UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

IF WE EAT LIKE THEM, WE WILL BECOME JUST LIKE THEM: A COLONIAL DISRUPTION OF CHEYENNE FOODWAYS AND ITS CONTEMPORARY CONSEQUENCES

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By JONATHAN CHAZTON MEADOWS
Norman, Oklahoma
2026

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IF WE EAT LIKE THEM, WE WILL BECOME JUST LIKE THEM:
A COLONIAL DISRUPTION OF CHEYENNE FOODWAYS AND ITS CONTEMPORARY CONSEQUENCES

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Acknowledgements

I acknowledge this research has been part of a much larger responsibility rooted in my relentless commitment over the past four years to learn and carry forward the Southern Cheyenne language and its relationship to cultural food sustenance. This work could never have been completed alone. It exists because of the relatives, friends, and family, whether newly met or long connected, who encouraged me, shared knowledge, and inspired me to pursue this topic as my thesis.

First, I extend my sincere gratitude to my thesis committee, Dr. Farina King, Dr. Natalie Youngbull, and Dr. Dustin Tahmahkera. From my very first days at the University of Oklahoma, I felt each of you in your own way, would help guide me toward the scholar I hoped to become. Your encouragement, thoughtful guidance, and genuine investment in my success made it possible for me to imagine this research and see it through. I am deeply thankful for your mentorship and support throughout this journey. My gratitude also extends to my professors at Fort Lewis College, Dr. Majel Boxer, Dr. Deanne Grant, and Dr. Keri Brandt-Off, who welcomed me at a time when I had little experience with higher educational research. Your patience, belief in me, and guidance helped set a path to become a major turning point in my life and shaped how my desire to return and serve the communities have always given me purpose and strength.

I also want to acknowledge Victoria and Travis Andrews, who first helped plant the seed of this vision. Your encouragement strengthened my desire to contribute to the understandings of food, not only as sustenance, but as ceremony, relationship, and spiritual connection in our lives

in present day. I give my deepest appreciation to my Cheyenne and Arapaho relatives whose teachings, stories, and ways of being, continue to ground my work.

I also want to honor the memory of two very special people, David Littlebear and Darnel Laughter. Though you are no longer here, I miss you deeply and carry you with me as I continue this work, in part for the dreams we once shared, of helping future Native generations live stronger, healthier, and more connected in Indigenous ways of living.

I am especially grateful to my father and my wife. Your sacrifices, constant encouragement to stay focused, and unwavering love carried me through moments when my own doubts and procrastination might have held me back. I recognize the weight you carried so I could complete this degree, and I will always hold that gratitude with me. Finally, I give my most heartfelt thanks to my son, Lakoah Irvin Meadows, *Votonéve'Haméhe* (Wuh-duh-ni-vih-hum-mih). Even though you are only two years old and could not physically contribute to this research, you have been my greatest motivation. You remind me every day of the responsibility I carry to be a good role model, to work hard, and to help build a future where you can grow up proud of who you are and where you come from. I hope one day you will see the love and purpose placed into this work and understand , in the end, it was always for you. I love you, *Votonéve'Haméhe* (Wuh-duh-ni-vih-hum-mih).

While there are many more people who supported me than I could ever fully name here, please know that I carry my gratitude for each of you with me. Thank you.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the colonial disruption of the Southern Cheyenne, *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas), foodways, and the ongoing consequences of western food regimes has to their community health, cultural endurance, and food sovereignty. Grounded in the prophecy of *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) "If we eat like them, we will become just like them," this research argues colonial food systems were deliberately imposed through federal policies, including buffalo extermination, reservation confinement, ration dependency, and boarding school assimilation. These actions fundamentally restructured the Cheyenne's relationships to land, food, and governance.

Drawing on archival research, oral history interviews with Cheyenne elders, and community-based knowledges, this research project centers on Cheyenne methodologies and epistemologies that value relational accountability, cultural ethics, and lived experience. These approaches challenge Western frameworks of food sovereignty that isolates food only as sustenance and disregards the system of knowledges, identity, and responsibilities that are embedded within them.

This thesis contends that contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty is not a return to a precolonial past, but an evolving, ongoing process of cultural revitalization and resistance. These cultural revitalizations are inclusive of the cultivation of land-based gardening practices, the restoration of traditional food knowledge which represents pathways toward renewed self-determination and improved community health. Ultimately, Cheyenne food sovereignty is imperative for cultural survival, noting that the reclamation of food systems is central to their self-determining right for restoring relationships between people, land, and their future generations.

Introduction

"If we eat like the white person (É-vé'ho'émėsėheo'o), at the end we will become just like them (É-vé'ho'évá'o)."

— Motsé'eóeve (Sweet Medicine)

For the *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas), commonly known as the Southern Cheyenne Peoples, this prophecy represents more than a warning into the future as an honorable responsibility needed for the survival of Cheyenne life on Turtle Island. *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve), more commonly known as Sweet Medicine, cautioned that if this prophecy came to pass, a vast number of deaths would follow as a consequence. Today, that moment has arrived for the Southern Cheyenne Peoples through chronic health disparities, cultural disconnection, and the disruption of traditional foodways that once sustained Cheyenne communities.

This thesis draws on historical documentation and community knowledge to examine how Southern Cheyenne life was sustained through food systems prior to the encroachment of settler colonialism and the imposition of Western food regimes, federal policies, and assimilationist strategies that ruptured Cheyenne lifeways. Yet even within this colonial restructuring, food remains an important component in the revival of culture, community health, sovereignty, and self-determination today.

By reviewing historical periods of Cheyenne environmental acclimatization, the deterrence and imposition of federal policies, and the experiences of boarding school institutions, it is necessary to modernize what *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) foodways looked like before settler encroachment. This will help envision what the future might hold for the upcoming generations of the Cheyenne Peoples today. In a contemporary society structured by fast-settler economies, many Cheyenne tribal members find themselves standing in line at a fast-food

restaurant because they no longer have the time or resources to prepare homegrown meals grounded in the values that previously defined Cheyenne approaches to food. It is then difficult to claim sovereignty or be defined as an independent people, if the basic necessities of life cannot be provided for themselves, their communities, and their nations through their own traditional food systems. These were the same systems that once helped foreigners who crossed the ocean to become more understanding of how to live in the environment around us and survive within it. Even though their colonial policies later sought to "kill the Indian, and save the man."[1] Food subsequently becomes more than a means for sustenance, but a means to understanding how life operates in itself. Food is power, and power resides within the food we digest, because ultimately we become what we eat.

This research is then grounded in Cheyenne methodologies that re-center epistemological approaches rooted in traditional values, relational ethics, oral histories, and community-based ways of obtaining knowledge. Within these methods, I reframe food sovereignty (FS) beyond a pure Western interpretation of agricultural policy, instead situating FS within a Cheyenne way of understanding knowledge, responsibility, and relationality. I argue that renegotiating food through culture makes it as healthy as culture is toward maintaining a Nation's distinctiveness in the United States today. Food sovereignty is an important tool for dismantling colonial food regimes, such as supermarkets, industrial food chains, and systems of dependency that have shaped how we maintain diets and relate to the environment around us. At the same time, revitalization efforts through urban gardens, home gardens, and subsistence practices present prominent pathways for Cheyenne communities to reassert their autonomy and restore

[1] Richard Henry Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, Nineteenth Annual Session (Denver, CO, June 23–29, 1892) (Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1892), 46.

community relationships to food. Therefore, the revitalization of Cheyenne food systems is not a cultural project tied solely to the recovery of traditional food systems, but rather a key step toward confronting the consequences of colonial disruptions that have affected many generations prior to Columbus's arrival. Through this work, the possibility remains open while we aim to critically understand what future generations of my children's children might look like if they were to live within a Cheyenne world sustained by the many teachings and lifeways that once prospered across the Plains of Turtle Island.

More importantly, this research aims to demonstrate that contemporary food sovereignty efforts should not be understood as attempts to return to a romanticized precolonial past, but instead focus on the procedures that determine how cultural restoration strengthens our relationships with human and more-than-human kin. Within a *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) food sovereignty framework, the nutritional restoration of diets represents only one dimension of a broader process intended to revitalize identity in a world shaped by colonialism. Revitalization must also ensure that traditional governance structures, ceremonial practices, and relational ways of living remain active so that communities may resist colonial systems of individualism by continuing their own *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) ways of knowing.

Despite the many challenges surrounding food insecurity in *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) communities today, ancestral knowledge of survival before colonial intrusion persists in community memory. These teachings deliver guidance for forthcoming initiatives that coming generations may rely on as different pathways to their survival. Revitalizing cultural foods functions not only as a means of sustenance but also as a pathway for restoring language, traditions, and sacred knowledge within *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) communities. Historically, Cheyenne survival was grounded in reciprocal relationships that required each

generation to maintain balance with all elements of creation upon Néške'emane Grandmother Earth.

This thesis is then arranged into several chapters that collectively examine the disruption and revitalization of *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) foodways. The first chapter provides historical background on Cheyenne food systems, including ecological adaptation, subsistence practices, community relationships, colonial policy, and the rise of food sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples. The second chapter outlines the methodological structure guiding this research, grounding the study in Cheyenne epistemologies, relational ethics, and oral histories that center community knowledges as its backbone. The third chapter explores accounts and teachings about Cheyenne food knowledge, highlighting the lived experiences of elders and community members whose memories serve as the foundation for preserving the continuity of traditional food practices today. The fourth chapter analyzes the wider implications of food sovereignty for the *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) through situating contemporary revitalization efforts, such as various community garden projects happening in Indian country, land-based practices, and cultural food restoration efforts, within the ongoing resistance to colonial food systems. Finally, the concluding chapter reflects on the significance of Cheyenne food sovereignty as a path toward cultural restoration, community health, and intergenerational responsibility, stressing the revitalization of traditional foodways to ensure the same continuation *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) wanted for Cheyenne Peoples.

Chapter 1: Historical Context of Food for the Tsetsėhestâhese

The disruption of *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) lifeways was not an inevitable byproduct of modernization but rather emerged through colonial systems that deliberately sought to reorganize Indigenous Peoples' relationships to land, food, movement, and governance structures. For the Southern Cheyenne and other Plains Nations, food was never a matter of pure consumption but was bound to their mobility, social organization, ceremonial life, ecological knowledge, and political independence across Indian Country. Prior to the final decades of the nineteenth century, Southern Cheyenne Peoples were tightly interlaced with the bison economy, a system that sustained all life across the grasslands. Environmental historian Andrew Isenberg explains that equestrian societies of the Plains "lived and had their physical being in the buffalo," and they relied not only on the buffalo for food, but also for clothing, shelter, tools, and fuel.[2] The bison functioned as the heart and soul of *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) power and constituted their own ecological-cultural foundation for living a typical Plains-style life.

For the *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas), this relationship to the Plains defines their extraordinarily strong identity with the buffalo. This is how they existed and operated within a wider system of reciprocal ties toward communal responsibility and a ceremonial way of being given to them by *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve). Hunting methods structured their seasonal movements, showing how their collective labor was to be organized, and, furthermore, helped them develop ecological attentiveness that ensured all herds remained abundant enough to sustain both the Cheyenne and their more-than-human kin. Isenberg notes this by suggesting the Plains lifestyle produced communal ethics in which food resources were shared during times of

[2] Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

scarcity, bolstering social cohesion within the camp.[3] Survival relied not only on individual accumulation but on preserving balance among people, animals, and land. So as long as the buffalo ranged freely across the Plains, these systems remained suitably balanced and sustainable.

The ecological balance started unraveling with the expansion of industrial capitalism booming the nineteenth century. Growing trade networks also linked the Plains to distant markets, transforming resources that had long been distributed within Indigenous subsistence systems into commodities for settler profit. By the 1840s, the bison robe was a highly desired trade commodity that had significantly intensified hunting pressure on the plains. According to Isenberg, hunters targeted bison because they supplied more than 100,000 robes annually to commercial traders across the country and overseas.[4] This shift denoted a move away from relational subsistence but toward more extractive, commercial economies due to colonial diseases. With the expansion of railroads becoming more visible and eastern industrial demands, hunting intensified beyond nature's own ecological limits by destructively harming bison herds to the brink of extinction which caused the destruction of the ecological system resulting in a famine.

The destruction of the buffalo can not only be felt as an environmental tragedy but also as a part of a colonial strategy that destabilized the Southern Cheyenne People's own autonomy among the Plains. Treaties such as those of Medicine Lodge (1867) and Fort Laramie (1868) guaranteed the Cheyenne their hunting rights "so long as the buffalo may range thereon," even though the majority of the federal officials understood these rights would soon become

[3] Isenberg, 65.
[4] Isenberg, 94.

meaningless as soon as the herds were to disappear.[5] The extermination of the buffalo represented a disaster that ecologically would collapse the plains biome environments, Plains cultures, and the expiration of treaty-based independence that is still very prevalent in today's society. Historian James Daschuk identified the loss of the Bison herds back then, as one of the most devastating environmental catastrophes experienced by Plains communities.[6] By the late 1870s, famine had spread across the Plains, and treaty promises of relief during times of "national famine" were repeatedly ignored due to the "relocation of groups to reserves, exacerbated by inadequate food aid from the Dominion government, [that] created ecological conditions in which the [many] diseases exploded."[7] This created a hunger drive that was not purely due to an environmental catastrophe, but to a structural advantage that Western civilization was producing to rearrange how the Plains were to be balanced for the next century.

The bodily costs of this collapse became even more severe as Daschuk shows how the consequences of malnutrition, forced relocation, and overcrowded conditions created severe circumstances for the Southern Cheyenne and other Plains Tribes in which tuberculosis became one of the top leading illnesses that epidemically devastated and pushed many to the brink of extermination.[8] Rather than responding with sustained support, colonial officials increasingly used hunger as a tool of coercion at their disposal so that, even by the early 1880s, starvation was openly employed to brutally force many Plains tribes onto reservation systems of agricultural

[5] See Jacki Thompson Rand, "Medicine Lodge Treaty," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=ME005; *Treaty with the Sioux-Brule, Oglala, Miniconjou, Yanktonai, Hunkpapa, Blackfeet, Cuthead, Two Kettle, San Arcs, and Santee-and Arapaho*, April 29, 1868, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, National Archives; and Isenberg, 125.

[6] James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2019), 99.

[7] Daschuk, 100.

[8] Daschuk, 100-101.

dependency upon the Federal Government.[9] Transportation efforts, such as horses and firearms, were also confiscated, annuities were withheld, and any movement became more restricted through mechanisms such as the pass system. The federal pass system was a method used to further restrict mobility by Plains tribes, requiring them to obtain written permission from an Indian agent before leaving reservation boundaries. This policy was highly effective in confining the Southern Cheyenne Peoples to enclosed spaces that prevented access to traditional hunting territories and reinforced settlers' colonial grip on the Cheyenne, reinforcing the Cheyenne's dependency on government rations for their survival. Daschuk explains, the pass system functioned as a device for colonial control that established "Reserve lands [to] be subdivided and worked by individuals rather than collectively" and was used to "increase the consumption [of] marginalize reserve populations [that] contributed to the failure of agriculture as a feasible alternative to the bison hunt."[10]

This was one tactic of colonial control that restricted greater movement for the Southern Cheyenne Peoples but also guaranteed they remained dependent on state-administered food supplies rather than following their own subsistence economies that formerly sustained them. What had previously been a very successful mobile hunting model was then transformed into a confined-state surveillance. This allowed government-issued rations, which were often white flour, lard, sugar, salt pork, and other nutritionally poor foods, to replace the originally diversified food system that had long sustained the Cheyenne and other Plains Nations. These new food regimes were not only nutritionally inadequate but also culturally alienated to them by

[9] Daschuk, 127.
[10] Daschuk, 160.

severing long-established relationships between the Southern Cheyenne and the landscapes that had cared for them for the past thousands of years.

For the Southern *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas), this transformation represented far more than an economic shift away from traditional ways of prosperity, but a direct disruption of social organization, ceremonial systems, and cultural identity. American anthropologist and the earliest non-Indigenous scholar to record Cheyenne life, George Bird Grinnell, noted that Cheyenne subsistence patterns were deeply integrated with social governance, spirituality, and communal responsibilities.[11] Donald J. Berthrong likewise explains that federal Indian policies toward the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes in Oklahoma sought to restructure how tribal life was to be further lived through assimilation policies that emphasized agriculture, individual land ownership, and economic dependence on the reservation system. Through policies such as the Dawes Act, communal tribal lands were divided into individual allotments and "surplus" lands transferred to the federal government for white settlement, while federal officials promoted farming, ranching, and wage labor as replacements strategies for traditional subsistence practices.[12]

These policies were still implemented despite the fact that many Cheyenne and Arapaho communities followed or maintained communal structures and resisted the transition to private property and sedentary agricultural labor.[13] This transformation also represented a dramatic break from the earlier buffalo-based subsistence systems that had supported prior Cheyenne life on the Plains, creating an ever-increasing reliance on government rations and supervision while

[11]George Bird Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Lifeways Vol. 1* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 84.

[12] Donald J. Berthrong. "Legacies of the Dawes Act: Bureaucrats and Land Thieves at the Cheyenne Arapaho Agencies of Oklahoma," *Arizona and the West* 21, no. 4 (1979): 336–337.

[13] Berthrong, 338.

binding them to the reservation system. Reservation life increasingly led to food insecurity for the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples, as federal rations frequently failed to meet the needs of tribal communities. During the early 1880s, Indian agent John D. Miles reported that reductions in congressional funding left the agency unable to provide sufficient beef and other rations, forcing tribal members to rely heavily on government-issued food while traditional subsistence practices had already been severely disrupted.[14]

Understanding this disturbance also requires looking further back into Cheyenne history, because these food systems did not begin solely during the buffalo era, but had earlier stages that paint the emergence of the Cheyenne as a fiery Plains Nation. Cheyenne foodways have always changed over time through various efforts of forced migration, adaptation, and natural shifts, long before their removal to Oklahoma and the establishment of Indian Boarding Schools such as Concho was enforced. Historical records, oral traditional stories, and ethnographic accounts, reveal at least four broad eras that can help trace these evolutions, they are an Eastern Woodlands period, a transitional Woodlands-Plains period, a Plains Horse-Buffalo era, and a Reservation-Extermination era.

During the Eastern Woodlands period, the Cheyenne lived along the waters and in the woodlands of the Great Lakes region, in what is now commonly known as Minnesota and surrounding areas. Cheyenne traditional stories told by Cheyenne Elder Ervin Bull depict a time when *Ma'hähko'e* (Mah-hu-ko-o), the Badger Spirit, showed the Cheyenne Peoples a way to the surface, where life flourished. This story not only indicates emergence but also expresses a

[14] Donald J. Berthrong. "Cattlemen on the Cheyenne Arapaho Reservation, 1883–1885," *Arizona and the West* 13, no. 1 (1971): 8-9.

worldview in which animals are honored as more-than-human kin.[15] During this early period, food systems were based in agricultural villages, seasonal celebrations, and structured forms of communal governance. Grinnell confirms he Cheyenne "formerly lived far to the east. . . in fixed villages and cultivated the soil," and that agriculture "furnished an important part of their living."[16] The Cheyenne harvested roots, corn, beans, squash, tobacco, fruits, and medicinal plants. Grinnell also notes that natural maple sugar and wild rice became important food sources, especially in winter, and that younger men seasonally hunted small game in areas known to be abundant in rabbits, skunks, and other Plains animals.

