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NATIVE AMERICAN HEGEMONIC STRUGGLE AND PROBLEMATIZATIONS:
EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TRIBAL SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES AND
DIFFERENCES IN POWER AND PLACE WITHIN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

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NATIVE AMERICAN HEGEMONIC STRUGGLE AND PROBLEMATIZATIONS:
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Native American Hegemonic Struggle and Problematizations:

Exploring the Connections between Tribal Socioeconomic Disparities and Differences in Power and Place within Capitalist Society

Abstract While Native Americans collectively fall among the most socioeconomically marginalized groups in American society, disparities in resources and wealth among different tribes are more substantial than often assumed, and a complex array of structural and cultural factors go into accounting for these. In order to get a sense of Native American discourses and consider them in light of their historical contexts in navigating issues of self-determination in a broader capitalist society, I conduct a qualitative analysis of an array of tribal newspapers. To a large degree, these discourses show how tribes differ in their connections to the broader capitalist economy and society. I use three major theoretical ideas to sensitize and inform the analysis: Burns and LeMoyné’s concept of “prioritizing summary symbols,” Gramsci’s theory of “hegemony,” and Foucault’s notion of “problematization.” I find evidence that differences in discursive approaches to Native American problematizations and summary symbols such as “traditional” indigenous culture versus “western” capitalism, self-determination, sovereignty, and tribal economic development, reflect differences in power and privilege among tribes. Seen in a comparative and historical context, my work can help to inform how language and culture are situated in broader hegemonic struggles.

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Keywords

Native American, self-determination, tribal economic development, prioritizing summary symbols, cultural hegemony, problematizations, power and privilege

Introduction

In February 2013, Oglala Lakota and Chicano journalist Simon Moya Smith posted an article on *Indian Country Today* entitled “The Dirt Poor and Filthy Rich: A Study in Contrasts.” In the article, Moya-Smith describes two Native American tribes on opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum: the Seminoles of Florida and the Oglala Lakota of Pine Ridge, South Dakota. For the Seminoles of Florida, who opened the first casino on Indian lands, gaming has proved to be quite profitable, with the tribe’s net worth estimated to be several billion dollars, allowing them to purchase 120 Hard Rock Café restaurants from a British corporation. By contrast, the Oglala Lakota of Pine Ridge struggle with high rates of poverty, dilapidated housing, and an overall lack of jobs and economic opportunity on the reservation. The researchers interviewed offered a number of reasons for the lack of development on the Pine Ridge reservation, ranging from geographic isolation, historical racism and exclusion in the marketplace, the legacies of the Indian Reorganization Act of the 1930s, and the inability or refusal of the tribe to invest in ventures outside the reservation. Interestingly, in the case of the Seminoles of Florida, Native American scholar Bruce Duthu argued that a mixture of proximity to tourist’s destinations, investments outside the reservation, and “a confluence of traditional decision-making with the western capitalist structure” are key components to their relative economic success. As Moya-Smith himself somewhat acknowledges, the Seminoles of Florida stand out considering that American Indians and Alaskan Natives as a collective had \$15,000 less median income than the U.S. average for 2010 (Moya-Smith, 2013).

So, what are we to make of such varied Native American experiences within American capitalist society? Beyond exploring the many structural and cultural factors that help explain such socioeconomic disparities between tribes, how do these differences influence discourses on

Native American historical experiences of capitalism, the meaning of tribal self-determination, and tribal differences in navigating modern capitalist society? In this paper, I use Burns and LeMoyne's concept of "prioritizing summary symbols," Gramsci's theory of "hegemony," and Foucault's notion of "problematization" to anchor both a theoretical understanding of scholarly and Native discourses, and a qualitative analysis of tribal newspapers which explore these issues related to Native American history, self-determination, and capitalist enterprise within American capitalist society. In the end, I argue that differences in discursive approaches to Native American problematizations and summary symbols like "traditional" indigenous culture versus "western" capitalism, self-determination, sovereignty, and tribal economic development reflect differences in power and privilege between tribes. Furthermore, these discourses also show how tribes differ in their connections to the broader capitalist economy and society.

A General Overview of Native American Socioeconomics Today

In the United States, Native Americans are one of the most socioeconomically marginalized groups within society. A long history of land and resource loss, racism, and discrimination has left many Native groups in lower income brackets or near outright poverty, with few job opportunities and a general lack of economic development (Healey and O'Brien, 2015, pp. 205-207). Using census data, Snipp and Hirschman (2004) found that, along with other racial minorities, American Indians collectively experienced only small improvements in occupational status and income during the period of 1970-1990 in the wake of "Affirmative Action" and other government policies which aimed to improve the socioeconomic situations of racial minorities.

Furthermore, according to 2016 American Community Survey data, single-race American Indians and Alaska Natives had a median income of \$39,719, much less than the

median income of \$57,617 for the entire U.S. population, and their 26.2% poverty rate was the highest of any racial group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Huyser et al. (2010) even found that while single-race Native Americans had the lowest levels of both educational attainment and earnings, all the biracial groupings of Native Americans (white and Native American, Hispanic and Native American, and black and Native American) had lower levels of education and earnings compared to whites. Thus, Glick and Han (2015) have shown that while changes in Census policy since 2000 allowing respondents to select more than one racial category have allowed more advantaged persons to begin categorizing as American Indian or Alaska Native, poverty rates in particular remain high for Native Americans as a whole relative to whites.

Still, other quantitative research indicates that economic differences between *different* groups of Native Americans is more substantial than usually assumed. Huyser et al. (2014) have found significant variation in poverty rates across different Native groups, both in terms of racial categorization and tribal affiliation. Using American Community Survey data from the 2006-2010 period, Huyser and colleagues found that while American Indians as a group were more likely to be in poverty compared to non-Hispanic whites both in terms of absolute (governmental) and relative (median income) thresholds, the *within-group* variation in poverty rates for American Indians is greater than that found for non-Hispanic whites. In the end, the authors argue that different historical processes such as the federal regulation of tribal memberships, reservation status, and intermarriage with other racial groups have shaped both how people decide to categorize themselves racially, as well as the differences in the “socioeconomic profiles” of American Indians in different tribes.

Summary Symbols, Hegemony, and Problematization

So, how does one begin to make sense of how these tribal socioeconomic disparities are related to discourses on Native American history, tribal self-determination, and tribal economic practice? First, we should start from the ground up, and discuss the ways in which cultural schemas themselves shape both social action and social consciousness within specific historical contexts by helping individuals and groups process and simplify information, particularly within discourse. Drawing on work from cognitive psychology, Burns and LeMoyne (2003) demonstrate how individuals are linked to cultural processes through contextually bound “semantic networks” and “summary symbols.” Due to cognitive limits, “semantic networks” help people prioritize certain information that helps them pragmatically navigate their lives. Within these semantic networks exist “summary symbols” which consist of words or short phrases that help to package, organize, and centralize complex information. For instance, one can think of terms like “equality,” “justice,” and “freedom” as sacrosanct summary symbols that organize and guide various social discourses within American society more generally. However, the centrality of certain summary symbols over others, as well as the linking up of different summary symbols to one another, is ultimately tied to the material realities of individuals and groups, and their positions within the stratification system of a society. Thus, because summary symbols exist within specific social contexts and “semantic networks,” the extent to which a concept becomes a “prioritizing summary symbol” depends on both its functionality and connection to other important summary symbols within the given worldview of groups and individuals.

Still, while Burns and LeMoyne’s conceptualization of “prioritizing summary symbols” lays a nice theoretical foundation on networks of meaning that drive symbolic action, how can

we begin to grapple with the power dynamics faced by Native Americans within capitalist society more specifically? As a Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci offers a critical analysis of power structures in capitalist society, particularly with the cultural or ideological spheres of capitalist society (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2017:279). Gramsci's chief theoretical contribution is his notion of "hegemony", or the ability of "dominant" social groups to rule over "resistant" or "subordinate" groups in society through both coercive and moral/ideological means. Dominant groups "lead" the classes that accept their "hegemony" within society through moral/ideological "consent", and "dominate" any resistant groups through coercive governmental and economic means. However, dominant groups must "lead" before they are truly able to "dominate", and continue to "lead" subordinate groups within society even after assuming control of legitimized force, maintaining their power through the consent of the subordinated, rather than through brute force alone (Gramsci, [1971] 2009, p. 75).

Interestingly, Gramsci touches on the notion of "compromise" between dominant and subordinate groups in society, but not at the expense of the broader interests of the dominant class at the economic level. The goal of "the State", or the various public and private institutions in society that serve both coercive or moral functions, is to make the cultural and ideological interests of the dominant group universal. By transcending narrow economic interest alone through concessions, the dominant group is able to align subordinate cultural and ideological interests with processes of economic production that ultimately benefit the dominate classes. Thus, the interests of the dominant group are largely maintained, but a perfect "hegemony" centered around economic goals alone is impossible. What is important to Gramsci, more generally, is the role of "the State" as a cultural and ideological "educator" in capitalist society, continuously developing "civilization" to ensure the interests of the dominant class. In this way,

the “bourgeois class” in capitalist society constantly seeks to “absorb” and “assimilate” all groups existing in society both culturally and economically (Gramsci, [1971] 2009, pp. 75-80).

