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Author

Rule, Elizabeth

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The Chickasaw Press: A Source of Power and Pride

Elizabeth Rule

[Stories are] the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

In a critical exercise of tribal sovereignty, the Chickasaw Nation established the Chickasaw Press in 2006 to develop and distribute scholarship from the Chickasaw perspective, seizing control over Chickasaw representations in the public sphere. This initiative was necessitated by the void of Indigenous voices in scholarly publications and made possible through tribal economic development. The creation of the Chickasaw Press signaled a wave of tribal-specific histories, cultural preservation, and community programming for the Chickasaw Nation. In all of its work, the Press both draws upon and bolsters Chickasaw tribal sovereignty by uplifting the voices of the Nation.

The Chickasaw Press is the first tribal press independent of a university affiliation and a seminal development in Indian country's historical recovery and cultural revitalization efforts.¹ Born from Chickasaw Governor Bill Anoatubby's vision for rigorous Chickasaw scholarship and quality historical resources, the written statement of purpose for the Chickasaw Press emphasizes the Chickasaw perspective:

ELIZABETH RULE (Chickasaw) is the assistant director of the AT&T Center for Indigenous Politics and Policy at George Washington University and received her PhD in American Studies from Brown University. Her work brings together Native American studies, legal histories, theories of gender/sexuality, and critiques of settler colonialism. Her work has been recognized by a Ford Foundation dissertation completion fellowship, a Mellon Mays predoctoral research development grant, the Chancellor Thomas A. Tisch award for graduate studies, and the Chickasaw Foundation's Holisso: The Center for Study of Chickasaw History and Culture fellowship. Rule was a 2016–2017 visiting scholar in anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has lectured, presented, and taught courses related to Native American studies nationally and internationally.

"The goal of the Chickasaw Press is to preserve, perpetuate, and provide an awareness of Chickasaw history and culture by: generating and publishing research and scholarship about Chickasaw history and culture; making such scholarship accessible to Chickasaw people; exercising 'cultural and intellectual sovereignty' by adhering to ethical and culturally appropriate research and publication practices; providing an outlet to Chickasaw authors and scholars."² In this way, the Press embodies the sentiment that, for Chickasaw people, the production, revitalization, and sharing of their history is itself a cultural practice.³

The significance of the Nation's effort falls squarely in line with decolonization scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's contention that

A critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as Indigenous peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented and excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by Indigenous peoples with a view to rewriting and rerighting our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes.⁴

For Native and non-Native people alike, derogatory images of Indigenous peoples remain a daily fixture of American life: sports team mascots, hypersexualized Halloween costumes, and broken-English cartoons represent only a small sampling of the numerous contemporary iterations of ideas long-bent on Indigenous destruction as part of the colonial project. Each stereotypical portrayal, as Edward Said reminds in *Orientalism*, renders Indigenous peoples as a cultural monolith and as inferior Others across every category of analysis.⁵

Paige Raibmon writes in similar terms of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, which displayed Native American people in live exhibits in order to build political and social support for Native American assimilation, reservations, and removal: "The anthropological circumscription of an authentic Aboriginal culture provided colonial governments and expansionists with scientifically based, and thus seemingly objective and respectable, rationalizations for the displacement and marginalization of Aboriginal peoples."⁶ Indeed, to perpetuate these derogatory representations decades, and even centuries, after these historical atrocities perpetuates their original intent. While the original images and conceptions raised public support to initiate anti-Indian policies, their contemporary counterparts exist in order to excuse past action and level new affronts against tribal nations.

While such representations of Indigenous peoples have long sparked violence, fueled disenfranchisement, and spread misinformation about American Indians, today's tribal nations find a source of strength in challenging those hardships through self-representations. The Chickasaw Press, for instance, deploys many of the practices for Indigenous research espoused in the pioneering works on Indigenous methodologies by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou), Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree), and Margaret Kovach (Pasqua First Nation), specifically by engaging non-extractive frameworks, validating Indigenous epistemologies, and ensuring community benefit, all of which disrupt the reinscription of colonial power relations between

Indigenous subjects and researcher manifest in Western research models.⁷ This practice emerges as an exercise of cultural sovereignty, characterized by the centering of Chickasaw culture in the Press's operations.

The Chickasaw Press confronts colonial representations through a centering of the Chickasaw perspective in peer-reviewed scholarship, embodying that which Robert Warrior has termed "intellectual sovereignty."⁸ In this way, the Press represents the Nation's commitment to investing in Native American scholarly and intellectual traditions, and specifically those specific to the Chickasaw Nation, through texts that constitute "part of the larger processes of social and political engagement" and "processes which Native people experience."⁹ Bolstered by these showcases of cultural and intellectual sovereignty, the most critical role of the Press is to grow the Nation's political power under settler colonialism and assert the Chickasaw Nation's inherent tribal sovereignty. This article draws on oral histories to record and recount the story of the Chickasaw Press from its inception as a community-driven initiative through current operations, including both publications and programming that are rooted in cultural relevance and that bolster tribal nationhood. Doing so reveals the Press's hallmark work in support of tribal, cultural, and intellectual sovereignty through publishing and scholarship.

