs that were taken from our ancestors (and us), there are important issues and rights that need to be addressed in our current political climate (continued assaults and erasure of Indigenous women, water rights, land rights, and so much more) as well. What makes us Native?

"This represents community and gathering place."- Madeline

Figure 13

What makes us Native may not be what others might assume or recognize. Media, policing both within and outside of tribes, and constructed caricatures by much of our public

education system can leave Native identity messy at best. Symbols, performance, and customs aside, identity can be challenging enough within a tribal nation. Choctaw Nation is no different. The two youngest co-researchers in the group talked about their time working at two Choctaw Nation owned and run eating establishments (Chili's and Gilly's). "I'm proud to be Choctaw. When Chief and Council come in, it makes me happy. Other people get mad or don't care at all. Some don't even know who they are." Another co-researcher jumps in: "I know, when I was working at Gilly's people would be like 'what is tribal council' and I would have to tell people like that's *name omitted* (tribal councilman). It is interesting when the cultural and commercial sides bump into one another." The reason for their policing of knowledge may largely stem from the fact that Choctaw tribal members/citizens get preference for jobs. Many (but not all) of Choctaw Nation employees are Choctaw. However, that does not mean that they understand tribal government or politics or even know who key Choctaw representatives are. The difference with these co-researchers is that they have participated in multiple Choctaw Nation programs that give them insight that others don't have (or don't know that they would want or need).

Another popular type of policing (perhaps both internal and external) came when people relocated to another area. One co-researcher talked about spending time in an internship and having to develop ways to talk about being Native in a way that others (not from Oklahoma) could understand. Another said it like this: "Moving helped me talk about being Native. I felt like I had to develop narratives that others understood. It was almost like I had to provide proof. I would always end up just talking about youth programs and our 'powwow,' aka Labor Day Festival, every year. They wanted to hear about our 'culture' and I felt like I had to tell them things that they would understand."

Another co-researcher agreed and shared a story about how you have to testify as an expert witness for child custody cases. Her professional position requires that she do this. She has to give specific information to 'prove' that she is a 'Native' person with authority to speak on the welfare of 'Native' children. The group was stunned. I wonder who these 'protections' protect?

Oklahoma is a state so rich in history. Our Native heritage and legacies alone cover the landscape from east to west. Oklahoma is our homeland, well Oklahoma Choctaws' homeland anyway. Southeastern Oklahoma, with its rivers, mountains, and woodlands, is definitely the homeland my co-researchers know and love. "Southeastern Oklahoma is a state of mind. Being Choctaw played a huge part of that. Understanding what it means to be Choctaw and Native American – what a blessing it is. I have a strong cultural connection. Choctaw Nation is involved in everything in southeastern Oklahoma. I belong to a tribe that cares. I want to use my talents to help my tribe because they helped me. Choctaw people are the smartest, coolest, most driven people." Another co-researcher agreed and added: "My definition of home broadened when I left. It became more regional. My hometown to southeastern Oklahoma. Southeastern Oklahoma is Choctaw Nation. That is my identity." She went on to say: "Being away you see a different way of life. Choctaw Nation is a big factor in Southeastern Oklahoma being less impoverished. (Other parts of the state don't quite have that infrastructure.) I want to come back and make it better – continue the upward mobility." This is a sentiment echoed by every co-researcher. It is also a narrative voiced across the broader region. Are we socialized to give back? Is it in us to give back? How do we know what that looks likes? Or, are we really just looking for a good reason to come back home?

Another co-researcher spoke about our homeland, southeastern Oklahoma, as a "source of our material culture." When asked to elaborate, he had this to say: "Our stories involve animals and the earth and the water. Also, we see the same land that they (our ancestors) saw when they first got here. It is so powerful." Powerful, indeed.

"Our hands also care for all things. Animals are important. She is holding a luksi."- Sarah

Figure 14

Although almost all co-researchers have strong ties and deep devotion to the 10.5 counties, many of the co-researchers talked about the ways in which higher education had played a significant role in the development of their Choctaw identity. Ironically, the ones who most noted this were the ones who left southeastern Oklahoma for education. Student programming was one important element for many of the students. "Being a part of the (Choctaw Nation) program changed everything. I learned so much. I am confident in my Choctaw identity because of it." Others noted that leaving a place and experiencing new things strengthened their ties to

home and their Choctaw identity. Some experienced this due to challenges in the Native programming and student organizations at their school. Some talked about feeling ostracized and "out of place." Unfortunately, with identity development in college can come policing of practices, behaviors, and phenotypes. Some felt that this was the case with them. Others noted that having to explain themselves and being in an environment where inclusivity was important helped them to better embrace their Choctaw identity. Had the cultural climate been different, I do not know that this would have been the case.