Again, it is important to remember that Gramsci heavily criticized standard interpretations of the relationship between structure (the economic base consisting of relations based on the means of productive forces in society) and superstructure (a given society’s cultural, ideologically, and political institutions) articulated in Marx’s concept of “historical materialism.” Instead of thinking of cultural, ideological, and political developments as merely inevitable extensions of economic base relations, Gramsci argues that hegemonic struggle consists of unique “historical blocs” of conflicting groups with their own cultural and ideological imperatives to distinguish themselves from one other and establish their own power within a given historical state of economic relations. Thus, the cultural and ideological realms of historically specific societies themselves serve as key movers of history that act back upon economic base structures (Gramsci, 2000, pp. 190-194).

Clearly, Gramsci’s idea of “hegemony”, and the relationship between dominant and subordinate (and/or resistant”) groups and ideologies leaves a lot of room for interpretation. As such, more recent scholars have reinterpreted many of the implications within Gramsci’s theory of “hegemony” when looking at other stratifying forces in society such as gender, sexuality, disability, and race/ethnicity (Storey, 2009, p. xviii). For example, Stuart Hall (1986) has argued Gramsci’s theory of “hegemony” is anything but economic determinism or mere reflections of class struggles alone. Hall asserts that Gramsci’s emphasis on “historic specificity”, the blurred relationship between the “civil” and “political” spheres in modern society, and the interplay between “dominant” and “subordinate/resistant” movements within specific contexts allows for a multifaceted, contradictory, and at times fused realm of ideas across many different “arenas of

struggle” within a given society. Therefore, to adequately study something like racism (or “racisms” as Hall words it), researchers need to consider historical context, “regional unevenness” in development and social formation, and the intersections of race, class, and culture. Furthermore, Hall advocates for highlighting combined and differentiated modes of production and incorporation in “developing” parts of the world, and an abandonment of the notion that the economic, political, and ideological realms of society develop in a perfectly linear fashion.

This more nuanced articulation of “hegemony” fits very well with what little sociological theorizing exists on the Native American experience. For example, Nagel and Snipp (1993) advocate for moving beyond the four processes that typically define research on Native Americans and other racial/ethnic minority groups: annihilation, assimilation, amalgamation, and accommodation. Instead, the authors conceptualize “ethnic reorganization” whereby “an ethnic minority undergoes a reorganization of its social structure, redefinition of ethnic group boundaries, or some other change in response to pressures or demands imposed by the dominant culture” (p. 204). According to Nagel and Snipp, there are different types of ethnic reorganization that often overlap with one another: social, economic, political, and cultural. In terms of American Indian economic reorganization specifically, the authors illustrate the tensions between “the voluntary, internally chosen, and forced, externally imposed aspects of ethnicity and ethnic change” (p. 206). Throughout history, the authors show how Native groups have navigated things like the introduction of the horse, mission-system agriculture, European fur trades, raiding of Europeans and other tribal groups, wage and slave labor, the international and American capitalist markets, urbanization, military service, and federal policies such as the reservation system and self-determination. Ultimately then, Nagel and Snipp argue that while

American Indian ethnic identity (as well as other ethnic identities) continues to persist and has deep historical roots, the reorganization of Native identities is ever evolving and historically specific.

Indeed, Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" provides a nice conceptualization of the dynamic interrelationships between dominant and subordinate/resistant groups and ideologies, and Nagel and Snipp's notion of "ethnic reorganization" illustrates the ways in which Native Americans specifically have been able to adapt and survive in response to hegemonic capitalist society. However, it is largely unclear how researchers could begin to untangle the many overlapping webs of conflict and compromise that exist in society by merely acknowledging hegemonic struggle as a state of affairs. Furthermore, how would one go about exploring differences *within* subordinate groups across different contexts? Thus, the question becomes: how does one both focus on specific points of struggle between groups while acknowledging their connectedness to differentials in power and place within the broader society? Here, Michel Foucault's notion of "problematization" may serve as a complementary analytical tool. When studying any sort of discourse within society, Foucault calls for distinctions between what he sees as "the history of ideas", "the history of mentalities", and "the history of thought". According to Foucault's conceptualization, "the history of ideas" chiefly deals with specific culturally defined symbolic systems, while "the history of mentalities" pertains to attitudes and behaviors that stem from these cultural symbolic systems. By contrast, Foucault sees "the history of thought" as analyses of moments in which one "detaches oneself" from these culturally defined symbolic systems and action schemas and treats them as objects of inquiry (Foucault, [1984] 1997, p. 117).

Foucault believes it is certain processes of change and conflict throughout different spheres of society during these moments that create “questions” or “problematizations” by making cultural systems “uncertain” and less taken for granted. Still, these “difficulties” or “problematizations” should not be viewed as inevitable consequences of these moments of change and conflict. Each articulation of a “problematization” represents an original and possible question and response to the unique social moment in which it is rooted. Furthermore, much like Hall suggests, these unique responses to “problematizations” can take on complex and contradictory forms. In the end, Foucault argues that when engaging in a “history of thought”, one should detail how both questions and responses within different “problematizations” have been constructed within particular moments of great social change and conflict, but also add to the discourse by developing new “problematizations” out of the old (Foucault, [1984] 1997, pp. 117-19).

Methodology

For the qualitative analysis, I selected four tribal newspapers: the *Lakota Times* (sometimes called the *Lakota Country Times*),¹ *The Comanche Nation News*, the *Chickasaw Times*, and the *Choctaw Community News*.² The *Lakota Times* is the official newspaper for two federal recognized tribes: the Oglala Sioux Tribe, and The Rosebud Sioux Tribe. The other three newspapers serve only one tribe each: the Comanche Nation, the Chickasaw Nation, and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Both the Lakota Sioux tribes, and the Mississippi Choctaw are reservation tribes, while the Comanche Nation and Chickasaw Nation are

¹ It should be noted that while I was initially forced to subscribe to the *Lakota Times* in order to access their digital archives, I was later able to access each cited newspaper’s link without providing login information.

² Due to issues tracking down links for all editions of *Choctaw Community News*, I was only able to provide a link to one of the cited editions. I would like to thank my colleague and Mississippi Choctaw tribal member Ozzie Willis for reaching out to family members who work for the newspaper, and were able to give me PDF files of the included editions.

Oklahoma tribes who have tribal jurisdictional areas overlapping the larger jurisdiction of the state (see U.S. Census Bureau, 1994).

I selected three editions from each newspaper over a span of a year (November 2018-October 2019) for the analysis, making the sample size 12 editions. Each edition proved quite dense for each newspaper, with most editions ranging from 20-25 pages a piece. I also supplemented with reports from the tribe (as with the Chickasaw Nation), or with editions from early periods (as with the Comanche Nation) when particular financial information couldn't be found within the sample time period. For the Lakota Sioux tribes, and the Mississippi Choctaw, I simply could not find any breakdown of tribal revenue and net worth. However, given the qualitative emphasis of this project, it was relatively easy to infer the economic standings of all the tribes. Thus, the Chickasaw Nation and Mississippi Choctaw represent relatively economically successful tribes, while both the Lakota Sioux tribes and the Comanche Nation represent tribes that struggle economically.

As far as my approach to the content analysis itself. I first read through each of the 12 editions of the tribal newspapers in PDF files, and created 10 color-coded themes derived from literatures on Native American history, tribal self-determination and sovereignty, and tribal economic development: economic success and other kinds of success, economic struggle and other types of struggle, new economic initiatives, money allocation, tribal governance, connections to the dominant society, tribal history and culture, issues relating to energy and the environment, aid from and relations with the federal government, and finally, examples of pan-tribalism. Next, I coded each instance of these respective themes within an excel file, then made another excel file where I made mostly 5-7 point summations of each theme, collapsing both the federal aid and relations, and the new economic initiatives categories into the other thematic

categories. Finally, I used both the summaries and specific examples to illustrate discursive differences around “prioritizing summary symbols” and “problematizations” relating to Native American history, tribal self-determination, and differences in navigating modern capitalist society. Given the theoretical and discursive approach to this project, I blend previous scholarship on Native American history, self-determination, and economics with my tribal newspapers analysis in each of the three sections, both because these discourses often overlap, and for purposes of narrative.

Historical Perspectives on Capitalism

Historical speaking, a key problematization for Natives and non-Natives alike has centered around what exactly constitutes “traditional” indigenous economic culture, particularly in relation to “Western” capitalism. In her introduction to *Native Pathways*, Colleen O’Neill (2004) has argued that academics have tended to, in one way or another, embrace a strict “modern/traditional dichotomy” when dealing with Native American economic histories, seeing “modern” capitalism as an oppositional destroyer of “traditional” indigenous cultures of the past. Within sociology more specifically, traditional Native American groups have largely been seen as hunter-gatherer societies that were often small in population, on the verge of hunger, engaged in environmentally friendly practices with minimal impacts on natural environments, and egalitarian with little to no concept of private property, creating a cultural gap between “Western” and “Native” societies since the colonial period (Healey and O’Brien, 2015, p. 188).