ORIGINS: THE NEED FOR A KNOWLEDGE-SHARING PLATFORM

Prior to the advent of the Chickasaw Press, authors taking up the Chickasaw Nation as its subject of inquiry primarily wrote about the tribe from non-Chickasaw positionalities and for a non-Chickasaw audience. Accordingly, while scholarship about the Chickasaw people existed, many of these works emerged in distant relationship to the subjects themselves. This removal from the community prevented many authors and texts from developing a truly reciprocal relationship with the Chickasaw Nation—a relationship that Shawn Wilson identifies as a central feature of "research as ceremony"—with the Chickasaw people being excluded from not only the methodological framing of the studies and areas of analysis, but also the potential impact of findings.¹⁰ At best, such practices marginalize and "other" Indigenous voices; at worst, they perpetuate the history of exploitative and extractive studies of Native peoples.

Furthermore, few outlets allowed for the production and sharing of Chickasaw knowledge. Those that did exist, such as the tribal newspaper, *The Chickasaw Times*, provided much-needed avenues for connecting Chickasaw tribal members through print publications and enjoyed a broad base of contributors and readers alike. This platform offered updates on the latest tribal developments, local news, and opportunities for tribal members to engage with their elected leaders. Traditional stories, cultural knowledge, and ancestral histories, however, remained almost exclusively within the realm of family and community teachings.

With the Chickasaw Legislature's chartering of the Chickasaw Historical Society on April 15, 1994, the tribe ushered in a new platform for Chickasaw thought: the *Journal of Chickasaw History*.¹¹ Operating with a balance of academic rigor and inclusive authorship practices under the leadership of journal editor and founder

Richard Green, who also served as the Chickasaw Nation tribal historian, this journal provided a space for Chickasaw writers to develop, record, and share their knowledge of Chickasaw subjects. In an editor's note, S. Matthew DeSpain outlines the journal's intentions as he speaks to its cultural-political work: "Consider the ensuing stories as a means to building up our memory. Indeed, the essence of a nation is that all citizens forming that nation have much in common in terms of legacy and memory. I hope this Journal issue will help develop further that common heritage, that we find in it the memory that defines being Chickasaw."¹² It produced a whopping nineteen issues in its first five years of operation and journal readership soared to over six hundred individuals.¹³ Taking up subjects ranging from histories to biographies, from family accounts to poems, and from book reviews to recipes, the *Journal of Chickasaw History* offered one of the only outlets for learning about Chickasaw history.¹⁴

In the early 2000s, the publication expanded its focus with a newfound emphasis on Chickasaw culture, moving forward under the revamped title *Journal of Chickasaw History and Culture*.¹⁵ This new direction allowed for significant growth of this venue for Chickasaw scholarship, history, and culture, but as it was surrounded by an outpouring of public enthusiasm from both prospective readers and potential future authors, demand to both share and consume knowledge about the Chickasaw Nation ultimately outpaced the publication's capacity and necessitated additional platforms. "There was a great need," explains former Chickasaw Press director and illustrator Jeannie Barbour. "There were several authors that had presented manuscripts and there really wasn't an outlet at that point."¹⁶

This hunger to engage Chickasaw history and culture arose from within the Chickasaw community itself, and similarly demanded a solution designed by and for the Chickasaw people. Given the success of the *Journal for Chickasaw History and Culture*, methods for further developing the tribe's print publishing began circulating amongst the Chickasaw people. "A committee of Chickasaw individuals and others with knowledge of publishing, writing, scholarship, and research were brought together to discuss the structure and the mission," Barbour recalls of those early planning meetings.¹⁷ Nearly a decade of community brainstorming ensued, with early academic contributions from Dr. Bob Blackburn, executive director of the Oklahoma Historical Society; Paul Lambert, author and consultant to the Oklahoma Historical Society and Chickasaw Nation; Richard Green, Chickasaw Nation tribal historian; and Dr. Amanda Cobb-Greetham, administrator of the Chickasaw Nation Division of History and Culture.

The tribal leadership of Chickasaw Nation Governor Anoatubby manifested in the first formal proposal for the Chickasaw Press, which the Chickasaw government enthusiastically embraced, and in October 2005, the governor first publicly announced the Press in his annual State of the Nation address, receiving a hearty round of applause from the audience.¹⁸ One month later, the *Chickasaw Times* released its first article on the new development, summarily titled "Chickasaw Nation Establishing Chickasaw Press," and issued a call for book proposals.¹⁹ Governor Anoatubby envisioned the Press as an area for excellence and tribal innovation, and as a means to meet the needs of the Chickasaw citizenry.

Chickasaw Nation tribal members heartily welcomed the arrival of the Chickasaw Press. Community embrace of the Chickasaw Press showcased the alignment of the Nation's actions with the desires and needs of its citizens, and offered an exemplary display of the leveraging of sovereignty in order to achieve this balance. This venture fulfilled the need for a tribal-specific knowledge-sharing platform that enabled Chickasaws to record and disseminate their cultural and historical insights and provided a means for Chickasaws living on and off of tribal lands to celebrate their heritage.

Nowhere was this phenomenon more clearly evident than at the Chickasaw Nation Annual Meeting and Festival, where Chickasaws from all corners of the globe reunite with friends, family, and their culture. It is also the venue for unveiling the Press's new releases. Barbour recalls of the book launches of the late 2000's, "It became this huge event during Festival. . . . The book releases became an event unto themselves and people were excited about it."²⁰ In keeping with the community spirit of the Press, this event provided an opportunity for attendees to engage directly with Press authors through meet-and-greets and book-signings. This format contributed a personal connection component designed to complement the work achieved by distributing information through print publications. The timing of the release in connection with the Chickasaw Nation Annual Meeting and Festival further signaled, from the beginning, the Press's commitment to bringing Chickasaw cultural and historical information to Chickasaws who resided away from the tribe, and a desire to bring those individuals who are separated from the daily life within the community into these knowledge-sharing exchanges. The practice of showcasing the latest Chickasaw Press publications at the annual festival continues today, a precedent set during the Press's infancy.

