

HOME IN THE CHOCTAW DIASPORA:  
SURVIVAL AND REMEMBRANCE AWAY FROM NANIH WAIYA

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes oral histories collected from Choctaw people since their displacement away from Nanih Waiya, to look for an understanding of Home and the formations of Home that have enabled Choctaw identities over time. Oral sources were reviewed from four collections that represent distinct spatial and temporal Choctaw perspectives, located at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma, the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida, and the Center for Oral and Public History at California State University, Fullerton.

The Choctaw values of *survival* and *remembrance* are so consistent in the analysis, that significant material formations observed in these collections are made meaningful by their relation to these values. Findings have been used to develop a narrative from a diasporic perspective that is rooted in the decolonization project of critically rereading history. Through oral sources and theoretical framing, the voices of Choctaw people contribute to and challenge colonial, postcolonial, and decolonization discourses.

## **DEDICATION**

Sanakfish, the amazing Kansas journey that started in a mini-van with a green tarp, became our most cherished time. The next academic success will be yours my brother, and I look forward to being the same support that you have been for me. Yakoke!

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## INTRODUCTION

*JOHN HUNTER THOMPSON: The dirt was used to make a sacred burial ground, which they called Nanih Waiya. (Mould 73)*

For nearly 200 years, Nanih Waiya, the place of Choctaw creation and emergence, was controlled by non-Choctaw people. Choctaw People, Chahta Alhíha, recognize the Nanih Waiya mother mound as the place of emergence, whether in their creation or as the longest stopping point in a history of migration.<sup>1</sup> It is the singular unifying place that connects all Chahta Alhíha to a homeland. Since the loss of control of Nanih Waiya in 1830 until its repatriation in 2007, Choctaw people became among the most dispersed Indigenous Peoples in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Forced into removal from their homelands in the 1830s, from the areas now known as Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Louisiana, this and further displacements separated Choctaw people into dispersed Indigenous Nations and into an expansive diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis will analyze oral histories collected from Choctaw people since their displacement away from Nanih Waiya, to look for an understanding of home and the formations of home that have enabled Choctaw identities over time. Home is a dynamic formation for displaced peoples. More critically, for Indigenous Peoples, home is an existential space that disrupts the policies that are constantly created or rejected by colonial agents, nation states and international bodies to define or redefine the homes of Indigenous people outside of the interests of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>4</sup> It is from within Choctaw homes, that I believe we can better understand how Chahta Alhíha upheld Choctaw culture and value systems that sustain Choctaw citizenry within the contemporary Choctaw Diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

The intention of this work, positioned in diaspora, is guided from varied historical, spatial, temporal and theoretical directions. Historically, as scholars of nearly every era have

agreed, Choctaw communities have never been static or unified, not under singular leadership or governance structures, nor politically, religiously, or socially.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the range of experiences within the Choctaw Diaspora cannot possibly be defined in a singular way, and the strategy that any scholar of Choctaw theory must assume is one of multiplicity, open to the vast spatial and temporal existence of Chahta Alhíha. The oral sources considered here, Choctaw narratives, come from Choctaw people within the Choctaw Diaspora between 1830 and the present. The uniqueness of the Choctaw narrators' spatial and temporal positions will help complicate an analysis looking for specific or distinct formations that represent Choctaw homes, and they may also help identify consistencies across diasporic formations. This approach is meant to create unique insight for scholars utilizing diaspora and decolonization theories to better understand Indigenous Peoples in general, and the discourses created by Chahta Alhíha in view of colonial formations in the Choctaw homeland and beyond.

In the 1830s, Choctaw people who chose not to leave their homeland, and stayed close to Nanih Waiya, still faced displacement since the mother mound was no longer under their control, and remained in this state until 2007.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, Nanih Waiya demonstrates how colonialism has continued into the present day. However, Her repatriation represents possibly the most important decolonizing action that has occurred for Choctaw people in recent times and can guide further acts of decolonization. This is not to suggest that Choctaw people have entered a post-colonial state, but Nanih Waiya, the mother mound, again stands as a sovereign centering point in time and space that is now accessible to all Choctaw people.

Nanih Waiya is a symbol and a beacon for this research, standing as the homeland in the diaspora, as a central figure in a decolonization narrative, and as the centering formation when looking at Choctaw formations leading up to removal, or looking back to removal. Choctaw

communities in the Choctaw homeland before the removals started in the 1830s, did not all have immediate access to this singular sacred space; it did not sit as a geographical center for the Choctaw (White 2). Yet, as removals began and communities became divided, and land was parceled and privatized, Nanih Waiya remained as one of the most identifiable sacred Choctaw formations, and became, what Richard White has named the “emotional” center of the Choctaw Nation (2). Greg O’Brien attributes this as a natural centering; looking backwards in time, “Just as their Mississippian ancestors constructed mounds to mark the geographic and spiritual centers of their societies, Choctaws looked to Nanih Waiya as the place of their birth” (64). Applying varied temporal, spatial, and theoretical perspectives, O’Brien reframes the significance of the Nanih Waiya mother mound, admitting that “[w]hether believed literally or not, the creation stories point to one inescapable fact: at Nanih Waiya Choctaws became a people” (64).

Today, there are over 200,000 Choctaw people residing around the world who claim Choctaw ancestry—as descendants or citizens of a Choctaw nation.<sup>8</sup> These nations include the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians in Louisiana, the MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians in Alabama, as well as the Clifton Choctaw, Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb, Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe of Louisiana, and Bayou Lacombe Choctaw bands all of Louisiana (Thompson 11). Between all of these nations, they claim to have citizens residing in every state of the United States, and they sponsor major Choctaw gatherings annually in Mississippi, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Alabama, and California.

One fact, easily deduced from these significant diasporic formations, and supported by a brief survey of oral narratives, is that Choctaw people, despite their distinctions, have always known how to come together. So, it may not be a wonder that so many people, who have been

thrust far away from a homeland, over the course of centuries, still maintain a connection to their Choctaw identities. Still, a move to frame Choctaw formations within a Choctaw Diaspora is an important step to help move Choctaw discourse beyond colonial and postcolonial discourses, and into decolonization discourse. Nina Asher encourages the process of *writing home* as a way to create decolonizing texts. She explains: “By ‘write home’ I mean not only writing (to) ourselves but also writing our own narratives of home that reflect both histories of colonization/oppression and efforts of resistance, that engage both our similarities and our differences across race, class, gender, culture, region, and nation” (4). Here we will look at how Choctaw people have written home within the Choctaw Diaspora. Asher contends, “In so doing, we can critique colonial texts, generate our own original texts, and engage original texts generated by others” (4). And create new dialectical spaces for Choctaw people to come together.

### **Choctaw Narratives & Historiography**

To accomplish this, I will present analyses of Choctaw narratives from the following four collections, and work to root these narratives in decolonization discourse. First, the oral accounts of Choctaw people in Mississippi during the time of the multiple removals occurring between the 1830s and 1900s and collected by Henry S. Halbert are organized in the *Henry S. Halbert Papers*, 1821-1918 at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.<sup>9</sup> Second, the oral accounts of Choctaw people in Oklahoma after removal from Mississippi, taken in the 1930s as a part of the United States’ Works Progress Administration, Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma, and available through the *Indian-Pioneer Papers Collection* in the Digital Archives of the University of Oklahoma.<sup>10</sup> Third, the *Mississippi Choctaw Oral History Collection* done in the early 1970’s, and available through the Digital Collections of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida. Finally, the narratives of Choctaw people

displaced by the Relocation Act of 1951 to the Urban Center of Metropolitan Los Angeles, CA in the mid-twentieth century, recorded in the *Native American Urbanization Project, Ethnic Studies Collection* in the 1970s and held at the Center for Oral and Public History at California State University, Fullerton.<sup>11</sup>

Numerous scholars are using oral histories to move Indigenous voices inside and around –colonial discourses, despite barriers.<sup>12</sup> Arturo Aldama, in *Disrupting Savagism* explores how Indigenous Peoples in the Americas are heard, or not heard, in colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial discourse. Aldama assesses a lack of voice among Peoples that are still experiencing colonization in the Americas (including the U.S.), and calls for work to hold theorists accountable to a more critical perspective of subjectivity in –colonial discourses. He poses two critical questions: “How does one disrupt how one is spoken of by a dominant or hegemonic discourse?” and, how does one translate one’s subjectivity into narrative terrain? (24). Other scholars point to oral histories.

Oral historian Waziyatawin Angela Wilson is emphatic about why oral accounts told by Indigenous Peoples are disruptive and necessary. She points to longstanding barriers in academia and asserts that “academic historians have often been dismissive...Or, even when our less controversial voices have been included in written histories, they appear as supplements to the “real story” or as colorful additions to support and validate the written sources” (“Remember This!” 169). Theda Perdue, who did extensive work with interviews from the *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, responds declaring that “oral history represents the democratization of a discipline which too often has been elitist” (xv).

Oral historian and theorist Alessandro Portelli reframes the value of oral history with resolve: “The first thing that makes oral history different...is that it tells us less about *events* than

about their *meaning*...Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes” (50). From here, Perdue is able to reposition the subjectivity of interviews collected in the *Indian-Pioneer Papers Collection* confirming that “these interviews reveal many things that more conventional historical sources do not: they record how southeastern Indians lived on a day-to-day basis, how they viewed the tremendous changes that occurred between the Civil War and Oklahoma statehood, and how they remembered their own history” (xix).

Wilson, however, disrupts discursive threads focused on historiography to bring forth her deeper concerns about the representation of Indigenous Peoples. She believes that, “though rarely acknowledged by colonialist historians, our accounts have been dangerous because they relate a different reality,” one that “serves to undermine the justification for the invasion of our lands and the continued oppression of our people based on an assumed inferiority (“Remember This!” 169). From this position it is easier to address the dramatic and reactionary assumptions Wilson and Aldama both describe being made in the face of decolonizing research that challenges colonialist historians and the dismissals of oral history. For example, Aldama has preemptively asked, how does decolonization discourse not suggest a return to some “static and utopic precolonial past?;” his answer is simple: it is a model for demonstrating needed “revisionary historiographic practices” (xii). The Choctaw narratives considered here, by virtue of their position in a complex diaspora, cannot be read by colonialist historians as a reactionary posturing, and therefore serve to change Choctaw subjectivity not just within historical discourse but also in theoretical discourses and decolonization.

Nina Asher describes an awareness that manifests with this transformed subjectivity: “When we are able...to begin freeing ourselves to ‘write home’, we begin understanding the

roots of our own inner conflicts and moving beyond denial and repression... We can then occupy the sites of knowledge, memory, and self that we evacuated for reasons perhaps we did not even know or begin to understand” (11). She also advises “resisting re-implication in colonizing forces, in the perennial tensions of being othered and ourselves participating in othering” (10). Portelli attests to the potential of oral history as a tool for this decolonizing process, noting that “Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge...and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts” (51). Choctaw oral histories reframed and validated in these ways explore deeper contextual meaning in Choctaw formations.

Recent scholarship is moving the focus of Choctaw historiography to include more intimate characterizations of the Choctaw experience, including oral sources, oral narratives and interviews.<sup>13</sup> Gary Cheek, in his overview of Choctaw identity and transformation before removal, uses oral narratives to explore the intricacies of “cultural flexibility” demonstrated by Choctaw people and communities, as they responded internally and externally to colonial formations (Cultural Flexibility 15-30). Surprisingly though, Cheek labels the adaptations as patterns of “assimilation,” a decidedly colonialist framework (1). Kevin Motes, using an extensive accounting of the Choctaw narratives within the *Indian-Pioneer Papers Collection*, moves away from framing Choctaw experience generally, and establishes that “[t]he profound changes in Choctaw culture that followed sustained interaction with American society should not be viewed as a process of assimilation... Instead, the evolution of Choctaw culture should be seen as a conglomeration of innumerable changes that in total comprised an organic response to pressures imposed by the exploding American population” (2). Motes’ work provides a critical



and careful analysis of intimate and meaningful Choctaw oral sources. Motes also critiques colonialist frameworks that are polarizing, or that seek to simplify Choctaw cultural adaptations, and argues that these types of analyses “have not only clouded the actual dynamics of cultural change by silencing the historical record of Choctaws themselves; they also have served as instruments of colonial oppression that tend to lessen or even exonerate the crimes of the United States government” (6).

Choctaw oral sources have been used for decades to contribute to Choctaw historiography, yet a critique of colonial subjectivities, Motes implies, is a relatively recent move. For instance, Theda Perdue, in her analysis of the *Indian-Pioneer Papers Collection*, chose not to critique the binary frameworks she encountered when researching the oral sources of Indigenous Peoples in post-removal Oklahoma. In the early twentieth century, Chahta Alhiha, and other Indigenous nations were faced with the influx of Oklahoma settlers, and Perdue compares the political landscape using terms that she explains, “often appear in historical sources and in contemporary works” (xii). She differentiates “conservative” or “traditionalist” people who fought to maintain their status and land within the jurisdiction of their Native Nations, and “Progressive” people who favored the privatization of allotted lands, the dissolution of their Native Nations, and the organizing of Oklahoma for statehood (175-198). We cannot deny the prevalence of these historical classifications. Choctaw people in Oklahoma were in fact politically divided as “Progressives” and “Nationalists,” but this type of colonialist narrative strictly categorizes people under extremely narrow social structures. Furthermore, after reviewing the same oral sources, this mostly political ordering system does not represent the experience of the majority. Unfortunately, Perdue actually uses the same binary to frame the contemporary organizing of Indigenous Peoples, saying that the “[c]urrent emphasis on tribalism

and cultural pluralism has aided the resurgence of traditionalists and...has encouraged whites and progressives to explore the heritage of the...tribes,” thus suggesting that Indigenous Peoples in Oklahoma will always be divided by this polarizing framework (200).

In Choctaw historiography, colonial frameworks are not limited to political orientation and exist in all areas of culture ranging from religion to identity and other social structures. Motes points out the earlier work of cultural analysts and historians such as Angie Debo, who created binary frameworks as a starting point for understanding the evolution of Choctaw culture. He cites Debo when critiquing “the polarized framework of "mixed bloods" and "full bloods," so often employed to explain the dynamics of Choctaw cultural adaptations” (6). The tendency to fall back on divisive terms, such as Cheek’s patterns of “assimilation,” must be continually critiqued.

In response to these limiting and colonialist subjectivities this thesis will embrace the challenges outlined by decolonization theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith:

*Coming to know the past* has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things. Transforming our colonized views of our own history...requires us to revisit, site by site, our history under Western eyes. This in turn requires a theory or approach which helps us to engage with, understand and then act upon history. (34)

### **Home Formations in the Choctaw Diaspora**

An analysis of *home* as a subject within a complicated and continual history of displacement may seem contradictory, especially within decolonization discourse. Namely,

because the stories that affirm the continuance of Choctaw formations within diasporic Choctaw homes still remain *away* from the homeland. I submit that by facing Nanih Waiya, the stories of displaced Choctaw people become decolonization narratives that connect the homes of Choctaw people throughout their dispersal directly to the Choctaw homeland from where they were displaced. *Home* as subject moves beyond the boundaries of domicile, and becomes the formation that supports the contributions and carried traditions of Choctaw communities and Choctaw people that resist colonization and assimilation. Stories of Choctaw home formations within a Choctaw Diaspora become decolonization narratives.

Bed Prasad Giri discerns the need for a strategic method when approaching this work:

In contrast to this tendency in postcolonial cultural theory, which represents diasporic literature and culture as a “counter-discourse” to the normative discourses of colonialism and modernity, I suggest that such literature cannot—and should not—be placed on the other side of any dominant power-knowledge formations...To begin with, postcolonial diaspora is a socially mixed situation that straddles and complicates both sides of the historically persistent colonized/colonizer divide. (224)

Linda Smith supports this approach by assigning analytic meaning to the Choctaw narratives: “It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying” (Smith 28). Each new finding, or critical perspective of Choctaw home formations brought to light through the voices of Choctaw ancestors contributes to restoring spirit. Therefore, I will take heed not to diminish the value of the Choctaw narrators by creating a counter-narrative that could infer an acceptance of

the colonial narratives aimed at assimilation or worse. Choctaw communities have always adapted and changed reflexively and have undergone significant cultural transformations in the face of displacement, colonization, and social divisions.<sup>14</sup>

Home formations that have carried through to the present day, demonstrate that Choctaw people have done more than just survive; an assumption, Seena Kohl suggests is often made about Peoples who have faced genocide, ethnocide and assimilation (99). Rather, Chahta Alhíha have survived because they have kept in place some of their most important cultural formations, those closest to home. Many Choctaw narratives, framed as decolonization narratives, are responsive, they are not oppositional; they seek to redress the past, not forget the past. They seek healing. They seek to be at home. Others provide greater insight into the struggles and compromises Chahta Alhíha experienced because of displacement.

### **Methodology**

The thesis is primarily focused on a comparative analysis of Choctaw narrations from four oral history collections. The collections represent Choctaw voices in the Choctaw Diaspora from four distinct places in time and space. In the initial survey of the four collections, I sorted each with the subject “Choctaw” and identified the following oral sources, the *Indian Pioneer Papers* (IPP) contain approximately twelve hundred Choctaw interviews/biographies in its holdings; the *Mississippi Choctaw Oral History* (MCOH) collection contains thirty six Choctaw interviews; the *Native American Urbanization* (NAU) collection contains four Choctaw interviews; the *Henry S. Halbert Papers* (HSHP) consist of twenty archive boxes, from which I identified four boxes with relevant possible sources. After this survey, all interviews from the MCOH and NAU collections were reviewed and considered for analysis. The four boxes in the HSHP collection were reviewed and seven sources were considered for analysis, however, only

one source identifies and cites a Choctaw narrator. In most cases the HSHP source material is attributed to conversations with multiple Choctaw narrators. The IPP collection was narrowed further, first by sorting with subjects “Choctaw” and “home,” which reduced the sources to seven hundred. The collection was next sorted with subjects “Choctaw” and “fire” and narrowed to approximately two hundred and seventy sources. At each sort, interviews were reviewed randomly with a total of two hundred and fifty-five being reviewed. One hundred and sixty were considered for analysis from IPP. All selected sources were then vetted for descriptions of day-to-day home and community life, and sixty-one identified sources are used for analysis here; two from the NAU collection, seven from the MCOH collection, fifty-one from the IPP collection, and one from the HSHP collection – six additional quotations are drawn from the HSHP collection but not from identified narrators. A few additional oral sources from other published works are quoted and cited in this thesis.

The analysis was led by the oral history sources. The first round of analysis looked for descriptions of day-to-day home and community life that contained distinct Choctaw references. This first round created two threads in the study. First, the Choctaw narratives described numerous displacement trajectories that placed them clearly in a diaspora. The innumerable references to displacement and removal validate the use of a theoretical lens that gives narrators more control of their historical subjectivity. Second, the most distinct Choctaw references in day-to-day life relate to larger community functions such as gatherings, ceremonies, and games. Therefore, it became necessary to look for distinct material formations at the most common Choctaw community functions. An interesting formation example is the use of fire, so the final sorting for analysis considered formations that utilized fire; the significance of fire will be discussed later in this introduction. As analysis continued, material formations across the

diaspora did not remain as consistent as the community functions. Additionally, certain material formations such as fire changed in meaning. Therefore, the final analysis looked for consistencies in meaning at community functions and followed relatable threads in material formations. The analysis also considered active descriptions of displacement.

The oral sources, and findings in the analysis, were used to create a narrative applying Indigenous diasporic perspectives and decolonization theory. Each chapter develops the narrative by comparing oral histories with different theoretical lenses. The foundation for this narrative is rooted in a decolonization project described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Smith has outlined twenty-five projects in decolonization work based on the following three imperatives in indigenous research: “the survival of peoples, cultures and languages; the struggle to become self-determining, the need to take back control of our destinies” (142). I have chosen to work with the project of *Reading* that Smith describes as a:

Critical rereading of Western history and the indigenous presence in the making of that history...to understand what has informed both internal colonialism and new forms of colonization. The genealogy of colonialism is being mapped and used as a way to locate a different sort of origin story, the origins of imperial policies and practices, the origins of the imperial visions, the origins of ideas and values. The rereading of imperial history by post-colonial and cultural studies scholars provides a different, much more critical approach to history than was previously acceptable. (149)

Using Smith’s project, Choctaw presence is re-appropriated when reading Choctaw narratives comparatively from four locations in Choctaw displacement history. Nanih Waiya grounds this rereading within the Choctaw origin story and homeland, and all Choctaw

references contribute to a genealogy of Choctaw ideas and values that connects directly to the homeland. Each chapter is grounded in this decolonization project, and guided by theorists working to move Indigenous voices into and beyond discourses that fail to consider Indigenous subjectivity in relation to home, homeland, and nation.