Even in his chapter for *Native Pathways*, Duane Champagne (2004) argues that most Native American cultural practices have historically been largely incompatible with stricter conceptualizations of the “capitalist enterprise” articulated by key theorists like Marx and Weber. Rather, according to Champagne, Native societies tended to embrace ceremonial redistribution

and harmony with the natural world, typically taking only what they needed for subsistence or maintaining “social-political relations,” even when participating in the fur trade or market-oriented agriculture with whites. Ironically, throughout American history, this binary distinction between “Native” and “Western” economic culture has been used both by whites seeking to justify appropriation of the lands and resources of “economically backward” Natives in the name of “progress”, as well as Native groups and those sympathetic to their cause as a tool of resistance against the marginalization of indigenous peoples and the broader societal ills of capitalism (O’Neill, 2004; Harmon, 2010).

Indeed, when looking at the tribal newspapers, it appears that some Native American groups themselves do often frame their histories as the destruction of “traditional” indigenous cultures at the hands of “Western” capitalist powers, and utilize the dichotomization of “traditional” indigenous culture and “western” capitalism as a prioritizing summary symbol. In October 2019, the president of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Rodney Bordeaux spoke at a news conference in Rome during the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon, and urged the Catholic Church to repudiate all past papal bulls supporting the “doctrine of discovery and manifest destiny” that has led to the “genocide, ecocide, and ethnocide” of not only the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, but also the Sioux. According to the article’s correspondent Inés San Martín:

Speaking about his presence in Rome, Bordeaux said that they are here to “share with our brothers and sisters [in the Amazon region] that what is happening to them now, happened to us in Dakota 120 years ago, when without consultation, they took our land away, based on economic gain.”³

Thus, Bordeaux not only sees the loss of indigenous lands as a result of colonization more generally, but also connects both the current plight of the indigenous peoples of the Amazons,

³ “BORDEAUX SAYS AMAZON IS DAKOTAS 120 YEARS AGO,” by Inés San Martín, October 24, 2019, *Lakota Times*, pp. A1,A2.

and the Sioux's loss of land at the end of the nineteenth century to capitalistic profit making specifically.

This relationship between the destruction of “traditional” indigenous societies and the hegemonic power of “Western” colonialization and capitalism is perhaps most evident when looking at the establishment of “Lawton’s Indigenous People’s Day” in November 2018 by Dr. Cornel Pewewardy of the Comanche Nation. While it is most certainly meant to be a time of celebration and pride in indigenous cultures, as well as a moment for outreach and “reconciliation” with the broader community, Dr. Pewewardy makes it very clear that Indigenous People’s Day is also about acknowledging and confronting the tragic, and often ignored, truths of Native American history:

One feature about Indigenous Peoples’ Day is that it is scheduled on the same day as Columbus Day, the second Monday of each year. It is not simply that Columbus is identified as the one who started the conquest and enslavement of Native/Indigenous peoples, the exploitation of their labor and the natural resources, and the genocidal destruction of whole cultures and peoples. Columbus Day to many Indigenous peoples has come to represent a huge legacy of suffering and destruction. He sets this modern framework of 500 years of colonization of the Indigenous peoples of North America and defines the outer limits of that legacy, which is the total destruction of Indigenous cultures.⁴

Clearly, Indigenous People’s Day serves as a direct challenge to dominant narratives of American history that tend to minimize the destruction of indigenous peoples and cultures through colonization, and includes the economic exploitation and marginalization of indigenous peoples through capitalist enterprise within its indictment.

Still, while such a conceptualization of history certainly has merit when comparing Native and European cultures, and has often proved useful within indigenous rights struggles in capitalist society, it is by no means the only lens through which to view tribal economic histories. Some scholars have argued that many pre-colonial North American indigenous groups did in fact engage in “market” driven economic practices to various extents, largely through tribal trading

⁴ “Indigenous People’s Day,” by Jolene Schonchin, November 2018, *The Comanche Nation News*, p. 14.

networks and systems of currency that spanned great distances (Smith, 2000, Chapter 2; Miller, 2001). Research has also shown that indigenous peoples greatly impacted their natural environments through agricultural practices, with evidence pointing to both “an environmental framework of sustainable development” (Smith, 2000, p. 32), as well as erosion and deforestation (Denevan, 1994). Finally, many tribes of the eastern woodlands in particular were quite large, sedentary, and agrarian, with matriarchal hierarchies based on kinships structures (Oswalt, 2009, p. 374-460).

After contact with Europeans, many Native groups also sought to gain economically from colonizers, and even found some aspects of European economic culture appealing. For instance, the “Five Tribes” of the southeast were particularly unique in their embrace of written language (Walker and Sarbaugh, 1993), westernized governance (Foreman, 1989), plantation agriculture (Harmon, 2010), market-oriented economic pursuits (Piker, 2004), and even in their high rates of intermarriage with whites (Foreman, 1989). Harmon (2010, Chapter 2) has shown how leaders in the “Five Tribes” embraced individual accumulation in order to demonstrate status as a generous redistributor of wealth. She concludes that these *tribal* economic values themselves were a driving force in trade relations between the British and the “Five Tribes”, as opposed to some “corrupting” effect of capitalist trade on “traditional” tribal cultures. In the end, while there is evidence that groups like the Okfuskee Creek initially struggled to bridge free-market consumerism with more traditional tribal beliefs which emphasized a communal economy (Piker, 2004, pp. 111-161), Harmon (2010, Chapter 3) argues that many in the “Five Tribes” had become integrated into the mainstream plantation economy of the South by the 1820s-30s, and were removed to present-day Oklahoma largely because they were seen as more or less equal economic competitors to whites.

Even today, the legacies of removal reverberate for those in the “Five Tribes” of Oklahoma, stirring up feelings of both sadness for the losses experienced, but also pride in the great strength demonstrated by tribal ancestors. Throughout the editions of *Chickasaw Times* specifically, various people in the tribe describe how their ancestors “overcame”, “endured”, and “persevered” during times of assault on both the cultural and material life of Chickasaws such as removal and even Oklahoma statehood. Such terms serve as prioritizing symbols through which Chickasaws understand their history. As demonstrated by tribal legislator Linda Briggs’ letter to fellow Chickasaws in May 2019, many see the tribe’s present-day prosperity in their “new homeland” as contingent upon ancestors overcoming past hardships:

Of course, it wasn’t like that 180 years ago following the removal of our ancestors from our Southeastern homelands to this new place. It was raw and rugged and often forbidding. Chickasaws were really “starting over” and building new foundations for just about every facet of their individual and tribal lives. And they made it! They carved out their territory, ratified a new constitution and got on about the business of operating a government and caring for the people.⁵

Interestingly, Briggs’ rendition of the Chickasaws carving out a life for themselves in this “raw and rugged and often forbidding” place contains shades of historian Grant Foreman’s (1989) claim that the “Five Tribes” a huge impact on the “settling” of the American West and the “prairie tribes” after relocation.

Indeed, a big part of what the Chickasaws ultimately built in this “new homeland” involved a thriving economic base. The October 2019 edition of the *Chickasaw Times* features a segment on the Chickasaws’ fight to maintain a tribal government through Oklahoma statehood, detailing how the Chickasaw Nation built its own “healthy economy” through businesses and infrastructure leading up to statehood, even attracting non-Indian settlers looking for opportunity.⁶ Thus, the establishment of economic vitality has also served as a prioritizing

⁵ “Chickasaws of the Past, and of Today, Learn from Challenge, Build on Success,” by Linda Briggs, May 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 7.

⁶ “Chickasaw Nation Government Survived Oklahoma Statehood,” October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 7.

summary symbol within historical narratives of the Chickasaws survival, no matter the obstacles presented, as further illustrated by tribal legislator Tim Colbert:

From adversity to prosperity, together, we have worked and persevered with one mission in mind: the progress of our great Chickasaw Nation. Today, we are seeing success and prosperity not even fathomed in the early days of the re-establishment of our tribal government.⁷

Even among the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, the importance of maintaining a strong economy in the wake removal carries much weight. After the tribe hosted the Annual Meeting of United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. (USET) in November 2019, where tribal leaders discussed “building sustainable Tribal Nation economies,” among other issues impacting “Indian country,”⁸ the organization wrote Chief Cyrus Ben a letter and said:

During the removal of most Choctaw to Indian territory, a Choctaw miko described the tragedy as “a trail of tears and death.” Since then, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw have been one of the most successful Tribal Nations in Indian country, an inspiring example of the strength and determination of a people to overcome extreme hardship.⁹

Given that the Mississippi Band of Choctaw also “commemorates” the signing of the last land cession treaty in 1830 every year during the Dancing Rabbit Festival,¹⁰ it’s clear that both the legacies of removal and economic success serve as prioritizing summary symbols in understanding tribal history even for those in the “Five Tribes” who stayed in their original homelands.

In closing, it is important to remember that tribal groups have historically both engaged in the capitalist economy to various extents, while often simultaneously framing themselves as distinctive peoples with cultural practices incompatible with capitalist society. This means that any given approach to economy or framing of historical experience hasn’t been exclusive to any

⁷ “Chickasaw Nation Success Translates into Positive Outcomes for Chickasaw Families,” Tim Colbert, November 2018, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 6.