Such heightened enthusiasm, in fact, proved one of the Press's early challenges, as it struggled to keep up with the high demand for new materials. "As [the Chickasaw Press] became better known, we started getting a lot of manuscripts that really didn't fit with what our mission was, which was mainly, at that time, academic-related history books. . . . What we were getting was fiction and children's books and all manner of different things that didn't quite fit, and so we realized we needed to think about expanding," Barbour recalls.²¹ This issue was further complicated as the Press attempted to navigate its role as both a government service to Chickasaw citizens and as a peer-review-style publishing house.²² For while the Chickasaw Press is decidedly not a vanity press for public relations, neither was it originally conceptualized as an outlet for creative works.²³ This early desire to incorporate a variety of genres under the Chickasaw Press heading, however, foreshadowed developments soon to come.

From the onset of the project, Governor Anoatubby "wanted to see the very best publishing efforts come out of the tribe. He wanted to see art and history and culture, all of it expressed in the best way."²⁴ In order to realize those best efforts, early decisions determined that the Chickasaw Press would be a not-for-profit venture and would be organized as part of the Chickasaw Nation's government programming.²⁵ Such financing was possible because of the Nation's diverse financial portfolio of more than one hundred businesses, developed largely out of gaming enterprises under the 1988

Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA).²⁶ Within the twelve-year period spanning 1987 and 2009, the Nation's annual budget soared from \$700,000 to \$800,000,000.²⁷ The Chickasaw Press came into fruition in this post-IGRA moment, during which time the Chickasaw Nation advanced a robust "heritage infrastructure" which also includes the Chickasaw Council House Museum, the Chickasaw National Capitol and White House, the Chickasaw Cultural Center, and a number of historic preservation sites.²⁸ Together, these initiatives signal the ways in which the Chickasaw Nation deploys its sovereignty through tribal economic development in order "to become the author of its own cultural and historical discourse."²⁹ More than \$60,000,000 is currently devoted to tribal culture, heritage, and history.³⁰

In its inaugural years, the Chickasaw Press partnered with the University of Oklahoma Press, which acted as its distributor. This relationship marketed Chickasaw Press offerings in a more mainstream book catalogue, thereby raising awareness of the Chickasaw Press and its publications far beyond the Chickasaw community. However, the Press quickly developed the skills, tools, and resources to make autonomy possible and the university press arrangement was short-lived. The Chickasaw Press has continued to manage distribution independently, largely through its online store and local storefront in Ada, Oklahoma, the headquarters and heart of the Chickasaw Nation.

This dedication to independence must be understood within the context of tribal sovereignty and self-determination. The Press's organizational structuring under the Chickasaw Nation government, for instance, enables the Press to exercise near complete autonomy. Today, the Chickasaw Press remains housed under the Department of Culture and Humanities, and is subgrouped as part of the Division of History and Culture.³¹ The Press's position as an affiliate of the department of Language, Cultural Resources, and Museums and Libraries speaks to the intersections of culture, history, knowledge-sharing, and service at the heart of its charter.³² In this way, the Press operates as a service to Chickasaw citizens and serves as a tool for education and good will, rather than as an economic development opportunity created to bring in profit.³³ In staying true to its origins within the Chickasaw Nation and its conception as a community-serving institution, the ability to self-determine every aspect of the Press's operations, including its marketing and outreach, serves as an arm through which the tribe exercises its intellectual sovereignty. The aims of the Chickasaw Press remain uniquely Chickasaw—they are radically distinct from mainstream publishing houses—and so it follows that the means of circulating its advertisements must also be designed to meet the tribe's specific needs.

The Press's organization as part of the Chickasaw Nation government allows the publishing house to focus on serving the overarching mission of the tribal nation—"to enhance the overall quality of life of the Chickasaw people"—rather than focusing on the finances of book sales.³⁴ Book publishing, within and outside of the Chickasaw Nation, has proven a volatile business venture, requiring many publishing houses to rely on museums and educational institutions for support. Falling in line with this national trend, the Chickasaw Nation's governmental and cultural resources bolster the Chickasaw Press, leading it, in a number of ways, to operate as a government service

similar to museums and cultural centers.³⁵ For example, items such as Chickasaw language dictionaries and historical atlases are not projected to sell popularly.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Chickasaw Press continues to produce them, as these types of foundational texts are “essential to a Chickasaw body of knowledge.”³⁷ “We get to focus on ‘this is the right thing to do; this is what our people want; this is a great story and people need to know about it,’” explains Chickasaw Press Director, Wiley Barnes.³⁸