Chapter one frames and theorizes the Choctaw Diaspora as a decolonization tool, and utilizes Choctaw narratives to move within and away from –colonial discourses. Theorists, such as Emma Pérez, James Clifford, and Hokulani Aikau, who have done significant work re-positioning diasporic subjectivity to consider the importance of a homeland for Indigenous Peoples, guide it. Choctaw Scholars, Kevin Motes, Ian Thompson, and Greg O’Brien guide the use of Choctaw narratives. Chapter two draws from the work of decolonization theorists to examine and critique colonial formations that continually displace Choctaw people, and bring awareness to the spaces where Choctaw people have practiced decolonization and disrupted colonial narratives. It is informed by the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Jeff Corntassel, Taiaiake Alfred, Jennifer Denetdale, and Andrea Smith. Chapter three analyzes Choctaw narratives that illustrate home formations in the Choctaw Diaspora utilizing oral history theory and analysis techniques encouraged by Waziyatawin Angela Cavender Wilson, Audra Simpson, Tom Mould, and Alessandro Portelli. The conclusion will assess the findings drawn from the Choctaw narratives and their importance in decolonization theory as well in Choctaw discourses. I have also chosen to include a personal narrative sharing how the overall project was led by my own efforts to participate in decolonization practices and important lessons learned along the way, most importantly acknowledging that this thesis was written in the Choctaw homeland.

## **Findings**

Fire, is an example of a material home formation that possesses meaning within Choctaw formations. For example, in personal discussions I have had with my colleagues and friends in the Pearl River Choctaw community in Mississippi, I have learned that fire is a vital formation at funerary wakes held for the recently deceased. What they tell me is the fire must burn for four days after their relatives passing, because it takes four days for the spirit to leave the body. In that time, the body is never to be left unattended, no rubbish is to be thrown in the fire, and all the wood collected for the fire must be completely burned. They tell me that only recently have the wakes been held at churches, and in many communities the body stays at the home, where the family keeps the fire going with the help of their friends and relatives for those four days.

Fire in this sense is a Choctaw home formation, but throughout the four Choctaw oral history collections analyzed for this thesis, fire is multi-faceted. Fire sometimes serves the same funerary role, but not as a home formation. Other accounts attribute deep spiritual power to fire. Fire as a Choctaw formation has carried significant meaning in Choctaw history from pre-historical times to my own personal interactions in Choctaw communities in the present day. For this reason I chose fire as a singular material formation to help sort and narrow my focus in selecting Choctaw narratives to analyze.

In ancient Choctaw cosmology, fire had a special relationship with the ancient Choctaw Deity named *Hvshtahli*. Kevin Motes explains, “[t]he Mississippian notion that fire is *Hvshtahli*'s primary ally on Earth, reporting back to the Deity any misdeeds it witnessed, also found expression in Choctaw culture. Choctaws acknowledged the status of fire by offering fresh meat from the hunt to a flame, and through the observance of numerous taboos regarding the use of fire“ (35). A story documented by Henry S. Halbert follows this thread that reconnects to pre-removal oral sources as far back as 1828



Fire, from its resemblance to the sun, was supposed to be endowed with intelligence, and was called the sun's mate, "Hushi Itichafa," for it was supposed to act in concert with the sun and to be in constant communication with him. It was an ancient saying that if any one acted wrong in the presence of fire, the fire would tell it to the sun before the offender could go the length of his extended arms. The belief in the intercourse between the sun and fire was recognized in an ancient Choctaw war song. While the chief and his warriors were seated on the ground, preparing to go on the war-path, the chief's waiter (tishu) arose and sung a song, in one stanza of which the warriors were exhorted to rely for success on the Sun-Power and the Fire, his mate, "Hushtahli micha Luak Hushtahli itichafa." (Box 17, Folder 8)

Fire is a home formation that embodies Choctaw meaning in many ways, but it does not remain a consistent formation in the Choctaw Diaspora. There are no material formations that are distinct in this way. However, in reading narratives that shared stories of fire and other material formations related to Choctaw homes, it became clear that the consistent formations in the Diaspora are not materials formations, but a set of values that the formations help manifest. Two Choctaw values are so consistent in the narratives, that every significant material formation observed in these collections, such as fire, is made meaningful by their relation to these values; they are *survival* and *remembrance*. Looking at fire, we see it has been used as a vital formation in funerary practices and serves to support the *remembrance* of the recently deceased. Choctaw warriors have ascribed it with the power to ensure *survival* through song. Formations such as these, manifest acts of *survival* and *remembrance* and appear in the Choctaw Diaspora as home formations as well as in diaspora community formations. The values reveal transformations in

the meaning and form of Choctaw material formations as significant as fire, and as surprisingly significant as food, for example.

Engaging these values as findings may not be a breakthrough, and in fact could easily be construed from a careful survey of any Choctaw history. The well-known Choctaw funerary practices, for instance, signal that Chahta Alhiha have always valued acts of remembrance.<sup>15</sup> The significance of these findings is that in each oral history collection, there are personal accounts that add a new perspective to each of these values, their expressions, and the home formations that maintain them. The values themselves also serve as an analytical tool, a lens, which gives meaning to formations that alone may not be considered significant or Choctaw. Finally, a significant value that I alluded to earlier, is that Chahta Alhiha know how to come together, and this thesis will consider home formations that support and illustrate the significant communal formations that have brought Choctaw people together throughout the Choctaw Diaspora.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chahta Alhiha, is the Choctaw phrase that represents Choctaw People, written in the modern orthography used by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Carleton 1; Tubby 7.

<sup>2</sup> Carleton 2; Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Champagne 280.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, "Trail" 288-289; Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century treaties recognized Choctaw territory as a large swath of land that ran through what is now Central Mississippi and parts of Alabama, Louisiana and Tennessee, and Arkansas. Because of the advantages of military and frontier staging along enclosed rivers and the routes to newly acquired trading regions within this territory, non-Natives began to settle there after the Louisiana Purchase. The pressure for Choctaw removal was intense, particularly between 1815 and 1835. Land speculators, increased settlement due to the rising population of the southern states, the influence of Christian missionaries, and differences within the Choctaw Nation all contributed to Choctaw Removal in the 1830's. See also Cheek "Clay People;" Debo, Kidwell, "Missionaries;" Kohl; Thompson.

<sup>4</sup> See Ackley; Aikau; Asher; Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations;" Deloria; Dunn; Fixico; "Writing from Home;" Simpson, "Reserve and Back."

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<sup>5</sup> *Home* in this discussion represents physical and existential spaces where Choctaw people reside away from the homeland. The multiple manifestations of home, as domiciles or community formations, are bound together in significance by the Choctaw subjectivity assigned by interviewees, and I have opted to not distinguish the term differently throughout. In this way, the term is elastic and the oral histories help expand a concept of home away from the homeland, with Choctaw perspectives.

<sup>6</sup> See Galloway, “Republics” 514, “Choctaw Genesis” 2; Cheek, “Cultural Flexibility” 14; G. O’Brien, “Revolutionary Age” 34-35; Foster 250-253.

<sup>7</sup> In 2007, Nanih Waiya was repatriated and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) regained full sovereign control of the Mother Mound. The third Friday of every August was designated as an official tribal holiday, Nanih Waiya Day, in honor of the repatriation. In July 2010, MBCI first performed a cultural storytelling performance called Chahta Aleha Ánówa. It is a formal telling of the return of Nanih Waiya back to the sovereign control of Choctaw People. It was later performed at the Nanih Waiya site on Nanih Waiya Day. These acts of repatriation, honoring, and celebration demonstrate the commitment by Choctaw people of today to honor the homeland of their ancestors.

<sup>8</sup> The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma lists 205, 327 members in the April 2011 issue of its monthly publication, *Biskinik* (Choctaw Nation Staff, “Title” 1).

<sup>9</sup> Greg O’Brien cites Henry Halbert as the preeminent scholar of Choctaw history and culture of the early twentieth century (21).

<sup>10</sup> Theda Perdue details the history of this collection, created to employ people in the post-depression era and that documented the experiences of Oklahoma citizens before Oklahoma Statehood. In this work she creates a “collective autobiography of southeastern Indians” highlighting their experiences between the Civil War and Oklahoma statehood, a history she believes would have been “lost forever” since they no longer “captured the imagination of the American public” like the Plains tribes in that era (xvi-xvii).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. displacement policy continued in the twentieth century and reached a height in the 1950’s as the result of the Relocation Act of 1951. The Relocation Act was a policy of population transfer justified by economic conditions that propelled a widespread Indigenous Diaspora in the United States. Urban Centers became major ports of entry for Indigenous people turned immigrant laborers in their own land, See Blackhawk; Fixico, “Urban Indian Experience;” Fixico, “Urban Indians;” Laukitis, “Relocation and Urbanization;” Philp, “Stride;” Philp, “Dillon;” Waddell, Watson; Weibel-Orlando.

<sup>12</sup> I have chosen to use “-colonial” to group neo, post, and other prefix frames that connect to colonial discourse, as a way to assert the prominence of colonialism in this discussion. See Aldama; Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, T’lakwadzi; Motes; Simpson, “Ethnographic Refusal;” Smith, “Decolonizing Methodologies;” Sunseri; Wilson, “Indigenous Knowledge;” Wilson, “Remember This!”

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<sup>13</sup> See Cheek, “Cultural Flexibility;” Collins; Cox; Kennedy; Matte; Motes; G. O’Brien; Pesantubbee, “Beyond Domesticity;” Squint.

<sup>14</sup> See Cheek, “Cultural Flexibility;” Galloway, “Republics;” Galloway, “Choctaw Genesis;” Kennedy; Kidwell, “Choctaws in Oklahoma;” Kohl; G. O’Brien, “Revolutionary Age;” Osburn, “Mississippi Choctaws;” Osburn, “Identified Full-Bloods;” Pesantubbee, “Choctaw Women;” Thompson; White.

<sup>15</sup> Choctaw funerary practices will be discussed in chapter three, but the awareness of Nanih Waiya as a significant burial site hints at the importance of remembrance in Choctaw funerary customs.

## CHAPTER 1: --COLONIAL THEORIES AND THE CHOCTAW DIASPORA

LEROY WARD: Sage Garland was mother's cousin and he started an Indian village where he was bringing the Indians together to become civilized but my mother's people said that they were already civilized and did not need his assistance nor any assistance from the Government. (October 9, 1937; Henryetta, OK)

Choctaw narratives, from their unique trajectories, offer a felt glimpse of the real experiences of people facing displacement and give them subjectivity as responsive people, whom we witness making decisions about their own subjectivity in a complex diaspora. Regardless of the theoretical imperative of identifying appropriate subjectivity or non-subjectivity, and the acts of decolonization, each action will always face a narrative of erasure, beyond physical displacement. Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel forewarn researchers and theorists that “we live in an era of postmodern imperialism and manipulations by shape-shifting colonial powers; the instruments of domination are evolving and inventing new methods to erase Indigenous histories and senses of place” (601). The narratives heard in this chapter confront “manipulations” and colonial formations Choctaw people have encountered in the Choctaw Homeland and Diaspora.

The theoretical frames presented here, that attempt to make sense of Choctaw displacement and the effects of displacement, move –colonial discourses into new terrain. It would be intriguing to follow some of the threads in various –colonial discourse such as postcolonialism and neocolonialism, where Choctaw people have National, Transnational, Globalized, and Cosmopolitan subjectivity, and can add stories to those of the marginalized, sub-altern, vicitimized, minoritarian experience.<sup>1</sup> But first and foremost, Choctaw people are

Indigenous people who have become part of a diaspora and their own stories demonstrate how they have remained distinctly Choctaw in a diaspora.

The stories, as a Choctaw narrative, demonstrate how Choctaw people continue on as people that have been influenced by changing economic situations, belief systems, under various governing structures, as bilingual dual-citizens and who have lived conventionally, and unconventionally, as share-croppers, farmers, slaves, slave owners, confederate and union soldiers, statesmen, medicine people, mothers, fathers, Christian preachers, prophets, storytellers, musicians, chiefs, storeowners, legislators, governors, students, professors and children. These are just some of the roles that have tinted the Choctaw narrative. Certainly, the Choctaw Diaspora expands well beyond the focus of experiences considered here and throughout. Even so, the more we can hear Choctaw voices leading the discourse about the experience of displacement, the better we will listen, and the better we can understand formations in the Choctaw Diaspora and their discursive subjectivity in colonial, postcolonial, and decolonization discourses.

I choose to use diaspora as a comparative space for analysis in critical theory because the characteristics of movement associated with a diaspora, most closely resemble the positionality of the majority of Choctaw people today. The accounts heard here will dilate the range of displacement that Choctaw people have faced. This framing does not intend to diminish the forced removals that occurred to displace and set off the long “Trail of Tears” that all Choctaw families are connected back to the homeland by; but it will help frame the positionality of Choctaw people who still actively consider the homeland. In many cases, such as Leroy Ward’s remembrance of his mother, there are uplifting and inspiring moments of courage where Choctaw narrators engage their displacement with critical analysis, and the Choctaw Diaspora,

with its expansive diversity and growing oral accounts, adds to the compelling theoretical nature of diasporic subjectivity.

I have chosen the work of Kim Butler to start the development of the Choctaw Diaspora. Butler names the following characteristics as distinguishing criteria for a “diasporan” status among displaced Peoples:

1. Dispersal to a minimum of two destinations
2. Relationship to an actual or imagined homeland
3. Self-awareness of the group’s identity. Diasporan communities are consciously part of an ethnonational group.
4. A temporal-historical dimension over at least two generations (192).

The following Choctaw narrator establishes the Choctaw Diaspora according to Butler’s criteria:

BILL COFFER: My people were separated from the tribe in 1830s...My people never did go over to Oklahoma. The Choctaw were removed from Mississippi in 1830 and for the most part settled in Oklahoma. But my people stopped in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri, and this is where I was raised. Rather than Oklahoma, I still claim Mississippi as my affiliation with the tribe (November 22, 1974; Fullerton, CA).

Clearly Coffey establishes three dispersal points, he defines Mississippi as the homeland, he identifies himself and his “people” as Choctaw with strong ties to the Mississippi homeland, and in defining the removal period for the majority of Choctaw people as 1830 we know that each of the dispersal points he ascribes to Choctaw people have a temporal-historical dimension over at least two generations.

In reflecting on his personal experience, he quickly builds the most vital formations of his home where he grew up in Missouri. As a narrator, the Choctaw formations that he establishes are indispensable.

BILL COFFER: Well my mother was Choctaw and my father was Irish but there was some Cherokee and some Delaware mixed in back there...Originally and traditionally, the Choctaw people are from Mississippi...First of all, we were not migrant...We built semi-permanent housing. We lived in fairly established communities and were not transient at all. Of course, I can't go back very far, just to the early 1800s but I have visited the old home place that my great grandfather built about 1832. It's still standing.

It is clear, that as he is fully aware of his displacement, that he is resolved to substantiate his Choctaw identity by family and through a direct connection to the Mississippi homeland. At the same time, he does not hesitate in defining his Choctaw Diaspora community in Missouri with permanence, describing distinct housing structures, and a history going back over 140 years. Bill Coffey is a displaced Choctaw person, but as he portrays his experience in the Choctaw Diaspora, the concise detail of his family's history and home deepens the view we have of the Choctaw Diaspora.

Bill Coffey and others, in describing their experiences, frame the Choctaw Diaspora and at the same time expand it. Descriptions of movement in the oral narratives shared here form unique trajectories that Choctaw people followed away from Nanih Waiya. Coffey's trajectory alone, in his own lifetime, expands the diaspora as he followed Indian Education programs from Missouri, to Arizona, to Utah, and eventually to southern California, all the while working to improve conditions for Indigenous Peoples. Below, we witness Bill Coffey connecting to a larger



Indigenous Diaspora, and along with most of the narrators, he is connecting to the places that allow him to maintain his identity as Indigenous and Choctaw.

BILL COFFER: Of course, when you become involved with groups of ethnic people such as American Indians or Chicanos, or Blacks, if you really care what happens, then you can't limit your activities to just sitting behind a desk shuffling a few papers and teaching a few classes. I am constantly being called on to take care of chores other than the academic chores, and I really appreciate it...I've been involved with various community activities here, with the Orange County Indian Center, with the Los Angeles Indian Center...with Indian communities in areas such as recreation, and youth activities...They're attempting to establish a better cultural identity with the young people.

### **Displacement and Diasporic Trajectories**

The displacement of Indigenous Peoples is a necessity within the master-narrative of imperialism in the United States. Gerald Vizenor instructs on how this master-narrative began: "Manifest Destiny would cause the death of millions of tribal people from massacres, diseases, and the loneliness of the reservations. Entire cultures have been terminated in the course of [U.S.] nationalism" (4). Louis Owens, re-articulates Manifest Destiny with a U.S. translation saying, "It is not difficult to see why the American Dream is one of motion, for after all that is how every European colonist came to this continent and how every new generation succeeded in further displacing the indigenous inhabitants. Constant motion meant renewed freedom and gain at the cost of others" (163-164). Therefore, displacement is a necessary location for building a narrative that considers the voices of Choctaw people.

Throughout the history of Indigenous displacements, the “success” of the master-narrative is benchmarked by the appropriations of land. But from the places that represent these benchmarks are stories and decolonization narratives that hold compelling truths from the voices of Indigenous Peoples who continually displace colonial discourses. Vizenor explains how these voices have suffered in the politics of erasure traditionally: “This reluctance to honor tribal stories in the blood, land, and oral literature, the names and stories of remembrance, is the course of manifest manners; the christened names of discoveries and dominance” (Vizenor, 10). What this acknowledges is that there are still “stories of remembrance” to be heard, and we are all challenged to listen for them.

After reading so many Choctaw narratives, I attest that these voices clearly displace colonial formations, especially where attempts at assimilation were used to displace people from their identities. The stories, Choctaw narratives and decolonization narratives, exist to be found in the diaspora, and they also exist to be heard in these discourses. And I believe they are now more discernible, since our research lenses have begun to filter the colonially induced methods of oppositional, counter and binary, with methods that move discourse to be critical, reflective, and progressive.

I would like to approach this discourse with a bit of caution, and neither as negativist nor revisionist. Bed Prasad Giri calls “for some critical reflection before we go on to theorize the uniformly radical character of any diasporic subjectivity” (221). Giri brings to light the politicized nature of diaspora theory, particularly as it becomes a tool for postcolonialists to participate in radical revisionist discourses. He demonstrates from the works of Bhabha and Gilroy, how “the rise of a diasporic politics of identity provides a useful transition into the counter-discursive politics of diasporic cultures” and credits Edward Said, who “theorized

postcolonial diasporic writing as a hopeful counterpoint to the ongoing processes of colonialism and imperialism” (217). However, Giri, drawing from the work of Jaqueline Rose and Vijay Mishra, asserts that without reflection, a reframing of experience can initiate or intensify carried over conflict, victimization, or even worse, continuing trauma.

The following narratives demonstrate responsiveness in the face of traumas. The experience of Leroy Ward’s mother, heard at the beginning of this chapter showed responsiveness, and yet when hearing the extent of his mother’s full displacement experience, her family’s responsiveness evokes new meaning.

