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# **Decolonial Directions: Rivers, Relationships, and Realities of Community Engagement on Indigenous Lands**

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## **Abstract**

In “Decolonial Directions: Rivers, Relationships, and Realities of Community Engagement on Indigenous Lands,” the authors present a digital installation that curates their experiences as academics committed to community engagement with a decolonial framework. The splash page of the installation includes an interactive image based on the seven sacred directions acknowledged by both Cherokee and Muscogee Creek cultures, among others. Each direction includes a video (titled “Prayer”) and placard (titled “Process”). The videos and placards comprising the installation present the early stages of a community-engaged project with a tribal nation. Each direction evokes the historical and cultural context of Oklahoma, where 39 federally-recognized Indigenous tribes live as a result of dispossession and/or containment. The authors invoke the directions to reveal the limitations, conflicts, and possibilities of doing decolonial work with communities on this land. Rather than present a conventional academic argument, they offer a non-linear digital space to highlight participation in choosing a direction and imagining decoloniality with the installation.

## **Link to the Installation:**

<https://decolonialdirections.org/>

## **Orientation**

### **Aerial View**

Since October 2018, we have been working with members of the Iowa (or loway or Bah Kho-je) Tribe of Oklahoma, hoping in the long run to help create and curate a digital archive for the tribe’s language, songs, stories, and culture. Scholars in the field of rhetoric can practice decoloniality by

using university resources to sustain Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices. The multimodal installation we construct here presents various moments key to the process of this work—some pieces connecting directly to the Iowa Tribe and other pieces showing a larger Indigenous cultural ecology as it unfolded to us. This installation is based on a community-engaged project in its earliest stages and begins in exploring and building our relationship to this land, the Indigenous peoples who have inhabited and continue to inhabit it, and to each other as scholars and colleagues.

Our installation is comprised of seven videos and placards respectively titled “Prayer” and “Process” on their corresponding entry pages, as well as seven audio recordings of Cherokee pronunciations. We decided to audio record our learning and use of the language—located at the beginning of each video and on the pronunciation page—with Cherokee elder and language teacher Charles Foster, emphasizing the crucial role of Indigenous elders in sustaining tribal languages and cultures. As our project with the Iowa also relies upon the knowledge of elders, these audio recordings with Mr. Foster reflect the critical reliance on elders in tribal community settings and resonate with archival recordings of elder Frank Murray’s Iowa language classes in the Prayer for the direction Galvladidla. Some of our Process placards are academic prose that provide a brief account of Oklahoma and Indigenous history; other Process placards offer stories about our embodied experiences in this project. As many scholars of color, particularly Indigenous scholars (Anzaldúa; Maracle; Royster; Powell; Cushman; Womack; Teuton; Bruchac; Kovach; Archibald; Wilson), have demonstrated, stories operate as theories, methods, and practices. In many Indigenous cultures, stories operate as agentive beings and provide an embodied way to engage the world and connect with other human and non-human beings. They make space, inscribe locations, and establish cultural ecologies when practiced in a place. The videos we have included as Prayers acknowledge how stories also work in Indigenous epistemologies to connect humans with larger, creative forces beyond our ultimate understanding. Stories always have an origin.

## **Origin Story**

Stories nourish identities and create relationships. Stories accumulate to create a larger story. Stories can enrich us as well as overwhelm us. Stories, or how stories are told, or whose stories are told, can also silence, neglect, dismiss people and their lives; they can also uplift, amplify, and attend to people and their lives. Stories are always cultural, defining and inscribing groups, peoples, and nations. As Cherokee Rhetoric and Composition scholar Ellen Cushman explains, stories “operate by relocating meaning in the context of its unfolding that opposes the imperial archive’s penchant for collecting, classifying and isolating” (116). Stories work “through the co-construction of knowledge based on interactions between storytellers and listeners,” defying the authority of experts (Cushman 116-117). Stories come in many forms and mediums and work on multiple levels. Origin stories often include narratives of first contacts. Our initial contact with the Iowa began with Rachel making a solo trip to their tribal complex in October 2018:

I remember driving onto the tribal complex of the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma for the first time. I am an Indigenous woman and a Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma citizen. My research has been community-engaged for over a decade. I make friends easily. Yet, I enter new Indigenous spaces with anxiety, and this is mainly because I want to feel and demonstrate respect in the right way. I want to listen and hear deeply. This is how you build relationships.

When I first went into the Iowa Tribal Library to introduce myself and speak with the librarian, I noticed an image on the wall behind her door. I stood and looked at it in silence for a long moment, my eyes searching for familiar patterns and struggling to find them. It looked like art to me, almost like a beading pattern drawn out and enlarged. I did not ask what it was, but rather waited to see if the librarian would explain on her own terms. Asking too many questions too soon can be off-putting, and I already had a long list of questions to ask.

“That’s No Heart’s Map,” the librarian told me.

“No Heart?” I asked, showing my ignorance.

“Yes. He used it in negotiations with the federal government sometime in the early 1800s. He made it to show them our territory.”

“It’s a map?”

“Yes, and he drew it.”

I’d never seen a map drawn by an Indigenous person before. Maps are drawn by imperialist explorers and settler colonialists. I remember feeling eager to tell Phil, to talk about No Heart’s map with a colleague who would be as amazed as I was, and to make sense of it together.

Prior to beginning the project in October, our (Rachel and Phil’s) relationship began in August 2018 when we were both new faculty members in the Department of English at Oklahoma State University (OSU). We met at the New Faculty Orientation and almost immediately started discussing ideas about research, teaching, and community engagement. Originally from Oklahoma, an Indigenous woman, and a Native Studies scholar, Rachel already had strong research experience and publications on Oklahoma cultures and histories. Rachel also had many relationships with tribal cultural workers across the state. Phil, on the other hand, had moved to Tulsa that summer from Lansing, Michigan, and had no connections to the people or land of his new home. By the end of the two-week orientation, we established a relationship that would involve connecting with the Iowa Tribe in Perkins, Oklahoma, hoping to collaborate with tribal members to identify their assets and needs for sustaining cultural literacy.

Working from initial interactions with Iowa tribal members and using Rachel’s previous work with the Kiowa community as an example, we co-envisioned a living digital archive of elders speaking the language and sharing songs and stories. Phil was invested in developing relationships

with the people of this land and their histories, particularly those marginalized and silenced by settler coloniality. Our relationship offered an ideal fit for two new colleagues invested in decolonial practice, and relationships between our story and other stories began to become clear. The Decolonial Directions project has helped us imagine and create these connections.