FOUNDING PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

At the heart of its operations, the Chickasaw Press holds that self-representations through publishing function as a service to the Chickasaw Nation as a sovereign political body. As former Chickasaw Press Director Amanda Cobb-Greetham writes, the Press believes that “history and culture are dynamic and alive; that knowledge of tribal history creates a shared identity and understanding of our current circumstances and needs and a basis for future decision-making; that we should take ownership of our history and practice ethical, culturally appropriate research methods; and that if more of our neighbors know about us, the more effectively we will be able to sustain productive government-to-government relationships and good-will.”³⁹ These foundational ideals form the bedrock on which the Chickasaw Press builds all of its work, and reveals its most essential values: specifically, to invest in a dynamic history and culture centers Indigenous perspectives on temporality, paving the way for Chickasaw scholarship to challenge narratives which constrain Native peoples to a static past. Conceptualizing history and culture as living entities casts Chickasaws as authentic to our own experience and the sole judges of what that authenticity entails. Barbour speaks to the Chickasaw Press’s role in shaping that collective consciousness when she explains that “the books, in important ways, make Chickasaw history and the contemporary culture come alive.”⁴⁰

These “important ways” take various forms. John Harrington’s accounts of his experience as the first Native American astronaut in *Mission to Space* (2016), for example, casts Chickasaws as a modern people and interrupts stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as mere historical subjects. To place topics such as space exploration in conversation with Chickasaw heritage makes clear, to both Chickasaw and non-Chickasaw readers, the variety of paths taken by contemporary Chickasaw citizens and how the modern Chickasaw Nation is thriving in business, the arts, and science, among other sectors. Works that demonstrate the centrality of Chickasaw history and hardship to the contemporary Chickasaw experience emerges as another means through which the Press makes Chickasaw history and culture “come alive.” *They Know Who They Are* (2008) and *Proud to Be Chickasaw* (2010), for instance, present and preserve voices of Chickasaw elders, and in doing so speak to the collective consciousness of the Chickasaw Nation as a community and a sovereign nation grounded in a shared history and future.

For Barbour, “important ways” of making history and culture come alive include highlighting the strength of the Chickasaw ancestors who safeguarded the culture and traditional ways. This concept shines through the four-volume *Chickasaw Lives*

series from the Press by Richard Green, which builds a narrative arc from the mound culture of the Mississippian period through the present. The illustrations by Joshua D. Henson are in the characteristic Mississippian style and meld past and present with depictions of contemporary figures such as football and baseball players, churchgoers, and professionals. All of these features convey the fact that the contemporary Chickasaw Nation has built itself upon a foundation of ancestral pride, knowledge, and strength.

As these examples suggest, the Chickasaw Press's work in encouraging tribal members to embrace a distinctly Chickasaw identity proves central to the tribe's political operations as a sovereign nation. Today, the Chickasaw Nation thrives despite centuries of institutionalized attempts to eradicate tribal identities, including the separation from traditional homelands during Indian Removal, assimilation-driven boarding schools, the outlawing of Indigenous religions and cultural practices, and attacks on Native languages. The Press's current emphasis on revitalizing a Chickasaw cultural identity appropriately acknowledges the burdens these projects of settler colonialism have placed on the Chickasaw Nation throughout its history, but also asserts that the Chickasaw people have and will continue to live up to our tribal motto: the "unconquered and unconquerable." Using the Press as a means of cultural revitalization makes clear that Chickasaw strength, knowledge, and hope for the future rests with the elders and culture bearers, who have carried Chickasaw ways from the past and share them now in the forging of the Nation's future.

The Press's commitment to culturally appropriate research methods also privileges Chickasaw perspectives in order to combat the oppressive, dehumanizing, and discriminatory legacy of settler representations of Native peoples. While directing the Press's policies and practices in its first years, Amanda Cobb-Greetham focused on integrating decolonized methodologies, "approaches to research that [address] . . . the unethical, individualistic practice of research that . . . often rewarded researchers for telling half-truths or downright lies, that misrepresented our world, and that gave authority about us to academic researchers."⁴¹ The tribe installed its own Institutional Review Board (IRB) and applied it to all disciplines of study, including those topics with publishing opportunities through the Chickasaw Press.⁴² In practice, the Chickasaw Nation IRB ensures sustained attention to interview practices, reflective research on behalf of the researcher, and open dialogue to allow the needs, desires, and customs of Chickasaw subjects to be heard, followed, and respected.⁴³

The development of an IRB additionally provides for academic transparency and legibility nationwide, both of which are essential factors in the Chickasaw Press publications successfully entering the mainstream. Critically, the Chickasaw Nation IRB determines to move forward with research only once the agenda has proven to be "beneficial" or "of interest" to the Nation and its citizens, positioning the Chickasaw people as the beneficiaries of such work, rather than merely subjects to be examined for non-Chickasaw interests and gain.⁴⁴ Together, the establishment of the Chickasaw Nation's independent IRB and the prioritizing of Chickasaw perspectives, values, and needs within that IRB framework performs the decolonizing work of presenting

Chickasaw research as viable, authoritative scholarship to Native and non-Native audiences alike.

Finally, positioning the Chickasaw Press as a tool for diplomatic relations showcases the interconnections linking the tribal nation's cultural, intellectual, and political sovereignty. In the words of Audra Simpson, "Within Indigenous contexts, when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominate representations of their past and, sometimes, their present."⁴⁵ The Chickasaw Press makes such a rupture possible by reclaiming tribal narratives from a tribal perspective and, in turn, utilizing those voices in the service of cross-cultural relationship building. As a modern tribal nation engaged in far-reaching development initiatives—housing, healthcare, gaming, education, sustainability, energy, tourism, hospitality, and cultural preservation, among others—partnerships must take root in accurate understandings of the Chickasaw Nation, particularly in relation to its sovereign political status. As this expansion continues and new collaborations emerge daily, the Chickasaw Press bolsters the success of such ventures by using its educational power to foster civic engagement rooted in Chickasaw values.⁴⁶