Perhaps even more so in culture than in faith or family, each co-researcher spoke about individual people who changed everything for them when it came to culture. Every single person named at least one Choctaw Nation program leader. The stories they shared were of being chosen, of being told that they could accomplish anything, and being told that they had Chahta hearts and should be proud of who they are. There were also tales of Choctaw elders and Choctaw citizens who stepped up and stepped in exactly when we needed them. I, personally, remember a Choctaw elder and instructor at the community college I attended who invested in me. He spoke out loud the good he saw in me. He told me I had a light and that he saw so much good in my future. He took me, along with several other students, to enroll in a university. I did not think about it much then. Now I know what a difference he made. These people each left a mark. One co-researcher talked about interviewing Chief Batton while interning at the Biskinik[135]. He was particularly struck by a comment Chief made about how "sometimes you gotta show your teeth, show some of that tvshka (warrior) spirit. I was like, 'alright Miko.'[136]. In many ways, we are doing that now. To be a warrior does not always look like suiting up in armor and

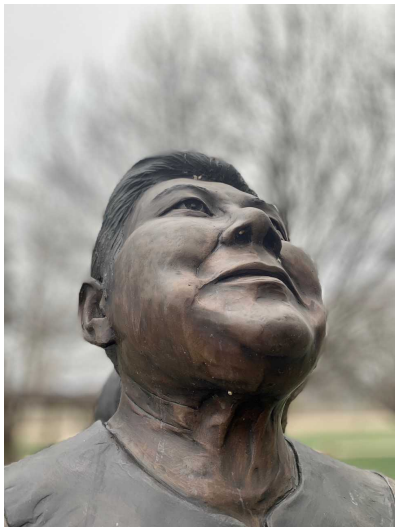
[135] The Choctaw Nation newspaper.

[136] Miko means Chief.

fighting. Sometimes the tvshka spirit is in being honest or in saying nothing at all. It can be found in loving actions and making difficult choices. It can be standing up when no one else will. It can be taking off the armor and laying down your weapon while standing your ground. I think there is a little bit of tvshka spirit in us all. Maybe in that, we find our culture – and ourselves. It just takes one person. Be that person.

"Like us, he has his sight set on where he is going. He is aimed at a goal." (Note: This statue is called "Tvshka") - Wes

Figure 15



"We are an upward looking people. No matter what tries to drag us down. We look up."- Sarah

Figure 16

Faith. Family. **Culture.** – 'Living out the Chahta Spirit of Faith, Family, and Culture'

‘Living Out the Chahta Spirit’ – Today and Tomorrow - (Chapter VI)

Natives in modernity. What does that look like? Over the years, I have asked my Choctaw students about the Choctaw ways of being and doing. When I tell them about something of our traditional culture, I ask what that looks like now. If they are unsure, I ask them what they think or feel about the topic. Once they answer, my reply is a simple one: “You are Choctaw. Therefore, that is a modern way of Choctaw knowing, thinking, or believing.”

To say that someone is a “good Choctaw,” “good Native,” or “good American” (and so forth) would imply that there are those with the power to define what that is (quite possibly for their own benefit). This type of policing is detrimental, rooted in fear, and weaves tangled knots around trauma and insecurity. This can be due to internal pain or conflict within a person or it can be from external pressures above (in a hierarchal structure) or around the individual. It can also be rooted in the very real pain of having their culture claimed and/or misappropriated. These can be tensions found within the culture or community or can come from the outside. There is a very real informal education that takes place within each culture and the various subcultures within. This can especially be true of Native communities. In the learning, re-learning, and reclaiming of knowledge, traditions, and customs, there can be differences of opinion on interpretation and modern practice. Some Natives believe that they should adhere to pre-contact[137] traditions. Others believe that they should follow the current trends in beliefs upheld by their tribal governments. Some believe they should learn, grow, research, listen, and follow what feels right (spiritually or metaphysically). Every person is on a journey. It is like a tree. We have powerful roots and strong layers of knowing that allow us to branch off and reach for whatever

[137] Ways of knowing and being before interaction with colonizers.

lies beyond in our own direction. Our branches of diversity give us a fullness and beauty. They give others rest and shade and comfort. Unlike parceling ourselves out like the famous "Giving Tree" storybook, we give by remaining intact – by weathering the storm, by allowing our internal conflict to bring us to new heights.