### **Relationships and Rivers**

Rivers provide water, which sustains all earthly life and draws us into relationship with places and peoples. Rivers, unless dammed, continually move. Rivers make pathways in the earth, shape the landscape, and create points of reference. Rivers transport people, goods, wildlife, and sediments to other spaces and places. Rivers create and sustain an ecological system, bringing basic sustenance to soils and plant life at the micro level while also being part of a macro ecology. They create a matrix, connecting to each other on a grand scale. Rivers contract and expand. They swell and flood, sometimes drowning out and destroying habitats, and other times (or at the same time) providing nourishment and opportunity for new growth. Rivers enrich the soil, providing nutrients for flora, fauna, and humans. Rivers cause migration—when a river dries up or floods, human and non-human life moves away from its banks. Rivers also attract humans and non-humans; they move humans and non-humans to them. Indigenous peoples, as No Heart’s map demonstrates, have lived by and with rivers for centuries.

No Heart’s map quickly became a centerpiece of our project. We went back to it multiple times as an orienting object for foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies and histories. *Na’je Ni’je* (translated fully as “No Heart of Fear”), the brother of Chief White Cloud, led Iowa members to D.C. in 1837 to negotiate a land agreement with the U.S. government. On his map, No Heart included three key markers: rivers, trails, and village sites. The map shows no borders or boundaries, and this makes it difficult, in the present day, to determine the expanse of land that the map represents. Though No Heart included rivers which spanned contemporary state and territorial boundaries, he did not include these boundaries but rather illustrated his

own cultural and epistemological relationship to the land. This relationship begins with water, made clear by the rivers' centrality in the map. The Iowa trails and village sites follow the rivers' paths. As No Heart's map illustrates the Iowa relationship to water via the rivers, it also centers our relationship with the Iowa.

In Cherokee culture, water is a sacred element. For Cherokees, water is life and also medicine. Water has power. In the southeastern part of what is now called the United States, ancient mound-building cultures associated water with the Below World—a place of disorder, danger, and mystery. The Cherokee, Muscogee Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole inherited the mound-builders' culture and relationship to water. The Decolonial Directions project and installation, though focused at first on the Iowa, also engages the histories and cultures of these southeastern tribes for several reasons. Most obviously, Rachel is Cherokee and brings her cultural perspective to the project. Secondly, as a penultimate example of settler colonialism, Oklahoma's history began as Indian Territory. Typically understood as beginning with the 1830 Indian Removal Act (though arguably starting earlier in the 1820s), the United States federal government relocated and/or contained over 40 tribes to Indian Territory prior to Oklahoma's statehood in 1907. Finally, the project also includes Kiowa history and culture. Because of Rachel's longstanding community-engagement with the Kiowa people, her work with the Kiowa serves as a model for our project with the Iowa. The Kiowa, along with several other tribal groups, inhabited the Southern Plains well prior to the removal of the southeastern tribal nations. The U.S. government first treated what is now Iowa land to the Muscogee Creek in 1825, and this treaty included the land on which our institution, OSU, now sits in Stillwater, OK.

OSU, as an example of the relationship between higher educational institutions and settler colonial processes, is a land-grant university—an institution created by the U.S. federal government granting previously treated Indigenous lands to states. Within a decolonial framework, scholars understand treaties as highly contested and generally signed under duress. Indigenous peoples understand treaties as a tool for stealing lands and

resources. Under the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, states used these stolen lands to establish educational institutions. Sharon Stein and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti remark that “Today higher education institutions continue to reproduce an epistemological hierarchy wherein Western knowledges are presumed to be universally relevant and valuable, while non-Western knowledges are either patronizingly celebrated as ‘local culture,’ commodified or appropriated for Western gain, or else not recognized as knowledge at all” (371). As a telling marker of this appropriation, the Department of English at OSU is housed in Morrill Hall, named after the law as one of the first buildings built on the campus. With our decolonial project, one of our goals was to reappropriate stolen resources for the Indigenous communities still living with the consequences of this history.

These intersections create a complex context for us to navigate as community-engaged scholars developing a decolonial project. They also render intricate intersections and a troubled narrative to articulate in an installation that represents the project. Yet, by honoring, speaking, and confronting the complex history and ongoing consequences of settler colonialism, we meet the primary markers of decolonial theory and research methodology, as well as decolonial curation. Ivan Muñiz-Reed remarks that “a decolonial curatorial practice would advocate for an epistemic disobedience, replacing or complementing Eurocentric discourses and categories with alternative perspectives” (101). To work toward decoloniality means entering the initially disorienting logics of multiple, co-existing epistemologies. Decoloniality requires more than the repatriation of Indigenous lands to Indigenous peoples; it requires new perspectives and voices, new ways of seeing and listening. It necessitates a willingness to be confused and uncomfortable because it is new, and new generates pathways out of the old colonial model.

### **Non-linearity, Decoloniality, and New Directions**

Our website presents our work and experience to the audience in a non-linear way rather than in a hierarchical, linear manner. Visitors can choose the direction which with they wish to begin, ultimately engaging uniquely

with the Prayer and Process pairings for all seven directions. We decided on a non-linear presentation of the piece for three reasons. First, linearity is key to colonial logic. From time to space to social relations, colonialism enacts and values a linear paradigm that structures western identity and epistemology and justifies exploitation, oppression, and violence in the name of progress and advancing civilization. Vine Deloria, Jr. states,

Western European peoples have never learned to consider the nature of the world discerned from a spatial point of view. And a singular difficulty faces peoples of Western European heritage in making a transition from thinking in terms of time to thinking in terms of space. The very essence of Western European identity involves the assumption that time proceeds in a linear fashion; further it assumes that at a particular point in the unraveling of this sequence, the peoples of Western Europe became the guardians of the world.  
(62)

This Western European and colonial paradigm enforces notions of “progress” and “advancement”—a linearity that, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, positions colonialism as a move out of the “dark ages” that “could be ‘measured’ in terms of technological advancement and spiritual salvation. Progress is evolutionary and teleological and is present in both liberal and Marxist ideas about history” (55). As such, we want our project to promote non-linear interaction, hopefully fostering various sets of arguments and experiences among visitors, depending on choices they make while enacting decolonial thinking and doing. Walter Mignolo comes to mind stating, “A linear argument cannot capture the nuances, since once a name or a paragraph is mentioned or quoted in a linear flow, it does not return: repetitions are not good in English composition but are important in decolonial thinking” (xxiii). While we do not necessarily have repetitions in the way Mignolo structures his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, after experiencing all the directions, visitors will notice returns to multiple themes and resonances between them.