LEROY WARD: My mother’s people were Choctaws but they stopped at Walnut Tree, Arkansas, when they were driven from their homes. A lot of Indians were killed there because they would not go any farther. They thought it was a disgrace to come here by being driven like cattle, as they were. Sage Garland was mother’s cousin and he started an Indian village where he was bringing the Indians together to become civilized but my mother’s people said that they were already civilized and did not need his assistance nor any assistance from the Government. (October 9, 1937; Henryetta, OK)

As contemporary readers we have no way of comprehending the loss that Ward’s family faced, but we know enough to see that the trauma in their story changed their diasporic trajectory. Giri predicts this sort of propulsion: “The fact that diasporic displacements propel our uprooted bodies across the world’s variously entrenched borders does not mean that our minds will follow suit. It is plausible to think that the diasporic mind constitutes its own unique place, and, under the conditions of a traumatic history (most diasporas claim some form of trauma as

part of their founding moment)” (221). Ward’s narrative in fact, continues to move in an unexpected responsive way:

LEROY WARD: We moved to the Cherokee nation to keep from allotting and Grandfather quit writing to all the relations who allotted. He and his people had pulled away from the Choctaw Tribe on account of the treatment and abuse of the Government as they had signed three treaties but had been driven back and back until they did not want anything to do with the Government nor with anyone who had anything to do with the Government.

In crossing many borders and facing untold losses, Leroy Ward’s family could only seek refuge away from their own nation and even their own relations, and his family’s diasporic trajectory is actively transformed. This narrative adds much more depth to the subjectivity of Choctaw people within a diaspora, because while expanding the range of the Choctaw Diaspora, it also questions the value of governance structures, Indigenous subjectivity and Indigenous Nation status, and community structures beyond the familial. Giri forewarns about those who may have faced intense trauma such as mass expulsion, genocide or ethnocide, that as an organizing counter-narrative tool, whether in research, literature or resistance movements, diasporic subjectivity cannot displace power differentials and other oppressive formations, colonial or otherwise, if they have carried on as diasporic formations (222-224). Though it is not completely clear which government Ward is referencing, it is clear that his family chose to live in a different Indigenous Nation rather than the Choctaw Nation or United States, and throughout their experience actively worked to avoid oppressive formations.

I believe that because Leroy Ward still identifies as Choctaw, and narrates from a complex spatial location, that his family’s subjectivity still remains within the Choctaw

Diaspora. It stands as a narrative that complicates the diaspora. His narrative is also important because, as we will witness, contemporary researchers have a very narrow view of the spatial positionality of Choctaw people. To illustrate, the following Choctaw Narrator, Louise Willis, was interviewed in Mississippi in 1973, and the initial question about the Choctaw removal poses a limited view of Choctaw positionality.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know how the Choctaws got split like this, with some in Oklahoma and some here?

The question is fascinating because it positions the Choctaw people as the initiators of the “split” between Mississippi and Oklahoma, and minimizes the experience of removal on many levels. Willis’s response takes an amazing turn however, reframing the ‘split’ all the way back to Nanih Waiya, and strategically repositions the roles of the Choctaw People, the U.S. government, and the colonizing settlers.

LOUISE WILLIS: Some wanted to stay here and they had to hide where the Nanih Waiya mound is, or the Nanih Waiya cave. They hid there for so many years until some white man found them there and thought that they needed help, because our people were having a hard time of living. And they finally set up a reservation, the government did. As I recall, the Indians did own land, but taxation came in and they had to pay tax on their land. And the white men would get the Indians drunk to where they wouldn’t pay for their tax. And when they didn’t pay for it, they would put it in the trust fund for the government, or the government just took the land away from them.

INTERVIEWER: Those who remained east of the Mississippi hid in a cave?

LOUISE WILLIS: Yes, that's what my grandfather said. You know where the Nanih Waiya mound is?

INTERVIEWER: The tribe's supposed to have originated there, or something.

LOUISE WILLIS: Yes, they said that God wanted them to stay, so they stayed there. But when the white man was going to take all the Choctaws to Oklahoma, some of the people that wanted to stay ran back, it's about two miles and you'll find Nanih Waiya. They ran away and they hid, and these other Choctaws went on to Oklahoma. They ran away and hid and that's where they stayed most of the time. It's near water, the cave...[b]ut the cave is a different place from the mound, and the Indians used to run two miles from the white people. (December 4, 1973; Choctaw, MS)

Louise Willis' narrative adds depth and substance to the Choctaw Diaspora. Her own invoking of oral narrative increases the value of this interaction. First she uses it to explain the formation of Nanih Waiya the mound and the cave, as both formations are vital to the Choctaw emergence stories; in doing this she grounds her own personal history in the homeland. She then codifies the relationship of Choctaw People with Nanih Waiya throughout the legacy of removal, first as a space that protected them but then as a space from where they were displaced. She is also able to stage both the Colonial Settlers and the U.S. government as the antagonists who caused the displacement away from Nanih Waiya. Finally, by describing the very specific experience of running two miles between the mound and cave, she adds personal meaning that further substantiates the value of Nanih Waiya, when the interviewer is minimizing both the formation and its meaning. The fact that she had lived near Nanih Waiya in Mississippi, almost her entire life, and yet expresses so viscerally her sense of disconnect from the homeland

formation, shifts the analysis of the Choctaw Diaspora in an astonishing way, as she locates her diasporic subjectivity so closely to Nanih Waiya.

By posturing diasporic subjectivity in relation to the homeland, it allows Choctaw people to critique the forms of displacement that have affected them and may continue to affect them. It also allows for critical reflection on the formations that created barriers between their home and the homeland, in order to look for the best decolonizing methods for breaking down those barriers. Below, Harvey William's narrative further expands the diasporic trajectories of displaced Choctaw people and critically reflects upon the unique barriers that his family faced.

HARVEY WILLIAM: I was born in Louisiana in 1894. I was quite small when my father moved to this country from Louisiana. My father's name was Tom William and my mother's name was Mary William. I don't know whether they were raised in Louisiana or not or whether they moved from Mississippi. They never told me how they came to be in Louisiana, but I always thought that when the Choctaws moved from Mississippi my grandfather did not move here but went to Louisiana. I have been told that we had some kinfolks who were already in this country...they came over several years after the move and located near what is now Idabel. I have been told that when the Dawes Commission came down to enroll the Choctaws, we had a hard time getting on the rolls. It seems that the Choctaw Council had to pass special laws for us who came from Louisiana for there were a good many of us who came from there who were not on the rolls so when the special laws were passed authorizing the Dawes Commission to put us on the rolls, no one could deny that we were Choctaws so they put us on the Choctaw roll. (September 15, 1937; Finely, OK)

Harvey William's family's diasporic trajectory represents agency in a way that skews the American master-narrative, and I believe it also calls in to question the intention of most colonial formations that were created to "support" the removals. As shown, Choctaw people who did not remove according to plan faced barriers. In Harvey William's case, in the early 1900s, if his family was not "authorized" by the Choctaw Nation and Dawes Commission—a Federal Commission, they would have no citizenship; in Louisiana they were sharecroppers. When their presence in Oklahoma did not fit the colonial frame, their citizenship status was complicated by colonial formations.

Hokulani Aikau, argues that regardless of the era, "the settler-colonial frame cannot accommodate the diasporic indigene: the natives who have been exiled from their homeland and who carry their own history of dispossession, exploitation, and expropriation with them as they settle in the diaspora" (479). What is disheartening to think is that many families were lost in the translation of displacement policies that failed to account for the agency of the displaced peoples, or that without citizenship, their status as displaced indigenous peoples with no land, could only lead them into exploitative settings, such as sharecropping. In the case of Harvey William, his family was able to gain support via their own agency as well as family support, and the support of the Choctaw Council in Oklahoma. Other narratives demonstrate the exploitation that occurred, and this is the first hint at how underdeveloped most removal plans were, beyond the outright physical removals.

### **--colonial Subjectivities**

Stories heard in these Choctaw narratives are lost in postcolonial discourse if postcolonial subjectivities fail to consider Indigenous Peoples and Nations, and impart allowances to imperialism within the borders of the United States. Duane Champagne discusses why –colonial



theories “cannot accommodate” Indigenous views: “I still find much of contemporary theory, such as postmodern and postcolonial theory, woefully inadequate for understanding Native peoples’ views, communities, and rights. Native perspectives continue to be marginalized in most contemporary theory, and one reason is that Native issues and peoples do not fit well” (25). Indigenous Peoples do not fit because they do not share many of the assumptions about the citizenry of modern day nations. Additionally, theorists cannot generalize the transformation of a colonized Indigenous nation to post-colonial status without understanding the unique struggles of *all* Indigenous Nations against U.S. imperialism in the present day.

I contend that any discussion aiming a lens at imperialism and colonial frames must consider the place of Indigenous identity, sovereignty, and land, if there is intention to unsettle imperial and colonial formations. Unfortunately, as Jeff Cornassel iterates, “the discourse over defining indigenous peoples,” which in turn subjugates prerogatives of Indigenous sovereignty and land, “has thus far been dominated by concerns of host states within international forums while de-emphasizing indigenous goals of political, cultural, economic, and social autonomy” (“Indigenous” 94). Until this changes most –colonial lenses applied in the United States will be blurred by the continual displacement of Indigenous Peoples.

Postcolonialists have reframed nation subject formations that consider immigrant and displaced subjectivities, in a way that creates a proximity to Indigenous Peoples who are displaced within the United States Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, in *On the Borders Between U.S. Studies and Postcolonial Theory*, provide a comprehensive overview of postcolonial theories and frameworks that consider nation, diaspora, and border formations together. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in *Racial Formations in the United States*, critique nation-based postcolonial paradigms by considering large racial and cultural formations. Inderpal Grewal in

*Transnational America* advocates for the strong presence of transnational formations that are the result of globalization and diaspora. Claudia Sadowski-Smith proposes a cross-cultural analysis of border crossing that enables broader agency for displaced peoples who understand the effects of globalization and displacement. Rarely, however do postcolonialists consider the unique subject formations of Indigenous Peoples in relation to their Indigenous nations and homelands. Postcolonial constructs of nations, beyond traditional nation-states, as defined by nation theorists, go so far as to include the nationalist and transnational formations of immigrant minority groups, but rarely the sovereign nation status of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>2</sup> This is further complicated in the United States because, as Champagne points out, “Native tribal members have not given up their rights to land, self-government, or citizenship within their Native nations” but, “U.S. policy has focused on assimilating Native people and transforming them into an ethnic group” as they are displaced farther from their homeland (22).

James Clifford and Emma Pérez articulate ways for displaced communities to approach their displaced positions as diasporic and decolonizing subjects, instead of as immigrants assimilating to the cultural norms of postcolonialism. In doing so, they have enabled an alternate discourse that makes space for displaced peoples and their articulated Indigenous subjectivity. Clifford supports Indigenous subjectivity, arguing that what is distinct in modern society for Indigenous Peoples is the “relentless assault on Indigenous sovereignty by colonial powers, transnational capital, and emerging nation-states” (“Diasporas” 310). Clifford, advocates for diasporic subjectivity, and frames his subjective analysis starting with William Safran, whose work, *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, proposes six criteria that extend the classification of minority groups within a diaspora in a way that also supports Indigenous sovereignty (Safran 83-84). Clifford extends Safran’s criteria by explaining the

permanent presence of Indigenous Peoples within all lands, and calls for diasporic formations to emerge in the same spaces as colonial formations: “In assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the United States... [immigrant] narratives are designed to integrate immigrants, not people of diasporas” (“Diasporas” 307). He continues, emphasizing that “Peoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be ‘cured’ by merging into a new national community,” therefore, “[p]ositive articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state,” and outside the framework of the master-narrative of imperialism in the United States (307).

Emma Pérez advocates for diasporic subjectivity that challenges the immigrant framing:

Diasporic subjectivity would not deny the culture of race, but instead would open a space where people of color...could negotiate a raced culture within many kinds of identities without racial erasure through assimilation, accommodation, adaptation, acculturation, or even resistance—all of which have been robbed of their decolonial oppositional subjectivity under the rubric of immigrant. (78)

Due to the reality that the majority of Indigenous Peoples in the United States now live as displaced subjects, Pérez maintains that the work of displaced, or diasporic subjects contributes to the construction of a “decolonial imaginary” that postures displaced Indigenous Peoples to assume their Indigenous status, outside of the colonial imaginary and where “[o]ne is not simply oppressed or victimized; nor is one only oppressor of victimizer. Rather, one negotiates within the imaginary to a decolonizing otherness where all identities are at work in one way or another” (7). She also stipulates that whether displaced Indigenous Peoples use diasporic subjectivity to weave through colonial power structures or to gain transformative mobility, the degree to which

second and third generation displaced individuals are aware of its oppositional function will determine the degree to which new, creative and un-imagined identities may thrive (78-79).

The following narrative, possibly the most difficult to hear, and ironically the most poorly copied and illegible from the collections I researched, illustrates the potential power of narrative in gaining transformative mobility. It is rooted in an awareness of tragedy passed on through generations. **WARNING-THIS IS AN EXTREMELY GRAPHIC ACCOUNT.**

EFFIE OAKS FLEMING: After grandpa died, grandmother made her home in the winter with the (unreadable)...sometimes she would stay with us till late in the fall. I know she was here a lot after I would start to school in the fall, and then I was studying history, she would tell us of the history of the Indian territory, and of their coming to this wilderness over the "Trail of Tears." She said everybody...had to walk, but if babies gave out or the parents could not carry them, the drivers of the ox-wagons would just take them and swing them against a tree and knock their brains out and leave them by the roadside like a dog or a cat and not bury them. Her baby brother, Joel...was four years old and very fat. She was just eight years old, but she took her turn at carrying him because he could not walk much, and she said that she would get so tired she'd think she was going to die but she would hang on to him. She was so afraid they would kill him. She said she saw them kill babies who were too big to be carried and would give out walking. Nobody rode. Occasionally a woman was confined. She was permitted to ride for a few days. Grandma said it would be about a year from the time one train of ox wagons with emigrants would get here till they would be back with another bunch. And just the younger and more able-bodied survived the trip. The

older usually stayed in Mississippi anyway. A lot of them refused to leave their homes. (June 12, 1937; Hugo, OK)

Fleming's account is important to hear because it demonstrates exactly what Pérez is calling for, where "second and third generations displaced individuals," in this case Fleming and all of her descendants, remain aware of their subjectivity as displaced people and use it change their subjectivity in relation to their homeland. Fleming's grandmother took special care to juxtapose her experience, her Choctaw history, with the history Fleming was learning in school, and emphasized the sacrifices people carried out to remain in the homeland and to survive.

Applied this way, diasporic subjectivity, appropriated from postcolonial theory and reframed as a decolonization tool is an appropriate subjectivity for Indigenous Peoples working through the rereading and reframing of their own history. Clifford, in more recent work, suggests that this subjectivity has been a long time coming and credits Indigenous nations, noting that "[t]he increasingly strong tribal sovereignty movements of the 1980s and 1990s show...that the current hegemony—call it neocolonialism, postmodernity, globalization, Americanization, or neoliberalism—is fractured, significantly open-ended" ("Articulations" 475). He goes on to suggest that as a result, "[v]ery old cultural dispositions—historically rerouted by religious conversion, formations of race or ethnicity, communication technologies, new gender roles, capitalist pressures—are being actively remade" (475). For specific Indigenous nations and Indigenous Peoples displaced from their homelands, this remaking, or what Linda Smith calls "claiming" and "reframing," is coupled with defining specific formations that establish indigeneity in relation to a homeland; Choctaw home formations found in the oral narratives from the Choctaw Diaspora create new sites for decolonization (142-154).

If diasporic subjectivity is tethered to an *Indigenous* homeland, "[i]ndigeneity, then,"

according Aikau, “is a broad category that reflects shared experiences of struggle against dispossession, exploitation, and expropriation as well as a point of view grounded in the particular cosmology and history of peoples that emerge out of their primordial relationship to a place” (Aikau 480). Clifford rearticulates this in relation to postcolonialism: “The land alters. Men and women speak from changing roles, in new ways, on behalf of tradition and place... Old myths and genealogies change, connect, and reach out, but always in relation to an enduring spatial nexus. This is the indigenous *longue durée*, the precolonial space and time that tends to be lost in postcolonial projections (“Articulations” 482). Thus, the decolonizing imperative becomes a reified commitment to the homeland. Clifford’s challenge for assuming diasporic subjectivity and rereading for decolonization is “indigenous identities must always transcend colonial disruptions (including the posts and the neos), claiming: we were here before all that; we are still here; we will make a future here” (482). From Nanih Waiya, the Choctaw narratives will continue to emerge and re-emerge.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Bhabha, “Nation;” Bhabha, “Minority Maneuvers;” Cook-Lynn; Grewal.

<sup>2</sup> See Aguirre 45-48; Warrior 122.

## CHAPTER 2: DECOLONIZING DISPLACEMENT

VINSON A. CAMP: I am the son of Amos Camp by first marriage, a native Choctaw Indian, living on my own allotment of one hundred twenty acres. I am one half okla falaya and okla hannali, special society or clan as one may wish to call it. The only difference in this so-called clan or society was that, in each settlement they adopted their own way or system, which was slightly different in the use of their language and unless one is accustomed to their idea they would not notice the difference in their changed ways or habit. Those who lived with them and practiced can soon tell their clan or tribes by listening to their talk or their changed idea. (May 11, 1937; Farris, OK)

The comparative analysis of Choctaw narratives across a diaspora depicts many direct experiences of displacement. The voices of displaced Choctaw people offer sometimes-overwhelming descriptions of shifting displacement tactics employed away from Nanih Waiya and across new Choctaw nation formations within the Choctaw Diaspora. Kevin Motes summarizes how Choctaw people adapted, telling how “[t]housands of Choctaws developed new ways to meet the material needs of their families, accepted new forms of worship, and trekked hundreds of miles on foot from their homeland to a foreign country that they made their own” (237). Displaced Choctaw people in the three centuries since removal have also contributed to decolonization narratives. And while, according to Motes, “[m]any previous historians have viewed these changes [displacement] as proof of a natural development toward assimilation into white American society,” Choctaw adaptations and cultural reconfigurations tell a more colorful story and require much “more sophisticated interpretations” (237). As Vinson Camp so plainly pointed out, “unless one is accustomed...they would not notice the difference.” His

decolonization narrative challenges observers by noting that most would have no comprehension of the intricacies of his language, clan affiliation, and distinct community social formations, even while he is displaced from the homeland.

For Choctaw people, the expanse of the Choctaw Diaspora further complicates assumptions about representation. Today, in the twenty-first century there are eight contemporary Choctaw Nations and the majority of Choctaw people live both away from Nanih Waiya and away from their nations. But, Choctaw people have continually created decolonization narratives that are sophisticated, in spite of their spatial and temporal displacement from Nanih Waiya. Chapter three looks at Choctaw narratives that defy displacement by articulating awareness of it. As a counterweight it will also feature narratives about Choctaw gatherings that show the most common places where Choctaw formations transform, shift, strengthen, and remain Choctaw despite shifting displacement tactics. With decolonizing subjectivity assigned to the Choctaw narratives, they follow Arturo Aldama's appeal for "decolonial processes that (re)claim and enunciate bodies of knowledge that are subjugated, silenced, and outlawed by colonialist [post colonialist] and patriarchal apparatuses of power and representation" (95). We will observe that Choctaw people did not fail to take account of their displacement experience, and still reclaim power over their representation.

SARAH NOAH: The Choctaw Indians are great storytellers. Now and then especially in the winter when all of the work about the house is finished, kitchen work, dining room, getting up wood and milking is finished, a big firewood is heaped up in the fire-place, all member of the family be seated around the fire when someone of the elder, man or woman would begin to talk on some subject of the olden days. (December 10, 1937; Atoka, OK)



## **Displacement Shifts**

Jennifer Denetdale directly confronts shifting displacement tactics, explaining that “[f]or Native peoples, the history of federal Indian policies, which have been largely assimilationist, has included the sanitization of our histories and has had far-reaching consequences, including an ignorance of American imperialism” (134). Her claims cannot be denied but I would like to develop two aspects of her argument to be explored and underscored by Choctaw narrators. First, while federal policies have been largely assimilative, the intent of assimilationist policy has never veered from the colonialist project of displacing people from land. For example, a subtle displacement tactic is the removal of an Indigenous person’s awareness of their status as a member of an Indigenous nation, or the utilization of colonial apparatuses that hold jurisdiction over Indigenous Nation membership requirements, such as blood quantum requirements. Indigenous nations and people that suffer from this type of displacement remain controlled by American imperialism if they fail to create space for their return to the homeland. The second point is Choctaw people have faced new colonialist projects at every point in the diaspora, at the hand of many different colonial agents, not just the federal government.