Food gathering and distribution were also communal, and Grinnell describes Cheyenne food systems during this period as "systematized and well managed" with "food secured" and understood as "common property."[17] Women played central roles in agricultural life, and these spaces functioned as sites of both sustenance and intergenerational teaching. Ceremonial relationships to food were so sacred and equally important that they would have celebrations and ceremonial dances, such as the corn dance that "carried the sacred ear of corn," which was a way that "corn was planted in quincunxes, four grains at the corners of the square, and one in the middle."[18] This is also a time of seasonal renewal and the welcoming-home celebrations of war parties returning unharmed but appreciated for their bravery in protecting the community. However, it can be understood that celebrations were not always happening, but also times when migration was the Cheyenne Peoples' best option for survival.

[15] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), interviewed by Chaz Meadows, Oklahoma, January 30, 2026.
[16] Grinnell, 246-247.
[17] Grinnell, 248.
[18] Grinnell, 252.

The movement from the woodlands into the Plains was not a simple abandonment of earlier practices, but a response to larger regional pressure, including territorial conflict, disease, new trade networks, and colonial encroachments. Grinnell notes the westward movement was shaped in part by the Sioux's expansion into areas around the Black Hills, including sacred places such as Bear Butte.[19] Cheyenne oral accounts also remember this period was one of strategic adaptation they had to endure. At the same time, migration westward did not erase previous horticultural knowledge. Grinnell notes the Cheyenne continued planting crops into the middle of the nineteenth century, placing cornfields above the Platte River and returning to tend them when possible. He also recounts older women continued to impose agricultural responsibilities on younger generations, showing the endurance of women's roles in nurturing food knowledge. Oral teachings were also preserved by knowledge keepers such as Gordon Yellowman, who similarly emphasized corn as a living relative and connected planting practices to ceremonial relationships with the earth, the stars, and seasonal renewal.[20] This transitional period illustrated how the Cheyenne creatively combined woodland horticultural systems with emerging Plains subsistence patterns to map out their knowledge of how to survive with both different systems.

With the introduction of horses through trade networks and alliances across the Plains, the Cheyenne increasingly became the Plains people for whom they are most often known today. In the Plains Horse-Buffalo era, buffalo became central to their mobility, ceremonies, economy, social organization, and survival. They adapted the role of becoming hunters of the é-se-vo-ne (Buffalo herded), which conveys much of the holistic system of nourishment. The buffalo

[19] Grinnell, 45-47.

[20] Gordon Yellowman, (Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribal Historian), interviewed by Chaz Meadows, phone interview, February 3, 2026.

provided the Cheyenne with food, shelter, clothing, tools, glue, ropes, hides, and ceremonial materials. Cheyenne hunting systems were sophisticated and highly organized. Men hunted in coordinated groups, while women prepared and preserved food through drying meat, pounding berries, and gathering medicinal roots.[21] Pemmican was a food source which included dried meat mixed with things like berries that ensured survival during harsh winters, while blood and other parts of the buffalo were carefully used in ways that provided nourishment and reflected respect. Food preparation and preservation were embedded in both gendered labor and ceremonial traditions that have been passed down through the generations. Food preparation and preservation were embedded in both gendered labor and ceremonial knowledge.

The Cheyenne's five ceremonial societies, which regulated how the hunting season would go, were the *Hotamétaneo'o* (Huh-dum-ih-dun-i-yo) Dog Soldiers, *Véhoo'o* (Vi-i-ho) Chiefs, *Hémo'eoxeo'o* (Hih-muh-i-ohk-i-yo) Elk Horn Scrapers, *Mótsęsóenetaneo'o* (Muts-suh-nih-dun-i-yo) Kitfox, and *Héma'tanónęheo'o* (Hih-muh-dun-noh-nhih-yo) Bowstrings. All societies collectively ensured that the camp would have direct access to, and that proper food distribution would be structured for, the tribe as a whole. This provided regulated movement, hunting, and social order. Food in this time was not abundant; it was part of a flourishing sacred relationship that structured how Cheyenne governance and collective life were to be lived in balance. . Food at this time was spiritually nourishing for them and it consisted through their strong connection to the Buffalo. The way they prepared each part of the buffalo was ritualistic because of the sacrifice the animal gave for the tribe. A vast amount of love and care shown towards the animal, as every part has a specific use for something. Some examples of this are: they would cook the blood in the buffalo's stomach; the women would poke and flip it until the

[21] Grinnell, 66-67.

blood was hard as jelly, which would become a nutritional meal for multiple camps, that gave them sources of iron and protein to help keep them well and strong. Another great super food that was very popular for the Cheyenne was pemmican. Women made this meal by pounding dried meat so it could be consumed in the moment rather than drying it out like jerky. It was craved as a favorite of the tribe.[22]

The Reservation-Extermination era violently disrupted the way Cheyenne did things culturally and ceremonially. As military campaigns intensified, buffalo herds began to disappear, and the Cheyenne's mobility was increasingly constrained. This forced Cheyennes to depend on western food economies for survival. Berthrong explains that many Cheyennes were driven south, leaving their northern hunting grounds behind, and the threat of extermination allowed little space for continued resistance. [23] Once confined in Indian Territory, Cheyenne families increasingly relied on annuity goods and treaty monies while engaging in small-scale gardening or accessing cattle passing through their lands. These changes represented a devastating break in traditional subsistence patterns and a new exposure to different types of food that tribes were not used to eating previously.

Students who returned from boarding schools such as Haskell, Chilocco, or Carlisle, frequently lacked the resources to apply the western agricultural training they had received, and many had little interest in farming in accordance with white agrarian values. [24] As Berthrong suggests, Cheyenne culture was not organized around the accumulation of property, but around access, use, reciprocity, and relational responsibility, which further collapsed through the

[22] Grinnell, 256.

[23] Donald J. Berthrong, "Federal Indian Policy and the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes, 1887-1907," *Ethnohistory* 3, no. 2 (Spring, 1956): 138.

[24] Berthrong, 148.

eradication of buffalo systems and the intensification of reservation life. This collapse brought forth the fractures in the ceremonial renewal cycles, gendered food roles, and ecological knowledge systems that would be passed on to the next generation. During severe times of hunger, Cheyenne people were also forced to eat animals such as horses and dogs simply to survive the colonial campaign of being obliterated by Western civilization. This was not their way of survival but a new imposed rule under forced conditions that were more foreign than the common ways they knew.

The Darlington Agency caused one of the most catastrophic colonial restructuring incidences, which will forever ripple through Cheyenne food systems. This was the introduction to the boarding school system that the Darlington Agency, which later transitioned into Concho Indian Boarding School, emerged and forever changed the Cheyenne ways of knowing forever. Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) was not an isolated institution, but a section of a broader federal system aimed at reorganizing Cheyenne life through its ration dependency, land control, agricultural assimilation, and forced education. The roots of Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) can be traced to President Ulysses S. Grant's "so-called" Peace Policy, which aimed to "educate and christianize the Indians, and to get them to farm and raise cattle."[25] What was presented as a benevolent policy was, in reality, part of a wider imperial strategy that Fort Supply, established in 1869 on Cheyenne and Arapaho territory, and later became tied to the Darlington Agency under the supervision of Brinton Darlington, a Quaker Indian agent. Darlington was presented by the federal government as a site where relocated Cheyenne and Arapaho bands would receive rations necessary for survival on the reservation. Ironically, when

[25] Gordon Yellowman, "First School Facilities Provided by the U.S. Government for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes," n.d., Yellowman Papers, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes Historic Preservation Office, Concho, OK.

reading through the unpublished archives of the story of Darlington, only one side of the story shows through western administrative records, a story that only shows the risks of reproducing the colonial story that Cheyenne people willingly surrendered their own systems of life to those of the new colonial ways of living. Oral renditions of the Cheyenne story of Darlington remember it differently.

Cheyenne oral traditions depict Darlington differently, showing signs of betrayal, coercion, and dispossession.[26] Darlington is understood more as a detention site than as a geographical remembrance through which the federal government sought to gather Cheyenne leaders to weaken their resistance and reorganize the Cheyenne nation into dependent forms. What was portrayed as protection was, in fact, a concealed broader motive of colonial control. Darlington enabled the federal government to access, monitor, and ultimately detain prominent Cheyenne men, including leaders and warriors, who were later imprisoned in places, such as Fort Marion beginning in 1875.[27] Berthrong's work helps situate Darlington within the earlier destruction of Cheyenne food systems, showing that poverty, dependence, and nutritional crisis were already being imposed before Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) ever opened. He further notes these imposed conditions created weaknesses from the "loss of their hunting grounds [that] was difficult to accept" and that "further military resistance would lead to [their] extermination."[28] Darlington which opened in 1871, was the start of the early federal schooling system which dismantled the ways of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes by taking control of the people and disassembling their cultural ways into a more structured system. Concho Indian

[26] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), interviewed by Chaz Meadows, in person Interview, January 30, 2026.
[27] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), interviewed by Chaz Meadows, in person Interview, January 30, 2026.
[28] Berthrong. "Federal Indian Policy and the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes, 1887–1907," 138.

Boarding School opened in 1909 after the relocation of Darlington, which became the extension of this earlier system in a more formalized institutional setting.[29]

Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) can be understood as one of the clearest examples of how colonial education policies disrupted Cheyenne foodways. Its purpose was not simply academic instruction, but the assimilation of Cheyenne children into western norms of living, eating, laboring, and relating to land. Like other boarding schools, Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) justified the removal of children from their families while prohibiting Cheyenne language, cultural food practices, and kinship-based ways of learning. Agricultural training and domestic labor became tools of "civilization," teaching students to value Western forms of food production while devaluing Indigenous food systems.[30] This process also affected Cheyenne families outside the school. Small gardens were often left idle because families lacked the tools, livestock, or resources needed to farm under imposed conditions, and land was increasingly leased to white farmers and cattlemen, frequently resulting in further dispossession.

Jennifer Bess's work on boarding school agriculture helps explain how institutions such as Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) functioned. Writing about Chilocco, Bess argues that federal officials viewed Native land as "rich agricultural property" and saw schools as "a powerful instrument for [Indigenous] civilization," intended to transform Indigenous land and labor into productive commodities while indoctrinating children into white ways and fitting them into the American economic hierarchy.[31] Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) can be

[29] William T. Dias. "Historical Sketch of Cheyenne Arapaho School and Agency," *The Oklahoma Indian School Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 2 (February 1933): 6.

[30] Berthrong. "Federal Indian Policy and the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes, 1887–1907," 140-144.

[31] Jennifer Bess, "Indigenizing the Safety Zone: Contesting Ideologies in Foodways at the Chilocco Indian Industrial School, 1902–1918," *Journal of the Southwest* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 198.

comprehended through this same framework. It was not merely a school, but a site where Indigenous land, labor, and food practices were reorganized into systems useful to the settler state rather than trying to bring the Cheyenne ways into a contemporary lifestyle. Western food staples such as sugar, flour, lard, and salt increasingly replaced traditional foods, resembling the warning attributed to *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve), Sweet Medicine, that if the Cheyenne ate like the white man, they would become like him and suffer for it. The consequence was not only dietary changes, but the weakening of intergenerational food knowledge and the growing normalization of colonial foods within Cheyenne life.

The historical effects of Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) continue into the present. The school deepened an already ongoing rupture in the transmission of food knowledge, ceremonial cycles, gendered food roles, and land-based practices. What once had been sustained through hunting, gathering, gardening, and kin-based teachings became increasingly fractured across the generations. The result is an intergenerational nutritional gap which was formed by trauma, dependency, and disconnection from traditional foods. The history of how the Cheyenne people have evolved today is not only a story of the loss of cultural ways, but understanding these historical changes also makes it possible to imagine what tribal foods remain available today, what knowledge still survives in community memory, and what can be revitalized back into the core of what being Cheyenne consists of. It is for this reason that the lived experiences of former Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) students and Cheyenne oral histories become essential for the information to be passed on. The legacy of story does not only recount the past; they shed light on the pathways through which food, memory, and survival continue to endure.

Understanding this historical transformation is essential for examining contemporary efforts to revitalize *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) foodways. The current challenges surrounding food insecurity, health disparities, and cultural disconnection within Cheyenne communities cannot be understood without accepting the colonial restructuring of Indigenous food systems that occurred during the nineteenth century. Contemporary movements toward food sovereignty, therefore, do not emerge simply as cultural revival projects but as a necessary response to those historical processes that disrupted Indigenous relationships to land, food, and tribal survival itself.

1.1 From Colonial Food Regimes to Contemporary Food Sovereignty

Modern food sovereignty movements cannot be fully understood without recognizing that colonialism was structurally designed to eradicate Indigenous ways of knowing, including food systems, and to digest Native diets as part of the fabric of American culture. To examine food sovereignty without confronting this history would be akin to recounting a story while omitting the very events that formed it. Hopi, a journalist and Phoenix Indian School alumna, Patty Talahongva, reflects in their article, that "food is an essential part of any culture," and noted that European contact altered Indigenous diets by introducing wheat, dairy, and refined sugars which were previously absent from Native foodways.[32] The introduction of Native children to Boarding schools intensified the transformation of westernized food into native children's diets. After school farms were dismantled, students were forced to rely on government-issued commodity foods "loaded with fat and carbohydrates and few real nutrients," fundamentally reshaping

[32] Patty Talahongva, "No More 'Die Bread': How Boarding Schools Impacted Native Diet and the Resurgence of Indigenous Food Sovereignty," *Journal of American Indian Education* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 145.

Native relationships to nourishment.[33] Talahongva's critique of frybread as "Die Bread," a food she argues "is killing our people," demonstrates how these imposed dietary shifts became normalized while adding to long-term health disparities.[34]

The long-term consequences of colonial policies keep shaping Indigenous food systems today. Settler colonialism aimed to remove Indigenous peoples from their lands, while it worked to dismantle their ecologically based relationships that sustained their economies and governance systems. Kyle Powys Whyte explains settler colonialism involves a process in which settlers seek to transform Indigenous homelands into their own while erasing Indigenous "economies, cultures, and political organizations" that depend on relationships with land and ecosystems.[35] These upheavals significantly altered Indigenous subsistence practices by altering the environmental conditions required for traditional food systems. Whyte further notes that Indigenous societies historically developed "comprehensive governance systems designed to relate to places with particular ecological conditions" in order to sustain "cultural integrity, economic vitality, and political self-determination."[36] Colonial infrastructure, including dams, extractive industries, and agricultural expansion, later reshaped ecological systems by altering "hydrological flows, soil nutrients, and many other ecological conditions" that Indigenous communities relied upon for survival.[37] Understanding these transformations reveals that contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty movements are not simply efforts to recover

[33] Talahongva, 146.
[34] Talahongva, 147.
[35] Kyle Powys Whyte, "The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and U.S. Settler Colonialism," *Red Ink: An International Journal of Indigenous Literature, Arts, and Humanities* 19, no. 1 (2017): 161-162.
[36] Whyte, 162.
[37] Whyte, 166.

traditional diets but represent the maintenance of governance traditions that emphasize reciprocal relationships between communities, ecosystems, and food systems.

As historian Michael D. Wise demonstrates, those disruptions were not incidental but strategic. Federal agents routinely wielded food as a mechanism of coercion, withholding treaty rations in order to pressure families into surrendering their children to boarding schools.[38] Once enrolled, students often endured meager meals and nutritional deprivation while performing the labor required to sustain the institutions that confined them. Wise explains that "food and hunger" functioned as "instruments of subordination," embedded within larger efforts to sever Native peoples from their land-based subsistence and political autonomy.[39] In this sense, the boarding school was not merely an educational institution but an agricultural and dietary regime that reorganized Indigenous lifeways at the level of basic phycological needs of the body.

Understanding this history clarifies why contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty movements are not simply about increasing access to nutritious food but about confronting and healing the structural consequences of colonial policy. Native diets, health outcomes, and relationships to land were deliberately reorganized through federal power, causing enduring effects that still shape Indigenous communities today. The growing movement toward food sovereignty, therefore, emerges not only as a response to present-day food insecurity but also as part of a broader effort to restore Indigenous governance, ecological knowledge, and cultural relationships to food that colonial systems sought to dismantle. It is within this historical setting

[38] Michael D. Wise, "Food and Activism in the Twentieth Century," in *Native Foods: Agriculture, Indigeneity, and Settler Colonialism in American History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2023), 130-131.

[39] Wise, "Food and Activism in the Twentieth Century," 127.

that the concept of Indigenous food sovereignty has emerged prominently as a framework for resisting colonial control and reclaiming Indigenous food systems.

1.2 Defining Food Sovereignty and Its Rise for Resisting Colonialism

Native American Food Sovereignty has emerged today as an important discourse for resisting colonial control over Indigenous food systems that have been abruptly disrupted by colonialism. With food sovereignty gaining its own momentum within the last decade, it has to be addressed that FS is nothing new for Indigenous Peoples, to adapt into their culture. The institutional academy has coined Indigenous Food Sovereignty under the rubric of Indigenous Ways of Knowing or Traditional Ecological Knowledge, but among Indigenous Peoples, it is known through its association with everything that distinctly sets them apart as an Indigenous culture in the United States of America today. The 1990's served as a pinnacle period for Indigenous peoples to express what Food Sovereignty is and how many initiatives have emerged from that period for Indigenous peoples to the present.

In the 1990s, there was heavy pressure on a global corporate-controlled food market to produce for the world, specifically aimed at eradicating small-scale farmers. In return, small-scale farmers founded the global organization La Vía Campesina, which later introduced the term "Food Sovereignty."[40] Cultural anthropologist Matthew C. Canfield, in "Translating Food Sovereignty: Cultivating Justice in an Age of Transnational Governance," coined that La Vía Campesina was an "International Peasants' Movement [of] food producers initially united to oppose threats to their lands, livelihoods, and diets" that pushed for a globally accepted

[40] "What Is Food Sovereignty?," La Via Campesina - EN, November 12, 2025, https://viacampesina.org/en/what-is-food-sovereignty/.

definition of what Food Sovereignty can be defined as for all people.[41] Canfield defined food sovereignty as "the rights of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriated food produced through ecologically sound and suitable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."[42] Sam Grey and Raj Patel, in "Food Sovereignty as Decolonization," argue that food sovereignty "is a continuation of anti-colonial struggles, even in post-colonial contexts" and is "much more than agricultural practice. . . [but] environmental maintenance activities deeply embedded in a cultural ecology."[43] Cultural ecology, in this sense, refers to the interconnected relationships among land, subsistence practices, identity, and knowledge systems that sustain Indigenous ways of living beyond merely producing food.

Prominent food sovereignty scholar Hannah Wittman also defines food sovereignty as "the right of local peoples to control their own food systems, including markets, ecological resources, food cultures, and production modes," which establishes a rights-based political framework to ground community governance at the forefront and its rights to make self-determining decisions based upon the community's interests alone.[44] When looking at the sacred teaching of the *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas), they are rooted from a culture that is then carried through distinctively deciding what tools should shape identity, self-connection, and the understanding of traditional foods by renewal and how it affects our metropolitan areas.

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[41] Matthew C. Canfield, *Translating Food Sovereignty: Cultivating Justice in an Age of Transnational Governance* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2022), 2.

[42] Canfield, 48.

[43] Sam Grey and Raj Patel. "Food Sovereignty as Decolonization: Some Contributions from Indigenous Movements to Food System and Development Politics," *Agriculture and Human Values* 32, no. 3 (October 5, 2014): 433-439, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9548-9.

[44] Hannah Wittman, "Food Sovereignty: A New Rights Framework for Food and Nature?" *Environment and Society* 2 (2011): 87.