Second, our seven directions of the project are not vertically or horizontally valued, rather they are situated within a spherical graphic that values a land-based perspective. That is, each direction of the installation has a value not only in and of itself, but also multiple meanings in relation to the other directions regardless of the order in which one engages with them. We believe our arrangement further emphasizes decoloniality by drawing attention to connections and relationships which often proceed in multiple directions at once.

Third, we want our piece to reflect the experience of entering a curated space (in contrast to traditional academic articles where most readers begin with the introduction and end with the conclusion). We used digital affordances because they allowed us to create the interactive, spherical “sacred directions image,” which served as the entrance into the space of the project. The colors we chose to represent the sacred directions of Juganawv’i/South (white), Juhyvdlv’i/North (blue), Wudeligv’i/West (yellow), and Dikalvgv’i/East (brown) come from *Building One Fire: Art and Worldview in Cherokee Life*, a publication of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. We selected the colors for Galvladidla/Up (purple) and Eladidla/Down (green) for personal and aesthetic reasons. We selected red to represent Ayehli/Center as a reference to the sacred fire that occupies the middle of Cherokee and Muscogee Creek ceremonial grounds. We acknowledge that there are several interpretations of the seven directions, and that those interpretations use different colors to represent them.

Ultimately, this multimodal installation curates digital pieces we created during the process of working with an Indigenous community on Indigenous and settler colonial lands to sustain cultural knowledge. In selecting, creating, and arranging these pieces, we have chosen to foreground decoloniality, particularly our own experiences with the process of decolonization as individuals and as colleagues working together on a university-sponsored project with the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma. We believe the pieces we have selected illustrate the experience of decolonization necessary for community-engaged work in Indigenous contexts. We have chosen to arrange the pieces according to the seven sacred directions

acknowledged by both Cherokee and Muscogee Creek cultures, among others. These brief cultural explanations of each direction (listed below) are based upon information given to us by our Cherokee language teacher, Charles Foster. They are not arranged in order of importance.

**Ayehli (Center, Where We Are Now)** – the place/space we occupy, the center of everything; also the word used for “nation” (in reference to the Cherokee Nation) and the word used for “half” (in reference to time as in half-passed the hour).

**Galvladidla (Up)** – associated with the “upper world” or spiritual world, the sun, light, life, order, the heavens, and heavenly beings.

**Eladidla (Down)** – associated with the “below world” (also a spiritual realm), the moon, darkness, death, chaos, water, powerful beings, and water creatures.

**Juhyvdlv’i (North)** – the place where it is cold; according to Cherokee stories and oral histories, the Cherokee migrated from the north; also associated with the U.S. Republican party after the Civil War.

**Juganawv’i (South)** – the place where it is warm; the location of Cherokee original homelands according to written history; also associated with the U.S. Democratic party after the Civil War.

**Dikalvgv’i (East)** – the place where it (the Sun) rises.

**Wudeligv’i (West)** – the place where it (the Sun) sets.

The following section briefly describes the associations between the directions and their respective section titles in the installment. We have arranged them here listing the cardinal directions first, moving counterclockwise from the south, which is consistent with Cherokee epistemology. Cherokees, as well as Muscogee Creeks, believe counterclockwise rotations bring balance to a clockwise world. We list the

final three directions (down, up, and center) in the opposite order of the list above, again to evoke balance.

**Juganawv'i (South)** indicates the southern location of the Ioway tribal complex in relation to OSU, where we are institutionally positioned. In Juganawv'i, we present our visit to the complex to meet with the Ioway Tribal Librarian, as well as our first encounter together with the map credited to No Heart of Fear (also referred to as No Heart), a historical Ioway tribal leader. The juxtaposition of this map with a current United States map creates a disorientation, a decolonizing topography of settler colonialism.

**Dikalvgv'i (East)** tells a story about our visit to the Muscogee Creek Council Oak tree in Tulsa, Oklahoma—a location east of the Ioway tribal complex and OSU. The Council Oak marked a central location for diplomatic meetings and ceremony among the Muscogee Creek villages after removal. East is also the direction of the Muscogee Creek original homelands in the southeastern United States prior to removal. The video shows the Morning Prayer sculpture and eight interpretive plaques adjacent to the Oak, the tree itself, and the stickball field and statues memorialized across the street from the tree.

**Juhyvdlv'i (North)** reflects the geographical position of the OSU campus in relation to the Ioway tribal complex. The media and placard foreground issues we experienced with the OSU IRB process and the IRB committee's response to our initial application. We layer a screen recording of the Google Drive folder (that houses our IRB materials) with historical photographs of OSU after the 1889 Oklahoma land run to link OSU's historical presence on the land to present-day research committee oversight.

**Wudeligv'i (West)** presents Rachel's work with the Kiowa Talk project, a living digital archive of Kiowa language and culture, as a model for the project that we co-envisioned with the Ioway. The Kiowa community with whom Rachel works is located in Anadarko, a small town in western Oklahoma. The video demonstrates the [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) website, while the

audio includes recordings of Kiowa Elder Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune singing the “Resistance Song,” as well as a much older archival recording of the song. The paired audio suggests the persistence enacted by sustaining cultural knowledge despite settler colonialism.

**Eladidla (Down)** overlays territorial maps spanning the course of about ninety years (1820-1906), visualizing the rich, complicated, settler colonial history of Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The video of these maps displays U.S.-imposed tribal jurisdictions and treaty dates, as well as the infamous Oklahoma land runs that began in 1889. The video presents the name and treaty date of each tribe removed or contained in Indian Territory at a five-second pace. This pacing and chronological linearity, which feels quick for those encountering the information for the first time, symbolizes the violence and speed of forced relocation and assimilation for Indigenous peoples. The audio silence of the video represents the silencing of Native American perspectives in U.S. settler colonial history.

**Galvladidla (Up)** represents a January 2019 meeting between Rachel, Phil, and the Iowa Tribal Librarian to target specific project goals for the spring semester. At that meeting, the librarian suggested, and together we decided, to submit a two-page formal proposal to the Iowa Tribal Council to request their consent for the digital archiving project. The audio for the video comes from an archival recording of Iowa Elder Franklin M. Murray (c. 1977) teaching an Iowa language class using his own dictionary. The recording represents historic efforts to sustain the language in the midst of settler colonial force and assimilation policy.

**Ayehli (Center, Where We Are Now)** presents our relationship to this land, this project, and to each other by metaphorically returning to No Heart’s map and the centrality of rivers. The video includes screen recordings and audio recordings of our conversations and travels to different rivers during and after spring 2019 flooding across Oklahoma. Together, the images and audio focus on embodiment, land-based rhetorics, and relationality as reflections on the process of doing community-engaged work on Indigenous land with Indigenous people.