Displacement tactics shift, transform, and adapt along with every new Choctaw formation. This requires consideration of theoretical assumptions about the subjectivity of Choctaw people in relation to shifts in place, identity, and nation. Choctaw narrators have utilized their mobility and extended their skill in coming together, to disrupt colonialist displacement projects from each of these locations. Audra Simpson explains how modern scholars can more clearly see these types of disruptions when we listen to Indigenous voices: “Within Indigenous contexts, contexts that are never properly “post-colonial,” the sovereignty of the people we speak of, when speaking for themselves, interrupt anthropological portraits of

timelessness, procedure and function that dominate representations of their past and, sometimes, their present” (“Ethnographic Refusal” 68).

Randolph Mantooth, in his own experience, situates the multidirectional positionality of a displaced Choctaw person. This interview is conducted in the homeland, but he is a person that has spent a significant amount of time away from the homeland.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about heritage and culture and preserving it?

RANDOLPH MANTOOTH: I think foremost that the heritage, well it’s here now, but it’s changing and heritage is going to be changed with different peoples. A prime example is Los Angeles, the heritage is always there and they come into Los Angeles and they’re exposed to other Indians and other tribes and there’s a lot of their own personal heritage that is lost because of the association with other tribes...It’s kind of hard because the heritage, I don’t think, will ever die with the Indian, if he just keeps on maintaining like he has been; for something like 400 years they’ve tried to knock it down and the Indian has stayed, and he will stay...They’ve got to try to keep the heritage and keep the culture going. Without it, there’d be a lot of people who would like very much for it all to wind up in a melting pot and come up with a whole totally different tradition. I don’t think it should die, and I don’t think it will die. I don’t think with people like I’ve met...the Choctaw people, with the Lumi Indian in Washington and with the Shoshoni in Nevada. They’re all working very hard not to let it die, and I don’t think it will. I don’t think they’ll allow it to. (July 16, 1974; Choctaw, MS)

Mantooth speaks with realistic hopefulness about the challenges Choctaw people face in maintaining distinct traditions. He also critiques the subtle colonial language that is used to

assimilate diverse peoples, noting how “a lot of people” subscribe to the “melting pot,” or the desire to dilute cultures. Mantooh recognizes other Indigenous nations, names them and connects them directly to their homeland. This is a strong statement about the potential loss of heritage when people are disconnected from their homeland and nation. Unfortunately, for many Choctaw people today, especially in urban centers like Los Angeles, displacement is interpreted as a necessary decision that their family made to survive. Emma Perez addresses this positionality: “Leaving home because the socioeconomic conditions there force migration, thus traveling to a host country/region that may offer economic and political reprieve, but at the same time racism and discrimination, compels these new cultural survivors to be as creative as possible as they move through power” (80). Mantooh recognizes the challenges that come in upholding culture in places such as Los Angeles, but he also represents “cultural survivors” who actively work to represent themselves as members of Indigenous Nations and resist misidentification regardless of spatial location, and with a clear awareness of the homeland. What Mantooh demonstrates, is that with creative subjectivity, Choctaw people can assume power by re-appropriating their position in relation to their land, their Indigeneity, and their Indigenous nation.

Louise Willis, speaking from the homeland, positions herself similarly:

LOUISE WILLIS: I was born here, but I was brought up in different areas. I came back to the Bogue Chitto reservation where I originally grew up, and I went back to the Indian school when I was about in the sixth grade. My family was relocated up to Ohio... That means that if we decide on relocating to another state where we could find a better job or be trained into some specific job... then my family would go there and ... my father would be trained. And if we don't like it,

we relocate back. It was Cincinnati, Ohio. He was training to operate some sort of machine to make stamps. We stayed there for about three years...After I graduated I went to Haskell Indian Junior College, [Lawrence, KS]. I took business but I didn't like it there, so I went up to Chicago and I became a long distance telephone operator. I stayed there for about six months and then I came back here.

Willis, from her personal and familial experience, describes her numerous spatial positions in the Choctaw diaspora, but supplants her displaced subjectivity by rearticulating it as mobility. Willis and Mantooth both describe forms of displacement that moved them away from the Choctaw homeland, but the homeland and their commitment to culture, prevented them from being assimilated or displaced completely, and they both are speaking to us directly from the homeland. Clifford calls this eventual return “grounding”...a sense of depth and continuity running through all the ruptures and attachments, the effects of religious conversion, state control, new technologies, commodities, schooling, tourism, and so on. Indigenous forms of dwelling cover a range of sites and intensities: there are “native” homebodies, commuters, travelers, and exiles. But a desire called “the land,” is differently, persistently active” (“Articulations” 481). In this sense, Willis’ mobility was grounded by her ability to return to her community in the Choctaw homeland, Bogue Chitto, as her parents did before her.

Because diaspora is about movement, it can also enable movement. In many cases diasporic subjectivity creates mobility. James Clifford promotes Indigenous mobility to “reveal, unmistakably, a kind of indigenous cosmopolitanism. Yet there’s a paradox, a rich and sometimes difficult tension, here. For to recognize a specifically indigenous dialogue dialectic of dwelling and traveling requires more than simply unmaking the exoticist or colonialist concept

of the homebody native, always firmly at home, in his or her place” (Clifford 476-477). By keeping a clear view of the homeland as well as their position in a diaspora, Choctaw people are constantly negotiating subjectivity with their mobility.

### **Displaced Diasporic Indigenous Homeland**

It was the custom in ancient times for the old men of the Choctaws to assemble the youths of their respective towns and rehearse to them all the ancient traditions and folklore of the tribe. (HSHP Box 5, Folder 3)

Hokulani Aikau, as a displaced diasporic Indigenous Hawaiian, proclaims that “[w]e are the collective composition of the stories that are told. In indigenous contexts, stories provide the foundation upon which a people establish and legitimate their connection to their ancestors, the land, the spiritual world, and the universe” (494). Stories disrupt the colonial experience and prompt action towards the decolonizing of colonial formations that have left them unheard. Hearing them is an important decolonizing action for all who share the collective history of their Indigenous nation and homeland. Diasporic subjectivity situates Choctaw narrators to disrupt displacement but they must speak towards Nanih Waiya.

Audra Simpson supports this by recognizing that “analyses of indigeneity may still occupy the “salvage” and “documentary” slot for analysis, an elaboration of object that results from the endurance of categories that emerged in moments of colonial contact, many of which still reign supreme” (Simpson, “Ethnographic Refusal” 69). A displaced person, who fails to recognize the homeland, remains displaced. Mantooh warned of a loss of heritage in spaces where individual identities become a part of a “melting pot.” Simpson warns how colonial categories continually compartmentalize people that “left their own spaces of self-definition;” in her view, “Indigenous” is a category that [does] not explicitly state or theorise the shared

experience of having their lands alienated from them” (69).

Therefore, if diasporic subjectivity is to be a decolonization tool, it must be aware of a homeland, and create spaces for return. Micaela Díaz-Sánchez, who has critiqued large, broadly inclusive, national diasporas, asks: “How do we account for disparate historical narratives in these diasporic imaginaries?” (2). Her question positions and challenges disparate Indigenous nations to (re)construct their own diasporic narratives with the emergent narratives of their own Indigenous nation. James Clifford begins to operationalize diasporic narrative construction, noting, “[s]ince indigenism and diasporism aren’t one-size-fits-all categories, we need to work toward a more nuanced vocabulary, finding concrete ways to represent dispersed *and* connected populations (“Articulations” 483). Each Indigenous nation and its citizens and descendants must create their vocabulary; their stories, as described by Aikau, provide a foundation.

Still, where diaspora by definition recognizes a homeland, Indigenous homelands have been politicized in postcolonial theories that failed to recognize Indigenous nations within homelands. Therefore, Indigenous Peoples must rely on the solidarity of their indigeneity to advocate for their place within colonial power structures, before articulating the unique aspects of their Indigenous nations and homelands. Jeff Corntassel aligns Indigenous Peoples who recognize the “interlocking concepts of sacred history, ceremonial cycles, language and ancestral homelands” and “their complex interrelationships” (“Who Is Indigenous?” 91). He believes that this is a starting point where scholars, theorists and practitioners, who have conceptualized Indigenous frameworks, can develop a “non-Western approach to identity” that demonstrates “flexibility, comprehensiveness, and allowance for cultural continuity and change” (94).

Aikau uses the work of David Gegeo to frame Indigeneity when dealing with challenged formations in a diaspora: “Place, one’s relationship to an existential foundation that includes an

original homeland and genealogy... is carried...regardless of where that person travels. Thus...people do not stop being indigenous when they migrate; rather, they carry their place—indigenous identity—with them to new spaces” (480). Aikau contends that the “point is not to overly romanticize indigeneity, but to challenge the pernicious notion that indigenous people who do not live in our homeland become less native the longer we are away from “home” (480).

The challenge for Indigenous people and nations is to continually advocate for their identity, nation, and homeland regardless of their spatial position. Which, according to Clifford is a constant role because “the contrast between colonial fixity and postcolonial mobility, between indigenous roots and diasporic routes, can’t be allowed to harden into an opposition or a before-after scenario” (“Articulations” 477). The Choctaw narratives become vital models of representation by connecting to the homeland and the important values that continue to transmit in Choctaw homes and communities. Corntassel affirms that representation and advocacy occurs in frameworks that “voice indigenous peoples’ community-based priorities regarding homeland autonomy, language rights, importance of oral histories, and ceremonial cycles” (94). The reading of Choctaw narratives helps sustain this work for Choctaw people and the Choctaw nations looking towards Nanih Waiya when setting priorities for community-based work.

### **Colonial Agents**

ANGELA RAMIREZ: Their initial home life was bad because the neighbors talked bad to them. They started in a Methodist Church and met Rev. Slade. Later the minister invited the Choctaw family to speak about the tribe and share the Choctaw Bible they had. Things got better after that. (March 24, 1971; Brea, CA)

Narratives such as Angela Ramirez' demonstrate why Choctaw people must be constant advocates in mutable displacement terrain. Angela Ramirez is a federal colonial agent. According to her interview, she served as a relocation officer for the Federal Indian Relocation program that moved Indigenous Peoples away from their homelands to work in urban centers. She was interviewed specifically to provide a narration about a Choctaw family that had been relocated to Hacienda Heights, California—a suburb of Los Angeles, in the 1970s. Her job was to support their assimilation into a mainstream lifestyle, and her narrative documented racial slurs and taunts the family faced in that community. Their supporting advocate however, was not Angela Ramirez. Their advocate was their Bible. Ramirez noted that they had gained support from a local church when they showed their Bible, written in the Choctaw language, to the church Reverend. Rev. Slade took an interest in their story, and allowed them to share the Choctaw Bible with the church. This is an interesting intersection, where a colonial home formation, the Bible, with Choctaw subjectivity, becomes the decolonial tool in the face of discrimination. Angela Ramirez later critiqued the family for their hard time in maintaining credit, and yet still represented them for this interview. Their absence is attributed to privacy issues. The narrative above clearly romanticizes the family's experience in overcoming racism with the simple gesture of showing a Bible. It also paints the changing face of colonial agents, a tactic that continues, although less subtly in the following accounts.

The following narrators work to upend displacement histories by exposing localized displacement tactics that were often violent and illegal. Choctaw narrators clearly depict their colonial antagonists, and by doing so, participate in a decolonization narrative that scrutinizes the exploits of colonial agents.



BAXTER YORK: In the treaty they were one nation—one big nation, covers all of Mississippi and part of Alabama, part of Louisiana, part of Arkansas where the Choctaws expand and occupy those places. They were called one big Choctaw nation at that time. Then the government came along and made the treaty with the Choctaws; and the Choctaws went ahead and made the deal with them. Most of all the Choctaws [were] supposed to go to Oklahoma when the deal went through, but some of the Choctaws that didn't want to go, didn't want to leave their original home, which is Mississippi—why then they stayed...So when that treaty was made back in 1830, and they started moving 1832, '34, back in that area, then the state of Mississippi began to come in and form what we call statehood...Why then, the state legislature are the ones that made this law saying that we couldn't have a head man...So they abolished that chief—we can't have no chief—and they put a fine on of maybe a thousand dollars and so many year in jail or penitentiary. So that's how come the chieftain was abolished by state legislature right after the treaty. (1978, Choctaw, MS)

Baxter York indicts the state of Mississippi for displacing the Choctaw Nation, not physically, as he explained the United States' role in that act of displacement, but with illegal legislative acts. York grounds each part of his removal narrative directly to the homeland, and obviates any doubt that Choctaw people were not completely aware of the continuing implementation of displacement tactics, tactics that literally unseated Choctaw governance structures.

Bed Prasad Giri, who continues to call for careful consideration when displaced peoples assume diasporic subjectivity, also calls for a critical analysis of power relations and abuses.

Giri claims “[t]he most enduring lesson postcolonial theory has taught us in the last two decades concerns the worldliness of colonial culture, thoroughly enmeshed in the relations of power; that lesson should not become irrelevant just because the subject currently under discussion happens to be postcolonial, minority, or diasporic cultures” (222). Fortunately, there have always been aware Choctaw agents, such as York, reflecting the experiences and adaptations that have moved Choctaw people within the diaspora. A contemporary critique that accurately portrays abuses of power strengthens the agency of Choctaw people who insisted on surviving, irrespective of their displaced orientation to the homeland.

The next two narrators tell an extremely compelling counterpoint about non-governmental agents who illegally displaced Choctaw people from Mississippi to Oklahoma. The first narrator gives a personal account of being illegally removed to Oklahoma in the early 1900s.

CALLIE DIXON: When I was still young, most of the Choctaw families faced bad times. They had to be moved to Oklahoma during the time when the whites tricked them. I went. I was there for four years. When the Choctaw find out that the whites lied, they had a hard time coming back to Mississippi...I went with my husband and four children. When we arrived in Oklahoma, we lived in a house that had holes...stopped up with mud. That is where we lived until they told us that the whites tricked us into coming way over there. So we packed up and left. We walked back. On the trip over here, we had a hard time. Before we left there, we packed only biscuits in a sack. Since we only had little flour for biscuits, the biscuits we packed ran out. We got back to Mississippi, we had hard times. We didn't have much. We had blankets which a Chickasaw woman gave us. Some

others didn't make it...some children went along, and there were many that died.  
Some died because they were starving. (June 28, 1973; Choctaw, MS)

The second narrator gives a detailed account of what he witnessed when Choctaw people were removed illegally from their lands in the early 1900s.

JAKE EARNEST WILLIAMS: In 1902, a large number of Mississippi Choctaws were moved to Ardmore from Mississippi by Hudson and Arnold. They were placed in some vacant buildings east of the Santa Fe tracks. These buildings were poorly ventilated, had no light or sanitary facilities, and the Indians died like rats. The Indians did not get enough to eat, and in their half-starved condition contracted pneumonia and tuberculosis. They were just ordinary tenant farmers, trust-worthy, sober and peaceful, although after spending a few months around Ardmore they became shiftless, and began drinking anything they could get that would make them drunk. These Indians were promised three hundred sixty acres of land in the Choctaw or Chickasaw Nation if they would make this move. It has been said that Hudson and Arnold signed contracts with the Mississippi Choctaws; in which these Indians promised them a certain amount of allotment they would receive after arriving here. Just west of Cornish was the Bill Washington ranch, which consisted of one hundred fifty thousand acres of land. Most of this land had been allotted by the Indians, although Washington and his men put up a fight to keep them out. The Indians would move in and stretch a tent, or build a little shack. Washington's men would go at night, bundle up their belongings, hog-tie them; carry them to the edge of the pasture and throw them out. (April 13, 1937; Ardmore, OK)

It is likely that these accounts are of the same displacement experience, but the locations of the narrators in the Choctaw Diaspora create an intriguing reconnection between two sides of a story that describe a disturbing truth about colonial subjectivity. The “Worldliness” that Giri talked about, is clearly the illegal appropriation of land. Joseph Jorgensen argues that these narratives reflect the root of most displacement initiatives. His assessment intuitively summarizes the impetus of colonial formations the Choctaw narrators have described:

The rapid development of urban areas after the mid-nineteenth century brought the Indian social ruin...as measured in access to strategic resources...and political oppression and neocolonial subjugation...The results were brought about by expropriation of Indian land and resources by the railroads, mining corporations, farmers, and ranchers...Indians were the first rural inhabitants to suffer from this development and the first people to be forced into underdevelopment from their previous condition of self-support and self-governance. (85-86)

### **Decolonization**

The narrators and scholars in this chapter have articulated the need for distinctive accounts that support the decolonization narratives of Indigenous Nations, on personal and collective levels. Narratives that represent specific personal, spatial, and communal attachments to Indigenous nations disrupt displacement. But narratives must be continually reconsidered because displacement tactics shift and colonial formations exist at every level of these efforts. All Indigenous Nations and Peoples must discern how to engage with colonial formations, careful not become absorbed in the narratives of other Indigenous nations, or the American master-narrative. Jennifer Denetdale has challenged her own nation on this very issue, describing what she calls a “manifestation of Dine traditional values” that conflates Indigenous nationalism

with American nationalism. She argues that “such articulations streamline Native pasts into the dominant American narrative about itself as a multicultural nation founded upon moral and ethical principles and erase the historical links between the past and the present, wherein Native peoples have been violently dispossessed of most of their lands and they see their sovereign statuses as nations continually undermined by the U.S. federal Indian policies and the Supreme Court” (131). For Choctaw people that continually learn from the narratives of our ancestors, it will become easier to hear stories that can hold both our nations and us accountable to creating decolonization narratives.

Audra Simpson alleges that oral history projects often “leave unexamined the critical interplay between consciousness, power and practice at work in the political and *social* life of Native communities” (“Reserve” 17). As a result, the cultural formations and attached values systems of Indigenous nations are devalued by dominant colonial formations, and Indigenous “people must articulate their claims to rights through the idiom of “difference,” – through “tradition” and political subalternity, leaving them vulnerable to claims of inauthenticity or “invention” (17). Hence, narratives that help restore value, power and practice to Indigenous cultural formations are of the utmost importance. Alfred and Corntassel rearticulate this position with pressing intent: “Purported decolonization and watered-down cultural restoration processes that accept the premises and realities of our colonized existences as their starting point are inherently flawed and doomed to fail. They attempt to reconstitute strong nations on the foundations of enervated, dispirited and decultured people. That is the honest and brutal reality; and that is the fundamental illogic of our contemporary struggle” (Alfred and Corntassel 612).

The following four narratives together present both sides of this need. They show a continuity of tradition and portray important cultural customs; they also convey a sense of

romanticism and concern for their loss. Because they still exist in these narratives as Choctaw formations, they continue to support a larger decolonization narrative, partly because they reflect colonialist language to be critically examined, but also because they describe significant practices directed towards youth, and impart sincere hope for the health of future generations. The interesting perspective that we have is that the majority of the formations described still exist in some form today, such as Stomp dances, other Choctaw dances, and big meetings. The concern for the reader then is to reflect presence and attribute power to these practices, especially where there is a perception that they no longer exist. And to continue reading and exploring Choctaw oral sources for stories that strengthen the Choctaw narrative.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS CHOATE: Each spring a stomp dance was held just before the green corn was ready to eat. No Indian would eat any corn before this dance, nor would they eat with anyone who did eat corn before that. For three days before the stomp dance, all the Indians took medicine, the Chief built a brush fire and the Indians dance around it. Music was furnished by fiddles and a drum and everybody sang as they danced. This dance lasted about three days, and was supposed to keep away sickness; after this we could eat green corn. At this dance, all the boys of the tribe who were about four or five years old were brought before the Chief and he gave each boy a name, and a small piece of tobacco. The boy was called by that name after that. (March 28, 1938; Guthrie, OK)

JOSIAH BILLY: The “stomp” or dance grounds on such occasions were illuminated by heaps of burning pine knots at convenient points. When all the participants were congregated a circle would be formed composed of both men and women and the dance was on. At first the songs were low and moaning and

the steps deliberate and measured. But as they warmed up, the songs became louder and the steps quickened, finally reaching a stage of abandon and weirdness that was captivating. Every moment had its own particular significance and visualized to the mind of the performers some deed of heroism attributed to the valiant members of their tribe. From the effect of the continuous repetition of the words of the songs and the exclusion of all other thoughts from their minds, the warriors sought to re-enact the motions significant to the heroic acts which they were engaged in commemorating at the moment. Their fervor knew no bounds. (July 8, 1937; Talihina, OK)

FRANK HENRY: Well, I think that different tribes, just like other tribes; we have our dances and [they] are very significant. Most of our dances are imitating perhaps, for instance, quail—they imitate quail; the imitate turtle and dust dance. Of course, we have to talk to the older people to find out the real significance about these particular dances...they had a good reason. We have a group of kids learning to dance that western tribe kind of thing, and they do that eagle dance, but not the Choctaw Eagle dance. I think we need to revive that if possible. Those are some things we are doing here just once a year during the Indian fair. I think...unless we hang on to it, we're going to lose it. Just like the people over in Oklahoma. Yeah, they've lost it. (June 25, 1971; Choctaw, MS)

JANE COLE: I and my husband used to camp at those big meetings which lasted about three or four days. We would kill hogs and beef and get everything ready, then we would go and camp and feed the people that came to the meeting; there used to be lots of Indians then and it took right smart feed to feed them, but we

had lots of hogs, cattle so it did not cost us very much. I wish the country was back like it was then. (April 20, 1937; Antlers, OK)

From here there is still work to do, because at nearly every point in the narratives, the narrators themselves are calling for the survival and remembrance of important Choctaw traditions. The words of Jane Cole, Frank Henry, Josiah Billy, and Christopher Choate each underscore the importance of Choctaw people coming together to celebrate Choctaw culture. They also begin to reveal the Choctaw formations that move this analysis closer to Choctaw homes and the attached values of survival and remembrance.