Renewal is another component that cannot be overlooked without defining its role in food sovereignty efforts, particularly in metropolitan areas. Elizabeth Hoover, a settler scholar, challenges dominant settler narratives that distinguishes food sovereignty from surrounding concerns such as market access or agricultural policy. Hoover describes Indigenous food sovereignty as "a process, or a journey [that] describes the process of growth and awareness [to] characterize a group of people working toward and achieving maturity [toward] the ongoing story of ourselves—our own continuance."[45] Many scholars increasingly define food sovereignty not only as a response to food insecurity, but also as a framework that cultivates improved futures grounded in proactive health, cultural restoration, and resistance to settler food systems. In a study conducted on urban Indigenous communities in Winnipeg, Canada, an anthropologist named Jaime Cidro and her co-authors demonstrate that Indigenous food sovereignty function as a recovery of cultural food practices, operating both as a response to colonial disruption and as a route toward renewed relational balance for displaced Indigenous communities.[46] Cidro et al. also states participants further noted that residential schools and urban migrations disrupted traditional food systems, "really interrupted our food sovereignty," producing generational "deskilling" and dependency on commercial food systems, which required a process of "re-learning IFS."[47]

The health consequences of "deskilling" and relying on commercial food systems has impacted the Indigenous community significantly by reducing access of traditional foods to an

[45] Elizabeth Hoover, "You Can't Say You're Sovereign If You Can't Feed Yourself," in *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States*, eds. Devon A. Mihesuah and Elizabeth Hoover (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 87.

[46] Jaime Cidro, Bamidele Adekunle, Evelyn Peters, and Tabitha Martens, "Beyond Food Security: Understanding Access to Cultural Food for Urban Indigenous People in Winnipeg as Indigenous Food Sovereignty," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 24, no. 1 (2015): 24-43, esp. 37–38.

[47] Cidro, Adekunle, Peters, and Martens, 37.

increased reliance on malnutritional commercial market foods and fast food options with long term life style health effects which contribute to higher rates of obesity and poor health outcomes which can lead to diseases such as type II diabetes and cardiovascular related illnesses among Indigenous populations.[48] The transition away from traditional food sovereignty systems into the reliance on store market foods is a structural indication of how far the colonial disruption of Indigenous subsistence has reached. Hoover, however, reminds us that food sovereignty is "really at the root of cultural sovereignty" because food serves as "an important vehicle for delivering cultural information," extending beyond colonial improvised food systems that reassert Indigenous food sovereignty toward the remedy of becoming self-determined within survival and intergenerational continuity.[49]

[48] Cidro, Adekunle, Peters, and Martens, 32.
[49] Hoover, 65.

Chapter 2: Cheyenne Methodologies & Ethics

2.1 Positionality: Locating Myself within Cheyenne Food Sovereignty

Motsé'eóeve (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) prophesied a time when the Southern Cheyenne people would become dependent upon *vé'ho'e* (Vi-hi-oot) ways of surviving. He warned that if the Cheyenne people began eating like the dominant society, they would eventually become like them. This teaching was shared with me at a young age while attending ceremonies in the Native American Church, the Cheyenne Sundance, and other Cheyenne ceremonial gatherings that renew our relationship with the Creator and the land each year. I have carried teachings, such as this one, with me throughout my life as a token of who I am with the responsibilities I hold as a Cheyenne Indigenous person. Over time, this prophecy has remained close to me, like hearing a song repeatedly and discovering something new each time it is played. Sweet Medicine's warning did not reflect on how the Cheyenne Peoples were to control their diet; it was a prophesized moment that foretold an intellectual and spiritual recognition of a colonial system that would eventually attempt to transform the Cheyenne lifeways they had held onto dearly. His prophecy acknowledged colonial structures would arrive disguised as progress to modernization, while simultaneously working to disconnect the Cheyenne Peoples' relationships to land, food, governance, and community. In many ways, the conditions he warned about are visible today through the transformation of how Cheyenne People view food and the systems that control their health.

As I began developing this research, one of the most pressing questions I asked myself was, did I have enough life experience to claim that role where I could fit within a Cheyenne food sovereignty framework? In many ways, I fit directly into what my Indigenous communities

are facing, because my up bring and the research I am now doing represents an ongoing process of learning and understanding of the dynamics of colonial food systems which continue to affect Cheyenne People. As a Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal member, my research is guided by a commitment to addressing food insecurity and cultural disconnections within Cheyenne communities. The criticism of this work lies in recognizing cultural knowledge about food, health, and land relationships is at risk of disappearing if meaningful efforts toward revitalization are not pursued. Without intentional intervention, future generations may not inherit the same historical stories about Cheyenne food traditions that I was fortunate to hear from my elders.

So how did the Indigenous people get here? Colonial food systems were intentionally constructed through policies designed to dispossess and reorganize Indigenous nations into structures of dependency on the federal government. This happened by identifying such historical patterns where Cheyenne tribal members began finding themselves in hospitals with illnesses that begin becoming hereditary such as diabetes. It has also had a great effect on how Cheyenne culture around foods are becoming less appreciated and more frequently replaced with catered foods from local western food regime restaurants. I approach this task not as an outside observer, but as a *Tsėtsėhéstâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) Southern Cheyenne and *Vanohetaneo* (Vuh-nuh-i-dun-i-yo) Southern Arapaho person whose responsibilities extend to the cultural continuance of both Tribes, but to seek a solution for the modern issues of food insecurities, cultural disconnect, and language loss. At the same time, my identity is formed by intersecting lineages that also reflect the histories of many movements and ways of survival across eras.

My family lineage traces through my mother, as I carry Southern Cheyenne, Southern Arapaho, and Thai ancestry. Through my father, I carry primarily Mexican American heritage with distant Blackfoot lineage. Those interconnected histories deepen my understanding of how

food functions, not only as a means of sustenance, but also as a vessel that carries memory, migration, and cultural legacies across geographies here on Turtle Island as the Indigenous people call North America. Rather than fragmenting my perspective into different pieces, I believe these layered legacies have strengthened my ability to observe patterns of fortitude within all Indigenous food systems while grounding my research in the responsibilities I hold for my Cheyenne relatives and community members today.

My approach to researching this topic is grounded in Cheyenne teachings such as: É'méhosenestȯtse-a-popá'ėstsėstsé (respecting and loving one another), É'hetómahe (truth and sincerity), and Éoéhnov (patience and calmness). These teachings are not intangible values but rather guiding principles which helped guide me on my journey of self-discovery on how to tackle this topic. I engage with my community's knowledge and interpreted the many stories and experiences shared with me. This responsibility is profoundly a humbling experience because I was handed down the memories and histories of ancestors who endured the deep violence of Sand Creek, Little Bighorn, among other battles and massacres during the expansion of the United States. This expansion also touches my family linage as my four-time great-grandfather Chief Black Kettle, who was wrongfully killed during the Massacre of the Washita River in 1868. Their steadfastness intensifies my pledge to pursue this work that contributes to the well-being of Southern Cheyenne communities and supports pathways toward renewed cultural independence. Ultimately, this thesis represents an effort to contribute to the broader picture of rebuilding Cheyenne food knowledge and cultural traditions so that future generations may continue to thrive. By grounding this work in relational responsibility, I hope to demonstrate how Cheyenne food systems remain as a living expression for continuance, survivance, and futurity.

2.2 Cheyenne Worldview and Cosmology

Understanding Cheyenne food sovereignty requires grounding this research within Cheyenne cosmology and worldview. Cheyenne knowledge systems understand that the land, food, animals, and human relationships are interrelated components of a living universe shaped by spiritual teachings and ancestral memory. These teachings have been preserved through oral traditions passed down across generations of *Tsitsistas* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) people and remain central to understanding the distinctiveness of Cheyenne communities' responsibility to the land today.

The creation of the *Tsitsistas* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) is foretold in many stories that have existed since the beginning of our people's presence here on the world we know today as earth. These teachings have been carefully nourished and preserved so that Cheyenne people may continue to maintain their relationships with the land, air, water, and the fires we gather around in ceremony and community. Remembering these stories also requires honoring elders, family ancestors, and those who made the ultimate sacrifices to ensure these teachings could continue to be shared in spaces where they are respected and understood. To the generations who are not yet here and to those who have already made their journey to Séáne (the happy hunting grounds), these stories remain vitally alive and live through the words of those elders, through ceremony, and through the responsibilities carried by Cheyenne people today.

According to Cheyenne oral tradition, before land existed upon Mother Earth, water was the dominant element in the world. On a cold and frigid morning within this liquid world, a great mystical prophet appeared floating upon the surface of the water. This prophet is known among the *Tsitsistas* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) as *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve), or Sweet Medicine. At that time, many forms of life already existed in the waters, including waterfowl such as swans, geese, and mallards, and other birds that traveled long migration routes. These birds had grown exhausted from their constant journeys across the water and cried out for a place to rest and lay their

offspring. Hearing their cries, *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t), the Creator, became angered because he had already provided them with everything they needed to survive. For three days, he uttered to them, attempting to show them that the answer already existed. Yet the birds did not listen.

On the fourth day, *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t) spoke to *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) and instructed him to gather the birds and ask them to bring back Ma'óma'ȯhtse, the red earth. One by one, the birds dove beneath the clear waters in search of the earth below. Each bird dove deeply, gasping for air as they searched the ocean floor, but none were able to return with anything. Even the strongest birds attempted the dive but surfaced lifeless from exhaustion. Finally, one small green-headed duck volunteered to try. The duck dove courageously to the depths of the water and eventually surfaced, carrying a small fragment of red earth on its bill. The duck swam toward *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) and placed the small piece of earth into his hand. Sweet Medicine then shaped the red earth into seven circular pieces and placed them upon the surface of the water. Each piece grew outward into land until rich and prosperous earth spread as far as one could see. In this way, the world that the Cheyenne people know today came into existence. The birds praised *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) for this act, yet it was *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t) who guided Sweet Medicine in teaching the people how to live in harmony upon the earth.

Cheyenne Laws and Cultural Values

After the creation of the earth, *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t) formed the first Cheyenne people from his creation that burned bright across the sky, which became ho'evȯhtse, the Earth Man. From the flesh of that man, he formed Mé'eohtsévá'e, the Appearing Corn Woman. These two were created at the same sacred location, Náhkȯhévóse, or Bear Butte. Soon after their creation, they were separated in different directions. Earth Man was placed far in the north, where he aged

and lived within chillier environments, while Appearing Corn Woman remained in the south, where life flourished. These teachings explain seasonal changes and the balance between different natural forces within the world. Within Cheyenne teachings, powerful spiritual beings such as Ho-im'a'ha, known as Old Man Winter, and the Nonóma'e, the Thunder Beings, represent the forces that move between seasons. Their movements across the land explain the cyclical balance between winter and summer that has persisted since the beginning of time. Through these teachings, Sweet Medicine also brought important gifts to the Cheyenne people. With the assistance of the Thunder Beings and the buffalo, he learned how to create fire by spinning a willow stick within a dried buffalo chip. This gift allowed the Cheyenne people to warm themselves during harsh winters and to cook their food in ways that improved its flavor and nutritional value.

Sweet Medicine also gave the Cheyenne people natural laws that guide how they are to live together as a nation. Among these teachings were principles of peace, protection of the land, consultation among the people, kindness toward visitors, and harmony among the community. The Forty-Four Cheyenne Chiefs were established to maintain peace among the communities, even during times of conflict such as war, genocide, and colonial encroachment. Equally important to this were the warrior societies, such as the Dog Soldiers, Kit Fox, Bowstring, and Elk Scraper societies. They all shared very intricate responsibilities, including protecting the people and the land amid external pressures. At the same time, Cheyenne law banned violence between Cheyenne people, and when such acts occurred, ceremonial cleansing was required for the People before they could move forward together again. These laws established what *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) instructed the Cheyenne people, so that foundational teachings could continue to guide Cheyenne cultural values into the next generation.

Land, Memory, and Historical Responsibility

Living from those kinds of ancient traditions within modern society creates challenges for younger generations today. Tribal governments, traditional leadership, ceremonial leaders, elders, and community members all play major roles in shaping the direction of younger generations' futures and what those futures will consist of for them tomorrow. These teachings carry delicate responsibilities, especially when addressing the contemporary health challenges faced by the Cheyenne people, including the horrid bio factors in the foods available to modern society. Many Cheyenne elders talk about a time when nearly every food they had growing up was also used in ceremonies, gatherings, and daily life, and came directly from Cheyenne communities themselves.[50] Today, however, many families rely heavily on outside food systems, and the long-term effects of those changes have contributed to serious health disparities within the tribe.

Understanding Cheyenne relationships to land is therefore key to understanding how Cheyenne food sovereignty is beneficial today for these issues. The land where the Cheyenne people live today serves not only as space for their homes but also as places of worship, gathering, ceremony, and burial for their relatives. These lands are sacred to them and hold the history of the Cheyenne people. One of the most significant of these locations is Bear Butte, which continues to hold spiritual importance for the Cheyenne People. Many Cheyenne individuals travel there to fast, pray, and seek direction from the Creator.

Stories handed down by elders describe moments when Sweet Medicine himself returned from Bear Butte, renewed and strengthened by spiritual power. For the Cheyenne People, land is

[50] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), in-person interview, January 30, 2026.

not a property right but a living archive that carries the memory of events that have influenced how the Cheyenne Nation has made it across the many generations. From an Indigenous perspective, land holds time differently than written histories, as it remembers events that colonial narratives have often attempted to erase. The banks of Sand Creek, for example, remain one of these places where the land recalls. There, a Cheyenne and Arapaho encampment was massacred despite raising white flags of peace. The earth itself witnessed this violence carried out against women, children, and elders. For Cheyenne people today, Sand Creek is not a historical site but a place where our memory, responsibility, and survival are still being carried forward. Through the Cheyenne understandings of land, the earth itself becomes a great witness to this history, reminding the Cheyenne people that their responsibilities to the land today must be shaped by truths that have never been forgotten. If not for the sacrifices undertaken by my ancestors who endured these events, many Cheyenne people would not be here today to preserve the teachings given by *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve). These teachings remain embedded inside the hearts of the *Tsitsistas* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) people and continue to guide how Cheyenne communities understand their relationships to land, culture, and food.

2.3 Cheyenne Ontology and Epistemology

Understanding Cheyenne food sovereignty required grounding this research within a Cheyenne way of understanding how the world operates and what it is made up of. Shawn Wilson, an Opaskwayak Cree scholar from northern Manitoba and a prominent professor of Indigenous Studies, contributed collectively to help me think through his perspective that research is an actual ceremony. Wilson's Indigenous research paradigm provided a meaningful framework that shaped how I could establish my own Cheyenne ontological and epistemological approach toward ways of viewing, understanding, and learning from the world

around us that we deeply depend upon. Wilson defines ontology as the "theory of the nature of existence or the nature of reality," while epistemology refers to the theory of how we come to have knowledge, or how we know what we know.[51] In a Cheyenne way of knowing, food is not a commodity or a nutritional resource but a relational system that connects the people to land, animals, plants, ceremony, and community. The prophecy of *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) provides an important starting point for understanding a Cheyenne ontology. Sweet Medicine, recognized as a central cultural figure and prophet of Cheyenne governance and ceremonial traditions, established many of the social and spiritual responsibilities that guide Cheyenne life. His teachings highlighted balance, respect for creation, and the significance of preserving relationships with the natural world. Within Cheyenne knowledge systems, food represents one of the primary ways these relationships are practiced. Food connects families to seasonal cycles, to migration routes, and to the animals and plants that sustain life. Knowledge about food carries ecological, cultural, and spiritual meanings that cannot be separated from broader Cheyenne lifeways. Cheyenne oral histories and cultural teachings describe multiple historical eras in which food systems adjusted to changing environments. These include the Eastern Woodland period, the Woodland-Plains transition, the Plains buffalo era, and the reservation period following the destruction of buffalo populations. Across these eras, Cheyenne communities-maintained systems of ecological knowledge that guided hunting, gathering, and food preparation.

Colonial policies deliberately targeted these relationships. The extermination of the buffalo forced relocation to reservations, the imposition of federal ration systems, and the

[51] Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 33.

introduction of boarding schools disrupted Cheyenne subsistence practices and introduced Western dietary regimes. These upheavals changed how Cheyenne communities interacted with food, land, and health. Apprehending these historical transformations is essential because they reveal how colonial systems reorganized Indigenous foodways into structures of dependency. At the same time, Cheyenne's knowledge surrounding food has never fully disappeared. Instead, it continues to exist within oral traditions, community memory, and contemporary efforts to revitalize traditional food practices. This research, therefore, approaches Cheyenne food systems as living knowledges that connect past, present, and future generations. By placing food within Cheyenne ontology and epistemology, the study recognizes that food carries memory, governance, and kinship responsibilities that reach far beyond the physical nourishment of our bodies.

2.4 Cheyenne Axiology: Values Guiding the Research

Axiology refers to the ethical principles and values that guide research. Plains Cree scholar Margaret Kovach explains how axiology asks questions such as what knowledge is being called upon. What will this knowledge be used for? And how will the researcher access and share that knowledge? [52] Within a Cheyenne worldview, this reveals how knowledge is inseparable from a responsibility one must have to the land. Knowledge emerges through relationships with the land, social engagements, and participation in ceremonies and seasonal cycles. These relationships carry ethical obligations that determine how knowledge should be

[52] Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 92.

approached and shared. One particular responsibility is to never take more than is needed, but always make an offering such as tobacco, food, or even water, to the four sacred spirits.

The importance of this responsibility lies in recognizing that all knowledge should not be recorded for memory but rather obtained through oral contexts. Certain teachings need to remain sacred, ceremonial, or intended only for specific members of the community from which they are coming from. Kovach renders this as "miyo means 'good, well, beautiful, valuable.' The word ethics is not differentiated from [having] good relations."[53] Similarly, for Cheyennes, the word *É-pėhévėstao'omenehe* (I-pefs-duh-uh-min-nih), means to have a good life that requires us to respect these same boundaries for the essentiality of protecting the integrity of Cheyenne cultural knowledge. Cheyenne teachings highlight a relational harmony through connections to the land and the cyclical movements of the four cardinal directions, reflected in the four seasonal changes. These teachings encourage us to feel more broadly toward ethical responsibilities, inspiring people to live in accord with the natural world while maintaining respect for all forms of life.

These values correspond closely with teachings associated with *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve), including principles of peace, protecting land and creation, consultation with the people, generosity, dignity, and the pursuit of good health. Together, these teachings have provided a strong moral foundation that guides my research process and the direction it can take. For me, these principles have never been theoretical guidelines but practices I have been rooted in through my upbringing and lifelong cultural education. They influenced how I listen to elders,

[53] Kovach, 98.

how I approach many of the oral histories I get to hear, and how I interpret the knowledge shared with me.

This research centers on care, reciprocity, and accountability to the Cheyenne communities I come from, rather than seeking personal recognition from them. Food itself represents one of the most powerful expressions of these values. Food contains stories of survival, teachings from elders, and relationships to the land that have sustained Cheyenne people across the generations. Understanding food as knowledge reinforces the importance of protecting how these teachings are remembered while supporting efforts to revitalize traditional food systems to help navigate a better future.

2.5 Research Questions

This study examines how colonial policies reshaped Southern Cheyenne relationships to food, health, and cultural knowledge across time. In doing so, the research aims to better understand how historical disruptions to Indigenous food systems continue to shape contemporary health conditions and food access within Cheyenne communities. At the center of this research, I was very fortunate to utilize bits and pieces of the "kwe as method" process, which is also "re-fusing colonial domination, refusing heteropatriarchy, and refusing to be tamed by whiteness or the academy."[54] How I then used kwe was to think in ways that confront colonialism from a Cheyenne methodological point of view, and that meant following the traditional laws of *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) as my leading lens.

[54] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Kwe as Resurgent Method," in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

To guide this investigation further, the following research questions frame how I could conduct this research and build upon a Cheyenne food study as follows:

How did federal policy transitions reshape Southern Cheyenne understandings of food, health, and cultural wellbeing?