Drawing on each of these foundational beliefs, the Chickasaw Press poses a formidable intervention in the fields of American Indian history and Native American cultural studies by recognizing and redressing the lack of Chickasaw voices in texts written about Chickasaw history and culture. Jeannie Barbour characterizes the many texts written by non-Natives about Native Americans as "always told from perspective that is slightly slanted," adding that, simply, these authors "couldn't possibly understand where we were coming from."⁴⁷ Thus, she concludes, "It is not unreasonable to suggest that any nation needs its own literature to be viable in the modern world."⁴⁸ Chickasaw Tribal Historian and Chickasaw Press author Richard Green similarly emphasizes the necessity of scholarship written from a Chickasaw perspective in pointing out that tribal elders have access to a body of knowledge which eludes non-Native academics.⁴⁹

Indeed, that the first book on Chickasaw history authored by a Chickasaw scholar was not published until the turn of the twenty-first century illustrates the need for Chickasaw perspectives in academic literature.⁵⁰ Amanda Cobb's *Listening to Our Grandmothers' Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852–1949*, published in 2000 by the University of Nebraska Press, paved the way for the Chickasaw Press and the increasing numbers of Chickasaw authors being able to share their voices and insights.⁵¹ Also significantly, Cobb's scholarly work as a Chickasaw tribal member merged, for the first time, the rigor of mainstream academic research with tribal-specific historical knowledge and a Chickasaw authorial perspective; the chapter titles, for instance, are written in Chickasaw language and accompanied by an English translation. Describing her project in the introduction as a "scholarly, historical narrative," Cobb steadfastly outlines the stakes of the research, carefully balanced with the assertion that "this book is an attempt to know my grandma better, to reach through time, to listen to and touch the past."⁵² These words acknowledge that at its heart, scholarship about Indigenous peoples is scholarship about family, community,

and nationhood. In this way, too, Chickasaw voices are necessary for the telling of Chickasaw stories.

Although Cobb-Greetham notes that both Chickasaws and non-Chickasaws are able to incorporate the Chickasaw perspectives in their respective writings through the use of appropriate methodologies, as part of its mission the Chickasaw Press maintains a specific dedication to the development of Chickasaw scholars.⁵³ As explained by Chickasaw Nation Governor Anoatubby in his 2005 State of the Nation address, "Our goal is to inspire the best—the best and greatest wealth of knowledge and skills, especially as it pertains to the Chickasaw people and our culture."⁵⁴ The Press encourages this tribal scholarship by balancing a selection of solicited and unsolicited manuscripts for publication and providing a staff position for an in-house writer to facilitate the authorial process.⁵⁵

The Chickasaw Nation Publication Awards provides an additional initiative aimed at increasing Chickasaw scholarship by Chickasaw authors.⁵⁶ "By providing an outlet for their work, awards for outstanding achievements and a resource to assist in research efforts," Governor Anoatubby reasons, "We believe we can do a great deal to inspire authors and expand the scope of knowledge of our tribe's history, heritage, and culture."⁵⁷ Chickasaw Press author Paul F. Lambert seconds this assertion, adding that the award programs are chartering new and innovative approaches to fostering tribal scholarship.⁵⁸ Falling in line with this investment in broad Chickasaw scholarship, authors publishing with the Press may be professional authors, historians, scientists, elders, and more. Brought together in a shared commitment to bolstering the voices of Chickasaw Nation, the Press's investment in publishing these diverse perspectives speaks both to the wide range of topics of relevance to a modern tribal nation and to the ways in which each of these many positions is valued by the Press as a source of important insights and knowledge worthy of public circulation.

Due to grassroots community enthusiasm, government-backed opportunities, and the need for a Chickasaw knowledge-sharing resource, to date the Chickasaw Press has published forty-four works. In accordance with the Press's original focus on documenting Chickasaw history, these texts range from biographies of notable Chickasaw figures to histories of Chickasaw political events that are rendered through the eyes of Chickasaw records, testimonies, and positionalities. Provided with a platform currently unavailable in mainstream media outlets, authors are able to commemorate individuals of national tribal significance and to center Chickasaw experiences in retelling United States history. Taken as a whole, Chickasaw Press publications uphold and embody cultural, intellectual, and political sovereignty by offering positive self-representations of a multifaceted, modern people.

SERVING THE NATION: DIVERSE APPROACHES

The White Dog Press, the Chickasaw Press's first and only secondary imprint, specializes in creative works, allowing the Chickasaw Press to maintain its founding commitment to research and academic publications. Chickasaw authors of children's literature, poetry, historical novels, young-adult fiction, instructional texts, travel

narratives, and memoirs publish their knowledge under this imprint and achieve the same benefits of sharing, documenting, and perpetuating Chickasaw culture: “Just as the White Dog in the Chickasaw migration story served as a guide for our Chickasaw ancestors as they made their way to a new homeland, White Dog Press is committed to blazing a trail in the publishing industry as we work to support and promote authors in generating quality publications that capture the experiences, culture, and history of the Chickasaw.”⁵⁹ Such is the case, for example, with award-winning Chickasaw poet Rebecca Hatcher Travis’s two White Dog poetry collections, *Constant Fires* (2017) and *Picked Apart the Bones* (2008). Travis writes,

When I heard the shell shakers
somewhere in my memory stirred as if

I knew these songs
knew this pride
knew this ancient way

Then I heard Grandmother whisper
dance.⁶⁰

As in this quotation, both of Travis’s collections of poetry imbue the reader with the wisdom of Chickasaw ancestral knowledge, the strength of a people who continue to survive, and the peace derived from Chickasaw connections to land and environment. Travis’s work and similar pieces of fiction and literature showcase the Chickasaw Nation’s modern tribal talents and does so in a manner which testifies to the resilience and strength of the Nation.