### CHAPTER 3: SURVIVAL AND REMEMBRANCE

LAURA SCOTT: I have attended the Choctaw cries and Pashofa dances. One Sunday after church at Double Springs, Sid Lawrence, a Choctaw Indian, led us down to this wife's grave not far from the brush arbor. He placed a black handkerchief over his head and we all gathered around the grave and cried for hours. They often had three days cries and would gather at the grave wherever it might be, as some were in the yards of the place they lived; and cry for three days. They sometimes built little houses over the graves...The Pashofa dances were held for the sick to drive away the evil spirits, so they might be cured. (August 3, 1937; Pittsburg, OK)

In this reading, the most consistent home formations throughout the Choctaw Diaspora are found as meaningful expressions of the values of survival and remembrance. Laura Scott's description of the Choctaw cries demonstrates an act of remembrance for a lost family member. She tells how the Pashofa dances are performed to ensure survival for the sick. These rituals brought many Choctaw people together across the diaspora. The material and objective formations that manifest in Choctaw homes and communities, to create ceremonies such as the Choctaw cries and Pashofa dances, are inexplicably tied to a long Choctaw narrative. One that creates a genealogy that roots the values of survival and remembrance deeply in the Choctaw homeland.

This chapter listens to Choctaw narrators describe formations as they are attached to the continuing efforts of Choctaw people to practice in their homes, acts of survival and remembrance. The Choctaw cries and Pashofa dances are two communal expressions, ritual ceremonies, which became prominent in Choctaw oral sources, as is evidenced in the narratives chosen for this work. But they are in-between expressions. Both have emerged strongly in these

narratives away from the homeland, and both have fallen out of practice. Expressions of survival and remembrance still exist in Choctaw communities, but few with the same intensity and detail that these two acts carried. Yet, they still exist strongly in Choctaw oral history.

The history and details of these ceremonies, as described by Choctaw narrators, may suggest why they did not carry into the present day on the most pragmatic levels. But, there are points in these narratives where narrators attribute their decline to displacement, or the influence of the settler society.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the reading of these narratives contributes to the act of what Angela Wilson calls “Indigenous knowledge recovery...an anticolonial project...that gains its momentum from the anguish of the loss of what was and the determined hope for what will be. It springs from the disaster resulting from the centuries of colonialism’s efforts to methodically eradicate our ways of seeing, being, and interacting with the world (Wilson, “Indigenous Empowerment” 359). I am not calling for the full recovery of the Choctaw cries or the Pashofa dances, but in hearing these narratives I believe that there is still much to learn from examining the many formations that rooted these ceremonies in Choctaw homes and communities, and in the Choctaw homeland. Vestiges of these ceremonies that exist today can then be reconnected to the long history of their traditional meaning, and revitalized by communities that choose to integrate them. Today, this can be done without the same retribution and discrimination that our ancestors experienced and describe in these narratives.

This reading also opens space for different types of cultural analysis—that of all the voices heard in this chapter. The juxtaposition of personal views from numerous communities in a large diaspora, allows for the narrators to create assumptions about their own position in relation to specific cultural expressions. For example, many Choctaw narrators did not participate in Choctaw cries, but were well aware of its attribute values and chose to represent

the cries in their narrative.<sup>2</sup> Audra Simpson has discussed in her own cultural analysis of communities, the challenges she engages when representation and the techniques of representation intermingle with topics such as ceremony. “I am interested...” she declares, “in the way that cultural analysis may look when difference is *not* the unit of analysis, when culture is disaggregated into narratives rather than wholes, when proximity to the territory that one is engaging in is as immediate as the self, and what this then does to questions of “voice” (“Ethnographic Refusal” 68). What she is asserting is that ceremony should not simply be observed for analysis, and the voices representing the ceremony should be the ones in immediate proximity to the actual event, if they choose.

To achieve this type of analysis, the narrative leading this chapter is primarily from the voices of the narrators. Alessandro Portelli assigns appropriate roles: “The narrator is now one of the characters, and the *telling* of the story is part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political and personal involvement than that of the external narrator” (57). As external narrator, I cannot be removed from the narration of this work, because I chose the narrators to guide the narration. Portelli says this is inherent, but more importantly, that Choctaw narrators as characters, regardless of their location in the narrative, are the most deeply involved, and should be regarded in the same way Simpson suggests—as the most immediate voice of decolonization. Their political and personal involvement will always be visible in this narrative because of their proximity to home and homeland.

For example, in the previous chapter Baxter York and Louise Willis engaged their political and personal roles in distinct ways. Baxter York is a narrator who is well aware of his family’s displacement, even as he speaks of it from a distant temporal location and from the homeland. His awareness provided a political orientation that gives agency to his narrative.

Louise Willis has already spoken of her multiple positions in the Choctaw Diaspora. She assigned mobility to herself and her family within her narrative, but was also able to return to her homeland. York and Willis both articulate a decolonization discourse in their narratives, with a clear awareness of the homeland. Although other narrators may not speak directly of the homeland or from the homeland, their participation in acts of survival and remembrance connects them politically and personally to the narratives that emerge from the homeland.

I believe that most of the selected Choctaw narrators have spoken with great intention to carry the narrative forward, fully aware of what they faced, and how they survived; how they were to pass knowledge on so that the homeland and ancestors would not be forgotten. I also assert that these narratives are just as important as other stories that have been more visible, perhaps due to their romantic or proverbial nature; they should be heard with the same intention. Tom Mould, who brought together many oral sources, and documented them in a collection, called *Choctaw Tales*, prefaces their reading: “Stories, like all aspects of culture, are always changing... Their oral nature makes them all the more dynamic... And when different versions contrast or seem to conflict, we see evidence both of the breadth of the tradition and of the individual storytellers behind each narrative, even though they exist as a part of a larger, collective tradition of storytelling“ (1-1i). The narrative of this work, with themes of survival and remembrance, is part storytelling, but the intention to frame the narrations in decolonization discourse must not be lost; they all call for a return to the homeland.

Experientially, because of the narrative’s subjectivity in decolonization discourse, each reader will experience and feel something differently, the same way that Mould framed the intent of documenting other oral sources: “Fixed to the page and read verbatim, the stories serve primarily a pedagogical rather than expressive function to the first-time hearer... For the

Choctaws, however, the brief summaries serve as a touchstone to a common heritage, to a recognizable past. Each recognizes the other's story, if not explicitly then at least by feel and character" (Mould lxii). Similarly, for Choctaw readers, there may be a more visceral experience from recognizing displacement histories, while for other readers, due to unfamiliarity and because we are not hearing these narrations with similar spatial and temporal orientation to the homeland, we may not be able to discern meaning just from seeing the words. Portelli has addressed this in one way—when the form of an oral source becomes a written source. He explains that "[t]he tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing" (47). For this reason, and others that lie undetected, the experience, feeling, meaning, and subjective orientation of this narrative will vary in our reading as much as it has in its telling. To me this is the beauty and complexity of analysis in a diaspora.

### **Remembrance**

Remembrance, as a value system, infuses Choctaw home formations starting from Nanih Waiya. Remembrance as a material formation is one of the most documented Choctaw cultural formations. Ian Thompson explains how remembrance manifested for Chahta Alhiha:

In the Southeast, stepping back in time, different Native community views and actions towards the deceased were of course somewhat diverse, but the general trends emphasizing spirituality and respect were the same. As was true for the other Tribes in the region, "(T)he oldest-known and traceable custom concerning the dead was the deep respect that the ancient Choctaw had for the bones of his ancestors" (Green 1979:10). Much effort was given to ensure one's body was cared for in the proper manner after death" (22).

Henry S. Halbert provides some of the earliest oral source accounts of Choctaw formations, following the removal period in the 1830's. His papers include drafts that document Choctaw cultural formations that are remembered by Choctaw people who remained in Mississippi. There are significant drawbacks to this collection, for his papers were not prepared for publication, and his drafts or sketches are a mixture of oral history accounts, with information drawn from other sources and other researchers. In the rare case that he did acknowledge a Choctaw speaker as a source it is often after summary statements that only recognize the speaker as an "aged Choctaw" or some other non-signifying category, such as "informed by aged Choctaws."

Nevertheless, his papers remain as one of the least researched collections containing Choctaw narratives. Much of his writing is also drafted in the Choctaw language, and may contain unique source information once translated. Here I have chosen a few of his sketches that provide early clues about the formations associated with remembrance. They provide a starting point, a genealogy of important home formations, that we will see transmitted in the Choctaw narratives.

When the bone-picker arrives at the house of the deceased, the family, kindred, and visitors, seat themselves on the mourning benches and go through their usual weeping and wailing. They then remove the benches and the bone-picker attends to his office. He first makes the coffin or coffins, ornamenting them to the best of his taste or ability. He then takes down the corpses, with his long finger nails separates the flesh from the bones, scrapes and washes the bones perfectly clean, paints the head red with vermilion, and places all, arranged in their natural order, in the coffin. The painting of the skull was intended as a mark of honor and

reverence to the dead. The decayed flesh and other refuse were then burned, but in subsequent years were buried. After this the scaffold was burned, while the crowd whooped and danced around it. This over, came the big festival, but in the subsequent changes of fashion this came after the deposition of the corpse in the bone house. The bone-picker received a fee for his services. (HSHP; Box 5 Folder 12)

Kevin Motes positions the role of the bone-picker in relation to the older funerary customs describing how “[b]y 1800...most Choctaws had ceased the traditional scaffold desiccation and bone-cleaning funeral rites in favor of burial close to or under the home” (50). Still, collections about the Choctaw bone-picker are common as historical exotica, particularly for their macabre details. However, In Halbert’s ethnography of the full funerary rites, he describes the meaningful and significant formations that served to honor the deceased, highlighting the creation of the ornamented coffin, the burning of refuse and the associated ceremony, as well as the bone house. The funerary customs as acts of remembrance are interlinked by home formations that clearly connect to each other in the Choctaw diaspora, such as grave houses, big feasts and the use of fire. So the formations Halbert described transform, but they are rooted to an ancient value system. They are also rooted to Nanih Waiya.

A common story throughout the removals of Choctaw people from Mississippi, were the intense visceral expressions of loss experienced by people being removed from the resting place of their ancestors. Remembering the words of John Hunter Thompson, about “a sacred burial ground, which they called Nanih Waiya,” we know that every Choctaw person has ancestral lineage to the sacred burial grounds of Nanih Waiya (Mould 73). As an act of remembrance, this places a strong value on burying ancestors at home, and as Thompson, Motes, and Halbert all

attribute to Choctaw people, the role of caring for the deceased. As removals occurred the symbolic disconnect from the homeland formation of Nanih Waiya, was made visceral by the actual disconnect from the ancestors buried in or near Choctaw homes.

The following narrations demonstrate how Choctaw people in the diaspora asserted and maintained the value of remembrance, despite their displacement. They highlight the experiences and formations that draw a connecting line between expressions of remembrance, throughout the Choctaw Diaspora, and back to Nanih Waiya. For the purpose of narrative I have framed them in a somewhat linear manner that describes acts of remembrance as they transformed in relation to Choctaw homes, under the following headings: Leaving the Homeland, Home Burials, Grave Houses, Grave House Maintenance, Choctaw Cries, and Ritual Decline.

### **Leaving the Homeland**

Baxter York and Sarah Harlin narrate two distinct expressions of remembrance. York passes on an oral account from long ago about the impending disconnect of the removals. He asserts the value of remembrance in his family's justification for remaining in Mississippi. Harlin viscerally expresses immediate loss, as she witnessed it while being displaced from the homeland. They both underscore the immediate responsibility of continually caring for the ancestors, and the extreme tragedy felt in leaving the land where their ancestors are buried. Women had a significant role in remembrance, that starts to appear in this section.

BAXTER YORK: After the removal of those Choctaw, some Choctaw remained in Mississippi. So the war department sent two man up here in Mississippi and they came here and saw Choctaw still here. Then they said " I thought you was supposed to be in Oklahoma now. Are you still here?" Some of the Choctaws say that they didn't want to leave their ancestors because they were buried here



and also they didn't want to leave their original home. (August 22, 1975; Choctaw, MS)

SARAH HARLIN: Mrs. Harlin came to Indian Territory by wagon from Alabama over the Trail of Tears. There were twelve in the party and they were what was thought in those days as well fixed, having a good wagon, fat horses, plenty of provisions and covering. The trip was started on September 15<sup>th</sup> and by October, their troubles had begun. Three of their horses died, the meat spoiled and sickness came. One little baby died and was buried in a grave of cedars by the roadside. After they journeyed on, the mother was missed and, on going back, was found by the little new grave singing a lullaby. (May 13, 1937;OK)

### **Home Burials**

There were no bone houses or ancestral burial grounds like Nanih Waiya in Oklahoma. So early in the displacements to Oklahoma, families buried the dead under their homes. They also negotiated new ways of remembrance as displacements continued. In the removals, crying over the graves was extremely important, as was feasting.

CHRISTINE BATES: When a member of an Indian family died, they would put the body in a cow-hide that they had dried, and hang it in a tree and leave it. When they began to make coffins, they were hewed out of trees and the body placed in a shallow grave under the house. When they would move to another place, they would kneel by their dead and cry and cry. (March 27, 1937; Durant, OK)

JACK CAMPBELL: When an Indian died in the early day when I was a young man, the woman, his wife, would look after him. Most of the Indian homes or

cabins in the early day were just log cabins and did not have flooring, only a dirt floor, so that when the husband or her man died she would have him buried right in the floor of her cabin about four feet in the ground and Indian woman would move her bed over this grave and sleep over it for one year. This they said would release them from any other obligation to their past husband. This rule was changed later and most Indians picked a high hill someplace and made it their burying place. (June 24, 1937; Wilburton, OK)

CELIA BROWN MCGAHEY: When any of our people died he or she would be buried in the yard, near the house. Every morning the family went to the grave and cried. Our people believed that by doing this the spirits of the dead would rest. The clothing that belonged to the dead was hung near the grave for it was believed that the spirit of the dead would take them away. After several weeks the clothing was given to the best friend of the dead. (April 12, 1937; Atoka, OK)

TOM ASHFORD: The Choctaws usually buried their dead at home, out close to the house, and sometimes in the yard or garden. After they had been buried for sometime a date was set for the funeral, I think they called it a “cry” cause everybody cries, and when the name of the dead was mentioned they sho’ cried. An arbor was usually built at the home of the one buried there. If it was summer time; lots of food was prepared, especially meat... This was sometimes called by the Indians “Big Eat.” (1937; Soper, OK)

### **Grave Houses**

When families were no longer able to bury their dead under their homes, they would build small houses over the gravesites. These were common formations of remembrance on

Choctaw gravesites at Choctaw homes and carry great semblance to the bone house Halbert described. For a long time great care was taken in maintaining the gravesites and grave houses.

BEN BENJAMIN: The Indians in this country did not have a burial ground. When one died, he was buried near the house. No markers were put over his grave, but they would build a little house or a shed over it to keep it from getting rained on, and to keep it preserved until they had their memorial or the cry. Of late years they began to have cemeteries for their dead, and these are mostly at the church grounds now. (June 9, 1937; Snow, OK)

FAMILY OF WILLIAM ATOKA: Lived with one Choctaw woman until October, 1876, when she died. There is a wood shed built over his grave, which is still standing there; being built up on high posts and protected from forest and grass fires. The Choctaw around in the community kept this grave up by looking after it all during the year, until 1900. (July 1, 1937; Atoka County, OK)

JACKSON KARN: My father and William Atoka, Chief of Atoka district, consisting of Blue, Atoka, and Jackfork Counties, were very good friends. Both were Choctaw Indians and influential in Indian courts, churches, and schools. William Atoka moved from Atoka Lake in the fall of 1875 to a place four miles west of what is now Farris, Oklahoma. There he built a log house in Section 10, Township 4 South, Range 10 East, and lived there until October 1878, when he died and was buried there. The Choctaws met in the fall of each year and worked and cleaned around the grave until 1900. This work was done to keep forest fires from burning the buildings off the graves and the home where he lived. (June 22, 1937; Coalgate, OK)

COLLIN SAMPSON: We walked over this burying ground, which is now covered with large trees and comprises what we considered about three acres. It was once fenced but the fence now is rotted down to a few posts and scattered rails. This burying ground has a number of Indian graves over each of which at one time was a small building. There is not much left of these buildings now except the rotting remains of what they once were. There were no grave monuments, only the remains of the little houses that once covered the graves and the ground over most of the graves has become level with the natural growth of vegetation. (June 9, 1937; Wilburton, OK)

### **Choctaw Cries**

Choctaw cries have a relatively simple form whether held at homes or churches. The narrators each have different experiences and perspectives, but all account for the importance of the big meals and meetings that accompanied the cries. Meaning continues to be found in women's roles and in cries. These narratives also show how Choctaw and Christian rituals were intertwined in the funeral tradition.

ELIJAH CULBERSON: My parents were John and Lucy Culberson. Father came from Mississippi at the age of nine in the year of 1830 and located in what is now LeFlore County but was called then Scullyville County. He told me the name Scullyville meant "money town." My mother was born and raised in Arkansas. We had our camp meetings about twelve miles from Scullyville at the Fulsom Chapel. Sometimes we would have these meetings under the brush arbor or in our little church house. Willis Fulsom was the preacher and he spoke both Choctaw and English. The people had their camp houses in which to camp and

they cooked over big fires on the outside. Food was served on a long table made with planks put together upon a scaffold. Everyone was invited to attend these meetings. The women mostly attended the Indian cries a year after the death of a person; however, these dates were always set. As to these cries being for three days as some say, I never knew that a cry would last all three days but the Indians would have a meeting for two days and then on Sunday they would have the cry. (November 4, 1937 North McAlester, OK)

JANCY BELL: We used to have those Indian [cries] at the church most of the time but some times we would go to the grave and have the cry there. It used to be that when an Indian died they would not hold much ceremony over him at the grave but would wait about one year when they would set a date for the memorial, and we would all go over and spend the night there, and the next day at about eleven o'clock the preacher would call the people together and preach the memorial. They would gather around the grave and cry and after the cry they would announce dinner when they would all gather around the table and eat, after which they would all go home. (April 23, 1937; Antlers, OK)

KATE BENJAMIN: When anyone got sick neighbors would gather and have religious meetings. If they got well we would all go home and if they died we would return in about a year and have a Choctaw cry. There would always be lots to eat. (July 14, 1937; Wardville, OK)

EMIZIAH BOHANAN: With reference to the Indian cry of the olden days, when members of the family agreed on time and place, the minister was selected and notified to perform the ceremony and it was customary and was required of the

neighbors to bring with them necessary groceries or other necessities of life such as coffee, sugar, corn meal and different kinds of corn prepared for cooking, while the members and relatives of the deceased would furnish and kill hogs, beef or both and prepare for the occasion. Men and women were selected for each different kind of work and that would be their required work to perform during their stay and no one was allowed to interfere with each others task or detail. I do not know of any instance where a beef or pork was ever barbecued at any of these places, as the rule they had adopted was that depending on the size of crowd in attendance, enough meat was butchered daily for three meals a day and if all meat was consumed during the day the number of beefs or hogs, would be killed the next following day and so on until the service is over. Sufficient meat was butchered daily until after the memorial, before the crowd would be dismissed to return to their homes. This would end the “cry” until time is set by some other of the family who would want to hold a memorial over their deceased loved ones.