"This represents our forward and upward thinking. It reminds me of that saying about how they tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds."- Kandace

Figure 17

There are also those with the power to speak into who people already are and celebrate the beautiful contributions they bring to their culture(s). That is a responsibility and honor that should not be taken lightly. These individuals are the one person that changed everything for someone. When you do not feel judged about your **faith**/religion or lack of faith/religion, you can accept yourself and work towards giving back to your community. When you do not feel judged about your **family** practices, or lack of family practices, you can accept yourself and be a

powerful advocate for your community. When you do not feel judged about the outward representations of your **culture** or lack of outward representations of your culture, you can accept yourself and reach higher for yourself and your community. It just takes one person. Be that person.

In their own ways and timing, each of these co-researchers are becoming that person. I asked them about modern Natives and what the present and future looks like. One co-researcher stated: "We are the only minority group that have to prove who we are. But, we are also the only minority group people want to be a part of. There is a lot of misinformation and there needs to be a re-education. But, I think we have to stop getting caught up in proving it. Just be it!" We talked a little about where and how people want to be Native. We talked about the problems that it can cause and what it means for us. I touched on the ideas of 'white-passing' and the battle we face within ourselves, not to mention, the internal and external battles we face in our communities as a result of phenotype, class, and other intersections of privilege or lack thereof. I touched on how class can serve as an equalizer or mediator and how so much of this is linked to monetary things. I mentioned K-12 students across the state and how, regardless of their background or phenotype, would be hard pressed to tell you which tribal nation they are a citizen. I wanted to bring up the erasure. I wanted to bring up the internalized shame across this state. I wanted to advocate for education and conversation that was not linked to learned performance. They were not ready for that conversation. However, they are closer to being ready now than they were.

"This moss is like us. We were the stuff no one wanted and we were where people did not want us to be. They did not see us as real. But, we grew anyway." - Kandace

Figure 18

"I think it is for sure okay to be Native now. Chief is really big on revitalization. We have all types of preservation, stickball, language and stuff. The language is everywhere now. It's on bathrooms and everywhere. It is about teaching ourselves and reclaiming what was lost. It is like the pendulum has swung. We are not struggling as much. We are not fighting to survive physically. We are learning and growing and developing. The nature of the battle has changed."

"I love seeing the Choctaw and English words beside one another for basic things. Language revitalization is so important." - Wes

Figure 19

The co-researcher comment shifted the conversation. Everyone nodded in agreement before another co-researcher commented: "I think we are really focusing on growth right now. Keeping up with the times and growing and giving our people tools to overcome and do more to get closer to a level playing field." Another agreed. "I feel like learning is a modern Choctaw story. We are not just focused on survival. We are going to the next level. We are working for better jobs, learning, and being proud." Everyone nodded, seemingly satisfied with these comments. With a tone of finality someone said: "Modern day for us is learning about it. Learning is being a modern Native." I had to, in many ways, agree.

"We all start somewhere and then we build on it and get better. Our ancestors laid the foundation and we walk up it while building more for the next generation."- Sophie

Figure 20

Another co-researcher hesitatingly said: "I'm owning my heritage unapologetically more so now, but I was thinking about what modern Native cultures look like and I could not help but think about things like modern Native fashion, pop art from like Steven Paul Judd, movements like NODAPL[138], Native short films, Native organizations, and stuff." I would agree that there is an intertribal movement of sorts that is building and creating a whole new modern Native culture. Some of the co-researchers were more familiar with this than others. The co-researchers who left the 10.5 counties had more knowledge of these cultural shifts and material culture. We talked about how Choctaws we knew from outside of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma territory were very involved in these intertribal programs and communities. Their beliefs and behaviors are not like that of the Choctaws we are or the Choctaws we saw growing up. We agreed that

[138] No Dakota Access Pipeline (NODAPL), A Political Protest and Activist Movement at Standing Rock Reservation.

class (as these people are typically more financially stable than many of us) and proximity to Choctaw Nation play an important role in identity formation, performance, and material culture.