In what ways did colonial interventions, such as buffalo extermination, reservation policies, boarding schools, and federal ration programs begin to transform Cheyenne food systems and their relationships to the land?

How do these historical disruptions connect the contemporary food insecurity issues and chronic illness within Cheyenne communities today?

How can Cheyenne knowledge systems regarding food contribute to current food sovereignty initiatives and future growth in community revitalization efforts?

All questions have positioned food as both a historical and contemporary site of colonial intervention, while also recognizing it as a powerful pathway for cultural renewal and community healing. Without thinking of food as a cultural revitalization tool, it becomes meaningless under the capitalist mindset of bureaucracy and the ideal of living the American dream.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

Cheyenne food across time draws upon Indigenous-style investigative approaches that center Cheyenne systems of relational accountability, lived experience, and community-based knowledge systems. Rather than approaching Cheyenne foodways solely through Western

analytical paradigms, I intended to study how the best Indigenous theoretical perspectives can emphasize the capacity of memory, its relationship to land, and cultural continuance without disrupting the inherent processes that make it uniquely distinct for each Tribal Nation represented on Turtle Island. One particular source I came across was renowned Māori professor, researcher, and author Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who wrote *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that research involving Indigenous communities must move beyond historically extractive academic practices to instead arrange approaches that support the needs, priorities, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. Smith explains that research has long been associated with colonial systems of knowledge production that have endlessly extracted Indigenous knowledge while overlooking the communities that produced it.[55] In response, she advocates for Indigenous research approaches that center community priorities and contribute to communal well-being rather than external academic interests.[56] Smith describes this approach as community-centered and practice-based research, outlining twenty-five Indigenous projects that function as collaborative processes geared towards addressing issues experienced by Indigenous communities.[57]

In this study, 17 of Smith's 25 Indigenous research projects informed the methodological approach that guided my work. Among these, the projects of discovering the beauty of our knowledge, creating, returning, restoring, and remembering have all been very influential in shaping the direction this research could take. Throughout these approaches, I have stressed the

[55] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 1.
[56] Smith, 1-3.
[57] Smith, 192-193.

revitalization of Native knowledge systems, the reclamation of cultural practices, and the restoration of community relationships with land, history, and collective memory, which should all be thoroughly reconsidered within a Cheyenne mentality way of understanding it to combat the issues I intend to address within this thesis.[58] Linda Tuiwai Smith's framework guides the overall design of this project and how one should treat Cheyenne knowledge, not as an objective tool to be extracted or analyzed, but as a delicate form of knowledge to be respected.

It is the same understanding that has enabled me to contribute to ongoing conversations within Cheyenne communities about food sovereignty, health, and cultural revitalization. By grounding this research in these Cheyenne methodological principles, my project will support community-centered knowledge production and reinforce the wider movement toward an Indigenous self-determining framework for Cheyenne cultural sustainability. This is where Felt Knowledge and Lived Experience also had a great place to fit within a Cheyenne epistemological way of understanding.

Indigenous feminist scholar Dian Million introduces the concept of "felt theory," which emphasizes the legitimacy of lived experience, emotional knowledge, and embodied memory as forms of intellectual inquiry. Million argues that personal stories and emotional experiences provide vital insight into the historical and contemporary conditions faced by Indigenous communities[59]. This system is particularly important when examining colonial food systems because their effects are not merely historical but also intensely personal and embodied. Experiences of food insecurity, health disparities, and cultural disconnection are felt within

[58] Smith, 204-210.

[59] Dian Million, "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 58. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40587781.

families and communities across several generations. Through this lens, Cheyenne food knowledge is understood not only through written documentation but also through stories, memories, ceremonies, and relationships with the land. To understand Millions' concept of Felt Theory thoroughly, we must learn, as a collective community, to plan for a better future.

Muscogee (Creek) scholar Laura Harjo introduces the concept of "collective power" as a central component of Indigenous futurity praxis, emphasizing, in many ways, how Indigenous communities can sustain themselves through relationality, shared responsibility, and community-centered processes of knowledge production and action. Rather than locating all power within formal governance structures, Harjo demonstrates that collective power could emerge through everyday practices such as dialogue, kinship-building, storytelling, and land-based engagement, generating what she described as "energy, kinship, and decolonial love" within community spaces.[60] In her discussion of the Prouds and Sorries workshop methodology, Harjo also illustrated how many communities identify both their strengths and challenges together, then move toward action by envisioning what they want for their futures and how to achieve it through their own knowledge systems and experiences. This process embodies a generative way to produce what Harjo terms an "emergence geography," where created ideas, relationships, and strategies for change are formed across communities and scales, seeking plans for future change, such as what I envisioned for my Cheyenne communities.[61]

Harjo's framework lastly emphasizes that collective power is inseparable from what she calls "este-cate sovereignty," a form of sovereignty enacted through relational practices,

[60] Laura Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 209.

[61] Harjo, 209.

knowledge-sharing, and community accountability rather than dependence on state recognition.[62] Within this sense, sovereignty moves beyond the political realm but becomes the lived and practiced way within one's routine interactions and within which communities can actively produce ways that sustain their own futures. More importantly, Harjo lastly asserts that these processes must remain community-controlled, warning against the extraction or misappropriation of Indigenous knowledge by external institutions, particularly those who continue to reproduce colonial power relations from Indigenous Knowledges. Collective power operates as both a method and an ethic to help one center its Indigenous agency, protect its community knowledge, and nurture a space large enough for participants to engage in conversation, reflection, and action on their own terms within their own communities.

This concept has been very beneficial by supplying a vital framework to understand how contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty movements operate in terms of opposing settler colonial foodways. Initiatives such as community gardens, seed-saving practices, and the revitalization of traditional foodways are methods that combat food insecurity and actively express a collective power within an Indigenous Community. They also serve as spaces where Indigenous communities can build on relational networks, transmit intergenerational knowledge, and exercise their own autonomous sovereignty through land-based practices within urban areas. Cheyenne Food sovereignty can then reflect the same processes Harjo describes of communities recognizing their requirements and goals together, drawing upon their own knowledge systems, and organizing collectively to create alternative models outside of colonial food regimes. These efforts all embody a great way for Indigenous futurity to resist colonial systems of dependency

[62] Harjo, 213.

yet more actively construct a sustainable way that culturally grounds futures for Cheyenne People to be anchored in community, land, and relational accountability.

2.7 Historical and Cultural Foundations

Ethnographer George Bird Grinnell provided one of the most detailed early accounts of Cheyenne lifeways by documenting subsistence practices, material culture, and social organization during a period of deep transition into American society. Grinnell's work illustrated that Cheyenne food systems were not based on individual accumulation, but were relational economies exemplified by reciprocity where "a man who was hungry need never suffer" because food was collectively shared within the community.[63] This revealed that systems of communal responsibility of labor, hunting, and food preparation were organized through cooperation and kinship networks rather than privatized ownership, as the dominant society demands.

Grinnell also documents the centrality of the buffalo to the Cheyenne, noting that it provided "a very large proportion of the articles that they possessed," stressing the deep ecological relationship between the Cheyenne People and the land around them. While his position is within a non-Indigenous observer, it requires a critical engagement for readers to have due to his long-term relationships with Cheyenne Peoples, which have allowed him to record many of their knowledges that might otherwise have been lost during the upheavals of colonial expansion.

Based on this ethnographic foundation, renowned historian Donald J. Berthrong traces how these relational systems were systematically disrupted by federal policies designed to

[63] Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life*, 170–172.

restructure Indigenous economies and governance from the outset. Berthrong's work validates that Cheyenne displacement was not singular to a coinciding event of being at the wrong place, wrong time, but the ongoing processes that begin with treaty violations, military campaigns, and forced removal to reservation lands within Indian Territory (what later became Oklahoma). Then, to end it, the land bases were dramatically reduced and controlled by the federal government as the so-called guardians of the Cheyenne Peoples.

Berthrong further showed how the Dawes Act institutionalized this disruption by breaking up communal landholdings into individual allotments with the explicit goal of transforming Cheyenne Peoples into agrarian subjects that corresponded with Euro-American economic models. These policies ultimately resulted in widespread land loss, as by the early twentieth century more than one-half of the population became landless and economically marginalized. In addition, Berthrong's analysis of cattle leasing and settler invasion later revealed how reservation lands were opened to outside economic interests, which further weakened the Cheyenne People's own control over land and food systems, and confined their own survival.

Grinnell and Berthrong provided a very good insight into how Cheyenne food systems were across time before and during the colonial uprising of settler intrusion in America. Grinnell's documentation of kinship practices, combined with how Cheyenne ecological relationships were, discloses core basic principles of how prominent Cheyenne foodways were for their survival prior to colonial intervention, while Berthrong exposed how federal policies intentionally dismantled Cheyenne food systems by replacing them with structures of dependency, land dispossession, and economic control. This was essential to situate contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty movements' focus on more than cultural

revitalization efforts, but as corresponding responses to the historically produced conditions of disruption, dispossession, and imposed dependency caused by settler colonialism.

2.8 Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Health

Contemporary Indigenous scholarship stresses the importance of revitalizing traditional food systems as a route toward community health and cultural resurgence. Enrolled Choctaw historian Devon A. Mihesuah argues that Indigenous food practices have historically sustained not only physical health as well as the cultural identity, relationality, and community well-being of a Tribal Nation. Her research continues to emphasize that precolonial Indigenous diets were uprooted in active lifestyles and unprocessed, land-based foods, which contributed to strong health outcomes prior to the introduction of industrialized and chemically altered food systems. Mihesuah argues that colonial systems, particularly through boarding schools, have imposed food systems that fundamentally changed how Indigenous Peoples were to have relationships to food by replacing their traditional diets with "salty, greasy, fatty, and wheat-laden dishes."[64] This has contributed to long-term health disparities and cultural disconnection that Mihesuah conceptualizes as a shift that is an aspect of a broader "boarding school syndrome" in generations of Indigenous peoples that were conditioned to view their own foodways as inferior while adopting Euro-American dietary norms.[65]

Simultaneously, Mihesuah also underscores that Indigenous food systems have always been grounded in community-based practices that extend beyond sustenance into governance, spirituality, and shared responsibility. Her discussion of traditional agriculture revealed that

[64] Devon A. Mihesuah, *Recovering Our Ancestors' Gardens: Indigenous Recipes and Guide to Diet and Fitness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 139.

[65] Mihesuah, 139.

many tribes cultivated their own crops through highly organized systems that included communal labor, gendered roles, ceremonial practices, and reciprocal distribution of food resources.[66] These systems are the same systems that *Tsitsistas* (Zi-tis-ta-aas) used, so that food production was not an individual responsibility but an aggregate one, allowing community gardens and family "patches" to be provided in common sustenance reserves that looked toward times of hardship.[67]

More importantly, most of these food practices were adaptive and resilient, allowing Native populations to survive environmental change, displacement, and economic hardship, including during the Great Depression, further showing that garden-based subsistence continued to sustain families despite the broader scarcity faced by America.[68] Mihesuah lastly argued that contemporary Indigenous food revitalization efforts, primarily within the resurgence area of backyard gardens, seed saving, and traditional food preparation, should serve as greater steps toward cultural reclamation and sovereignty. Gardening is a method for food production and also about restoring Cheyenne relationships to land, teaching intergenerational knowledge, and rebuilding Indigenous systems of care and responsibility.[69] Even in small-scale gardens, Mihesuah noted, are "greatly symbolic" and provide a direct link to cultural identity, demonstrating that food sovereignty is both a material and spiritual process of reestablishing connection with one's ancestral knowledge.[70] Mihesuah's work on Indigenous food practices showed the inseparability of identity, health, and governance, and that contemporary revitalization efforts represent more than dietary changes for Indigenous peoples but also the

[66] Mihesuah, 155-156.
[67] Mihesuah, 156.
[68] Mihesuah, 158.
[69] Mihesuah, 159-160.
[70] Mihesuah, 159

deliberate refusal to allow colonial systems to dictate which reassertion of Indigenous lifeways are to be utilized or dismissed.

Environmental activist Winona LaDuke connected Indigenous food sovereignty to broader struggles for land rights, environmental protection, and tribal self-determination, stressing that restoring Indigenous food systems is inseparable from restoring Indigenous relationships to the land. LaDuke frames these efforts within a broader critique of how global industrial economies have structurally positioned Indigenous communities within systems of dependency in which they "don't produce [their] own food" and are instead embedded in extractive, externally controlled economies that undermine both ecological sustainability and sovereignty.[71] LaDuke contends that to have meaningful sovereignty, one must rebuild localized, self-reliant economies rooted in land-based practices, including food production, energy systems, and community governance. This vision will contest dominant economic models by revealing that sustainable models are not technological models of economic growth, but relational ways grounded in Native knowledge systems that provide responsible instructions for understanding the land, water, and future generations.

LaDuke further established that environmental degradation and food system disruption are interconnected processes driven by corporate extraction and state policy, particularly through industries such as mining, energy development, and industrial agriculture that disproportionately alter how Indigenous lands are to be saved for future use by future generations. She also shows how these industries not only degrade Indigenous ecosystems but also degrade Indigenous political authority around their cultural survival by the reinforcement of cycles that create

[71] Winona LaDuke, in J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, ed., *Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 170.

dependency from dispossession. In response, LaDuke advocates for all localized food systems, such as farm-to-community initiatives and traditional harvesting practices, as key strategies to rebuilding Indigenous economies and restoring their community health. Ultimately, LaDuke positions Indigenous food sovereignty as a critical site of resistance, where an Indigenous nation can seek renewal to rebuild relationships with the land and achieve environmental justice, cultural survival, and political self-determination.[72]

Another great example of public health scholarship around Indigenous food sovereignty is Carla Lopes et. al comprehensive review of how Indigenous food-based interventions evaluate how "native" foods contribute to improved health outcomes across diverse Indigenous communities.[73] Their contribution to a combined study synthesizes evidence from nineteen distinct programs that incorporate Indigenous foods into public health initiatives, including community gardens, traditional harvesting practices, cooking programs, food distribution systems, and culturally grounded nutrition education.[74] All of Lopes's interventions were not framed solely as nutritional solutions but as holistic embedded practices that engaged with Indigenous knowledge systems, environmental relationships, and community responsibilities. A central piece to the argument Lopes et al. presented is that Indigenous foods provided measurable nutritional benefits that directly address deficiencies produced by industrialized food systems. Across multiple studies included in their review, participants experienced improved dietary intake, particularly in essential micronutrients such as vitamin A, iron, and calcium, as well as overall improvements in dietary diversity and food quality.[75] Some of these findings

[72] LaDuke, 164-165, 170.

[73] Carla Vanessa Alves Lopes et al., "Interventions and Programs Using Native Foods to Promote Health: A Scoping Review," *Nutrients* 16 (2024): 1-3.

[74] Alves Lopes et al., 1-2.

[75] Alves Lopes et al., 2-3.

addressed that the nutritional density of traditional food systems "all of them presented some positive cultural impacts . . . involving media campaigns reported [as] a reduction in social discrimination and more positive attitudes toward native foods."[76] This often allows for a better adaption to local ecosystems of cultural practices to be imported rather than relying upon processed foods that shifts dietary patterns which can risk chronic illnesses happening that is directly linked to nutrient deficiencies and poor diet quality.

Beyond physical health outcomes, Lopes et al. emphasize that Indigenous food-based interventions generate thoughtful cultural and social impacts upon communities that eat traditional diets. The incorporation of traditional foods into community programs strengthens cultural identity, reinforces how intergenerational knowledge transmission is created, and fosters a renewed sense of connection to land and community.[77] This enables revitalization of traditional food practices within communities to reclaim knowledge systems that have been disrupted by colonial policies, including forced removal from land, restrictions on subsistence practices, and the imposition of Western dietary regimes. These disruptions have historically undermined Indigenous health not only through nutritional decline but through the erosion of social and cultural structures that sustain wellbeing.

The study also further demonstrates that the effectiveness of Indigenous food interventions has on community and how it is closely tied to the methodologies Lopes et al. highlight. These programs are grounded in community-based participatory research (CBPR) and co-design approaches, where Indigenous communities actively shape the development,

[76] Alves Lopes et al., 9.
[77] Alves Lopes et al., 3.

implementation, and evaluation of health initiatives.[78] This reflects a shift away from externally imposed health models but into more Indigenous-led approaches that prioritize relational accountability, local knowledge, and collective cohesion decision-making processes. By centering Indigenous agency, most interventions will redistribute power within the public health system to align itself into broader ways that follow principles of Indigenous sovereignty. The authors make that clear through health outcomes improving not only because of the foods themselves, but because communities are able to reclaim their control over the processes that shape their food systems.

At the same time, Lopes et al. identify significant structural barriers that continue to limit the impact and scalability of Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives. These barriers include limited access to land for growing or harvesting traditional foods, the ongoing loss of traditional ecological knowledge, and insufficient policy support for Indigenous-led food systems.[79] Urbanization and economic marginalization further complicate any access to culturally appropriate foods, particularly for Indigenous populations living outside of traditional territories but within urban enclosed environments. The persistence of these barriers underscores the need for structural transformation at the level of policy, land access, and resource distribution in order to fully support Indigenous food sovereignty.

Ultimately, Lopes et al. position Indigenous food-based interventions as critical sites of both health promotion and decolonial practice. Their findings demonstrate that restoring access to traditional foods improves the nutrition and health outcomes while simultaneously strengthening Indigenous Peoples cultural identity, community cohesion, and knowledge

[78] Alves Lopes et al., 3-4.
[79] Alves Lopes et al., 4.

transmission.[80] In doing so, Lopes et al. provided critical evidence that Indigenous food sovereignty is a comprehensive framework for rebuilding Indigenous health systems, restoring community wellbeing, and reestablishing Indigenous control over the conditions that will shape life and how survival is to be made.

2.9 Research Methods

This study has employed a qualitative mixed approach toward methods that combines archival research, oral history interviews, and community-based knowledge. Together, these methods supply multiple perspectives on how Cheyenne food systems have changed over time. Archival research is one of those approaches that require tracing the historical documentation of colonial policies that sought to reshape Cheyenne food systems. Many sources from the Western History Collections, Oklahoma Historical Society, and the Cheyenne Culture Department included the paper trail of federal policy documents, boarding school records, ethnographic accounts, and historical texts that documented what Cheyenne subsistence practices and reservation-era conditions were like during those specific periods. These materials were what helped reconstruct my direction for the historical process through why the buffalo extermination was so devastating to the Cheyenne, why the federal ration programs deprived Cheyenne food systems from operating proficiently as seen before in history, and why boarding school institutions, like Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in), transformed Indigenous food systems by introducing a heavily weighted dependency upon Western dietary structures.

Another approach was to use oral histories as an essential method for understanding how Cheyenne food knowledge continues to exist today through community memory. By

[80] Alves Lopes et al., 3.

interviewing Elders such as Ervin Bull, Gordon Yellowman, and Nelson Chouteau, we uphold an important way for knowledge around traditional foods, gathering practices, and cultural teachings of food to be shared with the generations who did not grow up within a period where food was different than what it is today. Oral history interviews allow me to shed light on these very important perspectives from the Cheyenne tribe itself and help me understand the importance of this research for the future food sovereignty of the Cheyenne Peoples. It also allowed for prioritizing the relational accountability needed and the cultural respect still practiced today among elders who are still very much actively engaged in shaping where the tribe is headed. Participation in all interviews was voluntary, and each participant could forfeit all recordings if they chose to do so. This was to provide the very essentials I was raised with, which show that Cheyenne knowledge is very sacred to my people, and I respect the delicacy this knowledge carries, as well as the other research protocols that follow moral standards established through the Institutional Review Board approval at the University of Oklahoma.