Other White Dog Press publications serve an instructional purpose, such as dictionaries for Chickasaw language learning, traditional foods cookbooks designed to perpetuate cultural traditions, and spiritual texts rendered in both English and Chickasaw. Drawing on the oral tradition as their primary source material, these texts perform the critical task of documenting and preserving diverse elements of the Chickasaw culture. Further, by making the material widely accessible, user-friendly, and broadly appealing to a Chickasaw audience, these resource texts intend to revitalize cultural practices in many ways, with language revitalization a main focus. Each of White Dog’s Chickasaw language publications is unique in its contributions to the revitalization effort, whether it provides readers with audiovisual guides to learning the Chickasaw language, offers Chickasaw translations of Biblical excerpts and hymns, or documents the language variations in a dictionary format. Chickasaw linguist Jenny Davis’s work on Chickasaw language revitalization praises the Press’s publications as “a means of encountering [the Chickasaw language] written form beyond language description and pedagogical texts.”⁶¹ In this way, the works serve the purpose of creating sustained audience engagement with the tribal language for the purposes of immersion. This approach naturally fosters language learning, but also, by incorporating the language into daily Chickasaw life, it uplifts it from its earlier relegation as

only a subject to be studied and implements the cultural-political work of recentering Chickasaw as a language spoken among the Nation.

Indeed, children's books comprise a large subsection of the White Dog Press language revitalization effort, and often do so by embedding language acquisition in a culturally relevant format that "[preserves] the storytelling tradition that is so vital to Chickasaw culture."⁶² Chickasaw Press Director and children's book author Wiley Barnes looks upon his writing as a way to give back to the Chickasaw Nation, particularly by educating the younger generations.⁶³ For instance, his book *C is for Chickasaw* (2014) targets third- through sixth-graders in a guided bilingual movement through the alphabet.⁶⁴ Each letter receives a two-line rhyming verse poem, a letter-corresponding word translated into English and Chickasaw, and a lengthier explanation of the term at the bottom of the page:

Chickasaw/Chikasha

A Native American tribe rich in history

Proud, strong, and beautiful people you will want to see.⁶⁵

In order to optimize language retention, the book concludes with an activity section to encourage sustained engagement with the text material. Notably, Barnes conceptualized the book as a resource for Chickasaw and non-Chickasaw youth alike. He explains, "I wrote it as a teaching tool, so that if there's a fourth-grade classroom in Ohio that wants to teach their class about Native Americans and they want to cover Chickasaws, they can take this book and it gives you a broad overview of Chickasaw history and culture and people and the language."⁶⁶ This imagined scenario reflects again the Press's commitment to crosscultural education geared toward relationship-building. In this way, also, the goal of correcting misinformation and stereotypes finds a solution in positive self-representations.

In order to make Chickasaw self-representations as accessible as possible, the White Dog Press and Chickasaw Press draw upon digital technology to supplement their print publications. In 2014, the Chickasaw Press ventured into e-books, publishing three the first year. The Chickasaw Press solidified its commitment to technological innovation by creating a permanent staff position for a digital book developer. The White Dog Press proudly released its first mobile device application in 2016 and in 2017 a second release, Barnes's *C is for Chickasaw*, became the basis for the second application. Users can read the book with the aid of highlighted audio narration, engage in supplemental language learning activities, access additional information on Chickasaw history and culture, and play digital renditions of traditional Chickasaw games such as stickball. The Press anticipates these applications will be incorporated into local classroom curricula, with the ultimate goal of using the technology to relate to and engage the youth.⁶⁷ By providing the next generation with tools to learn accurate information about the Chickasaw Nation and its people, the Press instigates an early intervention to confront, challenge, and replace misinformation about Indigenous peoples, with the goals that Chickasaw children will become knowledgeable and proud of their heritage and non-Chickasaw children will come to respect the Chickasaw Nation as a thriving, contemporary people with a rich history and culture.

In addition, the Chickasaw Press creates specialized programs to foster an interest in Chickasaw scholarship amongst the youth and to teach the critical importance of documenting Chickasaw perspectives. As Chickasaw Press Senior Staff Writer Stan Nelson explains, these youth voices are needed in publishing because “the Nation has so many stories to tell, and they all need to be told from all the different points of view that you can find in the Chickasaw Nation.”⁶⁸ In June 2014, the Press initiated its first inaugural book-creation program, *Ikbi Holisso* Camp. This multiday camp provides the opportunity for ten young Chickasaws (ages twelve through eighteen) to learn about the writing, illustration, and design portions of the publication process. As a concluding collective project, camp attendees collaborate with Chickasaw Press staff to create a children’s book incorporating traditional storytelling and Chickasaw language. In its first year of operations, the resulting text recounted the traditional Chickasaw story of “how Raccoon got its mask.”⁶⁹ The Press then carried out a small-scale production of the text to be distributed to local Chickasaw daycare and Head Start programs.⁷⁰