## **On Sacred Ground**

In choosing to pair each piece with one of the sacred directions, we hope to provide a decolonial orientation to the installation that disorients the viewer and thereby enables new relationships between multiple meanings. Our project takes up these multiple meanings—not by providing answers, but by opening space for possibilities, limitations, imagination, and more questions. Our project is less about critical analysis or critique, which, to remember, “is necessary for noting the contours of colonial logics but it is insufficient for imagining into existence praxes that decolonize” (Patel 3). Rather, our project and our installation foreground decolonial inventions and interventions, nascent makings, and slow processes. We think of this multimodal installation as a practice of learning—an invitation to generatively engage with the unknown and imagine decolonial possibilities—in the way Leigh Patel describes,

Learning is fundamentally a fugitive, transformative act. It runs from what was

previously known, to become something not yet known. Terrifying and beautiful.

Education, for centuries, within the grip of coloniality, has sought to make this essential

aspect of humanness, learning and changing, definitively known. In its fundamental

unknowability, learning can remind us of the limits of coloniality. (6)

This installation invites viewers to learn *with us* in this project as we work toward Indigenous futures.

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Rather than only provide citations for work that we directly cite or summarize with a parenthetical citation, we also include additional sources that inspired or shaped us while developing this project.

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### **Juganawv'i (South)**

It's January 10, 2019, and we are headed toward the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma complex to meet with the complex's librarian for a discussion about the digital archive project. As Rachel drives, Phil expresses a sense of discomfort, an anxiety about entering this Indigenous space for the first time as a non-indigenous person and an awareness of his ignorance of Oklahoma history and land.

Rachel listens and drives on through the low-lying morning mist curling up from the Cimarron River, the mist wrapping through the bare post oaks and cottonwood groves and enshrouding the resting wheatfields along Oklahoma Highway 177.

"I'm a Native scholar and I feel the same way, if that makes you feel better," she laughs.

"I think it's the appropriate way to feel, actually, and she will see our hearts."

Located just south of Perkins, Oklahoma, which is eleven miles south of Stillwater, the home of Oklahoma State University, the Iowa Tribe of

Oklahoma lands begin where Oklahoma Highway 177 crosses the Cimarron. The Iowa originate from the Green Bay, Wisconsin area, and over the course of approximately four hundred years, and as a result of both intertribal conflict and federal force, they were slowly moved first to Minnesota and Iowa, and then to Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas (Olson). Through Executive Order in 1883, the U.S. government coerced the Iowa to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

Once arriving to the complex, we park and head toward the librarian's office. After entering her office, Phil notices to our right, slightly hidden behind the door, a framed picture with black solid lines, dotted lines, and circles scattered on a weathered background, reflecting a kind of tree with branches and abstract leaves. An eagle feather is tied to the upper-left hand corner. Rachel lets Phil look closely at the map, knowing that this is the map she had told him about several months ago after her first visit to the office. The librarian greets us with a warm smile.

“So good to see you,” she says. “I am glad you are here.”

“As are we,” Rachel returns, nodding her head to the image. “Could you tell Phil about this?”

The map inscribes *what* the Iowa knew of the land, from the ground, as well as *how* they knew it, through their bodies, across their remembered history up until the time of relocation negotiations, a period of almost 250 years. Rather than marking state and territorial boundaries, the map includes three primary reference points: rivers (solid lines), trails (dashes), and village sites (circles). The scale of the map or the size of the landbase it represents are not clear, although the size of the landbase covers nearly the southern half of Wisconsin, all of Illinois and Iowa, eastern Nebraska, and most of Missouri. As the University of Iowa notes, the map spans “nearly a quarter of a million square miles of the Upper Midwest and eastern Great Plains” and “illustrates the movements of the Iowa throughout time, from their traditional place of origin at the estuary of Green Bay in present-day Wisconsin about 1600 AD through their journeys

between the Wisconsin woodlands and the plains of eastern Nebraska for the next 237 years” (“The 1837 Ioway Map”).

According to the Library of Congress, historic cartography during settler colonial expansion in the United States, particularly during the 1830s, reflects the settlers’ desire for increased access to land and resources (via railroads) for industrialization (n.p.). And, as Natchee Blu Barnd remarks, “Mapping activities parcel out discrete segments for private property, establish reservation boundaries, and generally make tribal landscapes ‘legible’ to others” (32). The Ioway map, originally drawn by Ioway warrior and leader *Na’je Ni’je*, translated as No Heart of Fear (or No Heart) reflects the Ioway relationship to their traditional homelands, based upon their intimate knowing of the landscape over centuries of living along its waterways. It also represents No Heart’s rhetorical agility in adopting colonial cartography, understanding landscapes through measurement rather than relationship, as a resistance tactic. In 1837, No Heart presented the map to the U.S. government, saying, “This is the route of my forefathers. It is the lands that we have always claimed from old times. We have the history. We have always owned this land. It is what bears our name” (“The 1837 Ioway Map”).

In this moment together in the librarian’s office, we find ourselves seeking an orientation to No Heart’s map based on a familiar western framework. We are unsure which way is north. But the image represents a different way of knowing—a decolonial epistemology, not a way of measuring or ascribing value through appraisal, private property, or individual and state-sanctioned ownership. The map marks organic confluences of waterways, but the rivers are unnamed. There are no roadways, no straight lines, no key—instead, there is heart.

### **Dikalvgv’i (East)**

It’s February 1, 2019—a warm winter day, overcast and dim, the kind that seems newly normal in the Cross Timbers, the bioregion that joins the Ozark Mountains with the Southern Plains. We meet at Phil’s apartment in

Tulsa to begin the Oklahoma State University IRB form, although neither of us relish time given to complying with bureaucratic restraints. We sit down to a lunch of Phil's assortment of leftovers from local restaurants.

"You know, the Council Oak is right south of here. Have you been?" Rachel inquires.

"No, what is that?" Phil replies.

"The Muscogee Creek council met around that tree, after removal. They held council there, making decisions together for the people. Tulsa was first a Muscogee Creek *etvlwa*—like a village." Rachel's voice trails into silence.

"Interesting! Let's go after we eat."

After lunch, we walk to the historic tree, which is only seven blocks from Phil's apartment, to visit the sacred fire and stickball field sculptures. As we head south down Carthage Avenue and then over to Cheyenne Avenue, we chat about the work that we need to do this afternoon with the Iowa project. We conceptualize out loud how we might begin to think about the piece for this *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* special issue and how the piece could connect to the Iowa tribe's historical map, which was attributed to the Iowa leader *Na'je Ni'je*, translated into English as No Heart of Fear. Already we can see the complex cultural ecologies intersecting in this project. For example, we are working with the Iowa, but on land first treated to the Muscogee Creek in 1833 (and traditionally inhabited by the Osage prior to that). The Iowa were not relocated to Indian Territory, or, rather, Muscogee Creek Territory, until 1883.