Community-Based Knowledge is the foundation for where my research fits and how it relates to what the community knows. In addition to the formal interviews and archival sources, this research recognizes the importance of how community knowledge is gained through participation in the many ceremonies, cultural gatherings, and everyday community life I was fortunate to have before conducting this research. This also aligns with the years of relationship-building and kinship networks that were essential to making this research project take off before I could write a single statement. I was unaware that many of the prior relationships, projects, and ways of being, already practiced the many things colonial policy, society, and history sought to destroy.

These experiences provided important ways to connect with a greater understanding of how Cheyenne food systems continue to operate as living knowledge systems, as well as how these knowledge systems are connected from one tribal elder to another in direct cohesion. Community knowledge was a puzzle I was very lucky to have the honor of assembling. Each community has experienced a different form of oppression, deception, and trauma from the disruption of Cheyenne food systems, but they all exist with the same persistence that if they preserve what is left, the next generation will have a blueprint for what their future might hold.

2.10 Research Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Conducting research within Indigenous communities, specifically my own personal Tribal Nations, required careful attention to the ethical duties and cultural protocols that I have as a tribal member and an academic scholar. There were a number of challenges that are particularly important to acknowledge in order for this research project to be developed and conducted ethically in accordance with Cheyenne protocols.

Trauma and psychological overload were among the initial protocols I found myself walking through. The many discussions related to colonial histories often involve painful memories tied to specific settings such as boarding schools, land dispossession, and federal assimilation policies used against the Cheyenne people. For many Cheyenne families, these histories are not distant events faintly remembered but memories that remain with them through the lived experiences of their family members, those who are elders especially, which continue to have an everlasting effect on their community life and how it is being shaped today. Because of the delicacy this research required in the settings around prior life before colonial control, I understood that it might evoke emotional responses or reopen difficult memories that my elders

might not want to discuss. Approaching these topics required me to learn the essence of patience, compassion, and respect for their boundaries and for what they choose to talk about, discuss, or even mention to me when revealing their own experiences.

Upholding sovereignty and cultural protocols were another difficult task I encountered. Maintaining tribal sovereignty and cultural protocols has to be essential throughout the research process, particularly regarding the many ceremonial men and women who hold special positions within the Cheyenne Tribe as a whole. Certain teachings and cultural knowledge are not meant for public circulation or academic publication but only for the Cheyenne Peoples. Accepting these boundaries ensures that Cheyenne knowledge cannot be extracted or misrepresented within Western academic institutions, but rather is respected as living knowledge that guides the distinctiveness of Native Peoples here on Turtle Island.

This is where representation and narrative balance were essential to understand. This challenge involves avoiding misrepresentations that frame Cheyenne communities solely through narratives of trauma or loss and nothing more. Although my aim is to reveal the colonial restrictions within Western foods for Cheyenne Peoples, my biggest goal is not only to represent the horrific histories but also the resiliency seen today. While colonial violence must and has to be acknowledged, it is equally important to highlight how resilience, creativity, and cultural persistence continue to shape Cheyenne life today. My representation strives to balance discussions of colonial disruption with recognition of the strength and continuance of Cheyenne cultural traditions by envisioning a better tomorrow for the generations who are not here yet.

Lastly, there are the archival gaps and colonial bias that I observed when seeking reliable data on the Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples. Historical archives frequently reflect the

perspectives of only non-Indigenous observers who documented Indigenous lifeways through colonial frameworks. As a result, archival records may contain those same gaps, misinterpretations, or incomplete representations of Cheyenne cultural knowledge.

By approaching many different materials critically, it is necessary to understand what a primary source is and what an inaccurate academic source is, one that presents only a colonial point of view. Whenever possible, I asked questions of archival sources to be interpreted alongside Cheyenne oral histories and cultural knowledge, providing a more well-rounded understanding of what true Cheyenne food systems were across time, so archival gaps would not affect my further research and ensure accurate information.

Chapter 3: Remembering Through Cheyenne Oral Histories and Living Knowledge of Food

3.1 Oral Histories as Living Knowledge

Within Cheyenne communities, knowledge has never been confined to written archives but passed through story, teaching, and taught behavior of observation. My grandparents, around our ceremony circles, always express that the simplicity of just watching, listening, and learning is a true foundation of all Cheyenne teachings. This will be carried through the many stories, teachings, memories, and lived relationships that reach beyond the generations that come after me. For many Indigenous nations, such as the Cheyenne Peoples, storytelling is not separate from academia; it is a theory, but one that rooted itself in thousands of years and generations of knowledge. Teachings shared by elders function as intellectual systems that guide individuals in understanding how their obligations to land, family, and community are a part of how the future generations will continue grow. When these teachings center on food, they reveal that sustenance has always been inseparable from moral instruction, relational accountability, and cultural tradition. Approaching oral histories in this way required me to shift from Western research paradigms that treat oral traditions as supplementary written records locked away in file folders.

Instead, I have begun to understand oral histories as recognized authoritative forms of knowledge capable of correcting, expanding, and challenging colonial archives that have often misrepresented Cheyenne lifeways. My elders have demonstrated this by showing how Cheyenne knowledge has persisted despite disruptions from relocation, rationing, and the end of boarding school policies that sought to reorganize their relationships to food. Listening to their teachings has shown a recovery in recognizing that their knowledge was never lost but only

constrained. By centering oral histories, this chapter honors elders as knowledge holders whose lived experiences illuminate the deeper meanings of food beyond its nutritional value. The elders were the ones who used their words to guide this research toward an understanding of food as relationship, memory, and responsibility carried forward for future generations. Therefore, they have functioned as a recollection of what the past contained for them to eat, and I was very fortunate to conduct interviews to see their living expressions of governance, responsibility, and how survival was for them in their time.

Ervin Bull is a respected Cheyenne Elder within the Cheyenne community, currently 86 years old, whose life experiences, as recounted in oral traditional stories, offer a deeply grounded account of Cheyenne life in which food, labor, language, and survival are inseparable. His reflections move fluidly between memory and teaching, demonstrating that knowledge is not fixed in the past but actively carried through his lived experience. Rather than presenting food as isolated, Ervin situates it within a wider framework of relational responsibility, where everyday actions such as feeding animals, gathering wood, and participating in ceremony become larger expressions of cultural tradition. His oral contribution reveals that Cheyenne foodways must be understood not as practices of mere sustenance, but as broader systems in which knowledge organizes how people are to live, relate, and survive together, in a context where isolation is discouraged, but community is therefore promoted.

Ervin begins our conversations by situating how his upbringing was within a multi-generational Cheyenne household that was also shaped by his extended family structures in both daily life and the transmission of how knowledge was shared amongst him. He recalls growing up in Fonda, Oklahoma, where his grandparents, parents, and relatives lived in close proximity, forming the vivid community that he still remembers today. This was a time for him where all

responsibilities were shared among everyone. As Ervin explains, “my mom raised chickens . . . those were my chores . . . feed chickens daily . . . keep supply with wood . . . water,” pixelating how his childhood was structured around his constant participation and attention to sustaining the household with his siblings.[81] These responsibilities cannot be framed as burdens to him but as expected contributions that reinforced the idea that survival was a collective effort rather than an individual task which is the dominant society’s perspective today. The conditions Ervin describes feature a way of life that remained closely tied to subsistence practices around being Cheyenne. Without modern conveniences such as close stores, Walmart, etc., his daily survival required building an intimate relationship with the environment. Ervin explains that “we didn’t have any inside heat . . . we had firewood . . . water went up,” to emphasize that basic necessities of warmth and water were the requirement of continuous labor but his way of survival.[82]

Food was not always something always purchased or consumed passively, but something Ervin had to produce through his physical effort, knowledge, and cooperation. The presence of a household garden further illustrates his point, as Ervin noted, “we had a garden,” that reflected an entire system of localized food production embedded within his everyday life.[83] This grounding in subsistence practices demonstrates that even under conditions shaped by cruel colonial policy, Cheyenne households-maintained forms of food sovereignty at the family level. Food was grown, animals were raised, and knowledge was transmitted through doing so. These practices also ensured that younger generations learned not only how to survive, but how to

[81] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), interview, January 30, 2026.
[82] Bull, interview.
[83] Bull, interview.

understand their responsibilities within a broader relational system and Cheyenne dynamic of perspective.

At the same time, Ervin's story reveals the ways in which colonial systems reshaped pathways of his family's survival. His grandfather, who attended Carlisle Indian Industrial School, learned carpentry as a trade, bringing that knowledge back into the community. Ervin recalls following him to work, describing how he would "tag along" and assist with tasks, eventually developing his own skills in construction.[84] This experience led him to pursue trade certifications and a career in carpentry and masonry, working on large-scale projects across Oklahoma and beyond. Reflecting on his personal transition, Ervin states, "I didn't work for the tribe . . . I just competed in the world," a statement that captured the shift toward participation in wage labor economies for his family.[85] This shift was not a personal choice, but a structural reality imposed by colonial systems that disrupted traditional economies the Cheyenne peoples had prior. Participation in the "competitive world" became necessary for a way of their survival, such as for Ervin, as many Indigenous communities were all increasingly drawn into capitalist labor systems and leaving behind the traditional lifestyle in hopes for a better direction.

However, Ervin's experience within this transition did not erase his Cheyenne knowledge and how the systems he grew up in operated. Instead, his life has reflected a form of adaptation in which traditional teachings coexisted with new forms of labor. His skills as a carpenter, his work on construction projects, and his own experiences in ranching or other industries did not replace his understanding of how Cheyenne lifeways were to be lived but existed alongside them. This duality highlighted the complexity of how Indigenous Peoples looked at their own

[84] Bull, interview.
[85] Bull, interview.

survival and where cultural continuity is maintained not through isolation, but through negotiation within an imposed systems of colonial constraint.

Central to Ervin's testimony is the role of how language such as *Tsėhésenėstsestótse* (Tis-eh-nis-ss) is the key for the foundation of Cheynne knowledge. He emphasizes that Cheyenne was his first language, and he further explained, "Cheyenne was my first language. . . that's all we talked . . . even storytelling, that was all Cheyenne language."[86] This includes how knowledge of food practices was all transmitted through immersion rather than a formal way of having written instructions for one another to follow. Language functioned as a great medium through which individuals learned how to live, how to relate to others, and how to understand their environment outside of the basic foreign, flat, and stale English module that continues to neglect any cognitive feeling to the world.

In contrast, English was something Ervin learned later through schooling, highlighting the role of colonial education systems in disrupting Indigenous languages for children living at home. This linguistic shift has had lasting consequences, as Ervin expresses concern about the loss of meaning that accompanies language loss. Reflecting on younger generations, he asks, "they sing these songs . . . but do they know what they're singing about?"[87] This question underscores the critical issue I aim to research: the continuation of practices without understanding the risks that disconnect the cultural expressions from their own deeper significance to the Cheyenne Peoples. Language, in this sense, is not just a tool for communication but a repository where knowledge is embedded into relationship, perspective and feeling. It carries the meanings of songs, ceremonies, and food practices, linking to a broader

[86] Bull, interview.
[87] Bull, interview.

system of belief and responsibility. Without language, those connections become fragmented, and the knowledge embedded within them becomes more difficult to access, especially for the generations that are yet to come.

Ervin further illustrates the relationship between language and land through his discussion of place names. As he translates different Cheyenne terms for locations, he demonstrates how language encoded environmental knowledge and historical memory. These names are descriptive, reflecting characteristics of the land or events associated with it, rather than arbitrary labels that English typically ties itself to. This becomes the linguistic mapping for the Cheyenne People that reveals how the land is understood relationally and as something that holds meaning to its memory. Food systems, within this framework, are inseparable from its place. Ervin explains that Cheyenne subsistence practices were historically based on mobility, stating, "we were nomads . . . we followed our animals . . . that is how we provided."[88] This mode of living required a Cheyenne person to have a deep understanding of ecological patterns, including animal migration and seasonal cycles. Rather than imposing into fixed systems of production, Cheyenne people adapted to the rhythms of the natural world, ensuring sustainable use of its resources responsibly. This approach to food contrasts how sharply modern systems of industrial agriculture prioritize control and efficiency over the right for sustainability. Ervin describes a different way of understanding food, one that is based on how he grew up with only the tools of observation, respect, and adaptation.

One of the most detailed aspects of Ervin's testimony is his discussion of butchering practices, which he describes as an inherently communal practice growing up. "It was a

[88] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), interviewed by Chaz Meadows (in-person), Oklahoma, February 3, 2026.

community thing . . . we all butchered together," he explains, emphasizing that food production was a shared responsibility among community and not individually.[89] This communal approach ensured that knowledge was transmitted across generations and that no part of the animal was ever wasted. Ervin recalls that "old timers had names for everything," referring to knowledge associated with different parts of the animal.[90] This level of specificity reflects a sophisticated understanding of how Cheyenne Peoples understood anatomy and utility, where each part served a specific purpose for them. Such practices also demonstrate that Cheyenne food systems were both efficient and deeply respectful of animal life and how it was to be used. The process of hide tanning illustrates this knowledge system as Ervin explains that materials such as "white sand . . . that's what grandma used to use to tan her hide," as he described how natural resources were all used to prepare animal skins.[91] He further details the labor-intensive process of working hides, emphasizing that it required skill to have along with patience and continuous effort so cloths, shelter, and other forms of regalia for social gatherings could be made. These were the same practices that extend the concept of food beyond its own consumption to highlight how animal resources were fully integrated into the daily life of being a typical Cheyenne person.

Ervin describes how these practices intersected with Cheyenne economic systems. He recalls that there was once a market for animal hides, explaining that people would sell "coon, possum, skunk, coyotes," indicating that Cheyenne food systems were not all isolated but still productively engaged with broader trade networks outside their own communities.[92] This

[89] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.
[90] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.
[91] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.
[92] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.

explained how economic participation maintained many Cheyenne cultural practices while adapting to changing conditions settler society was facilitating around Cheyenne Peoples.

At the same time, Ervin underlines that many environmental changes have disrupted these systems as he noted the decline of wildlife by mentioning "we don't even have any rabbits anymore . . . no squirrels hardly anymore," and many of these attributes are attached to the harsh agricultural chemicals tied to environmental degradation being practiced around the lands of Cheyenne communities today.[93] He further explains that insecticides contaminated the waterways he grew up knowing which has killed the fish and reduced his access to many traditional food sources he grew up enjoying. His connection is toward a bigger historical and contemporary form of colonial disruption that we all face today as its consequences.

While colonial policies initially displaced Indigenous food systems, modern industrial practices continue to undermine their renovation and the process it takes for restoration. Ervin's story has revealed that food sovereignty is not only about reclaiming knowledge but also about addressing ongoing environmental harm while advocating for change to happen so that future generations can have something good left when the elders go to the *Séano'ehe* (See-ann-no-eh) happy hunting grounds. Ervin emphasizes this through his importance of understanding the seasonal knowledge and how it is the guide for how food practices should be shared. He describes that Cheyenne people followed a calendar that determined when to plant and harvest, as well as when animals would breed. Referring to these cycles, he explained that in the *Matsé'omééše'he* (Mah-zi-eh-yo-o-eh-shi-it) spring "that's when they have little ones," to stress the importance of aligning human activity with natural processes around us.[94] This provided an

[93] Ervin Bull (Cheyenne Elder), interviewed by Chaz Meadows (in-person), Oklahoma, February 13, 2026.
[94] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.

ecological awareness needed for us as humans so that food systems can become sustainable and responsive to how environmental conditions are.

Ceremony also plays a central role in how this system of knowledge functions. Ervin recalls attending *Mátáhéomēē'e* (Mah-ti-yo-mi-iii-t) peyote meetings as a child, where he learned songs, procedures, and teachings through observation. These experiences were formative, as they reinforced the interconnectedness of certain representations of food (Water, Corn, Fruit, and Meat), the spirituality tied to this food, and how community is what brings it all together. Within ceremony, Cheynne Tribal members learn not only how to sustain themselves physically, but how to maintain balance within a broader relational world in the spiritual, mental, and psychological sense. Throughout his testimony, Ervin has provided a consistent return to the importance of where community sits for the Cheyenne Peoples. Whether discussing language, food, or ceremony, he emphasizes that these practices are maintained through a collective participation and a collective responsibility toward one another. That this responsibility sits on him, me, and all Cheynne tribal members as a Nation united together.

Knowledge is not owned by any individual but is constantly shared, passed down, and carried forward through the pre-established relations or newly established connections. At the same time, Ervin expressed his own concern about the erosion of where these systems are today and how they will be further carried into the future. He describes visiting community spaces where Cheyenne is rarely spoken, noting the difficulty of finding others with whom he can converse fluently. This highlighted the same urgency of language revitalization efforts needed as mentioned in chapter one, as the loss of language threatens the continuity of knowledge systems tied to food, ceremony, and identity. I have sat in ceremonies where I have witnessed that we are clinging to our language by a thread. And once that thread breaks, our ceremonies, including the

knowledge around food, could also cease to exist forever. Ervin feels we are witnessing a generational change that has two choices of either losing their language with a prominent culture or creating a change in order to save it.

Ultimately, Ervin's oral history has established that Cheyenne foodways are not relics of the past but still living systems and knowledge centers adaptability and endurance for what settler society provides. His testimony reveals that food is an inseparable aspect from language, land, and community, and that its disruption has had profound consequences for Indigenous life, specifically among the Cheyenne Peoples. Yet, it also has affirmed that these systems persist through community memory, practice, and teaching. In this way, I understand Ervin's interview as both a documentation for Cheyenne history through his upbringing and great instructions for what he expects for the future of Cheyenne Peoples. It has provided a live record of his own experience to guide the future generations still coming, such as myself, toward a better understanding of what it means to live in relation to land, food, and community. Through his testimony, it has become clear that Cheyenne food sovereignty is not something new, but something that has always existed, that needs to be carried forward through the knowledge that is still living through the same words Ervin speaks and from those who continue to remember, practice, and teach every day.

Following Ervin Bull's testimony, which grounded Cheyenne foodways within systems of relational responsibility, labor, and language, another interview was conducted around the oral histories shared by Gordon Yellowman who is one of the forty-four Cheyenne Chiefs, Ceremonial Sundance Priest. Yellowman situated food, survival, and identity within the lived experiences of the Concho Boarding School from within his own experience. While Ervin illustrated his life in which Cheyenne knowledge systems persisted with his family and

community frameworks, Yellowman's recounted his grandmother, Mary Yellowhawk, a Cheyenne ceremonial woman, one of the last generations to conduct Cheyenne Animal Dance Ceremony, and the last to be a part of the Star Clan Society. Yellowman illuminates Mary's lived experience of how her identity, language fluency, and worldview persisted despite colonial dictatorship.

Gordon Yellowman, a Cheyenne & Arapaho tribal historian, presented Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) not exclusively as a site of trauma but as a space where Cheyenne people enacted endurance, resistance, and survival through their own cultural grounding. The story of his grandmother, Mary Yellowhawk, who attended Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) during its earliest years beginning in 1910, reveals how students outlived the school while maintaining their Cheyenne identity. Mary's experience reflects what can be understood as a quiet resistance despite pressures to "learn English" and adopt "the white man's way." She would continue to speak Cheyenne in private, sometimes directing her words toward the cottonwood trees surrounding the school.[95] This small gesture represents more than a thousand words could say because it constituted an assertion of how power identity and relationality is to land but demonstrated that language, and by extension the knowledge behind those words, remained alive even within isolation.

Mary's memories also carry forward knowledge of Cheyenne foodways that predated and resisted institutional control. She recalled teachings from her mother about gathering seasonal berries, cooking turtles, and maintaining gardens of mixed vegetables which were practices that all reflected a deeply embedded system of ecological knowledge and subsistence. These

[95] Gordon Yellowman (Southern Cheyenne), phone interview by the Chaz Meadows, Concho, OK, November 24, 2025.

recollections reveal that even as boarding schools attempted to sever children from their cultural foundations, those teachings persisted through memory and storytelling. At the same time, Mary's testimony exposes the violence of imposed food systems within Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in). The disruption of traditional diets and reliance on institutional foods contributed to chronic health effects, including stomach cancer that ultimately claimed her life. In this way, her story illustrates how food functioned as both a site of survival and a mechanism of colonial harm.