This kind of cyclical engagement showcases the community foundations on which the Chickasaw Press operates: elders pass down the traditional story, adults facilitate the publication of that story, youth translate the story into their own words, designs, and illustrations, and the very young receive tools not only for learning this story, but perpetuating it through this same cycle. Press Director Wiley Barnes speaks directly to this search for a lasting impact: “We’re trying to educate but we’re also trying to get kids inspired to want to go into the [publishing] industry and to want to write. [We want] to start building those relationships early so when those kids are in college or later, those kids can come back and publish with the Chickasaw Press.”⁷¹ The annual *Ikbi Holisso* Camp continues to grow. White Dog Press has given full-scale publication to more recent works created at the camp, such as *Jack and the Giant* in 2017.⁷² By supplementing their publications with youth programming, the Chickasaw Press instills from an early age the essential notion that Chickasaw history, culture, and voices are both valid and valued forms of knowledge and that Chickasaws can meaningfully contribute to their community through the field of book publishing.

AN INSPIRATION AND A MODEL

While initiatives heralded by the Chickasaw Press are diverse, the Press’s commitment to its founding principles remains constant: to view history and culture as ever-changing; to build shared cultural identity and informed decision-making through understanding tribal history; to promote and use culturally relevant research methodologies; and to strengthen sovereignty through education.⁷³ The Chickasaw Press’s unwavering commitment to these ideals enables a generative scholarly environment which, above all, serves the political, cultural, and intellectual sovereignty needs of the Chickasaw people. Tribal elders and youth, in particular, testify to the critical work carried out by the Chickasaw Press, showcasing the ways in which the Press draws on ancestral knowledge to shape the lives of the future generations.

Offering a youthful perspective, fourteen-year-old Chickasaw/Cheyenne student Micah Hart credits the Chickasaw Press with a role in developing his cultural identity: "The Chickasaw Press is important because they publish books so Indian kids like myself can learn more about ourselves and our history. It is great, but also sad, to know what our ancestors did and the hardships they went through so that we could be here. I hope to be a writer someday. Maybe they will publish one of my books," he explains.⁷⁴ As Hart's statement makes clear, the Chickasaw Press successfully engages youth audiences in terms of informing cultural identity, encouraging Chickasaw scholarship, and drawing connections between Chickasaw history and the contemporary moment.

For years, traditional storyteller Glenda Galvan refused to work with publishers who inquired about Chickasaw stories.⁷⁵ The distrust she felt derives from the long history of misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples and the political, social, and cultural consequences of such inaccurate portrayals. To safeguard traditional stories, as Galvan had done, enabled their inherent knowledge to survive colonialist attempts to divorce Chickasaw people from their culture, and, as a result, from their identity and political power. The establishment of the Chickasaw Press, however, offered new opportunities for sharing the stories that have been handed down through generations of Galvan's family. "For the first time, because the Chickasaw Press exists, I feel confidence in our ability to publish and thereby preserve these sacred stories accurately and respectfully," Galvan told the Press.⁷⁶ Galvan joined the Press as one of its first authors, publishing a total of three texts between 2011 and 2013. Gaining Galvan's trust and respect enabled the Chickasaw Press to publish the first-ever bilingual Chickasaw-English series, *Chikasha Stories*.⁷⁷ For this traditional storyteller to place her trust in the Chickasaw Press demonstrates that the Press is a successful tool, designed by and for Chickasaws, to preserve and share their knowledge in appropriate ways.

Moreover, recognition of the Chickasaw Press's value and distinctiveness extends beyond the Chickasaw community. The Press received the Moonbeam Children's Book Award four times, in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2017, the Oklahoma Book Award on eight occasions, and the Independent Publisher Award a total of seven times.⁷⁸ Such wide accolades reflect the high-quality publications put out by the Press and, consequently, their growing influence among non-Chickasaw audiences. Michael Lovegrove, author of *A Nation in Transition: Douglas Henry Johnston and the Chickasaws, 1989–1939* which received both the Chickasaw Press Holisso Award and the Independent Publisher Award, recalls his reaction to the news as "total shock . . . I just wanted to produce a work that the tribe could be proud of and that I could be proud of. My thought was, 'As long as they're satisfied, then I'm ecstatic.'" As Lovegrove's reaction makes clear, the primary audience from which the Press measures its success remains the Chickasaw people.⁷⁹

As a result of maintaining its focus on community, the Chickasaw Press has been effective in shaping representations of the Chickasaw Nation as a whole. In 2008, the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government's Honoring Nations Symposium honored the Chickasaw Nation and identified the Chickasaw Press as an example of outstanding tribal government programs.⁸⁰ Among the cohort of fellow recipients of this award are the Muscogee Creek reintegration program for formerly

incarcerated tribal members, the Osage Nation's governmental reform initiative for a new tribal constitution, and the Choctaw Nation's Project Falvmmichi for domestic violence prevention, a group of peers that speaks to the weight of the Chickasaw Press's community impact and innovative leadership. Cobb-Greetham describes this award as a "critical moment in the development of the Press," one that put it into the limelight on the national stage, adding that this recognition proved crucial to fulfilling part of the Press's mission to educate non-Chickasaws about governmental practices and tribal sovereignty, and, in turn, to strengthen the Chickasaw Nation's government-to-government relationships.⁸¹ Moreover, the Harvard Project on Indian Development elaborated on the distinguishing qualities of the Chickasaw Press, writing, "The Press publishes books written by Chickasaw citizens, using the highest standards of professional editing and production. In doing so, it gives new life to an ancient storytelling tradition."⁸² This national recognition is clear evidence that the Press is rendering Chickasaw self-representations legible to a national audience while upholding Chickasaw values, deploying culturally relevant methods, and serving the Chickasaw community.