⁸ “Tribe Hosts USET Annual Meeting, 50th Anniversary Celebration,” October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, pp. 1,8.

⁹ “Image of USET Letter,” October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, p. 4.

¹⁰ “Dancing Rabbit Festival,” October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, p. 26.

strict typology of tribes. For instance, Hoover (2001) has shown how Comanche tribal leaders like Quanah Parker learned valuable lessons on how to navigate American capitalist society during the last years of the reservation. Parker became adept at negotiating lease agreements with Texas ranchers, while simultaneously resisting and negotiating allotment by playing to the fears of more progressive Indian reformers, arguing that his people had not yet acquired the necessary economic skills of Euro-American society that would prevent exploitation from dubious white settlers. Furthermore, while many in the “Five Tribes” of Oklahoma embraced individual land allotment and unrestricted alienation rights as a means of securing economic prosperity and recognition as true American citizens (Baird, 1990), Stremlau (2011) has shown how the relocated Cherokees of Oklahoma were able to navigate around allotment policies, mixing private land ownership into traditional communal and kinship based economic systems. Indeed, both examples highlight the adaptability of Native American groups both in terms of economic practice and discourse.

Yet, these understandings of tribal economic histories, whether they be from scholars in Native American studies or tribal leaders themselves, show how *different* tribal groups have strategically deployed *different* approaches both in economic practice and in framing their own histories within capitalist society. While the dichotomization between “traditional” indigenous cultures and “western” capitalism serves as a prioritizing summary symbol for groups like the Lakota and Comanche, other groups utilize economic success in the wake of hardships as a prioritizing symbol in organizing their tribal histories. In fact, previous research on Oklahoma tribes even sheds light on how these differences have influenced how tribes are viewed relative to one another. Baird (1990) has argued that the prevalence of white ancestry and the adoption of Euro-American culture (economic culture in particular) amongst the “Five Tribes of Oklahoma”

have made some scholars and commentators alike question whether they are “real Indians”, especially when compared to the Plains tribes in the western part of Oklahoma. But, according to Baird, denying the authentic Native identity of those in the “Five Tribes” assumes that Native cultures are “static” and without “adaptability”, and also robs them of their “right to self-definition”. Still, La Vere (2001) has argued that the nomadic, buffalo-hunting cultures of the Great Plains found little value in the “Five Tribes” sedentary, agrarian lifestyles, and largely resented both their presence in the region and attempts to “civilize” and “settle” the Plains tribes. According to La Vere, these cultural differences and the relative integration of the “Five Tribes” was quite foreign to the cultures of the Great Plains, and has impacted differences between the tribes even today. Thus, it is clear that historical differences in power and connection with the dominant society have shaped how various strategies of both economic practice and discursive framing are deployed by different tribal groups at particular times.

The Meaning of “Self-Determination”

Today, discourse on Native American socioeconomics and tribal economic development often revolves around the problematization of *justifying* the cultural distinctiveness and sovereignty of Native groups, while simultaneously *empowering* tribes so they are able to preserve and maintain both cultural integrity and a widely recognized prioritizing summary symbol amongst tribes: the right to “self-determination.” As Harmon (2010) shows in the last chapter of her book, this problematization often brings the enduring dichotomization between capitalism and “traditional” indigenous economic practices back into play, whether it be reactionary non-Natives bemoaning the economic gains of some tribes in the late twentieth century, or Natives who are concerned with imbalances of power within tribes and the corruption of indigenous cultures. Ultimately, Harmon argues that these pressures both within and outside

Native communities regarding economic place and practices have left Native Americans “damned if they did get rich and damned if they did not” (p. 277).

Clearly, both cultural distinctiveness and marginalization have been driving forces behind more oppositional stances towards capitalist society amongst many Native groups. Despite originating amongst First Nations peoples in Canada, Native scholars writing in the “indigenous resurgence” tradition capture the feelings of many indigenous groups facing the sad legacies of colonization, as the movement has had profound political and intellectual influences amongst indigenous peoples throughout North America (Elliott, 2018). For example, Glen Coulthard (2014) has heavily critiqued “politics of recognition and accommodation” offered by the colonial state. Instead, he advocates for the reconstruction of traditional indigenous cultural, political, and material modes of life, as opposed to merely seeking concessions within the dominant society’s capitalist economy and nation-state political/legal framework. Simpson (2011) juxtaposes Native cultures against capitalist consumer culture, stating that consumer culture is defined by a continual “absence” or “wanting” of meaning, while indigenous cultures “engage in processes or acts to create meaning”. Native environmentalist Winona LaDuke (2015) not only articulates a struggle against the environmental degradation of tribal lands, but also a juxtaposing of “traditional” indigenous ways of life defined by harmonious connections to natural ecologies against the ecologically destructive industrial practices of capitalist society. Yurok/Karuk poet Shaunna McCovey (1998), has even argued that experiences of poverty and inequality are essential to “Indian” identity, as indigenous peoples have historically relied on and maintained their own cultural traditions in the face of marginalization. It seems, then, that many Native Americans not only see their cultures as at least somewhat in conflict with capitalist society, but

also see marginalization itself as a prioritizing summary symbol within a collective and “genuine” Native American experience.

Throughout all the tribal newspapers, cultural distinctiveness itself was a recurring prioritizing summary symbol. All five of the tribes are greatly concerned with “preserving” tribal history and traditions, whether it be through cultural centers, language revitalization programs, ceremonial events, intergenerational exchanges, or the chronicling of tribal history and heritage. Overall, these various efforts serve one essential mission: instill a sense of cultural pride and identity within tribal members. This point was perhaps most clearly articulated by Chickasaw Governor Bill Anoatubby in the inauguration ceremony for his ninth consecutive term when he said “Our cultural identity is what guides us and informs our most crucial decisions, which is why cultural preservation and education efforts are so vital.”¹¹ Indeed, it seems that a general sense of cultural distinctiveness is something shared by all Native American groups, as maintaining cultural pride and identity is one of the chief concerns of many tribal leaders. This alone lends much credence to Nagel and Snipp’s (1993) argument that the different experiences of Native Americans since colonization represent something much more complex than “annihilation, assimilation, amalgamation, and accommodation.”

Furthermore, a “resurgence” type perspective was espoused within two of the newspapers: the *Lakota Times* and *The Comanche Nation News*, and served as a prioritizing summary symbol in their understandings of self-determination. Among the Lakota Sioux, the news of Native and non-Native involvement in pipeline protests, and other environmental causes, is quite common. Again, drawing connections to the long history of “ecocide” experienced by indigenous people in general, Rosebud Sioux Chairman Rodney Bordeaux spoke of how his tribe

¹¹ “Gov. Anoatubby Inaugurated; Lt. Gov. Anoatubby, Legislators, Justice Take Oaths of Office,” October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, pp. 1,5.

is currently losing land to pipeline construction without tribal consultation, and asked “the Catholic Church to not stand in silence any more, but to stand with us in partnership so that we can save Mother Earth.”¹² There is also evidence of support for traditional Lakota material cultural values and practices, as illustrated by executive director of the Cheyenne Youth River Project Julie Garreau when discussing their “Food Sovereignty initiatives,” like “The Winyan Toka Win Garden”:

We work hard to incorporate traditional Lakota values, spiritual principles and life ways into our Native Food Sovereignty programs and events...We’re dedicated to strengthening the connection our children and families have with their Lakota culture; that lies at the heart of everything we do...Food sovereignty is essential to building healthy, strong, self-sufficient individuals and communities...We’re mindful that every step we take here will potentially have a lasting, meaningful impact on the future of the Lakota Nation.¹³

Clearly, traditional Lakota modes of production are seen as vital to not only maintaining a connection to Lakota culture and spirituality, but also to the general well-being of the community.

This call for “traditional Lakota values” has also been seen as an antidote to the many problems within tribal politics noted throughout the newspapers, such as factionalism, distrust of the tribal government, low voter turnout, and even election fraud. As columnist Delphine Red Shirt explains:

A real challenge is to view the current system of tribal governance at Pine Ridge as foreign because it was imposed upon us. For the oyate to realize why it has never worked and how, and that as a sovereign nation, we may be able to reestablish our traditional Lakota governance system by replacing the current system in entirety; start over by going back to our old political traditions.¹⁴

According to Red Shirt, then, the problems of tribal politics has everything to do with efforts to force westernized governance onto the Lakota people, and the only remedy is to return to traditional Lakota politics. In these ways, the push for an “indigenous resurgence” continues to

¹² “BORDEAUX SAYS AMAZON IS DAKOTAS 120 YEARS AGO,” by Inés San Martín, October 24, 2019, *Lakota Times*, pp. A1,A2.

¹³ “ANNUAL YOUTH HARVEST FESTIVAL,” October 24, 2019, *Lakota Times*, p. A5.

¹⁴ “LAKOTA POLITICAL TRADITIONS PART II,” by Delphine Red Shirt, May 16, 2019, *Lakota Times*, p. A9.

pop up in numerous realms of Lakota society today, including the economic, the cultural, and the political.