Yet, Mary's life also reflects adaptation and agency. The skills she acquired at Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in), such as managing leases, land allotments, and Individual Indian Money (IIM) accounts, were all repurposed to support her family's autonomy.[96] Rather than fully assimilating into settler systems, she redirected those tools toward sustaining Cheyenne self-determination. Her encouragement of younger generations to pursue education, despite her own experiences, further demonstrates her commitment to ensuring survival beyond her lifetime.

While Mary Yellowhawk's story embodies an earlier generation of Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in), Nelson Chouteau's testimony, a member of the school's final graduating class in 1983, illustrates how these dynamics persisted and evolved over time. Nelson recalls traveling to Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) on unmarked government buses, an experience that left him feeling dislocated and alienated in his own homeland.[97] This forced movement that embodies the broader colonial strategy of separating Indigenous children from

[96] Yellowman, interview.

[97] Nelson Chouteau (Southern Cheyenne), phone interview by Chaz Meadows, Oklahoma City, OK, November 17, 2025.

place, interrupting their relationships to land, family, and identity. However, Nelson's reflections also reveal a process of intellectual and cultural reclamation. Over time, he came to recognize that it was not Indigenous people who were out of place but settlers themselves, as he realized what constitutes his own form of self-decolonization through re-centering his Cheyenne worldview.

Food, within Nelson's experience remained a central site of both control and his connection to community. Institutional cafeteria systems imposed rigid dietary structures that mirrored wider mechanisms of discipline and assimilation. Yet moments of cultural endurance persisted through relationships with his Cheyenne relatives at *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in), such as Thelma Eaglenest, whose meals offered not only nourishment but also comfort, familiarity, and connection during a critical stage in his life. Using shared language and delicate acts of care, food became a medium through which his Cheyenne identity was shaped but also endured even within institutional constraints that opposed it. Upon returning home, Nelson encountered another form of disruption through reliance on commodity foods from *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in), which further showed how colonial food systems reached beyond the boarding school into his reservation life at home.

Despite these conditions, Nelson actively reengaged with Cheyenne cultural practices through participation in ceremonies, including tipi-raising and peyote meetings. These experiences grounded him in a relational framework that reaffirmed his identity and duties within the Cheyenne community. His reflections on prayer, remembrance, and the recognition of students who never returned from Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) demonstrate the ongoing presence of collective memory and responsibility. Nelson's story shows that boarding schools-imposed systems of assimilation did not fully succeed in erasing Cheyenne ways of

being, but instead individuals like Nelson maneuvered these systems as they maintained, reclaimed, and carried forward their cultural foundations.

These interviews conducted a way to amplify voices of Cheyenne Elders, including Gordon Yellowman's stories of his Grandmother Mary Yellowhawk's boarding school experiences; Nelson Chouteau's upbringing at Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in) which shaped his experiences and perspectives of life today; and Ervin Bull's insight on how Cheyenne foodways, language, and relational knowledge persisted across different historical contexts such as within the repressive structures of boarding schools. These oral histories reveal that food was never simply about sustenance, but remained deeply tied to their identity, survival, and resistance. Through the memories, which some were very delicate to hear, language, and acts of care, Cheyenne people continued to practice and maintain their knowledge systems. In doing so, they all have demonstrated that Indigenous food sovereignty is not only a contemporary movement but also a longstanding practice of the historical endurance, adaptation, and cultural survival that Cheyenne People have persisted across eras despite ongoing colonial disruptions they are still facing.

Chapter 4: Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Cheyenne Futurity

4.1 Food Sovereignty as a Decolonial Praxis

Indigenous food sovereignty has developed as a critical framework for resisting colonial control over food systems that have historically disrupted Indigenous lifeways, like those of the Cheyenne peoples. Many scholars, such as S. Grey and R. Patel, look at food sovereignty, not only as a strategic way for improving nutrition, but as an extension of the anti-colonial struggle grounded in cultural renewal, self-determination, and political autonomy. Within the Indigenous knowledge frameworks, food becomes more than a resource for consumption; it becomes how food can connect relational practices to communities to land to ceremony to governance, and toward their overall collective wellbeing.

Sam Grey and Ravi Kumar argue that food sovereignty represents "an extension of anti-colonial struggles, even in post-colonial contexts," portraying it as an active process of decolonization rather than a symbolic attempt to recover a lost past.[98] Reclaiming food systems, therefore, becomes inseparable from reclaiming Indigenous governance, ecological stewardship, and cultural authority over land-based practices. Food sovereignty challenges dominant global food systems that support market control, industrial agriculture, and external regulation while undermining Indigenous autonomy.[99] Similarly, Hannah Wittman defines food sovereignty as the right of peoples to control their own food systems, including markets, ecological resources, and culturally appropriate production practices, linking such governance directly to broader struggles

[98] Sam Grey and Raj Patel, "Food Sovereignty as Decolonization: Some Contributions from Indigenous Movements to Food System and Development Politics," *Agriculture and Human Values* 32, no. 3 (2014): 441.

[99] Grey and Patel, 433.

for democracy, justice, and cultural survival.[100] From this perspective, sovereignty cannot exist in a genuine form when communities remain dependent on externally controlled food infrastructures, as Indigenous food sovereignty prioritizes local control, ecological sustainability, and the authority of producers over corporate and market-oriented systems.

For Cheyenne communities, food sovereignty is a contemporary innovation for renewing longstanding governance systems that existed before colonial disruption. Before forced removals and assimilation policies, Cheyenne lifeways were structured around deep relationships with buffalo, wild plants, seasonal migrations, and ceremonial practices that governed harvesting and distribution. Reclaiming traditional foods, such as the methods of planting, harvesting, and relationship building, restores more than dietary practices for them; it reestablishes their unique relationships to land, kinship networks, and ceremonial responsibilities which historically structured how Cheyenne life was to be lived. Understanding food sovereignty through a Cheyenne lens reframes agriculture and harvesting as acts of cultural resurgence. Food sovereignty becomes a practice of renewal that reconnects communities to ancestral teachings while asserting their political authority over the future of their nation, specifically the Cheyenne way of understanding it. To gain this understanding, we must look at what makes up the Cheyenne population today.

4.2 Contemporary Cheyenne and Arapaho Nationhood

While colonial policies dramatically disrupted Indigenous food systems across the plains, Cheyenne and Arapaho communities today continue to assert sovereignty through governance,

[100] Hannah Wittman, "Food Sovereignty: A New Rights Framework for Food and Nature?" *Environment and Society* 2 (2011): 87-88.

cultural revitalization, and community-based development initiatives. The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes represent strong and revitalizing Nations grounded within ancestral values while actively forming a future centered on sovereignty, sustainability, and cultural resurgence. Headquartered in Concho, Oklahoma, the Nation operates under a constitutionally based tribal government, that formally ratified two distinct nations in 2006, which is structured through multiple branches to ensure the separation of powers and the active participation of its citizens in governance. This governmental framework demonstrates a broader devotion to self-determination, as the Tribes'constitution administer programs in education, healthcare, cultural conservation, and economic development that directly serve their people and reinforce community wellbeing.

Importantly, the 'Tribes' constitution emphasizes responsibilities to "promote education," "respect and protect natural environment and resources," and "advance the general welfare" of both present and future generations, demonstrating that governance is deeply tied to relational accountability and sustained durability.[101] Economic and social initiatives, including healthcare services, agricultural development, and community-based programs, illustrate how sovereignty is enacted through everyday practices that support both individual and collective well-being. At the same time, there continues to be obstacles such as poverty for younger and older generations who experience limited access to food resources, gardening supplies, land use and the continuing impacts of colonial disruption. The structural conditions being faced by the Cheyenne tribal members is the loss of taste for cultural food, in home language use, and their overall condition of maintaining a balance diet for positive health benefits. Defining the Cheyenne nation,

[101] Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, *Tribal Community and Justice Profile: Tribal Narrative Profile* (Concho, OK, 2016): 1-2.

underline these conditions that have significance weight on how tribal governance can plan or rebuild how community strength, restoration of cultural practices, and the regaining of control over land can be further developed for future use of food systems and economic opportunities. In this way, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes embody Indigenous food sovereignty, not only as a conceptual framework, but as a lived and evolving practice grounded in governance, resilience, and cultural tradition. Approximately 11,500 tribal members receive services through the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal government, and the Tribes maintain land holdings across eight counties in western Oklahoma, with jurisdiction over roughly 70,000 acres of individual allotments.[102]

These land bases and service networks reflect both the fragmentation imposed by allotment-era policies and the continued assertion of tribal governance across a broad geographic region. In spite of these historical constraints, the Tribes have actively pursued economic diversification initiatives that reinforce sovereignty and community sustainability. Tribally operated enterprises, including casino gaming, renewable wind energy projects, and buffalo restoration efforts, in hopes to generate revenue that supports employment opportunities and essential community services while reconnecting economic development to culturally grounded practices.

At the same time, language revitalization programs led by the Cheyenne and Arapaho Language Department work to restore fluency and intergenerational knowledge through school-based curricula, immersion programs, and digital tools. This ensures that linguistic knowledge stays central to cultural identity and worldview becomes the living and evolving practice for

[102] U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Concho Agency," accessed 2026, https://www.bia.gov/regional-offices/southern-plains/concho-agency

Cheyenne community integration to continue grow within the modernism of America today. Community social gatherings, such as the Oklahoma Indian Nations Powwow, Colony Powwow and ceremonial events, continue to serve as vital spaces of kinship, cultural articulation, and shared responsibility. These occasions reinforce relational ties not only among tribal members but also between people, land, and cultural practices.

Lastly, Cheyenne and Arapaho youth have changed educationally in modern days and are taking a stand for Indigenous communities in many ways. They are increasingly engaging in higher education, environmental justice initiatives, and community organizing efforts that shape future leadership within the Nation. Their participation reflects an ongoing devotion to confronting contemporary challenges while still remaining grounded within ancestral knowledge systems.

Despite generations of displacement, violence, and assimilation policies, the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples continue to reclaim and strengthen their relationships to land, culture, and governance. These efforts demonstrate that Indigenous nationhood is not simply a historical inheritance but a dynamic, living system of political, cultural, and ecological accountability that actively shapes community how the Cheyenne futures will be established as the years are to come.

4.3 Health Inequities and Colonial Food Systems

Comprehending the urgency of food sovereignty within the Cheyenne communities necessitates examining the contemporary health conditions formed by the colonial food systems. One could assume that this all started by historical disruptions to land-based foodways which have produced long-term physiological, ecological, and social consequences which continue to

dominate Cheyenne community health today. One research article by K. Sankaranarayanan et. al, shows that examining the gut microbiome diversity of Cheyenne and Arapaho individuals revealed the embodied impacts of industrial diets introduced through colonial food infrastructures. The study went on to say that the gut microbiome of the Cheyenne and Arapaho participants was mainly composed of the bacterial phylum Firmicutes, making up around 87% of the microbial composition, a pattern strongly associated with industrialized agricultural lifestyles and highly processed diets.[103] Participants also exhibited significantly lower levels of Faecalibacterium, a bacterium associated with anti-inflammatory properties and healthy gut function, denoting a microbial imbalance linked to inflammatory conditions.[104]

Dietary data from the study further reinforces the impact of colonial food systems by demonstrating that the Cheyenne and Arapaho participants consumed diets heavily composed of processed proteins and refined carbohydrates, with approximately 68% of protein sources coming from fried or processed and 92% of starches classified as refined or industrially produced.[105] Fruit consumption was notably low, while sugar-sweetened beverages and high-caloric snack foods were widely consumed, showing a significant shift away from traditional nutrient-dense food systems that could be grown on a farm. These dietary patterns are not incidental but are the direct result of colonial food regimes that have replaced diverse, land-based subsistence practices with limited, highly processed food options. These statistics are not just for the Indigenous populations but also seen in other low-income populations around the United States..

[103] K. Sankaranarayanan et al., "Gut Microbiome Diversity among Cheyenne and Arapaho Individuals," *Current Biology* 25, no. 24 (2015): 4.

[104] K. Sankaranarayanan et al., 6.

[105] K. Sankaranarayanan et al., 3.

Compared with traditional Indigenous populations, both Native and non-Native populations in Oklahoma showed a reduction in microbial diversity, further showing how industrial food systems reshape biological processes across populations.[106] The study additionally reported that approximately 93% of Cheyenne and Arapaho participants were classified as overweight or obese, while nearly 50% reported a diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes, underscoring the severity of diet-related chronic illness within the community.[107] Beyond microbial composition, metabolite analysis showed increased levels of bile acid derivatives and compounds associated with inflammation and other metabolic conditions, indicating that these dietary shifts are not only altering microbiome diversity but additionally reshaping metabolic function linked to chronic disease.[108] To put it simply, these health conditions and many others are changing the way our bodies work. Understanding food becomes beneficially nurturing to understand how health is affected or productively impacted.

These health conditions discussed earlier cannot be understood as biological inevitabilities or individual lifestyle choices. Rather, they reflect structural violence produced through colonial policies that systematically replaced traditional diets with processed commodity foods distributed through federal programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Boarding schools, ration systems, and forced removals disrupted Cheyenne subsistence practices that once centered on buffalo, wild plant harvesting, and locally cultivated foods, profoundly changing both diet and relationships to land. As a result, contemporary health disparities must be understood as historically produced and politically maintained rather than

[106] K. Sankaranarayanan et al., 4.
[107] K. Sankaranarayanan et al., 6.
[108] K. Sankaranarayanan et al., 6-7.

naturally occurring. Food sovereignty initiatives, therefore, operate as both a public health intervention and a process of decolonization. Restoring traditional food systems provides a means toward improving physical and mental health outcomes while simultaneously revitalizing cultural practices, strengthening community relationships, and reestablishing Indigenous authority over food, land, and knowledge systems.

4.4 Land, Gardens, and Buffalo Restoration

Urban Indigenous communities commonly face barriers to accessing culturally meaningful foods. Limited access to affordable and nutritious food in urban and rural areas creates barriers for maintaining traditional diets. These conditions have forced others to seek out innovative responses within Indigenous communities for survival. The reintroduction of community gardens have arisen as spaces of cultural revitalization where growing, harvesting, preparing, and sharing food have been seen as a way to reconnect individuals with land-based teachings. These gardens function not only as sources of food but as sites of ceremony, education, and community building. Within Cheyenne and Arapaho communities, buffalo restoration initiatives and communal gardens represent powerful forms of spatial reclamation. Buffalo once sustained the plains of Indigenous communities both materially and spiritually, by providing food, clothing, shelter, materials, and ceremonial significance. The destruction of buffalo herds by colonial campaigns destroyed and dismantled Indigenous lifeways which is why it is so important to reinstate this initiative.

Contemporary buffalo restoration programs reverse this process by rebuilding ecological relationships that once sustained plains cultures. Community gardens similarly reconnect Cheyenne youth and elders to traditional crops such as corn, beans, squash, chokecherries, and

wild turnips. These projects are part of a broader Indigenous Food Sovereignty Plan that seeks to revitalize traditional foodways while protecting sacred relationships with land and water. Rather than replicating the past, these projects adapt ancestral teachings to contemporary conditions, demonstrating how Native knowledge systems continue to guide community futures and help them understand the importance of food and the ceremonial practices they represent.

4.5 Food as Sacred Medicine

Foods is central to ceremonial practices within the Native American Church and reflect a greater understanding that sustenance is inseparable from the sacred elements that uphold life, particularly the use of water. As June-Ann Greeley explains, water in Indigenous worldviews is not simply a resource but "the life force of all creation," understood as both the material and spiritual base upon which all life depends.[109] Across Indigenous nations, water is regarded as the "blood of the earth" and the essential element that connects all living beings within a shared relational system, strengthening the principle that life cannot exist independently from the natural world. [110] This is the underlying concept of how Indigenous food systems all depend on the health and protection of water sources so that they have the ability to grow, harvest, and sustain traditional foods. Within Cheyenne contexts, where customary foodways once relied on seasonal cycles, plant gathering, and animal relationships, water functions as the underlying force that makes all food systems possible. Water is the sacred elixir of life that is vitally important to Cheyenne traditional ways of living, without having É-pėhévoomēha (good water) the world itself would become lifeless.

[109] June-Ann Greeley, "Water in Native American Spirituality: Liquid Life—Blood of the Earth and Life of the Community," *Green Humanities* 2 (2017): 156.

[110] Greeley, 156-157.

Greeley adds further emphasis on the idea that water is both life-giving and spiritually powerful, existing as a sacred entity that must be treated with respect, humility, and responsibility rather than control.[111] This relational understanding contrasts markedly with colonial systems that treat water as a commodity, extractable and controllable for industrial use. The disruption of waterways through federal policies, environmental exploitation, and land dispossession, therefore, does not represent only ecological damage but an intense violation of Indigenous spiritual and traditional systems. As Greeley notes, the destruction or restriction of access to water sources constitutes an attack on "the very ground of being, the soul of a people," as water is inseparable from identity, ceremony, and community survival.[112] There are some food sources that carry a historical meaning and ceremonial practices.

Corn has deep cultural, ceremonial, and historical meaning within Cheyenne lifeways, extending beyond sustenance into the domain of sacred relationship and spiritual obligation. As documented by Cheyenne historian Gordon Yellowman, corn known as *hoóköhtse* (ho-o-ko-se-tes) raw corn and *xamaemahemenotse* (khuh-muh-mhuh-minst) Indian corn, which was not simply a cultivated food, but a sacred gift embedded in Cheyenne cosmology and ceremonial practice. In the *Másèháome* (Muh-sah-um) ceremony, five grains of corn were placed at the four cardinal directions and at the center, signifying a spatial and spiritual mapping of the world in which corn functioned as a mediator between the people, the earth, and the spiritual realm. The act of waiting for the spirits to eat before the people expresses a relational ethic of respect, reciprocity, and acknowledgment that food originates first in spiritual sources rather than solely in human labor. Corn's sacred origin is additionally emphasized through its association with

[111] Greeley, 158-159.
[112] Greeley, 160, 164.

Esceheman, who gifted the first seeds to foundational Cheyenne figures such as Sweet Medicine, reinforcing corn's place within the teachings of survival, governance, and cultural tradition.[113]

Within the Native American Church, corn continues to carry this sacred resonance, reflecting its role as one of the four central ceremonial foods alongside water, meat, and fruit. In this context, corn symbolizes life, sustenance, and continuity, this grounds participants within both physical nourishment and spiritual connection during ceremony. The presence of corn in peyote meetings reflects an enduring Indigenous epistemology in which food is inseparable from prayer, ceremony, and relational responsibility. Even as colonial disruptions made agricultural practices more difficult following Cheyenne migrations and the confinement to reservation life, the persistence of corn cultivation into the late nineteenth century demonstrates its continuing importance as both a material and spiritual anchor within Cheyenne society. Thus, corn operates not only as a food source but as a symbol of survival, ceremonial order, and the maintenance of Cheyenne identity, bridging ancestral teachings with contemporary expressions of Indigenous food sovereignty. My vision for Cheyenne food sovereignty is rooted in the teachings shared by my ancestors and the wisdom instilled by *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve). These teachings emphasize the importance of land, language, and relational responsibility. This vision imagines a future where Cheyenne communities gather around shared meals prepared from traditional foods, where elders pass ecological knowledge to younger generations and where buffalo once again sustain both the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the people. Language, ceremony, and food remain inseparable foundations of Cheyenne identity. Without language, the stories, ecological knowledge, and kinship systems that define Cheyenne culture risk disappearing. Revitalizing

[113] Gordon Yellowman, "Corn, Maize (Cheyenne Cultural Notes)," unpublished manuscript, 10-11.

food systems therefore becomes part of a broader effort to strengthen cultural identity and community health.