According to the Muscogee Creek's own stories, the first land was called Nunne Chaha, a hill that surfaced from a world of water. This was the original homeland of the Muscogee people. Western history claims the Muscogee (*Mvskoke*) Creek originated in Alabama. In the 1830s, the Muscogee Creek people relocated to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma,

because of Andrew Jackson's settler colonialist 1830 law: the Indian Removal Act. The Act led to the forced relocations of Indigenous peoples living in the southeast to land west of the Mississippi. According to the Muscogee Creek Nation, after arriving next to the Arkansas River in 1836, the Muscogee Creek people ceremonially proclaimed their arrival and established their new home. At the ceremony, elders placed the ashes from their original fires back east at the base of a towering oak.

That oak became the Council Oak. It currently sits upon a hill, still overlooking the Arkansas River, though it now stands in the middle of one of Tulsa's oldest, most affluent neighborhoods, only two miles from the center of downtown. White settlers' commercial and residential development over the last 100+ years has obscured continued Indigenous presence and history. On this land, the Muscogee Creek Nation established the etvlwa/town as a place for the first inhabitants of what is present-day Tulsa. According to Jay Miller, anthropologist and Native Studies scholar, Tulsa was originally the Muscogee Creek townsite of Lucv Pokv Tvlse, "Where the Turtles Sit/Abide/Exist."

In 2008, Creek artist Dan Brook created the Morning Prayer sculpture at the Council Oak site as a monument to honor the Muscogee Creeks' suffering as they were forced to endure the trek from Alabama to Indian Territory. The monument resembles a ceremonial fire—cast in three bronze flames rising from the center of eight plaques ringing the fire. The plaques detail Muscogee Creek history and the sacredness and symbolic function of fires. One plaque reads, "During rituals, dances and prayers, the smoke rises from the sacred fires and it fades into the skies. The smoke carries the messages of the Muscogee Creek people to the Creator. These ceremonies are not primarily for personal benefit, but rather the benefit of the entire community or nation." As we read the plaques, circling around the representative flames, Phil lights a cigarette. Rachel laughs as tobacco smoke billows upward from his mouth into the air.

"That's exactly what you should do here," she tells him.

This is the spirit we want to animate our work; our tobacco an offering to the people and land; our walk to and around the Council Oak a prayer.

### **Juhyvdlv'i (North)**

When we submitted our Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, our goal was to craft an application that did not limit the project to the Iowa Tribe. We wanted the application to encompass possibilities in creating digital archives of cultural knowledges broadly with many potential local communities in Oklahoma. We also assumed that Oklahoma State University's IRB would have a clear sense of the cultural groups that make up Oklahoma's communities and histories, and therefore we referred to these communities without specific racial identifiers. Other than this assumption, we self-consciously made this decision for two reasons: 1) We wanted to defy colonial racial categorizations as consistent with decolonial practice; 2) We also hoped to avoid tribal IRB processes, which we understand as typically undermining the sovereignty of tribal members, particularly elders, as noted in Rachel's experience with the Kiowa Talk project and Kiowa community. However, as Indigenous contexts differ, after consulting with the Iowa Tribal Librarian and Iowa elders with whom we were connected, they believed the Tribal Council would have to approve their involvement. At the insistence of these community members, we crafted a proposal for the Iowa Tribal Council with the willingness to work with council members.

IRBs oversee the activity of researchers in ethical and regulatory ways. An IRB committee approves, asks for modifications, and disapproves proposed research carried out by researchers at its institution. One particular development and force of IRB involves the university taking necessary measures to protect itself legally. Sheeva Sabati notes that myriad scholarship has provided "critiques [that] are concerned with how IRBs function to protect the legal liabilities of universities and do little, in practice, to actually uphold the ethical treatment of potential research participants" (2). Sabati also calls our attention to how IRBs and their focus on crucial historical cases (e.g., Nazi doctors, Tuskegee syphilis

experiment) elides the erased history of universities acquiring wealth and investment “through slavery and indigenous land dispossession during the 18th and 19th centuries” (2).

Our project with the Iowa tribe is not about knowledge accumulation and extraction for the university’s purposes, but for the community’s purposes. To turn and shift away from such colonialist and capitalist practices, we chose to begin our project/research by building a relationship with the community, turning our focus away from IRB processes and protocol. Yet, even as community-engaged scholars, we are embedded within OSU and held to broader academic and disciplinary standards for publication and career advancement, which means we are unable to disconnect ourselves from IRB. As we negotiated our IRB application, we had to come to terms with the university’s oversight, doing so in a way that reflects Sabati’s call to identify “colonial entanglements of research and the complicities of universities” (2). In Oklahoma, a location that continues to honor frontier rhetorics extending from its settler colonial history, racial violence includes inscriptions of racial categories intended to segregate, classify, and control social relationships.

Settler colonialism, however, is not merely about racism; it involves the development and expansion of capitalism—acquisitions of resources, labor, and land. As Sharon Stein remarks, “capital requires perpetual frontiers of accumulation, which are in turn shaped by racial and colonial violence” (3). Higher education, from private to public institutions, primarily works as a site for such accumulation, even if veiled as a site intended for the accumulation of knowledge. Lori Patton contends that the “functioning of U.S. higher education is intricately linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression” (317). At its best, IRB functions to ensure STEM and social science researchers are not exploiting and undermining human subjects (while protecting the university legally). The IRB’s role is important, given the violent and exploitative history of western research in marginalized and vulnerable communities. However, in community-engaged projects in the humanities, the IRB process works as a colonial procedure to sustain the power of the

academy over community-engaged scholars, and thus over communities, with a surveillance mechanism.

We believed that the OSU IRB committee would recognize our proposed community-engaged project as occurring within the complex cultural histories of Oklahoma. By foregrounding cultural contexts and communities, we aimed to demonstrate the ethic of relationship central to local and Indigenous research without defaulting to racial categorizations that can limit relationships. We thought we had made our commitments and ethics clear in our application, a reflection of Sabati's argument, in which she states that "the ethics of research must critically situate the histories of our institutional contexts and of knowledge production practices themselves" and that "we must work toward active institutional commitments to shift resources and research practices to forms of knowledge that are anticolonial" (4, 6). We also assumed that once we identified Indigenous people as one of the groups we hoped to engage, OSU's IRB would require tribal IRB approval. We were mistaken on both counts. The OSU IRB did ask us to explicitly identify the ethnic groups with whom we would be working in our project. We included Native Americans among many potential ethnic groups in our subsequent revision. The committee did not, in the end, however, ask us to seek out permission from tribal research boards.