(May 10, 1937; Lane, OK)

WILSON JONES: The last Choctaw Cry I visited was in 1896. The Simte girl died three miles northwest of Farris, Oklahoma. Two hundred Choctaw Indians met and built large brush arbor and camped for three days. They made a big fire and joined hands and encircled it, singing and praying and crying for thirty minutes. They would then rest for four or five hours and do the same thing again, going through the routine for two days and nights. (1937; Lane, OK)

POLLY EYACHAHOBEE: My grandfather and grandmother came from Mississippi. When they arrived here they located east of what is now Grant,

Oklahoma...My father and mother died there and were buried there at home, for there was no cemetery to bury them, so they were buried at the house like all other Indians were buried at that time. The nearest church was a Presbyterian Church at Old Goodland. We would go there to attend the meeting. It was a camp meeting. The Indians would camp there and feed the people that came to the church. They sometimes would have a "cry"; that is, if some Indian had died they would have his memorial preached, then they would all cry. This would be on Sunday when their cry would be had. (July 14, 1937; Snow, Oklahoma)

PETER LOMAN: I have attended Choctaw Camp meetings; my parents were Christians; they were all Methodist people so we camped at the meetings every three months, they would have a great meeting and there were lots of Indians then who attended these meetings, and then they would have their cries at the church sometimes and then they would have them at their homes and at their graves. (August 24, 1937; Antlers, OK)

SARAH NOAH: In the olden times, when one of the members dies, usually they were buried in the vacant lot somewhere near the house or, if living near some church, the burial would take place there. The bereaved mother or wife...would go to the grave every morning before breakfast to cry. I have seen mourners that after her return from the grave, she would not take meal at the table with the rest of the family; instead she would remain in her room by herself where no one of the family was permitted to see or to talk to her. Meals would be brought to her. This would continue for two or three weeks at a time. In about six months or a year after the death of the member of the family the surviving family and relatives

would set a date to have a memorial service for the deceased, either at the family residence where the grave is or at some church. Everything of eats would be furnished for the festival, such as barbecued or roast beef, venison or hogs and all different kinds of dish known would be prepared. The ceremony usually took place at eleven o'clock and was conducted by some minister of the church on the day the time was set. Usually the deacon of the church rang the bell slowly and alternately and softly until the mourners would all enter the church in pairs and occupy the front seat, which was reserved for the occasion. After service the congregations would march to the grave where all mourners would cry for the last time and be dismissed. Then would come the feast as everything was ready and table set by the time the ceremony is over. (April 12, 1937; Atoka, OK)

VERINA WESLEY: We used to attend the Indian camp meeting; in fact, we used to camp at the church to help feed the people that came to attend the church. My father was an elder of the church during his lifetime, and we would go and camp with the other Choctaws every three months. I have attended the Indian cries. Some times they would have their cries at the church but most of the time they would have them at the homes where the grave was located. Everyone there took part in the services and they would all get around the grave and cry, kinfolks or not. It is very sad thing to attend one of those cries. I am full blood Choctaw Indian. My parents were full bloods and we lived among our tribe all of our life. My father was a part Chickasaw but he lived with the Choctaws all of his life and died at our old home place and my mother died there and is buried there with my father. (December 1, 1937; Antlers, OK)



FRANK HENRY: It has been changed tremendously in the last, I'd say at least twenty years. I remember as I was growing up, we used to go this burial ceremony and they used to call it a "cry." They had it and I used to go with my mother and grandmother. They used to have this ceremonial burial and feast and the crying and this type of thing, but this has been changed tremendously. In fact, most of our Indian people now are, of course, we have our churches, Baptist churches, Catholics, and other denominations. But they more or less adopted into the modern civilized way of doing those things. Not only the burial ceremony, but practically everything has been changed. I think, if I can remember, grandma used to say that this cry usually, you know, after the person has had a burial, they have a cry. Then, they'll have another cry, maybe, six months later. This goes on for one year. After that, it's over. (June 25, 1971; Choctaw, MS)

LIZZIE E. WOOD: I have attended Indian Camp Meetings where they had every three months and they would camp and feed the people that came to the meeting. They had their cries at some of those meetings, but most of their cries were at the home of the dead. The Choctaws still have those meetings but they are not as many of them as they used to be, they are nearly all dead. (August 18, 1937; Albion, OK)

ELI WILLIAMS: The first school I ever went to was Rock Creek Mission, which was an Indian school due north of Red Oak, Oklahoma. The Reverend Joe James was the teacher, owner, and supervisor of the school, mission, and trading post. It was here we had church every night and about once a month we had what we called a "cry" at the cemetery. We also had a stomp dance about once a month.

This mission is the oldest one in Eastern Oklahoma. I have seen as many as four hundred Indians gathered here at one time during the summer months for one of our meetings. These camp meetings would last from a week to a month. I have known them to kill as many as six or seven hogs and ten beeves [*sic*] for one of the meetings. One thing I can remember real well is the number of dogs.

Everyone had several dogs and always brought them to the meetings with them. The dogs would often get into fight and break up church for a while because everyone would be so interested they would watch the dog fight instead of listening to the preacher. (August 4, 1937; Whitesboro, OK)

JANE COLE: The Indian cry, as the white people called it, was just a memorial after an Indian died. They would have very little ceremony over him when he was buried. After about six months, or maybe a year after he had been buried, then his kin-folks would set a date for his memorial, notify all the Indians they can that they are going to have a memorial on a certain day, then they would fix for it. They would kill a beef or a hog or two, get plenty to eat for the night before the date set, the whole country would come out and camp for the night. They would feed their supper, and after supper they would have preaching. The next day at the hour set for the memorial they would ring a cow bell for them all to get to the place where the memorial was to be had. The preacher would preach the memorial at about eleven o'clock. It was the most saddest meeting anyone would attend. They would go over to the grave, get around it and everybody cried. After that they would be called to dinner; after dinner they would all go home. The Indians called it *Ayuksho*. (April 20, 1937; Antlers, OK)

## **Ritual Decline**

Eventually the ritual of the Choctaw cries began to decline. Sarah Frazier, James Mashaya, and Elizabeth Elaposhabee hint at the reason for the decline of the tradition. Tishie Long dismisses the cries. Their narrations together create an interesting comparative analysis of how values were viewed as shifting.

SARAH FRAZIER: I used to attend the church there; it was a Methodist church and the Choctaws would camp for the meeting about every three months. It was a big camp meeting; they would stay as long as the meeting lasted and it would last for about four or five days. This church was called the Ellis Chapel; it was named after a man of that name. There used to be many Indians who came to this meeting, but they finally all died out and the church died out with the Indians. They don't have any more meetings there now since the church house has been torn down and now the land is all in a farm where the church house used to stand. The Choctaws have quit having any more of their "cries" because the white people who attended them made light of the "cries" so they have quit and don't have them any more. (February 9, 1938; Rufe, OK)

JAMES MASHAYA: I am an Indian Preacher – Methodist Church. I have attended lots of Indian Camp Meetings and I have preached a good many memorials---the white people call it an Indian Cry, of course they [white people] cry, but it is a memorial and not an Indian Cry. When the Indians would have one of those memorials, the white people would gather around and poke fun at them

when it was a serious thing with the Indians. Of course, they did not understand the ceremony that was going on but it seemed to me that they would have the respect for themselves as well as the Indians to stay at home. The Indians no longer have these [cries], and I don't think that they ever will, because the white people make a show out of it. (April 23, 1937; Finley, OK)

ELIZABETH ELAPOSHABEE: We Choctaw Indians still have our camp meetings, but they have quit having their cries. Since the white people came into the country they don't have any more cries like they used to. I guess they are like the white people...once buried they forget him. All of my kinfolks were full blood Choctaw Indians, and I have lived among my own tribe for these many years, and now I am getting old and I don't think that I will stay here very much longer. I an a Six Town Clan they say; all full bloods are the same and they are right now very clannish in their ways. (August 31, 1937; Smithville, OK)

TISHIE LONG: Father had lots of full-blood Choctaw friends. Two families I particularly remember were the War sisters James family. These families lived mostly in the surrounding mountain territory. Every month they would come in to town and sell venison hams for very little. They would stay at our house for a week at a time. Father could speak Choctaw as well as English. We always attended church at High Hill, which is about seven miles southeast of McAlester. Here we would spend the day, taking our lunch with us. I have attended the Choctaw funerals and think it very outrageous when they call a funeral a three day cry as that is not what it is. In those days it was a very hard matter to secure a preacher at the time of a death and [it] was necessary to postpone the funeral until

a preacher could be gotten and in this way the date would be set and on Friday evenings and Saturday we would have a Choctaw meeting and then on Sunday we would have the funeral and naturally the mourners would cry if it was six months or a year after a death. I am in possession of a solid walnut dresser that belonged to my father, also an old Choctaw Bible. (November 17, 1937; McAlester, OK)

Tishie Long presents a narrative that contrasts the majority of other narrator's descriptions of the cries, in a way that hints at the power and effect of displacement on Choctaw values. She curiously describes the full form of a cry, acknowledging the Choctaw meeting, six month waiting period and the Choctaw meeting, but completely dismisses the value of remembrance, by detaching the Choctaw formation of a cry. To her, it is simply a natural human expression. This detachment could be because she has been too far displaced from her Choctaw identity, as she no longer speaks the language, and she distinguishes herself from "full-blood" Choctaw people. Perhaps she feels shame and experienced the ridicule of the colonial settlers at a cry. She also describes her Choctaw Bible as a relic, like the old walnut dresser. Whatever the case, her participation in the American master-narrative is realized. She acknowledges her Choctawness, but attaches no value to it, or any other Choctaw formation that exists in her home. I can only hope that the Choctaw Bible appeared to help someone else in her family remember and revalue their Choctaw identity.

The previous section provided examples of minor aggressions against long standing cultural formations in the Choctaw Diaspora. In the case of Tishie Long, and the diminishment of the Choctaw cries, these aggressions may have served their purpose. Audra Simpson warns of the power of such micro-aggressions and effacements, as they manifest in larger histories: "These historical...effacements of Indigeneity are predicated upon accounts...that become

histories which dialectically informed theories, which then emboldened the laws of nation-states” (Simpson 70). The burial practices of Choctaw people are an example of accounts that have continually displaced ancestors further away from Nanih Waiya, away from the bone houses, away from the home burials, away from the homes, away from the grave houses, and eventually away from the value of remembrance inherent in the Choctaw cries, by legal effacements and by ridicule. The challenge today is in discerning how to reclaim and revalue Choctaw formations, given the inevitability of change, to prevent future effacements, and displacements.

### **Fire**

Today and always, fire helps guide the Choctaw narrative of survival and remembrance. From my most recent personal interaction, in learning of present day funeral wakes in Mississippi to the collection compiled by Halbert, fire has had a role in acts of survival and remembrance and even in between:

According to Choctaw belief, the spirit was supposed to linger four days around the place of his death. During these four days, whether the weather was warm or cold, a fire was kept constantly burning in front of the cabin of the deceased. It was believed that if there was no fire kindled for his benefit, the spirit would become very distressed and angry, especially when the night was cold, dark, and stormy. A bereaved mother on the death of a child would kindle a fire and sit awake by it all the night. The wife would perform the same vigil on the loss of a husband. (HSHP; Box 5 Folder 12)

Other narratives do not speak of the formation of fire as frequently. However, as is evident in Halbert’s account and more so in acts of survival, the presence of fire cannot be detached from its obvious genealogy in the Choctaw narrative. Just as in Halbert’s account,

where fire ushers the deceased from life to death, fire will move the focus of this chapter from remembrance to survival. Fire as a material formation, is present in acts of remembrance, but its role becomes more meaningful in acts of survival. The fire that burns at a Choctaw wake is a part of remembrance, but its role is to specifically serve the spirit of the deceased, to help the spirit survive the long lingering period. In the next narratives, we will learn other roles fire has in the survival of Chahta Alhíha.

### **Survival**

Survival is an important value for Choctaw people, and the narratives that describe acts of survival are quite compelling. This value was not as distinguishable in the initial survey of Choctaw narratives. However, the presence of fire in the narratives began to illuminate the importance of survival. Fire, as I have mentioned already, and many other home formations, such as foods, are assigned significant meaning in acts of survival. There are more complex rituals and knowledge bases described in the following narrations. In reading them we are introduced to individuals with specific knowledge based roles, such as healers and doctors. This is likely the reason why acts of survival have been recounted less, and the reason why they remain important Choctaw narratives to read, because as Wilson asserts, “As Indigenous knowledge is revalued and revived, our people become stronger and we fuel our capacity for meaningful resistance to colonization. The importance of this work, then, cannot be overstated; the recovery of Indigenous knowledge is Indigenous empowerment” (Wilson, “Indigenous Empowerment” 371). In most cases, the value of survival speaks for itself in the narratives—in the face of sickness, war, or displacement. More importantly, the knowledge that the narrators share in these full accounts, assigns significant meaning to home formations and Choctaw homes in the diaspora. This section will feature descriptions of the Pashofa Dance, Herbs/Medicines,

War Dances, and examples of Sharing that have helped Choctaw people survive.

### **Pashofa Dance**

The Pashofa dance is one of the most significant Choctaw rituals, where the value of survival is enmeshed deeply into the home, food, fire, music, dance and individual community members. The detail in these narratives completely underscores the importance of the ritual and it's meaning, and also clarifies much about the form of the dance. Even if, according to Islin Wright, the other narrators have named the dance incorrectly.

ISLIN WRIGHT: There is...another dance called *tanchi pechifah hihla* (crushed or pounded corn dance). This pounded corn is prepared in various meats mixed in the cooking known as *pashofa* in the Chickasaw language or *tanchi lobona*, a Choctaw name. This performance is for the sick patient and is usually asked by the medicine man (*alikchi*) who is attending the sick. The dance though has now been discontinued. It was performed at the request of the medicine man who would lay the patient before the door of the house. When the doctor was called to see a patient, after exercising his skill in the knowledge of medicines know to nature if the patient grew worse, he ordered the *tanchi pechifah hihla*. The messengers would break the news in the community and at the appointed day the friends would assemble. The doctor (*alikchi*) would order a straight line be drawn from the center of the doorway of the house where the sick patient was confined, to a smooth and straight pole fifteen or twenty feet in length that had been firmly set up eight or ten rods from the door. Here two guards (*Tisho*) each armed with a long switch were each stationed at the opposite side of the line. The purpose and



the duty of these two *tisho* were to see that no one should pass or cross the line. No man, beast, chicken, or cat was allowed to cross this line. If the line was accidentally crossed by some man, woman or child, it was immediately known to the medicine man, who at once prepared some solution of medicine and gave it to the one who had crossed the line. Near the pole, where it was set up, a fire was built and a vessel filled with pounded corn and meats was suspended over the fire. The ground near this place would be swept clean on each side of the line to the door. Everything is set for the dance, the bed upon which the patient is lying would be drawn into a position in the room fronting the door to give the patient a clear view of the merry dancers. The tone of the little drum was respondent to the quick strokes of the musician. The *alikchi* would bring two women decorated with ribbons and beads of different colors also having thimbles or rattles made of dry turtle shells tied to their shoes or skirts of their dresses. He would place them on each side of the line, while several men stationed themselves on the opposite side of the line. The *alikchi* returned to his duties in the sick room, the musician starts the music and the dancing begins. The men were to remain only on one side, while the women dance, each being extremely cautious not to step over its magic bounds. One and two women only dance at the same time; when tired they gave place to others to whom were handed the bells or *luksi hakshup* (turtle shells) take from their ankles and dresses, which the fresh dancers attached to their persons. The leader or director of the *tanchi pechifah* was called *Tikla heka* (first leader). The dance usually began about two hours before sundown and continued until dark when they would adjourn for the *pashofa* feast. After the

refreshment, dancing was resumed but in the house instead of the yard where it was kept up until late hour of the night. The tinkling and rattling of the thimble bells and turtle shells mingling with the music and the voices of the dancers chanting E-yah-he-yah-he-yah, E-yah-he-heh was the cry to scare the evil spirits away. (December 9, 1937; Snow, OK)

SARAH CAPPS: Everyone went to the sick person's home like there was to be a "social." A fire was built about fifteen feet in front of the front door. The sick person's bed was pulled to the door in such a way that the sick person could see the fire. Stakes were driven into the ground from the fire to the door and strings tied to these stakes making a lane. The Indians danced around the house and fire, but did not cross the stakes, all night. The sick person was better by morning or was given up—and usually died. The medicine man was a very busy person all during the night. He gave orders to the other Indians, keeping the line right. He burned some herbs in the fire and walked down the lane from the fire to the patient. Never was I allowed in the room but I believe he put something on her like anointing with olive oil. He used herbs from the woods, wore terrapin shells that rattled when he moved, and sang some songs. The first time somebody started to cross the lane he was warned not to cross it, as that would kill the curing power of the medicine. If he crossed it he would be shot but everyone knew their rules and I never knew of anyone having to be shot, but I don't doubt for one minute that they would shoot the person who broke the rule. (November 18, 1937; Dewar, Oklahoma)

LAURA SCOTT: The Pashofa dances were held for the sick to drive away the evil spirits, so they might be cured. Some of the Indians would dance while others played the drum made from an old time jelly bucket with a hide stretched over one end. They would have terrapin shells fixed on their legs, which made lots of noise. They also cooked terrapins to eat, by putting them in the fire alive. They trained their dogs to catch them, as the Indian liked to eat terrapin very much.

(August 3, 1937; Pittsburg, OK)

IDA MCNEELY: We lived close to an Indian woman who had a daughter about my age and we have gone to Choctaw Indian sick dances. When some Indian was sick, they would gather at the place where the person was sick, and in the front yard they would stretch a rope around a fire and would have a big pot of all kinds of meats cooked up and thickened with corn meal, they would beat their drums for three days and at the end of this time, the medicine man would come out of the house, and jump the fire and run off into the woods. Then two Indian girls would come out, dressed in beads and terrapin shells, and dance around the fire as soon as they danced around the fire then everybody went to dancing. After this was over they would wait three days and start this over again and they would keep this up for three times if the sick one did not get well, they would say the witch had the sick one and they would let them alone. I have seen them eat this stuff they had fixed up with out of spoons made out of cow's horns. (February 23, 1937;

Pauls Valley, OK)

### **Herbs/Medicine**

Choctaw narrators describe numerous medicines and the people with different roles in preparing medicines with various herbs and herbal mixtures. The description of the Pashofa dance, mentioned the *alikchi*, or Choctaw doctors and their role in the rituals. The narrations featured here focus on medicines prepared for lesser sicknesses.