4.6 Colonial Disruption and the Work of Futurity

The urgency of contemporary food sovereignty initiatives becomes clear when placed within the broader historical context of colonial violence across the plains. Federal treaties, land seizures, and military campaigns reshaped Indigenous lifeways throughout the nineteenth century. The Treaty of Fort Laramie promised territorial recognition for Plains tribes but was repeatedly violated by the United States government as westward expansion intensified.[114] These betrayals culminated in violent events such as the Sand Creek Massacre, where Cheyenne and Arapaho people were attacked despite attempting peaceful negotiation.[115] Such events were part of a broader colonial system designed to dismantle Indigenous governance, remove Native people from their lands, and replace traditional food systems with federally controlled rations. Boarding schools and commodity food programs further accelerated the transformation of Indigenous diets. Food sovereignty initiatives respond directly to this history. By restoring traditional diets and land-based practices, communities address intergenerational trauma while rebuilding cultural infrastructures disrupted by colonial policy. Within Cheyenne contexts, futurity emerges as a leading guiding principle for any Cheyenne Food Sustainability project.

[114] See Jacki Thompson Rand, "Medicine Lodge Treaty," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=ME005; *Treaty with the Sioux-Brule, Oglala, Miniconjou, Yanktonai, Hunkpapa, Blackfeet, Cuthead, Two Kettle, San Arcs, and Santee-and Arapaho*, April 29, 1868, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, National Archives.

[115] Kimbra Cutlip, "In 1868, Two Nations Made a Treaty. the U.S. Broke It, and Plains Indian Tribes Are Still Seeking Justice," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 7, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/1868-two-nations-made-treaty-us-broke-it-and-plains-indian-tribes-are-still-seeking-justice-180970741/.

Imagining a future where food once again functions as ceremony, governance, and relational responsibility requires sustained commitment to community-led action.

4.7 Reclaiming Governance Through Food

At its core, food sovereignty represents a return to Indigenous governance systems rather than the creation of entirely new frameworks. By cultivating traditional crops, restoring buffalo populations, and renewing harvesting practices, Cheyenne communities assert authority over their futures while honoring ancestral teachings. Funding programs and partnerships play an important role in supporting these initiatives. Organizations such as the Native American Agriculture Fund and First Nations Development Institute provide financial resources for Indigenous agricultural development and food sovereignty projects which have "supported 16 Tribal and Native-led community partners from across 10 states, all working to ensure that Native youth are able to experience their traditional foods, foodways, and culture."[116] Federal programs, also administered through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, also support tribal agricultural initiatives and community food systems to "fund high-priority integrated projects that enhance the ability of producers and processors who have already adopted organic standards to grow and market high-quality organic agricultural products, and to increase resilience in American farming systems."[117] These partnerships will help expand community

[116] First Nations Development Institute, *Awakening the Seeds in Native Youth: Native Farm to School Evaluation Report* (Longmont, CO: First Nations Development Institute, 2025), https://www.firstnations.org/publications/awakening-the-seeds-in-native-youth-native-farm-to-school-evaluation-report

[117] U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, *Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) Program,* accessed May 9, 2025, https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/organic-agriculture-research-extension-initiative-orei-program.

gardens, buffalo restoration programs, and food education initiatives that strengthen tribal sovereignty over current food systems.

4.8 Models and Future Project

Several Indigenous communities across North America have developed food sovereignty initiatives that go beyond improving access to nutritious foods and instead function as systems of governance, cultural revitalization, and resistance to colonial food regimes. These initiatives reveal that food sovereignty is not a singular program but a multi-scalar process that operates across tribal governance structures, community-based implementation, and national policy advocacy. Upon examining there are several organizations that contribute to help implement the concept of Food Sovereignty such as the: the Oneida Nation Food Sovereignty Strategic Plan, the Rosebud Community Food Sovereignty Initiative, Food Secure, a Canadian's policy framework, and funding initiatives such as the Native American Agriculture Fund. It all becomes clear that Indigenous food sovereignty is rooted in restoring relationships between land, people, and governance systems while actively confronting the legacies of colonial disruption.



Fig 4.1. Oneida, *Food Sovereignty Strategic Plan*, February 2022, https://oneida-nsn.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Food-Sovereignty-Strategic-Plan-Goals-anbd-Objectives.pdf.

The Oneida Nation Food Sovereignty Strategic Plan offers one of the most comprehensive examples of how food sovereignty can be institutionalized within tribal governance. The plan outlines a long-term vision of creating a "self-sufficient, interconnected food system" intended to improve community health and overall well-being.[118] At the heart of this approach is the understanding that food systems must be resilient, adaptable, and responsive to both historical suffering, imminent challenges such as climate change, as well as public health crises. Rather than treating food as a standalone issue, the Oneida Nation integrates food sovereignty into broader systems of governance through aligning agricultural production, environmental management, and public health programs. This entails evaluating soil, water, and ecological

[118] Oneida Nation, "Food Sovereignty Strategic Plan," 2022, accessed online 2026, https://oneida-nsn.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Food-Sovereignty-Strategic-Plan-Goals-anbd-Objectives.pdf.

conditions as part of a holistic food system while reducing dependence on external food sources and on federal support.

Importantly, the Oneida Nation model stresses food sovereignty is inseparable from self-governance. By strengthening local food production, supporting community agriculture, and embedding traditional foodways into institutional structures like schools and health systems, the Oneida Nation demonstrates how food systems can serve as mechanisms of political sovereignty. This strategy provides a key framework for Indigenous communities to utilize through suggesting food sovereignty initiatives being embedded within tribal governance rather than operating as isolated community projects. For Cheyenne people, this could mean developing tribally led agricultural programs, embedding traditional foods into healthcare and education systems, and establishing long-term strategic plans that align food sovereignty with cultural teachings, ceremonial practices, and ecological care. In this sense, the Oneida Nation model shows food sovereignty is not only about recovering food but also about rebuilding systems of governance that can sustain all Indigenous life.



Fig. 4.2. Siċaŋġu *Food Sovereignty Initiative community food systems work* (Siċaŋġu Co.), https://www.sicangu.co/food.

At the community level, the Rosebud Community Siċaŋġu Food Sovereignty Initiative (SFSI) provides a strong example of how food sovereignty operates using localized, culturally grounded programming.[119] Developed by the Rosebud Economic Development Corporation, the initiative centers restoring traditional Lakota food systems while promoting economic development and community wellbeing. The program explicitly frames food sovereignty as a process of decolonization, stressing the importance of reclaiming the ability to "feed ourselves" as an essential element of sovereignty and self-determination.[120] This demonstrates a broader Indigenous understanding that food systems are directly tied to cultural identity, spiritual practice, and joint responsibility.

The Rosebud initiative incorporates multiple strategies, including community gardens, farmers' markets, youth education programs, and support for local food producers. Such efforts not only increase access to healthy, locally produced foods but also foster intergenerational knowledge transmission and community participation. Programs such as youth workforce initiatives and agricultural internships deliver hands-on learning opportunities that reconnect younger generations with traditional food practices while building economic capacity within the community. Additionally, the initiative aids local producers through grants and technical assistance, strengthening local economies and reducing dependence on external food systems.

What makes the Rosebud model particularly significant is its emphasis on relational understanding of food as the glue or connection to land, people, and spiritual life. Traditional Lakota food systems centered on buffalo, wild plants, and seasonal practices rooted in ecological

[119] Siċaŋġu Co., "Food Sovereignty Initiative," accessed May 9, 2025, https://www.sicangu.co/food.
[120] Siċaŋġu Co., "Food Sovereignty Initiative."

knowledge, and the initiative seeks to restore these relationships in current contexts. For Cheyenne communities, which share similar Plains-based histories of buffalo dependence, land dispossession, and forced dietary change, this model affords a pathway for culturally grounded revitalization. Cheyenne food sovereignty initiatives could similarly value community gardens, buffalo restoration, youth education programs, and local food markets, while ensuring these efforts are guided by elders and rooted in ceremonial teachings. The Sic̊aŋġu initiative demonstrates that food sovereignty must be lived and practiced at the community level in order to be sustainable and meaningful.

While tribal and community-level initiatives are essential, national and policy-level frameworks also play a critical role in advancing Indigenous food sovereignty. Organizations such as Food Secure Canada advocate for food systems grounded in justice, sustainability, and Indigenous rights. This tribal organization stresses that food sovereignty requires structural change beyond local communities.[121] Their work illustrates the importance of policy advocacy regarding addressing system-wide barriers such as land access, food distribution inequalities, and environmental degradation. By framing food sovereignty as a matter of rights and justice, Food Secure Canada reinforces the need for Indigenous nations to assert control over food systems at multiple levels, including legal and political arenas.

[121] Native American Agriculture Fund, "Funding to Tribes from 2019-2025" (infographic), accessed May 9, 2025, https://nativeamericanagriculturefund.org/.

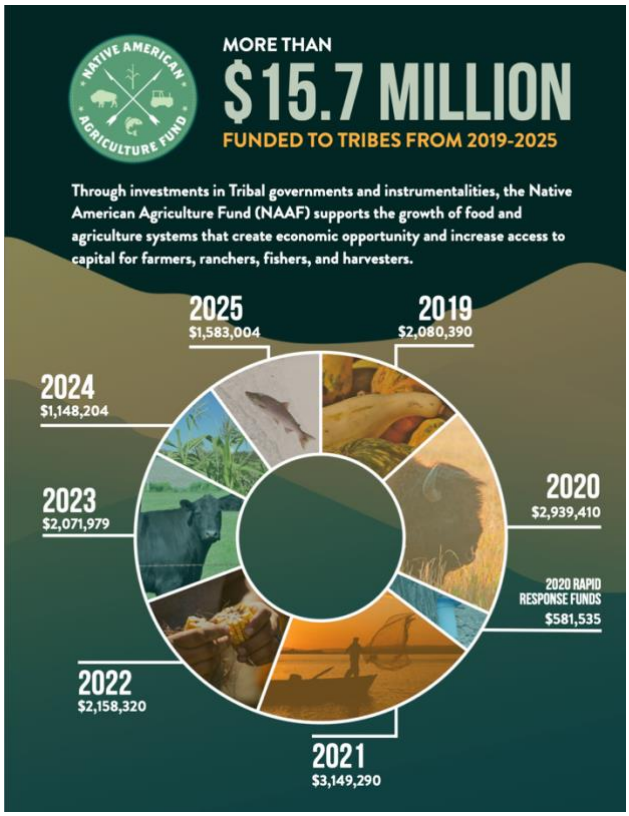


Fig. 4.3. Native American Agriculture Fund investments to Tribal Nations, 2019-2025 (Native American Agriculture Fund).

Similarly, funding initiatives such as the model 4.9.3 Native American Agriculture Fund deliver vital financial support for Indigenous-led agricultural and food sovereignty projects. These programs recognize that rebuilding Indigenous food systems calls for not only cultural knowledge but also material resources, infrastructure, and long-term investment. Funding opportunities support projects such as sustainable agriculture development, education programs, and community food initiatives, enabling Indigenous nations to build the capacity necessary to sustain food sovereignty efforts over time.

Together, these models show that Indigenous food sovereignty operates across interconnected scales of governance, community practice, policy, and financial support for each

of which is necessary for rebuilding sustainable, culturally grounded food systems. For Cheyenne communities, this multi-scalar approach suggests food sovereignty initiatives must be both locally grounded and structurally supported. Potential initiatives may include the development of a traditional food farms and education centered near Concho *Ma'evé'ho'eno* (Muh-i-vih-hu-in), the expansion of buffalo restoration lands, mobile food markets serving rural communities, and the creation of a food knowledge archive documenting traditional ecological knowledge and oral histories.

However, it is critical these programs are not simply adopted from other models but are instead adapted to reflect Cheyenne cultural values, histories, and relationships to land. Food sovereignty must remain a community-led process guided by principles of relational accountability, respect for elders, and the protection of cultural knowledge. In this sense, food sovereignty is not a static goal but a continuing process of renewal and responsibility. It does not only represent the restoration of food systems but the revitalization of Cheyenne nationhood itself by demonstrating that sovereignty is enacted through everyday practices of growing, sharing, and sustaining life.

Chapter 5: My Contribution to Future Work



Fig 5.1 & 5.2. Chaz Meadows Home Garden and Butchering Area. March 2026. Mustang, Oklahoma.

5.1 From Research to Responsibility

The images I have included in this chapter function as visual documentation of putting into practice what I have focused my research on and putting it into reality of how food sovereignty practices can be lived rather than becoming read conceptual concepts. Figure 5.1 captures the process of how I harvested and prepared a male buck deer; this reflects how my direct engagement was within the same land-based subsistence practices that have historically sustained my Cheyenne communities but in a contemporary setting of a neighborhood backyard. This moment represented for me, not only the achievement of providing food for my family but it directly embodies how I can express my own responsibilities of respect, reciprocity and relational accountability to the animals and the environment in which they were harvested from.

Figure 5.2 displays how I cultivated a garden space in my backyard within an urban setting that focuses on growing Indigenous foods and to further show Cheyenne Food ways are not confined to just rural areas but also can be adapted and sustained within contemporary landscapes shaped by settler infrastructure. These images reflect my personal approach to practicing and affirming food sovereignty in my everyday life. They challenge the dominant narrative that positions Indigenous foodways as something of the past, instead showing that they are living, evolving practices that continue to exist in the present. Food Sovereignty can be an accessible practice grounded in community action and everyday living.

This thesis has traced the historical disruption of Cheyenne food systems through colonial policies, the preservation of knowledge through oral histories, and the contemporary criticality of food sovereignty within Indigenous communities. By understanding food sovereignty only through an historical analysis or a conceptual model, it challenged me to reproduce a distance between knowledge and how the practices I learned around food are actually enacted within the lived realities of how the world is viewed from past generations of knowledge keepers. Within the histories of Cheyenne culture and traditions, knowledge was not meant to remain intangible but instead it was meant to be lived, practiced, carried, and enacted through a sense of responsibility or belonging to the earth.

All Indigenous methods I emphasized within this research required me to keep myself accountable to the communities and knowledge systems from which it emerges from. As Margaret Kovach argues, knowledge is relational and tied to lived experience, meaning that

understanding emerges through participation rather than observation.[122] Similarly, Dian Million centers emotion, memory, and embodied experience as legitimate forms of knowledge productions.[123] With these as some of my main guiding principles for creating food sovereignty in my own life, this chapter is aimed to shift from an analysis of Cheyenne Food Sovereignty to my own praxis of how food sovereignty can look like in an affirmative action reality. I argue that Cheyenne food sovereignty is not something that can be theorized any longer but something that must be lived, felt, and practiced every day. Through my own engagement with gardening, hunting, and hide tanning, I will demonstrate how the principles explored throughout this thesis are not confined to just historical stories or community programs, but remain accessible and actionable in the present. This chapter positions lived experiences as evidence of Native knowledge systems in motion and as a route toward Cheyenne futurity.

5.2 Urban Space as a Site of Cheyenne Food Sovereignty

Colonial depictions often position Indigenous foodways as belonging to rural or pre-contact environments that often refer to a romanticize past before colonialism dispossessed Indigenous Peoples. This however has strengthened the idea that traditional practices cannot exist within metropolitan area to illustrate how settler colonial frameworks seek to spatially confine how Indigenous identity are shaped or created. In reality, Cheyenne knowledge systems are not bound to a specific geography but were practiced, adapted and carried through memory, and relational accountability. This is where I came up with the idea to put Food Sovereignty into play for myself and see if this is something is obtainable and realistic for today's society.

[122] Margaret Kovach, "Emerging from the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies," in *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, & Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005), 31.

[123] Million, 58.

While living in Mustang, Oklahoma, a large urban area, I started growing my own garden as a way to reconnect with the same food practices discussed throughout this research. For me, it was not simply about producing food, but about showing on a small scale, how to re-establish ones' own relationship with the land, even if the land is constrained to city environments. This research is to show that anyone can restart their own connection, even if it is just started from a 4-by-4 garden bed.

The garden I created requires some basic attentiveness, such as physical labor as you work the land, understanding seasonal cycles, soil conditions and micronutrients, and giving love and care to the plants, which is especially important to the Cheyenne Peoples. I implemented and reinforced the teachings of the Cheyenne People when I created my garden and it showed me centered patience, care, and reciprocity, as my plants have started their journey right next to me in this life, in my backyard. I came to understand food sovereignty does not require anyone to have a vast amount of land to begin with, but can emerge in a small space if you have good intentional thought and planning to create your dream garden. For me, I thought that Indigenous food sovereignty must be on a large-scale or an institutionally driven model to be what colonial systems see as economically successful. Instead, my food sovereignty experience is being enacted through my own everyday practices that seek to restore my relationship to land and food, even within the confines of urban contexts shaped by settler infrastructures. This practice starts with making that connection everyday through prayer, song, and good intentions.

So, I started from scratch and I decided it would be great to start with something very adaptable to multi-weather conditions like they have in Oklahoma. Some of the plants chosen are leafy vegetables and fruits. It was unique to say they both go well together, but ironically, I

thought of them as important to building a connection to the necessities of life; water, greens, fruits, and meats.

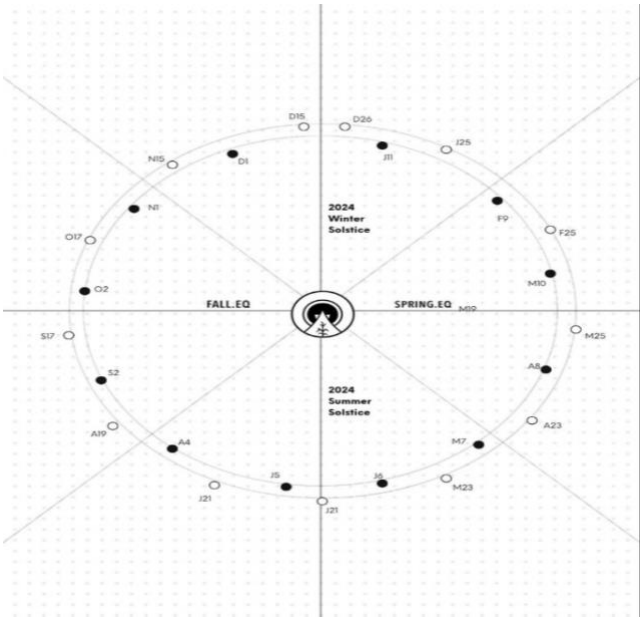


Fig. 5.3 *Four Sacred Direction Seasonal Planting Model*. Created by Tori & Travis Andrews, November 2025

Figure 5.1 is one of the many traditional models I found very beneficial to help me start my own garden and where I could build my own foundation from. With the permission of the creators of the Four Sacred Direction Seasonal Planting Model, Travis and Tori Andrews, creators of Native Farming Solutions (NFS), allowed me to share how their development of what looking at the sky for guidance means for small scale gardeners and how to find the perfect timing for all different kinds of plants. Both Tori and Travis share the same vision of growing traditional foods that can be used for medicinal purposes that incorporates the local ceremonial community and to serve as a community resource for cultural preservation. They both have dedicated their lives to enrich traditional practices of growing, sustaining, and harvesting foods for the wellness of native youth and Indigenous communities here across Oklahoma.[124]

[124] Travis and Tori Andrews, "Native Farming Solutions", 2026 Link tree. https://linktr.ee/nfsokc

This model was so beneficial because it speaks volumes of knowledge that is not actively discussed within community gatherings, at home, or even on an individual scale within tribal circles. The stars are the teachers, they can predict what is to come, and how those things are to come in the future. The seasonal diagram represents more than a way to visually map time, but reflects, connects, and makes sense of how Indigenous Peoples understood cyclical relationships between land, food, and responsibility. Tori and Travis organized this diagram around solstices and equinoxes within a four directional circular form that illustrates how time is not experienced linearly but through a never-ending recurring pattern that guides planting, harvesting, hunting, and ceremony. It is like our circles ceremonially, that situate each person as equal and never ending. It is a reminder of a teaching that my elder Ervin Bull has shared that each time you past the same place you of where you started, it gets better and better each time.[125]

In December 2025, I planned out my garden on paper and collected all the supplies I would need to get started building my plant boxes and maintaining my garden. Once completed, I started working the soil with natural composts that I fermented from Buffalo manure, organic wastes, and many other biodegradable ingredients, other than the strong methane smell, this was worth it, knowing my plants are given the best micronutrients to create a nutritious food. What fascinated me the most, was seeing the life this garden has brought to my back yard. The birds came around, the insects are acknowledging what is taking place, and through my own work and enjoyment, seeing something come to life from raw earth which is so overtly satisfying. One thing I had to learn and understand is how and when the correct time was appropriate to start

[125] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.

planting without having prior knowledge of the celestial time that *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t) gave my people to follow.