Our conversation trickled to more light-hearted topics. We spent some time laughing about casino culture and how people think that casinos are who we are. The laughter was laced with a tinge of anger and frustration. "People think modern Natives went from teepees to casinos. There is such a stigma and stereotype. Not to mention the irony of 'taking advantage of people who took advantage of you.'" They continued on with jokes about how it helps pay for our education. As the conversation was waning, one of the co-researchers said something that stopped the chatter: "Casinos are commerce, not culture." As a chorus of "yassses," "amens," "snaps for that," and "retweets" echoed throughout the room, we all knew we were 'practicin' what we preach.' I used to be somewhat ashamed of some of the practices of Choctaw Nation. There used to be a fire in me that despised that they (Choctaw government and powers that be) had seemingly 'sold out.' I felt the inauthenticity and disingenuous performances for monetary gain. There was an anger for 'playing the old White man's game.' Over the years, I have come to a better understanding. I was right about a lot. I could lash out and roast all that is wrong. Sometimes I really want to. However, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is growing. There is a resurgence of pride. There is a revitalization of language. There are programs and services. The economy is growing in southeastern Oklahoma. Maybe southeastern Oklahoma saved us way back then, but we are saving it now. Maybe operating in the White man's way in this White man's world, will allow us to start to reclaim what was lost. Maybe in the 'selling out,' we are buying our culture (and ourselves) back. We have casinos and resorts. We have restaurants, grocery stores, and travel plazas. We have farms and ranches. We also have hospitals, clinics, wellness centers, housing programs, education programs, community centers, and so much more.

As long as we honor and take care of people, I see value. However, I sometimes fear that we have done a face lift, when what we need is a heart transplant. I see all the sides. I'm not sure where I stand. But, I think it is pretty clear where this group of Chahta hearts lie: "Not gonna lie, I see the future Choctaw council in this room right now." Maybe she is right. Are they ready for a new heart?

"She is reaching to pick the tanchi. No matter our age, we can help and nourish our communities."- Jenna

Figure 21

Faith. Family. Culture. – 'Living out the Chahta Spirit of Faith, Family, and Culture'

Coming Full Circle and Into the Future

These thoughts allow us to look forward and backward in the same glance[139]. They create us as we create them. They show us that research is story, research is relationship, and research is

[139] King, 2003

creative. Through our research reach-out, research remarks, and research retreat, we each created something new. We became as we are constantly becoming. In this was honor. In this was expression. In this was creativity. We told the story. We honored the relationships. We created the change. I think we are all our ancestors prayed we would be.

Our identities are created in the choices that we make. Nelson[140] and Lyons[141] remind us to think about Native identity as communal and linked to histories and stories. Although I do not disagree, I think the choice is ours. To be Native is to make the decisions of who to be and how to represent who you are despite warring notions within and without. Others may agree or disagree based on a variety of factors. For so many reasons, the choice to be who we are, has been taken from us. It has been erased. Perhaps the option was not presented due to fear or survival, separation, trauma, or a myriad of other things. Shared history and community do play a part in this development. But, creating spaces and providing information about our choices is vital – in our communities, in higher education, and beyond. (I do understand that there are people who assert an identity in which they cannot 'prove' or 'trace.' This opens the door for hurt and trauma based on the misappropriation of culture. This is an important argument. One that would take much more than this space and time to dissect. However, in the space of this work, I argue for compassion, freedom of expression, and love.) What we decide we are to be is a powerful choice to make. Equally powerful, is who we do life with – they can impact our choices. Choose wisely.

[140] Nelson, 2014.
[141] Lyons, 2010.

Similar to identity, our land is a part of us. Our home is also a part of us. Taun[142] and Fitzgerald[143] help us think about the ways in which we, as Natives, are connected to the land. We are connected through our stories, our past, and those who came before. The land is a part of us. It can never leave us. We carry it with us and it becomes us. Whether it be the preacher from 'back home' Sunday morning or your grandmother, there is a wisdom that knows place and space allow for options – options that may not have a place in previous space. Higher education increases options. The difficult (and oftentimes painful) decision to change is ours to make. Deciding home is where you make it is just as difficult. In the end, most of my co-researchers and I have or will go home – to our families – to God's country – to Choctaw country.

Similar to Brayboy's work, returning home to give back and help family and community was a sentiment shared by all of the co-researchers. Similarly, spending time at home while finding home on campus were also a part of their stories. This is also consistent with existing Native scholarship by Waterman, Lee, Guillory, and Shotton, among others. The existing work helps us think about the role that faith, family/community, home, and culture play in the lives of Native students as they navigate through higher education. This work extends that conversation into the tensions that can be found in creating spaces for these diverse students and all the reasons we must invite Native student voices into the choices and create space for meaningful dialogue. I believe higher education can be a site of healing and growth. I have seen it happen. In order to achieve this, the academy must be open to differing ways of knowing, listening to Native student voices, welcoming all identities, providing options, freedom of expression, and choice, and supporting students as they grow, learn, and explore without fear of policing from

[142] Taun, 1977.
[143] Fitzgerald, 2015.

either side of the fear-based spectrum. This scholarship is one step in that direction – and sometimes all we need is one step.