Even within the Comanche Nation, a “resurgence” theme has recently been gaining traction across different arenas of Comanche life, specifically because of various initiatives on the part of Dr. Cornel Pewewardy. As Dr. Pewewardy illustrates during his inaugural speech for Lawton’s Indigenous People’s Day, through both the celebration of Native cultures and the combating of “dysconscious racism” and the “deficit ideology,” this special day problematizes the dominant society in a very particular way, and sees colonization as an ongoing process that must be confronted through “indigenous” understandings and alternatives:

Indigenous Peoples’ Day in Lawton is a grass-roots, front-line, oppositional, place-based movement working across tribal and international discourses. Personal steps toward liberatory practice are a process of decolonization, an inherent right to self-determination...Theoretically, moving through the processes of colonization redirects ones’ consciousness in the direction of liberating colonial thinking and affirming Indigenous ways of knowing and pathway for understanding the roots of racism, violence, conflict, resolution and reconciliation.

Thus, Indigenous People’s Day is about much more than simply recognizing and celebrating Native American heritage; it aims to critically engage the continuing problems of dominant colonial society, and provides “indigenous” ways of bringing the whole society together.

This shift to an “indigenous resurgence” perspective can also be seen when looking at Dr. Pewewardy’s efforts to start a charter school called Comanche Academy. Starting with grades K-2, then adding a grade every year after the first year until reaching K-12, Comanche Academy provides a “place-based” educational experience “Where the Comanche (*Numanuu*) culture, language and history are the foundation of experiential curriculum.” The Comanche Academy’s core values include “kinship obligation” to humans and all things of the natural world, “responsibility” to community including past, present, and future generations, “reciprocity...to sustain cyclical relationships through which all things are related,” and “resurgence” through “The Nationhood obligation” and a focus on “respecting Indigenous knowledge bases, ways of

knowing and land-and water practices.”¹⁵ Although Indigenous Day and Comanche Academy may not be directly economic, the clear “resurgence” worldview in each has huge implications for Comanche stances towards capitalist society.

However, the “resurgence” juxtaposing of Native cultures against capitalist society exists alongside other approaches to maintaining tribal autonomy and cultures for future generations. Cornell (1987) has argued that while the “meaning of success” for many Native groups is quite different than the typical “American Dream” of mainstream society, as tribes are concerned with the “sovereignty”, “self-determination”, and “survival” of their people, his more recent research indicates many traditional capitalistic strategies can help tribes be economically viable, ensure tribal sovereignty, and avoid the problem that has historically plagued tribes: “dependency” on the federal government (Cornell, 2006). These strategies include having clear business goals, good business sense among a board of directors, balancing the relationship between the political and business spheres of the tribe to avoid micromanaging, the use of independent and objective mediators to resolve internal disputes, and educating all tribal members regarding economic goals.

Indeed, while some research has suggested that troublesome controls by federal and tribal governments (Miller, 2001), and multiple taxation through jurisdictional overlap between tribes and states (Croman and Taylor, 2016) both impede economic growth, others emphasize the importance of economic involvement on the part of tribal governments as a vehicle for economic improvement, which leads to increased tribal sovereignty and “self-determination” (Cornell, 1987; Cornell and Kalt, 1998). The notion that economic success within the capitalist system actually serves as a prioritizing summary symbol in the fight for tribal sovereignty and cultural

¹⁵ “Comanche Academy Opening Doors in 2020,” by Cornel Pewewardy, May 2019, *The Comanche Nation News*, pp. 1,15.

integrity is widespread within the discourse on tribal economic development. Mohawk economist Dean Howard Smith (2000) argues that economic activity can strengthen tribal culture, if tribes embrace a social compatibility paradigm in which economic modes of production develop in line with tribal cultural values. Still, Smith suggests tribes use a four stage cyclical model of economic growth developed by urban theorist Jane Jacobs: 1. developing an export industry earning imports, 2. developing import replacing industries within local tribal communities, 3. developing innovative products and productive techniques, and finally, 4. developing new export industries that can increase or substitute import earning income.

When looking at the tribal newspapers, the Chickasaw Nation provides perhaps the best example of a tribe that strongly embraces economic success within capitalist society as a prioritizing summary symbol in maintaining self-determination. Throughout the editions of the *Chickasaw Times*, various Chickasaws talk almost ceaselessly about the importance of economic “development,” “expansion,” and “growth” as a means to 1. enhance the quality of life for tribal citizens through ever-expanding programs and services, and 2. ensure “opportunity,” “progress,” and a “strong future” for the tribe. Furthermore, as Governor Anoatubby asserts in his October 2019 letter to the Chickasaw people, building a strong economy also means giving the tribe more sovereignty and control over tribal resources:

At the Chickasaw Nation, we have collectively walked an economic path together for many years, and that path has been built on a solid plan. We began our work in 1987 with a simple mission: we would formulate a roadmap to prosperity for Chickasaws across the country. Our goal was to end our reliance on federal funds and achieve economic self-sufficiency...Another key element that makes the Chickasaw Nation unique is our ability to manage our own tribal businesses ourselves. We are truly grateful for the many sharp, talented Chickasaws managing our vital interests, including top administrators, managers and workers.¹⁶

¹⁶ “Our Economic Plan Is Producing Great Results for All Chickasaws,” by Bill Anoatubby, October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 3.

Not only, then, do Chickasaw leaders see capitalistic economic success as the vehicle for ensuring self-determination, but they also want to be sure Chickasaws themselves are in the driver's seat.

This approach to self-determination also shapes how the Chickasaw approach tribal governance and tribal rights issues. While the “resurgence” perspective rejects the “concessions” made by tribes within the “politics of recognition and accommodation” offered by the colonial state, the Chickasaws tend to frame their own sovereignty *within* the dominant society's political and legal discourses. While it has been “either tailored to fit or unique to the Chickasaw people's expectations of their own government,” the Chickasaw Nation's constitution itself, established in 1856, is based heavily on the U.S. Constitution and mode of government, containing executive, legislative, and judicial branches, separation of powers, a supreme court, district courts, and a bill of rights. The Chickasaw government retains this same basic structure even today, and is described as “the fundamental and organic law for its people and the soil in which its sovereignty grows and thrives.”¹⁷ For Chickasaw leaders at least, their form of government isn't necessarily a mere concession, but rather the bedrock of their right to self-determination.

Furthermore, Chickasaw leaders often express the importance of maintaining good relationships with the local, state, and federal governments, as demonstrated by Chickasaw legislator Lisa Billy after being named the state's first Secretary of Native American Affairs by Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt:

I make sure we establish excellent relationships between Gov. Stitt and every tribe...Gov. Stitt is very supportive. He knows that tribes are sovereign nations and aren't going anywhere.¹⁸

¹⁷ “1856 Constitution Outlined Purpose of Chickasaw Government,” May 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 9.

¹⁸ “Lisa Billy Confirmed as Oklahoma Secretary of Native American Affairs,” May 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 4.

Maintaining good relations also means holding the federal government in particular to their treaty obligations, as Governor Anoatubby argues when talking about the importance of ensuring accurate census counts of Native Americans:

An accurate accounting of Native Americans is particularly important because of the government-to-government relationship...The federal government has treaty responsibilities to provide certain services (to Native Americans). Education is one; health care, housing and other services...It is important that we, as tribes, step up and become partners...By participating, we speak for the generations of Native people that preceded us and for those yet to come. The funding that results from our participation will help us to continue to build a bright future for our people.¹⁹

Thus, maintaining such “government-to-government” relations helps the Chickasaw Nation not only assert the legitimacy of its sovereignty, but also helps in its mission to improve the quality of life of its tribal citizens.

Among the Mississippi Choctaw, the importance of economic success to tribal self-determination also emerges as a prioritizing summary symbol. Much like in the *Chickasaw Times*, segments throughout *Choctaw Community News* continuously stress how recent economic success and progress has meant improvements to the reservation community, increased programs and services, and more opportunities for growth and prosperity. This point was strongly communicated by Chief Phyliss Anderson during the announcement of her reelection bid in April 2019:

Over the last eight years, my administration has proved our dedication & ability to produce real results for the Choctaw people. We have built great institutes of health, education & enterprise while vastly improving our communities & tribal services.²⁰

Furthermore, such economic expansion is tied directly to the Mississippi Choctaw being in control of their own destiny, as illustrated by the tribe’s director of economic development John Hendrix when discussing the tribe becoming a Rural Certified Community by the Tennessee Valley Authority Economic Development program:

¹⁹ “U.S. Census Bureau, Chickasaw Nation Join Forces to Ensure Proper Count of Indians in 2020 Census,” May 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, pp. 1,8.

²⁰ “Chief Anderson Announces Re-Election Bid,” April 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, pp. 1,4.

We're very pleased with the designation and the recognition...We work daily to insure the self-sufficiency of the Tribe by building an economic environment that is conducive to business.²¹

It appears, then, that Mississippi Choctaw leaders see economic development as an essential part of serving their people and giving them power.