Within Cheyenne lifeways, such as our own seasonal orientations, I was able to apply this celestial knowledge into food knowledge, the availability of what plants, animals, and water sources need to be understood at different times of the season. This occurs through observational memory, and the intergenerational teachings I received from them. Tori & Travis's four directional model challenges Western agricultural systems which impose rigid, industrial timelines that disconnect humans from ecological rhythms Indigenous People have maintained their close kin to. The 5.1 model stresses an attentiveness needed for an environmental change by reinforcing that food sovereignty is attached with an intimate consciousness of how seasonal shifts actually operate or work. The placement of dates along the circular path suggests how our ongoing relationship with time that is lived and revisited, rather than passed or forgotten. Learning from this model has reshaped how I could understand my own practices, from gardening to hunting, as part of a larger system of relational accountability to align to the human activity of movements to the natural world I have had a longing for. My mentors, Travis and Tori, shared with me this diagram, as first a teaching tool, but also it becomes a reminder to me that Indigenous food systems are guided by cycles of renewal, where knowledge is continuously carried forward through practice, observation, and one's own connection to land. This connection has also opened possibilities of thinking about harvesting animals that are used ceremonially but also responsibly for the survival of our everyday lives.

5.3 Hunting as Relational Practice and Responsibility

Connecting to the land really intrigued me to think about what going out to harvest a deer would mean for this research, but more importantly, for my community. Although I did grow up knowing how to butcher animals, used in ceremonial practices, hunting was never something I experienced on my own or in a community setting. I was able to conceptualize this monumental experience of connection, especially to the lands, where my ancestors were stripped, whipped, and forced to forget their identity at one point in time, for practicing what was is called Né-méahešenámáne (surviving through a winter). It symbolized a significant shift or a trigger in my soul of how fortunate I am to be roaming the same forests my own blood relatives were hiding desperately in for safety. This is when I began to think how I could better understand food sovereignty as a lived responsibility, because hunting is often misunderstood within many Western frameworks as an act of extraction or sport, but for some, it becomes more than that.

On the morning of hunting day, I left the comfort of my home to enter the frosty forests. I felt something internally that told me to pray. I needed to pray about the life I was going to take from this earth, not in vain, but for the sake of my communities' survival. It was vital important to do so due to the ceremonial teachings of making offerings before you do anything, so I É-oestóne péeonó'e (Offered Tobacco). Simultaneously as I arrived on my tribal reservation lands, a herd of deer was waiting there for me as if I was meant to see them right in that moment. It could have never been perfectly laid out for me as if *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t) put his touch onto it. I was able to come back home satisfied, and I experienced something my Cheyenne People were always so grateful for.

Within Cheyenne lifeways, hunting is always embedded within a part of our everyday systems those values are respect, relationality, and obligation. I decided to become a provider for my community that day I stepped into that forest. This was especially important during the Federal government shutdown, when many of my elders depended on me for assistance with their survival. Also, during that time, many other tribal members and I were able to provide 30 deer to our community while also exercising our sovereign right to hunt on the lands deemed as reservation lands of the Cheyenne & Arapaho Peoples. This brought feelings of comfort, healing, and belonging back into not only my life but also those different relatives that were able to have a great source of protein once more.

Learning to hunt required me to understand more than just the technical skills of operating a firearm but it demanded my awareness of how to read the environment such as how many animals' behaviors are felt by their recognition of what is coming through that forest. This came down to the sound, scent, and the responsibility of maintaining good intentions that we have to carry when coming to the forests looking for them. It is referred in the Cheyenne language as É-pėhéve'šeme ma'heóneaná (Make a good sound to eat spiritually good) If you don't have this energy, you will never find what you are looking for. This was the experience I couldn't help but recall the teachings I learned in my research, that food is not just an acquired part of life that humans are expected to have. In reality, it has to start with it being given to you. This giving comes from a spiritual understanding that it is important to acknowledge the animal with great respect for giving its life to you.

Hunting became a moment when I could feel that close bond with the land and how it related to my ancestors. When it hit me that I was in Colony, Oklahoma, a former Industrial Boarding School for Cheyenne's & Arapaho's, the animals, and the generations of Cheyenne

people who have practiced many of the same traditions in that specific area, I felt something was productively done for the future of Cheyenne Food sovereignty this past winter. It opened my eyes to see how using the resources *Máheo* (Mah-hi-yo-t) gave us on our land can further establish our independence from contemporary ways and help our community once again.

Through my experience I have found that food independency is way to move forward for any tribal food sovereignty initiative seeking for better health, cultural resurgence, and replanting one's identity. I see it as a way that opposes any reliance on industrial food systems, where we can find ways to have a connection with food we eat so we can regain our own connection and responsibility to land as humans furthermore. By actually getting out to hunt, I came to understand food sovereignty as a way that changes the way you think about food and where it comes from. It reorientates your way of thinking toward resisting the dispossession and disconnection produced by colonial food systems. Although hunting was just one part of this process, but utilizing all of the animal and the processes that need to occur when working with the animal's hide and how to "break" which is a process of stretching, flexing, and softening a tanned skin while it dries to prevent it from becoming stiff, hard, and unusable.[126] Within this way, it could be used on our material side of culture for various things such as lodges, clothing, and warmth. This all has a process that helps build into an internal sense of responsibility felt hands on.

5.4 Hide Tanning and the Ethics of Use

The process of learning hide tanning deepened my understanding of how Cheyenne People built their relationships to their food and material life which is so unique that many tribes

[126] Bull, interview, January 30, 2026.

could identify whether it was Cheyenne made or not. Hide tanning is a continuation of teachings centered around using all parts of what is harvested. It reflects ethical responsibilities of respect and resourcefulness that stands in opposition to the wastefulness embedded within capitalist consumption. So, learning these techniques is important to understand the full circle of respecting the circle of life. It is good to understand how Indigenous hide tanning techniques requires physical labor to work the hide into different stages before it becomes the finish product.

The labor involved in tanning a hide which includes cleaning, stretching, and softening, required a big portion of time. But what is time? It taught me patience and care for every detail of the animal. I learned the anatomy of each section of the animal we skinned and then I was able to see each part for it was. It was a spiritual embodiment, a cleansing I did not understand at the moment. Going through the process of it all, the ending is when I felt my spirit move to understand that I am doing something my ancestors put their soul into. Gathering the sand from the banks of the Washita River to soften the hide, using wood harvested from the forests these animals came from, and then use their hide in ceremonies for our drums, was well worth it. The drum sound, vibration, and feeling behind the tones were different. These differences were acknowledged by elders from my community with questions of, “Where did you get this one at?”, “That is a good hide grandson. I sure enjoyed the sound of that drum.”; “I really felt that spirit. I could feel our people with us.” I couldn’t help but think, this is what I have been exactly researching and writing about but to actually feel it was something I could not explain but something that only one can feel. Throughout this process I came to understand the relationship does not end with hunting the animal, but it continues through how one will honor the life that was given to you. This aligns with the Cheyenne teachings that emphasize how balance and responsibility can be reinforcing through sovereignty so we can validly express how our four-

legged creations are to be treated, not how they are obtained in vain. Although hunting is depicted as an individual practice within settler society for some, but a community is needed for it to become worthwhile and something that can productively impact the lives of understanding or rekindling themselves to Cheyenne culture.

5.5 From Individual Practice to Collective Power

While these experiences may appear as an individual project for me, but the reality is, it has been community driven. This concept reflects what Laura Harjo describes as a collective power, which puts community knowledge, relationships, and actions accumulated at the forefront to shape Indigenous futures.[127] Practices such as gardening, hunting, and hide tanning are part of a broader system of relational accountability that extends across families, communities, and generations. Food sovereignty is not just learned in institutional programs or policy frameworks; however, those remain important to the processes for the bigger picture of the overall goal. It exists within seeing, visualizing, and feeling everyday actions of what makes us choose to engage with responsibilities to land, food, and community. Sovereignty is not only a political status within the realm of the federal government but is also apart a living and breathing culture that has continuously been enacted through ceremony, songs, and prayer that depicts those kinds of living connections to all the creations on earth creating a collective power. When the people move away from the ways of how Cheyenne people are supposed to live, the tribe itself starts to be divided then distinguished into modernity of society as another lost culture. Looking back at old teachings to build a better future has always been vital for finding ways to maintain forward progress without having to pause or take steps back the Cheyenne Peoples as an entirety.

[127] Harjo, 209.

5.6 Cheyenne Futurity and the Continuation of Responsibility

The teachings of *Motsé'eóeve* (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve), which warned of the consequences of adopting external ways of living, remain deeply relevant in my understanding of contemporary food systems. The reliance on industrial food infrastructures has contributed to both cultural disconnection and health disparities within Cheyenne communities. Yet, the ability to engage in practices such as gardening, hunting, and traditional skills demonstrates that these teachings have not been lost. Cheyenne futurity is not about returning to a fixed past but about carrying forward these teachings in ways that respond to present conditions. As Dian Million suggests, knowledge lives through experience, memory, and emotion. By engaging in these practices, I am participating in the continuation of Cheyenne knowledge systems rather than merely documenting them.

Conclusion: Food Sovereignty is a Way of Life

This thesis has argued that food sovereignty must be understood as a lived practice grounded in responsibility, relationality, and lived action. Through my own experiences, my elders lived testimonies and the history of the *Tsetsėhestâhese* (Zi-tis-ta-as), I have demonstrated that the principles of Cheyenne epistemologies are not distant or unattainable values but have continued to remain accessible within everyday life regardless of colonialism confliction on how to live within a Cheyenne way of life.

Food sovereignty therefore cannot be something that is fully achieved through policy or programs alone but begins with a willingness to come to gather as an individual or as a community and engage with the land, with its knowledge, and the responsibility that comes along with taking care of the Earth, your community, and its protections of all creation. Whether it's through planting a garden, learning to hunt, or obtaining practical traditional skills, these actions all represent pathways toward reclaiming Cheyenne identity and sovereignty. Food sovereignty is not only about what we eat or how we eat, but also about how we live on an Earth each day surrounded by millenniums of knowledge rooms stored in the rocks we plant our feet on every day. It is a continuation of Cheyenne ways of being that has persisted colonial disruption, genocide, and the stripping of Native identity. By practicing these teachings, I am not only writing about food sovereignty alone, I have chosen to be accountable to it by practicing the ways of respect and how the knowledge that live within it also pertains to all aspects that make a Cheyenne person distinctively different from another respected tribal nation. All food practices have and will continue to demonstrate that Indigenous food sovereignty does not begin at the

level of institutions, but at the level of taking a responsibility that is carried through one's body, enacted through practice, and sustained through a relationship to all creations around you.

This thesis began with a question rooted in both history and responsibility: what does it mean for Cheyenne people to reclaim food sovereignty in the wake of colonial disruption? Through examining the destruction of traditional food systems, the violence of boarding school policies, and the resilience carried through Cheyenne oral histories, it becomes clear that food sovereignty is not simply about the access to food. It is about restoring and having a relationship with the land, to gain knowledge, to live within a community, and lastly, to our tribe; so, our grandchildren's children will have it better than what we have, what our grandparents had, and what our ancestors sacrificed their lives for.

The historical records demonstrated that Cheyenne food systems were never economic structures but were deeply embedded within their own ways of knowing that spoke from systems of governance, kinship, and ceremony. Colonial policies did not only change what Cheyenne people ate; they sought to sever their relationships entirely by replacing them with systems of dependency designed to restructure all Indigenous life. The long-term impacts of these disruptions are visible today in both cultural disconnection and ongoing health disparities. Yet, as this research has shown, these systems of knowledge were never fully lost, and the ways of the tribe are able to be revived and put into practice.

Through the voices of Cheyenne elders, including Ervin Bull and Gordon Yellowman, this thesis demonstrated that knowledge continues to be carried through story, memory, and lived practice. Their lived stories revealed that even within the institutions that were designed to assimilate and erase Indigenous identity, Cheyenne people-maintained many forms of resistance,

adaptation, and survival. Food within these contexts, became both a site of control and a site of resilience.

At the same time, contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty movements across North America have illustrated that reclaiming food systems is not only possible but already underway. These initiatives provided models for rebuilding relationships to land, revitalizing cultural practices, and strengthening community health. However, this thesis has argued that food sovereignty cannot exist solely at the level of programs, policies, or institutions. It must also be lived every day for it to work as an agent that decolonializes us from the disruptive colonial food regimes.

Lastly, sharing how my own experience in practicing food sovereignty displayed that Cheyenne food ways begin with taking accountable action of just getting out there and doing it. Through cultivating a garden in an urban space, learning to hunt, and practicing hide tanning, I have come to understand that the teachings carried throughout this thesis are not confined to the past or to distant community initiatives. They are present, accessible, and actionable. These practices are not extraordinary, but they are responsibilities bounded to be taken up by anyone willing to engage with them.

This is perhaps the most important realization of my work which is that Cheyenne food sovereignty is not out of reach. It does not require waiting for anybody to create an institutional change, nor does it depend entirely on the access to a large piece of land with formal programs to show you how to connect to that land. It begins with a shift in how we understand our own relationship to food, land, and responsibility. It begins with planting something, with learning, with listening, and with remembering. From a young age, I was taught by my grandparents and

elders, that in ceremony our ways are not meant to be forgotten, only carried as vessels for the next. Around those circles, I learned that the simplest teachings of watching, listening, learning are not small guidelines, but are the foundation of how we live as Cheyenne people. Those teachings stayed with me, even when I did not fully understand their weight. It is only through this work, and through the practices I have taken up, that I now recognize what they were preparing me for.

Nátamónėhéne'ēna hé'tóhe tséévėhetotse'óhéto héva tsé'éeonésenòhtóveto héva hóva'e hēā'e hé'tóhe máhtáme. Éta'né'ta'e. Ésáavovóhponėhéne'enóhehane héva éto'senétàhéva'e hová'éhe héva vo'èstane héva vé'ho'e tsésto'seéenétàhévane hová'éhe naa máto héva tséhetao'o ho'e tséto'seéehešèhotse'óhéto héva tséto'seéehešèhénėhéóhe-hó'xèstàhétse. Éohkeasenétàhévevé'hoome hé'tóhe ho'e naa máto hé'tóhe néhe tsétàhešèhó'xèstàhétse héva máhtáme naa tséto'seasė-hová'éhe-nėhešèhéne'enohe.

Héva tséstšèhe'kéahéto ná'éevovéstomóne héva tséhevéškeméto naa tséhemèšéméto naa ma'háhkèseho ta'se néto'sèsáavonetanó'tàhénone hé'tóhe tséheševo'èstanéhévétse héva tséhešema'heónevo'èstanéhévétse héva néto'sèhe'konetoenánone komááhe tàháóhe maato tsémóneéšeese tsèhéne'enánóvo.

Héne tséheševovéstomónéto nèhe'xóvéva násáapèhévèhéne'enáhe tséhešèháenane.Naa hé'tóhe tséhetotse'óhéto naa tséheševo'èstanéhévéto nátamónenanóhta mónáameéxo'emáotaehevóhe.

Motsé'eóeve (Mah-zi-eh-yu-ve) warned our people that if we eat like them, we will become like them. That warning was not only about food, but about the loss of relationship,

responsibility, and identity. Yet within that teaching was a pathway forward that reminded us that we still have the ability to choose what we digest differently. That we can return, not by going backwards, but by carrying forward what has always been ours. For Cheyenne communities, the future of food sovereignty will not be determined solely by policy or external support of outside organizations. It will be shaped by the choices we make in our everyday lives by whether we plant, whether we learn, whether we pass knowledge on, and whether we remain accountable to one another. It will be built through gardens, through our community hunts, through ceremonies, and through the conversations between elders and the youth that continue to sustain us.

What this thesis ultimately leaves is not an understanding of what has been disrupted, but a recognition of what remains and what is still possible through the love, hope, faith, and charity of Cheyenne ways of knowing.

That Indeed, Cheyenne food sovereignty is not gone.
It has never been gone.

It lives in the land.
It lives in the hands of those willing to learn.

And as long as we continue to carry it.
through our actions, our responsibilities, and our relationships-

it will never be lost.

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Appendix

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: February 27, 2026 **IRB#:** 19546

Principal Investigator: Chaz Meadows

Approval Date: 02/27/2026

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Indigenous Food Sovereignty: Cheyenne Foods Across Time O

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Marshall Cheney

Marshall Cheney, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Reggie Wassana
Governor

Hershel Gorham
Lieutenant Governor

Memorandum of Understanding

Subject: Support for Jonathan (Chaz) Meadows's Master's Thesis Research, "Food Across Time for the Southern Cheyenne People"

WHEREAS, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes recognize the importance of preserving and strengthening traditional and contemporary Indigenous knowledge systems, including foodways, language, health, and cultural practices that sustain the well-being of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples; and

WHEREAS, Jonathan (Chaz) Meadows, a citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes and a Master of Arts graduate student in Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma, is conducting scholarly research titled, "Food Across Time for the Southern Cheyenne People," which examines how foodways have evolved and persisted across generations through cultural teachings, lived experiences, and historical changes; and

WHEREAS, this study seeks to respectfully engage Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal members and Elders—all voluntary participants over the age of eighteen, most over the age of fifty-five—to share their experiences and teachings related to traditional foodways, agriculture, ecology, boarding schools, migrations, and removals, to deepen understanding of how these factors have shaped cultural and communal food practices; and

WHEREAS, the research will be guided by the highest ethical standards of respect, reciprocity, and accountability to the Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples, and will ensure that all findings are shared with the Tribes in accessible and meaningful ways that may support future tribal programs, cultural education, and community initiatives;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes hereby grant their support and approval for Jonathan (Chaz) Meadows to carry out his Master's thesis research in collaboration with the Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples, and to respectfully engage with tribal members and Elders for the purpose of oral history and community-based learning concerning Cheyenne and Arapaho foodways, ensuring that all tribal participants are informed and have granted their consent for his graduate research with them;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that any findings, recordings, or documentation resulting from this study shall remain the intellectual and cultural property of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Peoples, and the researcher shall provide the Tribes with copies of final written and recorded materials as part of this collaborative understanding;

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that this MOU affirms the shared goal of sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and culture through academic and community partnerships grounded in mutual respect and the sovereignty of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes.

100 RED MOON CIRCLE, P.O. BOX 167, CONCHO, OK 73022 • (405) 422-7734