The aim of this work was to draw from Indigenous paradigms and arts-based educational inquiry in order to collect Choctaw student stories of higher education, home, and identity. It is my hope that the sharing of these student stories helps Native students to understand that their voice matters. I think it also illustrates the complexities of Native student identity. This work shows us that there is not a single Native student narrative – but many Native student narratives. To assume that there is just one Native way of knowing, doing, or being is further erasure. This work is important in that it assists in facilitating a better understanding of the complexities of Native students, their relationship to home and community, and their experiences in higher education. It gives us space for conversation within tribal support communities and initiatives and for higher educational institutions as they strive to better understand and serve all students. This work is not for everyone. But, it is for those who come along and see themselves (or their students, colleagues, community members) in these stories. Sometimes, that is enough.

Working with Choctaw college students and working with my co-researchers on this project has only further solidified the need for this type of programming and conversation on college campuses. Tribal education departments and higher education alike would benefit from these types of partnerships and collaborations. When college students have an opportunity to embrace their Native identities in a safe and welcoming setting, it changes three generations. It speaks to the individual, sparks insight and conversation with their parents oftentimes, and will play a much larger role in the ways they raise their own children. What was once used as a site of erasure (education) can be a site of renewed hope and a reclaiming of ourselves and our nations.

A few additional important lessons from the stories revolve around the highly contextual nature of identity. Higher education would do well to understand the complex nature of Native identity and be careful not to assume the single narrative many have been socialized to see. An openness to dialogue in the classroom and university community space is also important. Developing partnerships with community and tribal leaders across campus departments could also help facilitate an atmosphere of understanding and support. Additionally, tribes could assist college and university stakeholders with opportunities to partner and learn from one another as questions arise. Tribal nations can also help facilitate opportunities for students who wish to return or relocate for the first time to the places and spaces where their tribes reside. Higher education could also help support students' creativity, imagination, and business acumen to create opportunities for their hometowns and their people (if they so choose to return).

Ultimately, in this project, I wanted to learn if higher education changes our identities, for better or worse. I think it is safe to assert that it does, for better – and for worse. I wanted to know if higher education made it challenging to return home because we changed or because there were no opportunities for us there. Again, the answer is both. I wanted to know if having spaces to learn and grow in your Choctaw identity within the context of higher education changed the way you interacted in the community. Yes, may higher education and our communities see our potential, passion, and power to change ourselves and our home for the next generation. I wanted to know about our formal and informal educational metamorphoses[144] as it related to our identities and relationship with home, family, and community. I think it is clear that there were people along the way who changed everything for the co-researchers. This gives

[144] Jane Roland Martin, *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006)

us hope that despite flawed systems and colonized structures, people can always step in and change our lives – may we be those people. There was also something else I wanted. I wanted to share the stories of young Choctaw students who were from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I wanted to give a voice to ways of knowing and being Native that are not what everyone expects. I wanted to help people see the faces and the snapshots of the lives of real Native young people and I wanted them to be better for it. I think we all are. This was only the beginning.

There is so much more work to do. The titles for my planned topics for future research stemming from this piece are as follows: Identity, Communities, and Power Structures: Claiming, Invention, and Existentialism, Authentic Dissonance: A Look at Modern Tribal Government and Native Identities, The Allusion/Illusion of Freedom: A Native Conversation, Choctaw Christians: The Role of Faith in Identity, The Educational Metamorphoses of Native Students: A Conversation with Jane Roland Martin, This is Why We Can't Go Home: The Burden of Choice and Change, Overcoming Policing of Marginalized People in Academic Spaces: A Native Case Study, Decolonizing Education: A Look at Stories from the Field, Research as Storytelling: A Native Perspective, Arts-Based Indigenous Research: Past, Present, Future.

These are our stories. These are our songs. Stories tell us who we were, who we are, and who we will be. We live in stories – stories we have heard and stories we have created. May we never stop telling them.

Research is Storytelling. Research is Relationship. Research is Creative.

Tell the Story.

Honor the Relationship.

Create the Change.

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