Again, much like the Chickasaw, Mississippi Choctaw leaders include this understanding of economic power in capitalist society within their approaches to tribal sovereignty rights issues, and often frame them within the dominant society's legal and political discourses. As somewhat touched upon in the previous section, the list of discussion topics and goals from the Annual Meeting of United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. (USET) in November 2019 highlights such an approach to tribal rights:

During the week, Tribal leaders discussed important topics, such as protecting Tribal Nation homelands, building sustainable Tribal Nation economies, constitutionality threats & challenges, & protecting communities through the restoration of Tribal jurisdiction.²²

Interestingly, along with building strong economic bases for member tribes, USET seems to approach tribal rights issues from the standpoint of tribal nations within a nation, asserting its member tribes' respective sovereignty through constitutionality and jurisdictional lines. Such an approach, then, means also establishing good relations with the local, state, and federal governments, a point brought up by various Mississippi Choctaw leaders, like Chief Cyrus Ben:

As a tribal government & tribal operation, we operate here on our tribal lands & at the same time we work cooperatively with fellow governments in the local city, county, state, & all the way to the federal level. We are very appreciative of the relationship we are able to have with our neighbors.²³

Indeed, for Mississippi Choctaw leaders, ensuring self-determination means navigating not only the capitalistic marketplace, but also the American legal and political landscapes.

²¹ "Tribe Becomes Rural Certified Community by TVA," October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, p. 9.

²² "Tribe Hosts USET Annual Meeting, 50th Anniversary Celebration," October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, pp. 1,8.

²³ "Tribe Hosts Annual Thanksgiving Feast," October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, pp. 1,10,11.

In the end, it is clear that Native American tribes differ in the extents to which they see their cultures as distinct, and even in conflict, with various aspects of American capitalist society. While some stress a “resurgence” perspective as a prioritizing summary symbol in their fight for self-determination which calls for a “return” to indigenous modes of cultural, political, and material life, others see capitalist enterprise itself as a prioritizing symbol in their self-determination and frame their sovereignty rights within dominant legal and political discourses as nations within nations. Still, it is important to note that no one approach to self-determination holds a monopoly on any given tribe, as these bodies of discourse often communicate and overlap in subtle ways. As Elliot (2018) points out, even within the “indigenous resurgence” movement, the push to “disengage” with the normative structures of settler societies goes hand in hand with a process of “reengagement”. Thus, the true aim of “resurgence” is that indigenous and settler societies engage in true “reciprocity” by “unsettling” the dominant discourses on colonialism, sovereignty, environment, political economy, and language, acknowledging the norms that govern these areas as “contingent and contested”.

Furthermore, as Champagne (2004) argues, economic development is never an end itself within Native American communities, but rather a means of ensuring tribal sovereignty and community empowerment, as well as alleviating poverty. Thus, as I demonstrate in the last section, all tribes engage in various kinds of economic development projects to certain extents, seeing the positive impact it can have on both the standards of living within their communities, and the amount of power they can wield as sovereign peoples. However, as we’ll see, not all tribes are equal in their abilities to navigate the capitalist economy, and thus, differ both in their connections to the dominant society, and in their respective power and privilege.

Navigating Modern Capitalist Society

Again, while one can debate the extent to which tribes embrace a true “capitalist” ethos, it’s fair to say that both sovereignty and cultural integrity are key to any tribal business venture, even if they overlap heavily with mainstream markets and society. This becomes especially evident when looking at research on tribal gaming, which accounts for 45% of all gaming revenue in the United States (American Gaming Association, 2018). While gaming itself isn’t necessarily seen as a form of tribal cultural expression, the massive profits from casino ventures have allowed some groups like the Florida Seminole (Cattelino, 2004) and Southern California tribes (Rosenthal, 2004) to not only fight successfully for greater tribal sovereignty and ensure cultural revitalization and distinctiveness, but also become major players in their respective regions both economically and politically.

These findings largely fall in line with studies from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, which generally show positive social and economic benefits of Native casino and other gaming ventures, particularly for reservation tribes, as tribal governments are required by law to place profits back into tribal programs (Cornell et al., 1998; Grant, Spilde, and Taylor, 2004; Gonzales, Lyson, and Mauer, 2007; Akee, Spilde, and Taylor, 2015). Furthermore, such evidence lends support to Light and Rand’s (2005) argument that tribal sovereignty and self-determination is the ultimate driving force behind tribal gaming ventures both big and small, as well as the politics and controversy that often surround Indian gaming more generally. Although many tribes are heavily invested in the casino and gaming industry, others have been able to branch out into other types of businesses such as smoke shops, manufacturing, and oil and other natural resource industries (Healey and O’Brien, 2015, pp. 196-200).

Still, some research suggests that gaming has not created uniform opportunities for Native Americans collectively. Some argue fewer than 15% of Indian tribes able are to generate serious revenue from casinos, as rural tribal casinos often struggle relative to those near metro areas. (Partnership With Native Americas, 2019). Davis and colleagues (2016) found that even the rapid urbanization of American Indians in the last fifty years, and the growing number of tribally owned casinos, have done little to eradicate labor market inequalities and differences in poverty rates between American Indians and non-Hispanic whites. Although the presence of Native casinos slightly reduced poverty rates, particularly for reservation tribes, the authors find that Native poverty persists across all geographic localities (native/non-native and rural/urban areas), suggesting that the historical legacies of racial discrimination have created “rigid” structural inequalities for American Indians today despite supposed increases in labor market opportunities through urbanization and gaming. Finally, looking at American Indian trust and reservation lands, Mauer (2017) found that while gaming and self-governance compacts had only marginal effects on poverty rates, having no work opportunities was the strongest predictor of poverty. Thus, economic diversification and opportunities for employment in general are vital in helping tribes improve their socioeconomic situations.

Indeed, throughout the editions of the *Lakota Times*, there is discussion of various initiatives for economic development and improvement amongst both of the Lakota Sioux tribes beyond their gaming operations. In October 2018, former Oglala Sioux Tribe president Theresa Two Bulls agreed to endorse and form an alliance with candidate Julian Bear Runner because, as she said, “both of us are committed to bringing educational and economic opportunities for the Oyate.”²⁴ There have been various attempts to bolster entrepreneurship, like the Lakota Funds

²⁴ “BEAR RUNNER AND TWO BULLS FORM ALLIANCE,” by Yvette Running Horse, November 1, 2018, *Lakota Times*, p. A8.

Agriculture Business Planning Workshop in May of 2019,²⁵ and participation in Native Youth Entrepreneurs by two aspiring “Lakota Entrepreneurs”: David Fraser, who wants to start an auto repair shop, and Carl Peterson, who wants to operate a video game design studio.²⁶ Finally, some even see economic opportunity in preserving and celebrating Lakota cultural, as demonstrated by Pine Ridge Area Chamber of Commerce director Ivan Sorbel when discussing the building of the Oglala Lakota Living History Village:

In addition to the opportunity, through the living village, to share the Lakota culture with the world, the attraction will have the opportunity to funnel visitors south to the reservation, continuing to build the fledging tourist industry.²⁷

Some among the Lakota feel that renewable energies provide the tribe unique opportunities to both engage in environmentally sound practices and provide economic opportunity. As *Lakota Times* editor Vi Waln writes when discussing the free solar training workshop offered by Red Cloud Renewable and Solar Energy International, “Lots of possibilities are developing for Native Americans in renewable energy and sustainable building. Interested persons are encouraged to do all they can to gain the skills you and your tribe need to move towards energy independence.”²⁸ Furthermore, as Oglala Sioux tribal member Lyle Jack said in his testimony before congress about the Oceti Sakowin Power Authority’s (OSPA) renewable energy project, it can provide the kind of economic diversification that is severely lacking in his isolated, and rural reservation:

They asked me what our goals were...In oral testimony I explained that it’s about economic development and also taking care of the climate. And trying to diversify, since gaming doesn’t really work for us because we’re not located near a huge metro area.

²⁵ “Ad for Agriculture Business Planning Workshop,” May 16, 2019, *Lakota Times*, p. A3.

²⁶ “NATIVE YOUTH ENTREPRENEURS,” October 24, 2019, *Lakota Times*, p. A3.

²⁷ “LAKOTA VILLAGE COMING TO CACTUS FLATS,” by Tom Crash, October 24, 2019, *Lakota Times*, pp. A1,A3.

²⁸ “FREE SOLAR TRAINING ON PINE RIDGE,” by Vi Waln, October 24, 2019, *Lakota Times*, pp. A1,A5.

Even so, Jack goes on to describe how the project needed a federal charter to protect it from tribal politics, and increased funding from the federal government to help with start-up costs to ensure the OSPA maintained majority ownership, which would otherwise go to their partner Apex Energy.²⁹ Thus, these findings mirror the large body of previous research that has detailed the delicate balancing act between concern for the environment, goals for economic development, and maintaining tribal control of resources that many Native American tribes are forced to engage in when dealing with energy and resource extraction industries in general (Smith and Frehner, 2010; Needham, 2010; Johnston, Dawson, and Madsen, 2010; Needham, 2010; Powell and Long, 2010; Allison, 2015).