### **Wudeligv'i (West)**

The [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) project provides an example of the work we hoped to do with the Ioway Tribe of Oklahoma when we first met with the Iowa Tribal Librarian in January 2019. The [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) website grew out of the desire of Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune, the Kiowa elder featured in the website videos, to utilize digital methods to capture her cultural knowledge in a sustainable, widely accessible format. Dorothy's sense of urgency stems from the critical situation most Native American nations currently confront, as elders—who embody decades of cultural knowledge and retain language fluency from their childhoods—pass on, taking all they know with them.

The [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) website currently archives videos of Dorothy by organizing them in the categories of “Language,” which includes basic sounds, vocabulary, and words and phrases, “Stories,” and “Songs.” The videos include an on-screen transcription of the Kiowa language Dorothy shares and an on-screen translation of the language into English. This website was presented to the Iowa Tribal Librarian as a prototype with multiple potential adaptations appropriate for the Iowa cultural context.

Though primarily supported through the Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities, a college-level Native Studies course that Rachel has co-facilitated for over 12 years, [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) initially began with the support of an Oklahoma Humanities Council grant (Jackson). The grant paid for Dorothy’s time and cultural contributions, Rachel’s transcription and translation of the Kiowa language content, and the project’s videographer and web manager, both of whom are members of the Anadarko, Oklahoma community where the Kiowa Clemente Course is held.

As the elder inspiring and animating the project, Dorothy believes that she is not beholden to the Kiowa tribal administration’s approval for her work on the project or the content that she contributes to the website. She also believes that the increasing need to sustain cultural knowledge beyond her generation renders cultural taboos about sharing that knowledge obsolete. These views put her at odds with tribal leadership, but she looks to examples of her own elders, including her father Charley Whitehorse, to establish a precedence for working outside of tribal oversight (Jackson). In traditional Kiowa ways, elders provide leadership. Tribal governments created by constitutional documents (adopted as a result of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975) can be understood in some Indigenous contexts as colonial institutions, enacting western democracy and replacing traditional governance models. Because [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) operates outside of tribal governance, it offers instead a model of decolonial, community-engaged cultural practice.

## **Eladidla (Down, Bottom, Underworld)**

“Wait, wait, wait. What were you doing just then?” Rachel asked as she watched Phil click, zoom, and compare digitized historical maps of Indian Territory, tracking the Territory’s changes over time.

“I was lining up this county in the corner of the state on these two maps,” Phil responded a little impatiently. “Why you askin?”

“What’s it like looking at these maps as an outsider?” Rachel replied. “Are they becoming more familiar to you?”

Phil paused for a second, digesting Rachel’s questions. “Slowly, yes. I’m starting to recognize the patterns of the rivers and the borders, I guess,” he said. “It’s still so new to me, and since I’m not from here, it’s requiring a lot more patience to try to fully understand the complex history and its people. What’s it like for you?”

“They are familiar and still very strange, even after living here my whole life. What a mess, right?”

It is challenging to understand and explain the Native American history in Oklahoma in simple terms. Numerically, Oklahoma is home to 39 federally recognized tribes, though a total of 42 tribal nations and towns have jurisdiction within the state’s borders (Clark). All of these tribal nations, except for two, are indigenous to other locations within the United States mainland. Historically, only the Wichita and Caddo Nations can claim actual indigeneity to lands within Oklahoma—meaning they have lived here the longest, prior to written history. Of the remaining tribal nations, many of them, such as the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache (Plains Apache), were forcibly contained here. Most tribes were coerced here, most famously from the Southeastern United States, such as the Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw.

Native American history in Oklahoma is critical to understanding history in the United States. In total, tribal nations removed to Oklahoma came from all over the country: California, Arizona, Texas, South Dakota, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, New York, Delaware, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Florida. The layers of cultural and historical trauma accumulated on this landscape connects with oppression, violence, and historical erasure on landscapes elsewhere in the United States. All U.S. locations are complicit in the continuing consequences of these histories as they are lived by both Natives and non-Native settlers. These histories tie places and people together in concrete and material ways.

In researching Indian Territory maps to illustrate this history visually, we noticed disparities between dates, but the cartographic trajectory remained the same. Oklahoma became a state in 1907, but prior to that, one sees a steady increase in boundary lines inside Indian Territory that indicates the ongoing removal and containment of Indigenous peoples over the course of the decades preceding statehood. Additionally, the maps show an increase in “unassigned” or open lands in preparation for non-Native settlement. Beginning in 1889, after the passing of the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, lands treated to tribal nations within Indian Territory and held communally by those nations were surveyed, divided, and allotted to individual tribal members. Allotment aimed to destroy traditional communal land tenure practices and impair tribal communities and cultures. As tribal lands were allotted, remaining unallotted land parcels (in some cases referred to as “Unassigned Lands”) were opened for settlement via land runs and lotteries. Tribal jurisdictional boundaries were slowly replaced with counties, many of which are named after regional and national leaders in the settler colonial movement—Custer being the most recognizable example.

Oklahoma State University was founded, prior to Oklahoma statehood, on land that was first treated to the Muscogee Creek, and then to the Sauk and Fox, and then to the Iowa, before the remainder was opened as “Unassigned Land” in an 1889 Land Run. As Sheeva Sabati explains, “Not

only was the wealth of many early campuses built through practices of land and labor extraction, but colleges and universities also played an important role in consolidating ideas of racial difference as scientific truth to legitimize racialized violence within the broader social and political development of the United States” (4). Stillwater, Oklahoma, where OSU is located, is the County Seat for Payne County. This name is significant because, between 1880 and 1884, David Payne organized the “Oklahoma Boomer Movement” and led dozens of groups of colonists into Indian Territory to claim land illegally from Indigenous tribes. We see our project with the Iowa as a decolonial project enacted through the reappropriation of stolen resources and land.

### **Native American Tribe Arrivals to Indian Territory/Oklahoma**

We borrowed the dates listed below from Blue Clark’s *Indian Tribes of Oklahoma: A Guide* and indicate the ambiguity around Native American removal as recorded by western historians. In some cases, the early date listed indicates the year the corresponding tribal nation signed a treaty with the United States government, and the latter dates indicate the period of time during which they were removed to Indian Territory.