NICHOLAS BILLY: They suffered much during their trip on account of sickness, but as far as food was concerned they did not suffer as there was plenty of game in the country...Very often in case of sickness of someone in the family, they would stop and camp at some suitable place and remain there until the patient was able to continue on the journey. There was always someone in the tribe or community who was an herb doctor and who would wait on the patient and treat him until he would recover unless in extreme cases. (June 1, 1937; Coalgate, OK)

SUSAN LEWIS: One treatment was to sweat a sick person; I remember we used to gather a weed called “ice weed” and make a pot full of tea out of it. Then the older folks would take the steaming pot of tea into the sick room and use it to make the patient sweat. They had some sort of ceremony that they went through, too; something they had learned from the Choctaws, but I never was allowed to be present, being just a child, and so I don’t know what the ceremony was. (January 19, 1938; McAlester, OK)

AMANDA JAMES SMITH: I am full-blood Choctaw Indian. My mother had her own small mortar for beating corn, I used to help her fix “Tomfullah”. She would beat the corn in the wooden mortar and after fanning the husks out of it until it was clean she would soak as much as she thought she would need and put

meat in with it and boil it. We used pork meat. Then we would put some of the corn in a stone jar with water over it and set it close to the fireplace and let it sour; this was called “sofka.” My mother made some of our medicine. If we were sick, she would use a paste made of persimmon and flour baked for a laxative and give us a small amount when needed. For colds or croup she would use broom-weed roots boiled and take the juice and sweeten it with brown sugar or honey to suit the taste. I remember one time, my sister and two brothers and I built a big fire and caught some dry land terrapins, roasted and ate them. As they tried to crawl off we would throw them back on the fire with a stick. When they were roasted we would take the hull off and eat the meat. I don’t know why we did this; mother always had plenty on the table to eat. (April 10, 1937; Pauls Valley, OK)

ISHAM MORRIS: I am an Indian doctor. I have not practiced very much for when the white doctors got in here and after statehood they made a law that no one could practice medicine unless they had a license to do so. But I have practiced a little along, for when the Indians got sick they send for me and then I go and do what I can for them. The Indians do not want to have a white doctor much—they don’t like their medicine, so they send for me. I go and do what I can for them. I have not lost many patients during my practice. I used bark, herbs, roots, and leaves of certain kinds, may apple roots, blackroot for stomach ailments, and several kinds of roots. I have different kinds of herbs and other things for different kind of sickness, and I have cured people that were given up by the white doctors. About pay, I get whatever they give me. I don’t charge them anything but if they give me anything I take it. I sometimes make pretty

good, not in money, but they give me a hog, or a pony, and sometimes I get corn and various things they so mind to give me. (April 26, 1937; Corinne, OK)

### **War Dances**

The War dance and Scalp dance are commonly mentioned dances that were held to ensure the survival of Choctaw people who were away at war. These accounts reference dances that were held during the U.S. Civil War.

SARAH FRAZIER: I used to hear Mother tell about the war dance the Choctaws had during the war; she said that when a young man got ready to join the army they would have one of those war dances and they would dance all night for him and the next morning he would get on his pony and start off for the war and sometimes they would have the scalp dance. She said that she did not dance then and did not see the dances but that she used to hear of the dance. The Choctaw people do not dance now at all; it seems that they have quit dancing of any kind and they don't seem to care but very little for any amusement of any kind. I have not seen any dance by the Choctaws for a long time and they don't play ball like they used to. I have seen them play ball years ago but they don't now; they have just quit I guess. I am a full blood Choctaw Indian and all of my people were full bloods and lived among their tribes until their death and they are buried at the old home place behind the house. (February 9, 1938; Rufe, OK)

EASTMAN WARD: My grandfather and grandmother left Mississippi, and they said that they had a tough time getting over to this country. They said that it took them a long time in getting over here; that lots of Indians died coming over: that they had nothing to eat on the way, and but very few clothes to keep them warm;

and that they were driven like they were a bunch of cattle, they had no mercy of them at all. They finally landed in Little Rock, Arkansas, and they stayed there for some time. There my father was born and they then moved on, and landed in this country...He used to tell us that during the war they sure had a hard time; they would go several days without anything to eat, and lots of times they had to sleep on wet ground. The Indians back at home would pull off the war dance when the Indian soldiers would kill one of the enemy and send the scalp back home. They would dance all night. They did this every time they got a scalp from the front. The way they got scalps was that they would send some one from the camp wherever they were, he would bring the scalp back home, then they would have those war dances. (May 1, 1937; Miller, OK)

### **Sharing**

Leroy Ward and Jimpson Davenport both tell interesting stories of sharing that embrace the value of survival. Leroy Ward shares an experience from the Civil War. Jimpson Davenport explains how his family opened up their home to help other Choctaw people get by. It seems appropriate to assume that this type of sharing of resources was quite common throughout the diaspora, for a people committed to surviving.

LEROY WARD: The Civil War caused some of the Morcs to change their names. Grandfather Henry changed his name from Morc to Morse and he fought on both sides. He was heading for the Northern Recruiting office when he was conscripted for the Southern side and served on the Southern side for eighteen months. During a battle, a friend slipped him a Northern suit. He always called it his stolen suit and he fought for three hours on the Northern side...The reason he

wanted to fight on the Northern side was because he had a brother who was mean to his negroes and Grandfather Henry knew that his brother would have to release his slaves if the North won the war. (October 9, 1937; Henryetta, Oklahoma)

JIMPSON DAVENPORT: There used to be lots of Indians who stayed at our house nearly all the time. They worked for father on the farm, but most of them just lay around for their feed. It was just like home to them, some of them would stay for a week at a time, did nothing but eat. My father didn't say anything to them; he would let them stay as long as they wanted to. We had corn and all kinds of stock which was not worth much, so he would get them to kill a hog, or a beef any time they wanted to, I guess this was custom with them at that time, and they still do that now; of course they don't have the stock now that the Indians had at that time, but they still go from house to house and stay as long as they want to, then go home. The Indian house is open to all who wants to come and stay a few days. (June 14, 1937; Darwin, OK)

Early in this work Bill Coffey, spoke of his family's displacement. Bill Coffey also shares his families experience in sharing, to help others survive. He had a personal and political investment in the value of his connection to the Mississippi homeland, and made a career out of assisting other displaced Indigenous people. In this analysis, Bill Coffey is the most remote in his temporal and spatial distance from Nanih Waiya. He also did not speak of the ceremonial home formations that most narrators have been aware of. I choose to end this chapter with Bill Coffey though, because his interpretation of the values of survival and remembrance, despite his location, are most connected to the Choctaw home. In the first chapter, Bill Coffey embraced the value of remembrance by describing the importance of the old home that his great grandfather



built after they were displaced to Missouri. He does this in the context of educating the reader about traditional Choctaw housing styles. The home that he describes is the most permanent and personal formation that connects him to his family's history of displacement, and as such, it connects him directly to the Choctaw homeland. His diasporic trajectory did not connect him to the same formations that the majority of Choctaw narrators have spoken of in this chapter, but Coffey has clearly attached the value of remembrance to the home formation. Here he attaches the value of survival to his home as well.

BILL COFFER: I found that my mother instilled in us our Indianness...When I was a kid during the Depression, every bum on the railroad knew where our house was. They knew that if we had a hand-out at all, they would get it. We never worried about people stealing from us. Of course we didn't have anything for them to steal. We made out with what we had, we shared it with whoever needed it. I can hardly remember a time that we didn't have somebody living with us, not even related to us. If people needed a home, if they needed a meal, or a place to sleep at night, or if they needed a place for six months or a year, they knew that our place was always open. (November 22, 1974; Fullerton, CA)

Coffey's narrative, and the career he made in supporting young students and community groups, shows his indiscriminate assumption of the value of survival. Coffey assigns this trait to the lessons of his Choctaw mother, and as something he learned growing up. To him, creating a safe home space for people that are struggling represents survival. Coffey is completely aware of how his family was displaced, along with so many others that he encountered in his diasporic trajectory, and so, takes full responsibility for the personal and political nature of his work in the Choctaw Diaspora. He does this because he values his Choctaw identity as much as he values

the survival of others that have faced similar acts of displacement, and he wants to help people know their own nation's narrative, the way he knows his.

For many in academia, such as Bill Coffer, the acts of survival and remembrance are paramount. Angela Wilson explains the value of ensuring the remembrance and survival of Indigenous narratives: "At the dawn of the twenty-first century the recovery of Indigenous knowledge is a conscious and systematic effort to revalue that which has been denigrated and revive that which has been destroyed. It is about regaining the ways of being that allowed our peoples to live a spiritually balanced, sustainable existence within our ancient homelands for thousands of years ("Indigenous Empowerment" 359). For the Choctaw people, Tom Mould has consciously returned the stories he collected, to them.<sup>3</sup> I believe this conscious act, of increasing the accessibility of Choctaw narratives and oral sources, supports this work. In academia and in the world, there is still work to be done in uncovering and illuminating oral histories. But this is not the most important work. Mould explains why it is only the first step when documenting oral sources: "Written to preserve and educate, it celebrates not only the stories themselves in their complexity and variety, but the people who have created, narrated, and passed them on. For in the end, it is they who must continue to preserve these tales, not by reading them, but by telling them" (Ixii). In Wilson's words, the stories must be revalued. This chapter has attempted to uncover and share narratives that can contribute to the decolonizing acts of recovering and sharing Indigenous knowledge. How it is revalued is up to the hearer.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term settler society to name the colonial settlers, or non-Indigenous Americans, but most narrators simply say "whites" or "white people."

<sup>2</sup> This example is a point of concern regarding the interviewers of the IPP Collection. In many narratives from this collection the same themes arise often, and the narrator's representation of cultural formations like the Choctaw cries may have been prompted more often than other formations. This doesn't mean

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that the Choctaw cries were misrepresented, just that the interviewers may have led the prominence of this formation in the collection.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from providing a comprehensive collection of stories, all the proceeds from the work *Choctaw Tales* go directly to the Choctaw language programs in Mississippi.

## CONCLUSION

EMMA COBB WILLIAMS: Long time ago we have big meeting, three hundred or four hundred people come at Philadelphia Church in Goodwater. Bring sho' good eat. Some time preach all night, sometimes pray all night...One man preach while 'nother man sleep. Then have lots of coffee and biscuit for breakfast. White people from Arkansas bring flour bread. Choctaw make sour bread, pashofa, shuck bread, hominy, and Tom Fuller. Camp meeting last long time, maybe three four week. Choctaw kill beef. Some time pig, not much though in summer time. Kill deer, turkey, squirrel. Lot's to eat. Sho' good eat too. Wish meeting come back, sometime. Have good time. (December 29, 1937; Oklahoma)

It is possible that the most important home formation in the Choctaw Diaspora is food. These days, at Choctaw funeral wakes in Mississippi, people will bring food to honor and support the family of the recently deceased. Hominy and Shuck Bread, or in the Choctaw language *Tanchi Labona* and *Banaha*, are still popular at Choctaw festivals and fairs. *Tanchi Labona* was the most important part of the *Tanchi Pechifah Hihla* healing ceremony. Choctaw foods have significant meaning for every Choctaw gathering, whether for survival, remembrance, or celebration. In fact, some narrators such as John Folsom, Vinson Camp, Emiziah Bohanon and Robert Krebs give meaningful, enlightening reflections on Choctaw foods.

JOHN NATHANIEL FOLSOM: Unlike the rest of the Indians of my tribe, we have never had sour bread, hominy, or any kind of Indian dish as most families had. Instead, our every day food consisted principally of biscuits, coffee, sugar, meat, and garden vegetables. I enjoy the regular Indian dishes very much and the

only time when I saw this kind of good eats was when I attended Indian church meetings. (May 25, 1937; Caney, OK)

VINSON A. CAMP: Boys just learning how to kill turkeys and to hunt deer were not permitted to shoot any other game like squirrels or rabbit or quail. The only time these were killed was when one of the members of the family who has been sick...wanted either squirrel soup or fried quail. (May 11, 1937; Farris, OK)

EMIZIAH BOHANON: I knew of a woman who was an herb doctor. My only wish was that she would treat me so I can be a great hunter and with this in my mind, I went to her home and explained to her my mission. After a long conversation I was told that after the treatment all of my hair will turn gray but I insisted and took the treatment. She went and gathered some kind of weeds and smoked me with this herb once a day for four days. She told the truth as after the treatment my hair turned gray as she said it would and today my hair is snow hair caused from this treatment. This was in the year 1907, and after instructed what to do and how, I have never missed killing a deer. I kill only what I need because I was taught to never kill a deer for sport or wasted. After knowing where they range I can go to the place and wait. After a few moments I can see one coming up the hill or down depending on where I am hiding and one would walk as close as ten and fifteen steps from me and of course he was killed and today there is no trouble for me to kill when others fail. (May 10, 1937; Lane, OK)

ROBERT C. KREBS: When one of the Tribe died, a date was set for the “cries” and at the appointed time, Indians for miles around would attend. White people who were neighbors and friends, also attended, some of the Indians would go real

early, and do the cooking which consisted of [Pashofa] (corn & pork cooked together) [Banaha] (different kinds of meat cooked together) and kettle pies which were cooked similar to the cobbler pie, we now cook. They would all gather around the grave and cry. If it should be a man that died, his wife would belong to the tribe from the time of his death until the “cries” were over, then she would be set free or could remain with the tribe, which ever she may choose. At a man’s death, his personal belongings, such as his hat, boots, pants, and sixshooter were buried with him, salt and pepper was also placed in the coffin. The salt and pepper was put there, so when he arrived at the Happy Hunting Ground, he would have it to use when he killed something to eat. (March 1, 1937; Muskogee, OK)

John Folsom laments his limited access to “good eats.” Vinson Camp offers a glimpse of the customs related to food, and when the customs were broken. Emiziah Bohanon discloses to what “gray” ends he went for an assured meal. Robert Krebs describes foods at the Choctaw “cries,” both in and out of the coffin. All of the narrators including Emma Williams show sincere appreciation for the Choctaw foods they ate and the settings where they had them. The enlightening and uplifting nature of these narrations articulate the most important element heard in all of the Choctaw voices in this thesis. They bind the value systems explored here directly to the Choctaw home. Each Choctaw person that participates in an act of survival, remembrance, or coming together decisively connects Choctaw formations to their home, regardless of where they are in the Choctaw Diaspora.

From this place of Choctaw agency and diasporic subjectivity, I believe Nina Asher appropriately assigns the most important component in the overall project of *reading* as it has occurred in this thesis. She says, “the work of writing home/decolonizing text(s) entails not only

our self-reflexive efforts to get past binaries of self and other, colonizer and colonized but also the commitment to transformation in social and educational contexts. In other words, the work of decolonization needs to occur in both the inner/individual and outer/systemic realms” (Asher 10). Jason Black describes this form of recounting as “Native Moral Inheritance,” or participating in work in contemporary times as a method for insuring that our ancestor’s work and struggles were not undertaken in vain (73). Asher and Black are assigning personal responsibility to all Choctaw people today, to connect to the Choctaw formations that still exist, just as Choctaw ancestors have exemplified throughout the vast trajectories of the Choctaw Diaspora.

The research and analysis conducted for this thesis project can determine only one absolute, that there is no singular trajectory to follow in assuming the responsibility of “Native Moral Inheritance” in Choctaw Diaspora analysis. The non-static nature of the Chahta Alhiha, as evidenced by Choctaw narrators, is the most beautiful element of an expansive diasporic culture. As a result, the idea of a home formation has shifted significantly for me, and because there is still so much interpretation to be done with Choctaw oral sources, it would seem impossible for a different researcher to arrive at the same analytical conclusions.

Therefore, the most important outcomes were to increase the visibility of these narratives, and create intersections for interpretation and analysis in critical discourse. By framing them within decolonization discourse they have added Choctaw voices, not just as storytellers but also as theorists in a complicated discourse. Andrea Smith, helps bring this approach together by determining that “[n]ative communities today cannot replicate their precolonial formations because Native nations are and always have been nations that change and adapt to the surrounding circumstances. However, our understanding that it was possible to order society

without structures of oppression in the past tells us that our current political and economic system is anything but natural” (“Settler Colonialism” 50). Smith, aligned with critical thinkers that are taking time to honor the stories of their Indigenous nations in the past, hopes that “[w]hile these visions may be critiqued for being utopian or romanticizing, their importance today is not so much that they were true of all Native communities or that Native communities were perfect. Rather, the fact that any memories of alternative social organization exist at all helps denormalize our current social structure. If we lived differently before, we can live differently in the future” (50).

With so much to still be explored in the Choctaw Oral History, even minute formations can be looked to for visions of different ways of being. Halbert may be romantically generalizing below, but his detailed account of engagement among Choctaw men, carries a familiar value system and celebrates taking time to come together.

The Choctaws like all other Indians, always travelled in single file. If two men meeting while travelling should wish to engage in conversations, they would sit down on the ground facing each other and begin to talk. If one should have a pipe and tobacco, he would fill the pipe, light it, take a few whiffs, and pass it to his friend, who, after taking a few whiffs would pass it back to the owner. The pipe during the entire conversation would thus alternate from one to the other.

If two parties of any size should meet while traveling, they would sit down facing each other, as to form a circle and carry on their conversation. Should any in the crowd happen to have a pipe with tobacco, it was lighted and the pipe passed around the circle, each one taking a few whiffs. When the tobacco in the pipe was exhausted, the pipe was refilled, relighted, and again made its circuits.



The strict Choctaw etiquette was observed in these meetings. Only one talked at a time and he was never interrupted. When he had finished, after a short silence, another would begin his talk. In this decorous manner they entertained each other until the circle broke up and separated.

Among the Choctaw of the eighteenth century, smoking was the only way in which tobacco was used, and it was thus used by men alone. The tobacco was often mixed with dried sweetgum leaves. (HSHP Box 5, Folder 8)

The space of engagement described here is one that values cordiality and male camaraderie, adds ritual to acts of communication, and teaches forms of respect. I believe wholeheartedly that these are the types of visions that Andrea Smith is calling for a return to. Not the material formations, especially if they are unhealthy, but the value systems they represent. Le Roy Arrington describes an adaptation to the last tradition, sharing an uplifting shift that connects the old tradition Halbert described, but more importantly, represents self-determination and survival.

LE ROY ARRINGTON: Mother is 107 years old, eats three hearty meals a day, very active and still smokes an old clay pipe twice a day. She used to raise her own tobacco, and when she would get without [she] would dry sumac leaves and smoke them. (June 1, 1937; Durant, OK)

### **Self Determination**

Choctaw ancestors, Choctaw scholars, Choctaw nations, and Choctaw people have continually been self-determined in their efforts to survive. Along the way there have been innumerable transformations in Choctaw identity. This will not stop. Nor does it need to. James Clifford, whose significant theoretical moves have supported my articulation of the Choctaw

Diaspora, shows awareness of the vitality and complexity of Indigenous cultures, and provides a much better theoretical starting point that overturns many of the theories that simplify indigeneity or fail to consider it. His work also calls for continual interpretation and re-examination when change is the most consistent factor:

All-or-nothing, fatal-impact notions of change tend to assume that cultures are living bodies with organic structures. So, for example, indigenous languages, traditional religions, or kinship arrangements, may appear to be critical organs, which if lost, transformed, or combined in novel structures should logically imply the organism's death. But indigenous societies have persisted with few, or no, native language speakers, as fervent Christians, and with "modern" family structures, involvement in capitalist economies, and new social roles for women and men. "Inner" elements have, historically, been connected with, "exterior" forms, in processes of selective, syncretic transformation. ("Articulations" 478)

To be syncretic in research with the transformations that our subject and subjectivity endure, we must all be self-determined to find the right analytical course to follow. I surely had to be careful about generalization when considering such a wide research terrain and thankfully I had some guidance from my own Choctaw Nation.

Truly, the most significant and influential formations that remain in most Choctaw homes are news media. Any member of the Oklahoma and Mississippi Choctaw Nations has monthly access to their respective news publications, the *Biskinik* (formerly the *Bishinik*) in Oklahoma, and the *Choctaw Community News* in Mississippi. These news publications are available directly to the majority of Choctaw people, and in the past few years have become available to anyone via the Internet. Although they focus mostly on local news within the nations, these news

media resources create threads of information, directed by political, religious, cultural, and public information sources that unify Choctaw people in popular Choctaw discourses. They also lead to the further creation of Choctaw formations in homes, because they continually provide Choctaw people with research and information about cultural traits, changes in political and public structures, and opportunities for shared community activities in Choctaw communities. The value of this single gesture, a consistent contribution on behalf of Choctaw nations, is the continual growth of Choctaw formations in the Choctaw Diaspora.

It was in the *Biskinik* that I learned of the *Henry S. Halbert Papers* collection in Alabama. And while I was conducting research there, I was informed that the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has made monthly trips to scan the collection for the Choctaw Nation archives. Soon, many more of the stories held there will be available to the Choctaw Diaspora. It is an exciting time and hopefully the decolonizing actions of reading and reclaiming, will be less academic diatribe and more community development and cultural enrichment. In either case, stories will become more complete and meaningful. For example, by following the lead of my own Choctaw Nation, I was able to juxtapose an old story from the *Henry S. Halbert Papers* and find new meaning in a more recent iteration of the Choctaw creation story recounted by Henry Willis:

Many years ago, two brothers, Chahta and Chickasaw, listened to the prophecy of a prophet shaman and he led the Choctaws, who lived in the west, to move toward the east.