These issues related to economic diversification also exist for the Comanche Nation. For example, in April 2018, it was reported in *The Comanche Nation News* that gaming alone contributed a little over \$59 million to the tribe's annual budget \$63.1 million for the fiscal year of 2018-2019.³⁰ Still, this reliance on gaming doesn't mean those in the Comanche Nation are not, to some extent, branched out into other types of businesses as well. It is noted in a couple of places that the tribe is also involved in tobacco sales through a number of smoke shops. Ads for small businesses, such as Comanche Auto Repair & Service and W & R Mechanical, proudly displaying "Native American or Indian owned and operated" can also be seen throughout any given edition of *The Comanche Nation Times*. Furthermore, much like the Lakota Sioux, there's a general sense that both Comanche leaders and average tribal members would like to see the expansion of economic opportunities, as illustrated by tribal attorney Robert Rossette during the Annual Meeting of the General Council in April 2019:

²⁹ "LYLE JACK TESTIFIES ON LAKOTA RENEWABLE ENERGY," by Jim Kent, May 16, 2019, *Lakota Times*, pp. A1,A4.

³⁰ "Proposed Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Budget Released," April 2018, *The Comanche Nation News*, p. 4.

I know you are very eager to build your economy. We work closely with the Business Committee, and take a lot of directive from the Business Committee, but at the end of the day, we work for this tribal council, we work for the people, and you have voted as to be here.³¹

However, it is clear that building such an economic base for the Comanche Nation has proven quite difficult. In May 2017, *The Comanche Nation News* reported that, since 2012, the tribe had overspent its budget four of the six years, the highest being an over expenditure of nearly \$14 million dollars in 2014. In that time, the tribe's budget hovered around \$40-\$50 million. While the tribe had been under budget the last two years, it was only left with about \$3 million left over each year.³² Considering that the proposed budget for the fiscal year of 2020 was only a little over \$62.8 million,³³ it looks as though the Comanche Nation's focus will largely remain on balancing the budget in years to come until more consistent profit can be established. Coupled these budgetary issues, legal issues with both those inside and outside of the tribe seem to be derailing many of tribe's economic development efforts, as tribal attorney Robert Rossette acknowledged during the annual meeting in April 2019:

I am hoping we can change the culture of tribal members, third parties, and outsiders, not wanting to bring suits against the Nation because they are going to see it is going to be a real uphill battle to get a judgement... We are eager to get through that phase of cleaning up the various court cases and litigation that you have so we can work on productive things, constructive things. I know you are very eager to build your economy.³⁴

There is evidence that some of these lawsuits involve economic matters with other tribes. In April 2018, it was reported that the Comanche Nation was suing the Chickasaw Nation over their construction of a casino near the main Comanche Casino in Terral, Oklahoma. The suit claimed that the Bureau of Indian Affairs gives preferential treatment to wealthier tribes like the

³¹ "2019 Annual Meeting of the General Council Brought 389 Tribal Members," Jolene Schonchin, May 2019, *The Comanche Nation News*, pp. 1,4.

³² "Annual General Council Meeting Brings over 300 Tribal Members," by Jolene Schonchin, May 2017, *The Comanche Nation News*, pp. 1,3.

³³ "2019 Annual Meeting of the General Council Brought 389 Tribal Members," by Jolene Schonchin, May 2019, *The Comanche Nation News*, pp. 1,4.

³⁴ "2019 Annual Meeting of the General Council Brought 389 Tribal Members," by Jolene Schonchin, May 2019, *The Comanche Nation News*, pp. 1,4.

Chickasaw Nation in the awarding of trust lands, which has given the Chickasaws a near monopoly on gaming the state.³⁵ ³⁶ Given the Comanche Nation's reliance on gaming revenue, one can clearly understand their vested interest in bringing the suit, along with what the suit says about power differentials between tribes.

In many ways, the Chickasaw Nation does have far more economic power when compared to tribes like the Comanche Nation. According to their 2019 Progress Report, the tribe's total revenues neared \$1.7 billion, and their net assets are worth about \$3.3 billion. Furthermore, the tribe's net assets have increased exponentially over the past three decades, only totaling about \$9.2 million in 1987, then skyrocketing up to about \$94.6 million by 1999, nearly \$784.5 million by 2007, and finally exceeding \$2 billion by 2015.³⁷ Indeed, the Chickasaw Nation focuses a great deal of energy on both increasing its business diversification, and creating economic opportunities through job creation for tribal members and non-tribal members alike. As Governor Anaotubby demonstrates in his October 2019 letter to the Nation, while the Chickasaw Nation owes much to its gaming operations, the tribe's portfolio includes an ever-expanding range of businesses across a variety of industries:

We obviously have built a solid commercial foundation with our entertainment operations. These interests have, thankfully, continued to grow over the years. In addition to these operations, we have also made the commitment to diversify our business portfolio into areas that offer great growth potential. The Chickasaw Nation now operates manufacturing, management consulting, media, hospitality and other commercial endeavors that are paying good dividends. We are also involved in contracting, financial services, banking, fuel and convenience, and more. We are continually exploring new avenues of growth-oriented expansion.³⁸

³⁵ "Statement of the Chickasaw Nation Case Facts Relevant to the Issues Presented for Review," by Richard Grellner, April 2018, *The Comanche Nation News*, p. 6.

³⁶ A simple internet search reveals numerous sources saying the claim has since been dismissed by the U.S. Supreme Court (Silverstein, 2019).

³⁷ *The Chickasaw Nation 2019 Progress Report*, 2020, The Chickasaw Nation, pp. 66-67.

³⁸ "Our Economic Plan Is Producing Great Results for All Chickasaws," by Bill Anoatubby, October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 3.

Furthermore, as Governor Anoatubby stated in his ninth inauguration ceremony earlier that month, revenues from Chickasaw businesses provide most of the funding for the 200 plus services and programs offered by the tribe.³⁹

Another important feature of Chickasaw economic expansion relates to the tribe's connections with and impact on the broader economy and society. This includes a number of business partnerships, like agreements with the Dallas Cowboys through Bedré Fine Chocolate and Winstar World Casino, as well as partnerships through Chickasaw Nation Industries such as the Filtra-Systems mobile water recycling system for oil fracking operations, and Corvid Technologies defense contracts.⁴⁰ Throughout the *Chickasaw Times*, different segments discuss how the Chickasaw Nation plays key roles within local, city, and county economies, and even within the Oklahoma economy more generally, whether it be through job creation, business and entrepreneurship outreach conferences, or internship programs with local business. In fact, Governor Anoatubby highlighted the precise economic impact of the tribe on the state, stating "Currently, the Chickasaw Nation supports more than 22,000 jobs and \$1.2 billion in wages and benefits as part of a \$3.7 billion annual economic contribution to the Oklahoma economy."⁴¹ Interestingly, this understanding of the tribe's economic impact also influences how Chickasaw leaders view the economic importance of tribes collectively in Oklahoma. This was most clearly articulated by tribal legislature Karen Goodnight who served as a board member for the Oklahoma Tribal Finance Consortium, and noted "the tremendous economic impact that the 38 Tribal Nations have contributed each year to the state of Oklahoma" after the release of an

³⁹ "Gov. Anoatubby Inaugurated; Lt. Gov. Anoatubby, Legislators, Justice Take Oaths of Office," October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, pp. 1,5.

⁴⁰ "Business Diversification, Growth Key to Health, Education, Services," November 2018, *Chickasaw Times*, pp. 1,5.

⁴¹ "Gov. Anoatubby Inaugurated; Lt. Gov. Anoatubby, Legislators, Justice Take Oaths of Office," October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, pp. 1,5.

economic impact study.⁴² While one can obviously see how such instantiations of pan-tribalism can serve strategic purposes in moments of collective Native American struggle, they can also belie very real differences in wealth and power between tribes.

Looking to the Mississippi Choctaw, we also see the importance of business diversification, expansion into non-gaming enterprises, and overall growth in economic opportunity. Perhaps most importantly, such economic vitality keeps jobs within the Mississippi Choctaw community. As Choctaw Shopping Center Enterprise (CSCE) General Manager Diane Maxwell said when discussing their efforts to continually attract businesses into the community and expand:

As a community, it is important to support the businesses & services in our shopping center so we can retain our current services & attract future businesses. When our local stores are kept in business, it helps keep jobs for our community members & money in our local economy. It also keeps our community significant & expanding.⁴³

Furthermore, much like the Chickasaw, it can mean less reliance on gaming revenue alone. Towards the end of 2019, in fact, Chief Phyliss Anderson discussed how the tribal council was able to increase per capita payments to tribal members, and provide two separate pay incentives totally \$300 each to tribal government employees, all with non-gaming revenues.⁴⁴ Thus, not only has recent business diversification and economic success meant better programs and services within the Mississippi Choctaw community, as noted in the previous section, but has also meant more money put directly in the hands of tribal members.

Even though this recent economic growth and expansion has meant better services and programs, and more jobs and money within the Mississippi Choctaw reservation, it has had huge

⁴² “Tribal Nations Continue to Have a Positive and Growing Impact on Our Economy,” by Karen Goodnight, October 2019, *Chickasaw Times*, p. 6.

⁴³ “Opportunities Coming to CSCE,” by Melford Farve, November/December 2018, *Choctaw Community News*, pp. 26,27.