#### **1820 - 1854**

Choctaw: 1820 (1830 - 1834)

Yuchi/Euchee: 1820 - 1850

Cherokee: 1828 (1838)

United Keetoowah Band of Cherokees: 1828

Shawnees: 1831

Senecas: 1831

Cayuga: 1831

Muscogee Creek: 1833 (1836 - 1837)

Thlopthlocco: 1833

Seminole: 1833 (1835 - 1842)

Quapaw: 1833

Alabama Quassarte: 1833

Kialegee: 1833

Natchez: 1833

Chickasaw: 1837  
Absentee Shawnee: 1839

**1855 - 1865**

Delaware Nation (Western Delaware): 1859  
Kiowa: 1865 (1867)  
Comanche: 1865 (1867)  
Apache (Plains Apache): 1865 (1867)

**1866 - 1889**

Delaware Tribe of Indians (Eastern Delaware): 1867  
Sauk and Fox: 1867  
Peorias: 1867  
Ottawas: 1867  
Wyandottes: 1867  
Pottawatamie Shawnee: 1867  
Miami: 1867  
Arapaho: 1869  
Cheyenne: 1869  
Osage: 1870  
Kansa/Kaw: 1872  
Wichita: 1872  
Caddo: 1872  
Modocs: 1874  
Pawnee: 1876  
Ponca: 1881  
Otoe-Missouria: 1881  
Iowa: 1883  
Nez Perces: until 1885  
Tonkawa: 1885  
Kickapoo: 1889  
Ft. Sill Apache: 1894

**1891 - 1906 Land Runs, Lotteries, and Allotments**

Open by Allotment 1891: Tonkowa  
Land Run September 22, 1891: Iowa, Sauk and Fox, and Pottawatamie  
Shawnee  
Land Run September 16, 1893: Cherokee Outlet  
Land Run April 22, 1889: Unassigned Lands  
Open by Allotment 1892: Pawnee  
Land Run April 19, 1892: Cheyenne and Araphaho  
Land Run May 23, 1895: Kickapoo  
Open by Lottery June 9 - August 6, 1901: Wichita and Caddo  
Open by Lottery June 9 - August 6, 1901: Comanche Kiowa and Apache  
Open by Allotment 1904: Ponca and Otoe-Missouria  
Open by Allotment 1906: Kansa/Kaw  
Open by Allotment 1906: Osage Reservation

### **Galvladidla (Up)**

Working with communities requires building relationships with community members. Like any relationship, it takes time to build trust. Decolonial methodology requires that Indigenous epistemologies, priorities, values, and voices animate research and scholarship. Rachel's work with the Kiowa community in Anadarko, Oklahoma, draws on twelve years of weekly contact that creates consistent connection with the elders with whom she collaborates. While our project uses Rachel's previous community-engaged research and scholarship as a model, we are only in our first year of developing a relationship with the Iowa community and understand that the model may look quite different, based on Iowa members' different language, knowledge, cultural practices, and vision. That is, we must keep in mind that a model that works for one tribe cannot be expected to be replicated with another tribe. Indigenous communities differ culturally and historically.

We began building a relationship with the Iowa Tribal Librarian to identify small digital projects based on the current content of the tribal library's website. Rachel made several visits to the tribal complex during fall 2018, also meeting with the tribal elder who organizes the Elder Council. On

January 10, 2019, Phil accompanied Rachel on a visit to the complex to meet with the librarian. We listened to the librarian's vision and goals, responding with skills, knowledge, and abilities that we could offer. Together, the three of us imagined a spectrum of projects for the Iowa community, some large and complicated and others small and compact.

After more than an hour of conversation, we learned that the Frank Murray dictionary, which is [included as a pdf download at the bottom of the library's website](#) (titled "Frank M. Murray-Language Introduction"), needed enhancement and that his daughters, now elders in the community, might be willing to participate. Perhaps, we thought, the daughters would agree to read the loway words their father included in the dictionary aloud as we recorded them. Then, we could put their father's spellings and translations of the words on the screen. In this way, we would replicate the [kiowatalk.org](http://kiowatalk.org) website, a digital archive that Rachel has developed with Kiowa tribal members.

As the three of us chat, the librarian tells a story about a water ritual that she witnessed at funerals many times as a little girl. At traditional services, a man and boy would come around with a bucket of water, which had been prayed over, and pour a little into everyone's cup. Once everyone had a drink of this water, food was served and everyone ate. The librarian's story was a lament. Having recently attended several funerals for elders in her family, she had observed these old ways changing and, in her mind, becoming lost. Her story teaches us two important lessons: first, there is a right way, an order, to doing certain tasks that resonates with ceremony. Second, elders who remember these ceremonies play precious parts in sustaining cultural knowledge.

Toward the end of the conversation, the librarian concludes that seeking the Tribal Council's permission to work with these elders and the Elder Council is critical. She suggests that we write a proposal briefly describing our project for the Tribal Council to ensure we followed proper tribal protocol. We submitted that proposal to her on January 15, and she passed it along to the Council secretary. We continue to wait to hear from the

Council before contacting the elders, which means the project is up in the air.

### **Ayehli (Center, Where We Are Now)**

In spring 2019, storms and torrential rains leave their mark in the Midwest and Southeast U.S. with floods that drown crop fields, engulf streets and sidewalks, and raise the Mississippi River to near record highs. In Oklahoma, heavy rains drench the majority of the state in the month of May, causing flash floods in various counties and cities. Tornadoes touch ground over the span of two weeks, but the rains leave a lasting impression this year. Despite some political rhetoric that suggests that global warming is a hoax, the extreme storms evince the impact of humans' environmental footprint, created by western industrialism.

It's around 7:00 pm on May 23, 2019, and we decide to travel separately to the Cimarron River to get a visual sense of the recent floods. Rachel lives a mile from the Cimarron, and as the river shoots up into Kansas and then heads back south into Oklahoma, it merges with the Arkansas River just west of Tulsa, where Phil lives. The Cimarron makes up the northern boundary of the Iowa tribal lands, just outside of the town of Perkins, OK. Our visit to the river involves each of us standing at different locations along the same waters, and so these waters join us topographically as this project has joined us personally. We decide to record our FaceTime conversation once we get to our respective banks of the river, hoping to generate a way of thinking through positionality and relationality between ourselves, the river(s), and the land. We also record our conversation as we drive to our respective river sites. In the video (Prayer), we integrate these recordings, along with photographs and video from Rachel's visits to the Medicine Bow National Forest in the Rocky Mountains of southern Wyoming and remote northeastern New Mexico, and Phil's balcony in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

For us, these rivers overwhelming their banks represents the overwhelming feelings that we have experienced in this project with the Iowa, as we

managed our own relationship as new colleagues and friends, our relationship with the Iowa tribal members and government, and our relationship to our institution, Oklahoma State University.