They walked through hot and cold days and nights; it was a harsh year.

One night, a white dog appeared to them. At night, wherever the shaman staked his staff, the white dog would sleep at the base of it. And on the morn, he would be up, and, it was said, he was always facing the east.

Sometimes they called the dog 'white dog' or 'war dog'; others called him 'miracle dog.'

There are many sayings and writings about what happened to the white dog. Some say when they were crossing the Mississippi they made a raft for him and the river carried him off. Some say an enemy tribe killed him, and some say he joined the Chickasaws.

This is what I was told. One morning the shaman planted his staff somewhere. There, where it was standing erect, they found the white dog lying dead. And so it is said, if you look up into the sky you can see the white dog's tracks (which are also known as the Milky Way). (Willis, "The White Dog" 188)

From Willis' story many Choctaw people have known of the White Dog, *Ofi Tohbi*. In recounting this story, Willis extolls the White Dog for its spiritual guidance and virtue.

The Milky Way is known among the Choctaw as "Ofi Tohbi I hina," The White Dog's Road. The writer...has been informed by an aged Choctaw, who had an imperfect recollection of the myth that it came from a white dog which stole a bag of meal from a hunter living up in the sky, and in running with it across the heavens, the sack became untied, and the meal was scattered leaving a broad white trail, which from that day has been known as the white dog's road. (HSHP Box 5, Folder 3)

In the story Halbert documented, the White Dog, was in fact a spiritual guide, but its presence in the cosmos is audaciously less virtuous.

## Decolonizing Imperatives

In 2011 there are still Choctaw stories to be found, retold and remembered and Choctaw formations to be reconsidered from narratives that carry back to the initial Choctaw removals of the 1830s and beyond. Taiiaki Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, cognizant of the never-ending threat of erased history and shifting displacements, have created imperatives to guide the work of Indigenous Peoples committed to decolonization, and that have guided the analysis in this project. They clearly and simply define next steps: “Living within such political and cultural contexts, it is remembering ceremony, returning to homelands and liberation from the myths of colonialism that are the decolonizing imperatives” (Alfred, Corntassel 601). Kevin Motes has re-articulated these imperatives as a call for Chahta Alhiha: “As long as a particular element is remembered by even a few, it can be resurrected and reemployed. Beauty, genius, deep spirituality, and profundity fill the Choctaw cultural warehouse, and we Choctaws can and still do draw upon these to meet the needs of a world that continues to transform before our eyes” (240).

I have attempted to embrace this call by speaking directly of paths that lead to Nanih Waiya, by finding and sharing the remembrances of Choctaw ceremonies, and by listening to Choctaw people who have epitomized survival through every colonial formation they faced. More than anything else this work reminds of the importance of coming together. For Choctaw communities, intersections remain to share lessons of the past that may help to improve the health of Choctaw people, instill greater pride in heritage, and bring back roles for children, women, and men that strive to grow the Choctaw values of survival and remembrance.

The last narrative in this work is an extended narrative compiled by Henry Halbert. Halbert prefaces, explaining “[t]his account of the Choctaw war ceremonies was given to the

writer in 1880, by James Porter, of Neshoba County, a Choctaw then about seventy five years of age, who stated that in early life he took a special interest in learning all these details from old Choctaw warriors” (Box 4, Folder 17). It is a final lesson from a Choctaw elder on the value of listening to the voices of Choctaw narrators. In this narration the Choctaw chief calls upon his warriors; he calls them to his home to prepare for action.

In this thesis the narrators are our ancestors and they have issued a resolute call to action. They are calling for us to come home.

### **Call to Action**

In the ancient days when a Choctaw chief wished to raise a war party for a campaign against the enemies of his country, he sent a messenger around among his warriors, bidding them assemble on a certain day at an appointed place, generally near his house. The messenger carried with him a number of small broken sticks, either “foli kaua,” broken switches, or “oshi kaua,” broken canes. On summoning a warrior, the messenger presented him a bundle of these small sticks, which represented the number of days between the day of the summons and the day of the appointment or rendezvous. By throwing away a stick every day, the warrior could make no mistake in the time, as the day on which the last stick was thrown away was the day of the meeting. On the appointed day, the warriors armed and equipped, and with their families, promptly made their appearance on the muster ground. The chief went among them and made his selections for the war-path. Thirty was the usual number chosen. The chief in making his selection put to each man a set question: “Nakni chia ho?” Are you a brave? To which an affirmative response of course would be given. Among the

warriors was one man specially chosen, to whom was given the name “Issish,” which means Blood. As night approaches the warriors assembled at the “ahihla,” or dancing ground, which was lighted up by the blaze of lightwood fires, and where their families were already in attendance.

The thirty chosen warriors, plumed, painted, and stripped naked with the exception of the breech clout, now arrange themselves in three parallel files, ten men in each file, facing once of the cardinal points, generally the south. The issish is at the head of the central file. Every warrior wears, suspended from his neck in front, a small buckskin bag, and below his right knee, a small bell fastened with a buckskin garter. All except the issish carries a tomahawk in his right hand.

The issish, who is the master of the coming ceremonies, carries a drum. Everything being ready, the issish says “Ia Lishke,” I am going, to which the warriors respond with “Omeh.” The issish now steps forward, tapping his drum, and the three files, each man holding his tomahawk poised horizontally in his right hand, and keeping time to the tapping of the drum, now march about sixty paces to the south; thence they turn and march sixty paces to the east; thence sixty to the north, thence the same distance to the west, to the point of departure, thus completing the square. In this march the issish and the warriors sing a short song. The outside of the square is thronged with spectators. Four times do they thus march around the square, the issish tapping his drum and the warriors holding their tomahawks poised at arm’s length. A halt is made at the northwest corner at

the completion of the fourth round. The father, mother or some near relative now approaches each warrior and makes a red mark on his back.

This ceremony over, the issish again taps his drum, and four times do the again, with tomahawks poised, march around the square with the song and refrain. Again a halt is made at the northwest corner. The issish now leaves his position, goes along the left hand side of the central file, and makes a red mark on the back of each warrior. After making the mark, he takes a small bag of red paint out of the pouch which he wears and presents it to the warrior, who deposits it in the small pouch suspended from his neck. When the issish has served all the men of this file, he returns the same way along their left hand side, goes to the head of the right hand file, and goes through the same ceremony with the men of this file, moving along their left sides, then returns the same route and goes to the leader of the left hand file, and serves this file in exactly the same manner as the first two, then returns along their left sides, and assumes his position at the head of the central file.

Again he taps his drum, and with poised weapons, four times again is the circuit made, with the same song and refrain. A third halt is made at the north corner. A prophet now comes forth from amid the spectators with a bowl of black drink (ishko lusa), in his right hand and a buffalo horn spoon (yanash ishtimpa) in his left. He first comes to issish, ladles out a spoonful of black drink, and presents it, which issish drinks forthwith. He then goes along the files of the warriors, exactly in the same manner as issish did and gives each man a spoonful of the exhilarating black drink. This ceremony over, the drum taps, the warriors poise



their tomahawks, and now without singing the warriors move along the line of the square to the southwest corner. When they have advanced halfway along the line which runs to the east, issish chants a new song: “Ia li hokut ik sullo hokmat ula la he oke.” I go, if I do not die I will come back, to which the warriors respond with – “ik sa showo hokmut ula la he oke.” If I am not a corpse, I will come back.

While singing this song all move backward with the backstep until they reach the southwest corner. Then without singing, they move forward again, and when they have reached the middle of the line running north, they sing again the same song, moving again with the back step until they reach the southeast corner.

Again they move forward, and when the middle of the line running to the west is reached, the same song is chanted with the back step to the northeast corner, then the forward march is resumed and continued to the northwest corner. Here again a halt is made. The prophet again comes forward, makes a short talk, bids them be ready for the war-path tomorrow, and then dismisses them, the warriors giving a finale to the ceremonies with a tremendous war whoop.

The remainder of the night is passed by the assembly in general revelry and feasting. The next morning the chosen warriors all present themselves to the chief, painted, armed, and provisioned for the war-path. (1880, Neshoba County, MS)

*Nakni chia ho?*

## PERSONAL NARRATIVE

In the fall of 2009, I moved to Mississippi to live on the Choctaw homeland and to begin learning the Choctaw language. This was a radical move considering I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and I had no family base there, and with regard for the language, it is a completely different dialect from the Oklahoma Choctaw dialect. The decision really hinged on the fact that Choctaw people in Mississippi still use the language in every day-to-day setting, and it seemed the only way to be fully immersed. In Oklahoma there are extensive language classes in many communities and with extensive Choctaw literature and other resources, but I decided I wanted to take a grassroots approach. In the back of my mind I also felt that I might find a different kind of inspiration to finish this thesis project. My original project, to conduct interviews about displacement, with Indigenous people in Los Angeles, was not ready to happen and I definitely needed new direction. So, I made the move and after a year of making contacts, building relationships, and finding a job in a Choctaw community, this thesis emerged.

My work has definitely received support and grown in unexpected ways because of my proximity to Nanih Waiya and the people that I have the privilege to learn from everyday. There have been many stories, personal interactions and personal experiences that have allowed me to witness the continuing Choctaw formations I have spent much time trying to understand through these oral histories. I learn new Choctaw words every day and see the cultural elements I recognize from my youth, like stickball sticks, with new appreciation, because I see them in their appropriate cultural context. I do not know if I could have read or understood the words of the narrators in this work if I was not in the appropriate Choctaw homeland.

This is what I mean. The stories of every narrator contain a power that I am just starting to understand. I was attuned to this back in Los Angeles when trying to re-engage with the Los

Angeles community to conduct research for this thesis. On a number of occasions, simply working within an agency didn't provide me with the visibility that allowed community members to trust or identify with the words I was telling them about my research project. Some community members gladly agreed to participate and even offered to help if they could in any way. Others made comments like, "You've been back in town but where have you been? We never see you." Some actually made concerted efforts to persuade me to make certain commitments to community projects. Not just as a speaker or supporter but as a volunteer using their education for the good of the community. I did become very involved, but this was still not enough to gain trust, because this was expected regardless of my research.

The next step was to actually build, or re-build relationships with people beyond the weekly meetings or monthly community forums. One family insisted that I meet and talk deeply with them about the point of my project, the kind of questions I was asking, and how it was all going to be used. They told me that I had to build their trust before an interview would be allowed, and that they didn't know when that was going to happen. This was a humbling part of the relationship building that was not considered into the methodologies of the project at all.

As it continued I learned more and more, and not by my own realization, that I was not prepared to ask questions about displacement. I was not prepared to be responsible for the expressions of trauma that would be released, especially if I didn't have a plan beyond using the interviews for research. This brought me to a juncture leading in two directions: first that that project needs to happen but not with me as the lead, it needs to happen from a grassroots place and be lead by the larger community. The second direction, which had to be followed first, leads me to understanding my own families experience with displacement. To do this I needed to find and hear the voices of Choctaw people who could help me understand the displacements and

traumas of my own ancestors, and more importantly the healing that allowed me to know and comprehend my identity as a Choctaw person who grew up so far away from Nanih Waiya.

The work behind this project is my own decolonization narrative. I was led to Nanih Waiya by a deep urge to bring the Choctaw language back into my family. I have returned to the homeland, and in this place Choctaw voices have begun to teach me. It has allowed me to honor Choctaw ancestors in my academic work, by moving away from a generalized discourse in Indigenous studies to specific threads in Choctaw discourse. It has helped me understand worldview with a Choctaw lens. It has helped me know how to prepare for the next steps I want to take in my education, or personal development. I believe it is a good start in preparing for harder projects to come, especially if I want to continue work in Los Angeles, the home of the largest population of displaced Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

Other parts of my own decolonization narrative are continuing in the Choctaw homeland. I have become more attuned to colonial formations that remain in the homeland, like discriminating social services and a severe lack of health services. These types of inequities have exposed me to more deaths and tragedies than I have ever witnessed directly in my life. I only currently work with four other people, and in my time here each person has taken significant time off for passing family members, one week there were six family deaths before Wednesday. At the Choctaw Health Center, funded by Indian Health Services, I learned I am not eligible to be Choctaw royalty. When I visited the dental office for an emergency filling, they told me I could get a temporary filling, but not a much-needed crown, because I am only one-quarter Choctaw by blood. I thankfully have other resources, but I wonder how many Choctaw children are denied needed health services because of blood quantum restrictions.

At the same time, being on the homeland has granted me access to the most healing energies I have ever experienced. Every new Choctaw word or phrase I learn is invaluable. Every new experience and relationship I build tunes me in to the larger Choctaw narrative that exists between all of us. Nanih Waiya is helping me begin healing in areas of my life that have been unhealthy. The most powerful experience so far, was being at the Nanih Waiya mother mound with my own mother. It changed our relationship and had transformed my life.

I believe the family that challenged me the most back in Los Angeles, knew clearly that this is the type of healing I need. This project in its transformation, has then partially led my own decolonization narrative, and the Choctaw homeland will lead to its completion.

## NARRATORS

The table of Choctaw narrators below identifies the sixty-one Choctaw narratives that were quoted in this thesis. I have listed the dates and locations of the interviews, if available, and identified the interviewer(s) of each Choctaw narrator. These documented narrations are held in four collections in the Choctaw Diaspora. The collections are listed by acronym as follows: IPP-Indian Pioneer Papers Collection, University of Oklahoma; MCOH-Mississippi Choctaw Oral History Collection, University of Florida; NAU-Native American Urbanization Collection, California State University, Fullerton; HSHP-Henry S. Halbert Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History. The date in the collection column indicates when the interview was first accessed for this project. All volume and identification numbers used to organize the collections are listed in the last two columns.

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Collection</i>	<i>Vol</i>	<i>#</i>
Arrington	Le Roy	June 1, 1937	Durant, OK	Lulu Austin	IPP 1/16/11	3	0000
Ashford	Tom	1937	Soper, OK	Hazel B. Greene	IPP 1/17/11	3	6123
Atoka	William	July 1, 1937	Atoka County, OK	Joe Southern	IPP 1/16/11	3	6462
Bates	Christine	March 27, 1937	Durant, OK	Lulu Austin	IPP 7/7/10	6	5202
Bell	Jancy	April 25, 1937	Antlers, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/17/11	7	5583
Benjamin	Kate	July 14, 1937	Wardville, OK	Charlie M. Culbertson	IPP 1/16/11	7	6693
Benjiman	Ben	June 9, 1937	Snow, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/16/11	7	6171
Billy	Nicholas	June 21, 1937	Coalgate, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP 1/9/11	9	6348
Billy	Josiah	July 8, 1937	Talihina, OK	Gomer Gower	IPP 1/17/11	8	12198
Bohanan	Emiziah	May 10, 1937	Lane, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP 1/17/11	9	5733
Bohanan	Emiziah	August 24, 1937	Darwin, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP 1/17/11	9	7348
Camp	Vinson A.	May 11, 1937	Farris, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP 1/16/11	16	5736
Campbell	Jack	June 24, 1937	Wilburton, OK	Bradley Bolinger	IPP 1/3/11	15	6449

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Collection</i>	<i>Vol</i>	<i>#</i>
Capps	Sarah	November 13, 1937	Dewar, OK	Grace Kelley	IPP 1/15/11	15	12175
Cherry	Lucy	November 26, 1937	Boynton, OK	L. W. Wilson	IPP 1/18/11	17	12276
Choate	Christopher	March 28, 1938	Guthrie, OK	Don Moon, Jr.	IPP 1/16/11	18	10386
Coffer	Bill	November 22, 1974	Fullerton, CA	Daniel Espinosa	NAU 10/20/10	O.H.	2148
Cole	Jane	April 20, 1937	Antlers, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/17/11	38	5458
Collin	Sampson	June 9, 1937	Wilburton, OK	Bradley Bolinger	IPP 1/16/11	19	0000
Culberson	Elijah	November 4, 1937	McAlester, OK	Charlie M. Culbertson	IPP 2/15/11	22	12068
Davenport	Jimpson	June 14, 1937	Darwin, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/16/11	23	6212
Dixon	Callie	June 28, 1973	Choctaw, MS	Janis Jimmie, Velma Sam	MCOH 2/26/11		N/A
Elaposhabee	Elizabeth	August 31, 1937	Smithville, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/17/11	27	7394
Eyachahube	Polly	July 14, 1937	Snow, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/16/11	28	6736
Fleming	Effie Oaks	June 12, 1937	Hugo, OK	Hazel B. Greene	IPP 1/16/11	28	6214
Folsom	John	May 25, 1937	Caney, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP 1/9/11	31	6270
Frazier	Sarah	February 9, 1938	Rufe, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/13/10	32	12918
Harlin	Sarah	May 13, 1937	OK	Lulu Austin	IPP 1/16/11	39	5654
Henry	Frank	June 25, 1971	Philadelphia, MS	R. E. Fitzgerald	MCOH 2/26/11		T-653
Jones	Wilson	1937	Lane, OK	Joe Southern	IPP 1/16/11	49	6019
Karn	Jackson	June 22, 1937	Coalgate, OK	Joe Southern	IPP 1/3/11	50	6385
Krebs	Robert C.	March 1, 1937	Muskogee, OK	H. L. Ramage	IPP 1/16/11	51	0000
Lewis	Susan	January 19, 1938	McAlester, OK	James Russell Gray	IPP 2/1/10	53	12757
Loman	Peter	August 24, 1937	Antlers, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/9/11	55	7309
Long	Tishie	November 17, 1937	McAlester, OK	Charlie M. Culbertson	IPP 3/30/11	55	12304
Mantooth	Randolph	July 16, 1974	Choctaw, MS	Nanih Waiya Staff	MCOH 4/4/11		55A
Mashaya	James	April 23, 1937	Finley, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/3/11	61	5473
McGahey	Celia Brown	April 12, 1937	Atoka, OK	Etta D. Mason	IPP 1/16/11	58	0000
McNelly	Ida "Burd"	February 23, 1937	Pauls Valley, OK	Maurice R. Anderson	IPP 1/16/11	59	0000
Morris	Isham	April 26, 1937	Corinne, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP 1/16/11	65	5488

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Collection</i>	<i>Vol</i>	<i>#</i>
Noah	Sarah	April 12, 1937	Atoka, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP	67	5325
Noah	Sarah	December 10, 1937	Atoka, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP	67	12367
Porter	James	1880	Neshoba County, MS	Henry S. Halbert	HSHP	Box 4	17
Ramirez	Angela	March 24, 1971	Brea, CA	Nancy Callaci	NAU	O.H.	529
Scott	Laura	August 3, 1937	Pittsburg, OK	Charlie M. Culbertson	IPP	81	7033
Simpson-McMillan	Sarah Jane	December 2, 1973	Choctaw, MS	S. Proctor	MCOH		9A
Smith	Amanda James	April 10, 1937	Pauls Valley, OK	Maurice R. Anderson	IPP	84	1108
Ward	Eastman	May 1, 1937	Miller, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP	95	5574
Ward	Leroy	October 9, 1937	Henryetta, OK	Grace Kelley	IPP	95	7781
Wesley	Verina	December 1, 1937	Antlers, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP	96	12308
Whistler	Nancy	1937	Shady Point, OK	Gomer Gower	IPP	96	7288
William	Harvey	September 15, 1937	Finley, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP	98	7525
Williams	Jake Earnest	April 13, 1937	Ardmore, OK	Jennie Selfridge	IPP	98	1204
Williams	Eli	August 4, 1937	Whitesboro, OK	Lawrence A. Williams	IPP	98	7036
Williams	Emma Cobb	August 20, 1937	Idabel, OK	Hazel B. Greene	IPP	98	7284
Willis	Louise	December 4, 1973	Choctaw, MS	John K. Mahon	MCOH		4A
Wilson	Emma Jane	December 29, 1937	OK	Hazel B. Greene	IPP	99	12528
Woods	Lizzie E.	August 18, 1937	Albion, OK	Johnson H. Hampton	IPP	100	7200
Wright	Islin	December 9, 1937	Snow, OK	Pete W. Cole	IPP	100	12378
York	Baxter	August 22, 1975	Choctaw, MS	Nanah Waiya Staff	MCOH		49A
York	Baxter	July 5, 1973	Choctaw, MS	Nanah Waiya Staff	MCOH		N/A



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