⁴⁴ “Annual Thanksgiving Feast Held in Choctaw,” November/December 2018, *Choctaw Community News*, December, pp. 9–11.

implications for connections to the local and state economies within Mississippi. Sometimes this has meant hosting job fairs, or entering into job training partnerships with local companies and technical schools. But, more often than not, the Mississippi Choctaw have simply been able to provide opportunities for employment through sound business practices. As mentioned in the previous section, late in 2019, the tribe's economic development program was named a Rural Certified Community by the Tennessee Valley Authority Economic Development program, which "provides third party evaluation & feedback of organizational structure operation & strategic planning efforts to recognize rural economic development organizations who are prepared to compete for job creation & investment." Chief Cyrus Ben called the certification "a great accomplishment for our economic development team," and went on to say it was "a tough competition that required us to demonstrate the highest professional standards with our economic development efforts." Indeed, the Mississippi Choctaws' growing impact on the state economy likely played a large role in them receiving the certification, as the segment goes on to say that "Providing permanent, full-time jobs for over 5,000 Tribal-member and non-Indian employees, the Tribe is a major contributor to the state's economy."⁴⁵ Thus, in the case of the Mississippi Choctaw, it seems tribal economic success begets opportunities for more economic success through outside consultation on development projects.

In closing, while all tribes may strive for economic development in a variety of ways, it appears that some tribes have been able to better navigate capitalist society, and expand their economic bases into multiple industries. For these tribes, this has meant ever-increasing levels of business diversification, allowing them to be less reliant on both federal aid and revenue from gaming alone. It has also meant that they have been able to situate themselves as powerful

⁴⁵ "Tribe becomes Rural Certified Community by TVA," October/November 2019, *Choctaw Community News*, p. 9.

economic agents within broader local and state economies, seeing themselves not as groups *removed* from the capitalist system, but as competitors *within* it. In this way, being a key player in the broader economy can itself be a prioritizing summary symbol for expanding tribal power. Because tribes like the Chickasaw Nation and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians have economic bases that rival many successful corporations, they help generate jobs and revenue not only within their own tribal communities, but also within their respective local and state regions. In this way, tribal economic success becomes enmeshed with the vitality of entire local and state economies, which is reflected in the amount of economic and political power these tribes often wield. Thus, while all tribes are to a certain extent marginalized simply by virtue of the racist legacies of colonialism, they are by no means marginalized in the same ways. Suffice it to say, then, *different* tribal groups engage discourses on historical experiences, self-determination, and capitalist enterprise from *different* positions of power and privilege.

Discussion/Conclusion

In conclusion, this theoretical and qualitative exploration of socioeconomic and discursive differences between Native American tribes does have its share weaknesses. First, it would be a gross error to say that it covers every point of view related to issues of Native American history, sovereignty, identity, and economics. As mentioned in the methodology section, I have tried to include as even of a split between economically struggling and prosperous tribes, as well as reservation and non-reservation tribes as possible; but, true representativeness is always difficult when discussing a group as diverse as Native Americans. However, I believe I have provided a useful template that covers the *major* discursive camps relating to issues of Native historical experience in capitalist society, the meaning of tribal self-determination, and tribal differences in navigating modern capitalist society. My hope is that future researchers will

take these ideas, apply them to different tribal contexts, and also utilize different empirical approaches. For the time being, given that much of the quantitative data available on Native American tribes is mostly limited to government agencies, like the Census Bureau, such research will likely be limited to largely qualitative approaches in order to give this issue of tribal socioeconomic differences the detail and nuance it deserves. Still, qualitative approaches like this one can help to better inform the research instruments utilized by those of more quantitative-bent.

Second, I'm well aware that I offer very little, if anything at all, regarding policy implications for issues of tribal economic development, governance, and sovereignty. Even though I believe the different voices within these discourses have much to offer in their own ways, they also have their own respective biases. The main point of this exploration was to show that all of these perspectives on Native history, tribal self-determination, and approaches to capitalist society reflect differences in power and privilege *between* Native American groups. While I agree with Native scholars like Dean Howard Smith (2000) who argue that tribes must embrace economic practices that fall in line with their cultural values, I also believe that the issue of tribal economic development, and even the meaning of authentic Native "culture" itself both exist on such contested terrain that it becomes difficult to chart any sort of course for all tribes to follow. Thus, even as a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, with a certain amount of vested interest in my own tribe's approach to economic development, I adamantly believe such discourse should stay contested, as no one has a right to monopolize the interpretation of tribal history, self-determination, and relationships to capitalist society.

Still, if my framework offers anything by way of policy from the standpoint of the dominant society, it can perhaps be illustrated by discussing a recent tribal rights issues in my

home state of Oklahoma. In the summer of 2019, Governor Kevin Stitt, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, argued in an op-ed piece for *Tulsa World* that beginning January 1, 2020, the state's 2004 gaming compact with tribal nations would expire. According to Stitt, because of the "tremendous benefit" tribal gaming had made to the state economy, tribes should begin paying the state a higher rate of gaming revenues, as the previously agreed upon rates of 4 to 6 percent had become some of the lowest in the nation, while other states charged rates up to 20 and 25 percent (Stitt, 2019). Predictably, almost all 39 Oklahoma tribes united to fight Stitt's proposal to hike the rates, and argue the previous agreement should carry over. The state's first Secretary of Native American Affairs Lisa Billy ultimately stepped down over Stitt's refusal to back down over the issue, and many in tribal communities even began calling Stitt's tribal ancestry into question (Romero and Brewer, 2020).

Along with the fact that many have pointed out Stitt's proposed rate increases only hurt the tribes' abilities to pump money into their own much needed services and programs, while ultimately contributing very little to state coffers (Greene, 2019; Romero and Brewer, 2020), they also completely ignore the great disparities in wealth *between* tribes in the state highlighted in this paper. Thus, not only would such increases in payment rates to the state hurt tribes more generally, it would create even more strain for those tribes who are particularly economically vulnerable. Furthermore, as demonstrated by both my framework and others involved in the conversion, Stitt risks alienating one of his potentially most powerful allies, specifically those tribes who are in fact the big job and revenue creators in Oklahoma. As Chickasaw Nation Ambassador and former politician Neal McCaleb said when discussing the sovereignty issues surrounding the *Carpenter v. Murphy* murder case in 2018:

Through our relations, we have resolved countless differences that are common to intergovernmental relationships. Oklahoma has negotiated and implemented more state-tribal intergovernmental compacts than

has perhaps any other state. Each compact represents hard work and compromise by all sides, and as a body, they provide for stable economic development and growth, benefiting all Oklahomans (McCaleb, 2018).

Aside from respecting tribal sovereignty, then, dominant society's leaders should also respect the power of many tribes as corporate entities who have a stake in ensuring their own economic positions for the betterment of their people. Thus, if hegemonic struggle and revolution in capitalist society requires a "long slow march through the institutions," as many attribute Gramsci as saying,⁴⁶ it looks to also require marching through the vested interests of subordinate groups who benefit from the economic status quo, such as tribes like the Chickasaw Nation and Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians who have established themselves within local and state economies in order to carrying out their own visions of self-determination.

Furthermore, the usefulness of my framework in helping researchers understand the complex issues at stake within discourses on Native American history, tribal self-determination and sovereignty, and tribal economic development can be demonstrated through stories like the Sioux's monetary settlement for the Black Hills. In 2010, Tim Giago from the Native American Journalists Association wrote an article about the settlement for the *Huffington Post*. Since 1981, settlement funds awarded to the Sioux tribes for lands in and around the Black Hills has grown considerably, and currently totals a little over \$1 billion dollars. However, despite a growing openness from newer tribal leaders to either accept the money, or renegotiate a bill in congress to gain back some of the land, past treaty councils among the reservation tribes have adamantly refused to accept the money, and debates continue amongst the tribes today about how the money should be allocated. Still, Giago describes the "abundance of poverty" that continues to plague the Sioux tribes today, along with how "the people calling themselves Lakota, Dakota

⁴⁶ The slogan seems to have actually been coined by Communist student activist Rudi Dutschke, who was heavily influence by Gramsci (see "The long march through the institutions," 2020, *Wikipedia*).

and Nakota still hold their heads high and, against all odds, still find pride in their poverty” (Giago, 2010). What explains this feeling of pride in the face of severe socioeconomic marginalization among many in the Sioux tribes? Would accepting the settlement funds for the Black Hills not only conflict with the sacred value the Sioux place on their historical homelands, but also undermine the sense of Native identity felt by many among the Sioux that stems from the collective marginalization of their people?

In the end, Native American discourses are guided by key problematizations and prioritizing summary symbols that deal with issues like the relationship between traditional “indigenous” cultures and “western” capitalism, the meaning of tribal self-determination and sovereignty, and the importance of tribal economic development. While tribes like the Lakota Sioux and the Comanche often deploy a “resurgence” perspective as a prioritizing summary symbol, and call for a return to “traditional” indigenous modes of life and the dismantling of oppressive colonial structures like capitalism, other tribes like the Chickasaw and Mississippi Choctaw see economic success within the capitalist system as vital to their sovereignty and the well-being of their people. Thus, while both tribal self-determination and economic power are prioritizing summary symbols within Native American discourses, connections between self-determination and economic power differ between tribes, and serve as reflections of tribal differences in power and place within the broader capitalist society itself.

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