*Phil*

As I drive out to the meeting of the Cimarron and Arkansas (only a fifteen minute drive), I see a dozen or so vehicles pulled over along Oklahoma Highway 412 with their drivers and passengers looking out on the river that weaves along and under the highway. Some use their phones to snap photos or capture videos; others simply stare at the aftermath of a week's worth of excessive rains.

What does it mean for me to be here—a settler, a transplant to this land? What are my obligations, my responsibility to this place, this history, this nation? As I sit on a cliff overlooking the junction of the Cimarron and Arkansas, a memory emerges. In November 2016, I made a trip to Oceti Sakowin Camp, a campsite located less than a mile from the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota, to deliver tents, winter clothes, blankets, and firewood to water protectors. The pipeline is a \$3.7 billion piece of infrastructure, intended to carry crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois. The pipeline threatens to poison the Oceti Sakowin tribe's water supply (as well as many other Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' supply) and destroy its sacred burial sites. Since 2016, the Sioux tribe and other Indigenous tribes have resisted the pipeline's encroachment, and they have welcomed any donated supplies and available labor in sustaining the camp and continuing their resistance.

On my first morning at the camp, I attended newcomer orientation, which is led by Indigenous youth leaders. After orientation, I talked with many Sioux youth and elders. Any questions I asked them were answered with stories. In one conversation with an elder, I asked him a general question about what he thought the camp needed. He then told me a story about some visitors who identified themselves as activists. The visitors wanted to deploy certain kinds of protest tactics that would disrupt the boundaries laid

out by authorities to reinforce construction sites. When the elder asked one of the visitors why he took this approach, the visitor responded that he was passionate and dedicated to helping Indigenous people reclaim ownership of the land. The visitor wanted to be on the frontlines, resisting. But, as the elder explained, Standing Rock, which is the land of the Sioux Tribe, “is not a protest and the people there are not protesters. Standing Rock resistance is about protection and the people are water protectors.” The elder continued: “we are all guests on this land and we want to build a new legacy—one that breaks the historical cycle of violence, colonialism, and white supremacy.” These outsider activists, though well-intentioned, did not see how imposing their protest tactics reinscribed this history.

I also chatted with a nineteen-year old Apache man. He had been on the frontlines, including the night that authorities used water cannons, pepper spray, tear gas, and rubber bullets on him and other water protectors in below-freezing temperatures. He and I chatted a week after that night, and he said that he’ll have to go to the frontlines again very soon. Similar to my conversation with the elder, I asked him what he thought the camp needed. “We need more than people going to the frontlines,” he remarked. “We also need help in the kitchens, with construction, with the medical tent, and with the supply tents.” His comment reminded me of the concept of invisible labor—the work that people don’t associate with activism, such as cooking and cleaning—that is so often needed, or so often there, but isn’t recognized as much. “Being involved with activism and with community,” he stated, “isn’t just fists up. Having your hands in water with dirty plates, for example, is needed just as much.”

When I reflect on these interactions and living in Oklahoma, four key Standing Rock resistance principles come to mind: being in line with an Indigenous-centered mindset and following Indigenous leadership, building a new legacy that breaks a colonial cycle, being of use even in subtle or invisible ways, and always listening to the specifics of the land, of the Indigenous people, and of communities where we live now.

*Rachel*

I am an Indigenous woman. I am from Oklahoma. I know its rivers and lakes like I know my own body—and yet both are also still mysteries to me. The Cimarron River, a mile from my home, begins from headwaters formed in northern New Mexico and flows into the Arkansas and eventually the Mississippi. Its water is red like the clay, and its sand bars move with the river’s current, shifting shapes on a daily basis.

In Cherokee culture, my culture, the earth began as water. All of creation in this world was once one vast ocean. The animals and other living beings in the world above were too crowded and decided to find a place to land on Earth. Water Beetle went down to inspect the land but could find no place for footing. She swam down to the bottom of the ocean and brought a morsel of mud back to the surface. From this mud, she built the land. Grandfather Buzzard, a powerful bird associated with both death and creation, dried the mud and sculpted the Smoky Mountains, the traditional Cherokee homelands, with his wings.

It is the end of June 2019, and I am writing this from southern Wyoming after spending the last week in Custer, South Dakota, with a group of Kiowas and our elder instructor, Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune. The rains continue in South Dakota as they do in Oklahoma, with each day bringing more accumulation of water, which has fewer places to go. We spent the week learning how to brain tan buffalo hides the Lakota Sioux way. The Kiowa consider the Black Hills part of their original homelands, which they left because of hostilities with the Sioux people. The Kiowa still share similar cultural practices and lifeways with the Sioux. The skill and practice of making buffalo hide tipis, or TDOE HEHN (meaning “original dwelling” in Kiowa), has not been practiced recently in the memories of the oldest living generation of Kiowas, likely not since the 1930s and 1940s. Our goal is to relearn these skills and reawaken the practice back home in Oklahoma.

Kiowa stories indicate their original homelands were mountainous and cold. According to oral tradition, their home prior to the Black Hills was most likely in northern Wyoming and southern Montana. They migrated slowly

south over the course of centuries. Their principal deity in the old ways, ZIE DAY TAHLEE, or “divided boy,” was the son of the sun, and stories say that he walked into a mountain lake when his heroic deeds among the Kiowa were complete. Dorothy and other elders believe Spear Lake, a snow-fed lake nestled deep in the Big Horn Mountains of northern Wyoming, is this lake. The lullaby traditionally sung to all Kiowa babies is called “The First Song After the Flood” and was first sung to the infant ZIE DAY TAHLEE by Grandma Spider, who found the baby nursing from his dead mother. The story of the flood has been lost. After our hide-tanning workshop, we drove to Wyoming to visit Devil’s Tower, a sacred Kiowa site. We could not visit Spear Lake because the continuing snow made the trails impassable.

As July approaches, the snow keeps falling in Wyoming, as rain keeps falling in South Dakota and Oklahoma. We all have water in common. Water connects us as interdependent beings. Rivers connect us topographically, as they connected Indigenous peoples and enabled relationships between them. I am on my way home. The North Platte River rages outside my hotel room in Southern Wyoming, full to its banks, just as the Cimarron and the Arkansas overflow back home. These waters, and the floods, relate us to each other. These waters, as these stories, tell of our origins and our fate. All of these rains and rivers eventually flow to the Mississippi, which flows to the Gulf of Mexico, where the world becomes ocean again.