Tribal nations across the United States have looked to the Chickasaw Nation and its press as a model for developing their own publishing houses since its inception.⁸³ When Jeannie Barbour delivered a presentation on the Press to representatives of other Native nations as part of the Harvard Honoring Nations recognition, her talk was met with unanimous excitement.⁸⁴ Barbour recalls that, "These tribes were really interested in the fact that we were trying to publish and, of course, they were interested in how we did it."⁸⁵ At the audience's request, the Chickasaw Press later compiled a resource handbook outlining the process of starting the Press or tribal nations interested in undertaking similar projects in their own communities.⁸⁶ In a similar effort, Amanda Cobb-Greetham consulted with the Cherokee Nation about the development of its own publishing houses.⁸⁷ The Cherokee Heritage Press was organized under the Cherokee Heritage Center and "[publishes] new works or identify and publish works which provide a better understanding of Cherokee history and culture."⁸⁸ In a notable difference, however, the Cherokee Heritage Press maintains no official affiliation with the Cherokee Nation, and, unlike the Chickasaw Press, does not function as an arm of a sovereign political nation, although Cherokee Nation government officials and tribal citizens remain heavily involved in its operations.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

The establishment of the Chickasaw Press in 2006 distinguished the Chickasaw Nation as an innovative leader in the field of Native American scholarship and publishing. Scholarship fostered and published by the Chickasaw Press critically shapes the academic fields of Native American studies, cultural studies, and United States history, by providing, for the first time, peer-reviewed literature written from Chickasaw perspectives. Other tribal nations look to the Chickasaw Press as a model from which to develop their own tribal presses and the Press continues to distinguish itself through national book awards and marks of excellence for its impact on

tribal development. The Press has emerged as a pioneer within Indigenous scholarly and intellectual traditions by paving new methods that, rooted in tribal sovereignty, embody a commitment to community, which Jace Weaver has identified as “the single thing that most defines Indian literatures.”⁹⁰ In preserving Chickasaw history and culture in a culturally appropriate way, the Chickasaw Press enables traditional knowledge to be shared, celebrated, and perpetuated through the generations.

The Chickasaw Press’s success rests in its unwavering commitment to serving the Chickasaw people. In taking up this charge, the Press has fundamentally reconceptualized the functions of a publishing house by linking its texts with youth programs, elder engagement, methodological innovations, community events, and scholar incentives. Thus, in addition to its award-winning publications, the Chickasaw Press’s contributions to Indigenous research and methodologies, all carried out in the service to the sovereign tribal nation, cannot be overemphasized. For tribal elders, the Press provides the opportunity to preserve Chickasaw history and culture; for the youth, the Press enables learning these traditional ways, stories, and histories. The particular emphasis placed on connecting these two groups itself reflects the Indigenous values so central to the Press’s operations, as the passing down of knowledge from elders to the youth ensures the perpetuation of the nation.

Similarly, the Chickasaw Press’s attention to reaching Chickasaws physically and/or culturally removed from the community showcases a commitment to national cohesion, pride, and identity. Barbour explains, “We have Chickasaws living all over the place, it’s not just in Oklahoma and Texas, but coast to coast and overseas. [The Chickasaw Press] was another opportunity to connect them and to help them to better understand the history and the culture they belong to.”⁹¹ In order for these processes to be effective, the transmission of knowledge must take place through a culturally appropriate avenue, respectful of sensitive information and rooted in nonexploitative practices. For while anyone can learn the objective facts of Chickasaw history and culture, comprehending the contours of tribal belonging proves an entirely different task.

The ability to represent oneself and one’s people remains a cornerstone of a nation’s sovereignty and its ability to exercise self-determination. As Barbour points out, “Generating and publishing our own research is not only an act of ownership over our own history but is also an exercise of self-determination and cultural sovereignty.”⁹² Amidst centuries of misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples, the Chickasaw Press confronts these colonial constructs head-on. By educating non-Native people and non-Chickasaws about the culture and history of the Chickasaw Nation, the Press facilitates government-to-government relationships between the tribal nation and local, state, and federal governments.⁹³

In each of these many ways, the Chickasaw Press supports Indigenous intellectual, cultural, and political sovereignty that are both specific to the Chickasaw Nation and relevant to tribal nations across the United States. The Chickasaw Nation recognized the lack of Chickasaw perspective in scholarship and sought to redress this void through creation of the Chickasaw Press. This initiative decenters dominant representations of the Chickasaw people, rooted in the politics of colonization, and replaces

them with community-centered self-representations. In doing so, the Chickasaw Press intervenes in the academic literature and in the colonial national narrative to assert the authority of Chickasaw knowledge within the mainstream. Amongst the Chickasaw Nation itself, the Press safeguards ancestral knowledge and facilitates tribal sovereignty and cultural identity development. Thus, through its service and contributions to “[enhancing] the overall quality of life of the Chickasaw people,” the Chickasaw Press proves a source of power and pride for the Chickasaw Nation.⁹⁴

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NOTES

1. Diné College, formerly Navajo Community College, operates the only other tribal press which existed at the time of the Chickasaw Press’s conception. While the Diné College Press is controlled by the Navajo Nation, it functions within a significantly different framework than the Chickasaw Press: specifically, the Diné Press directly serves the students, faculty, and institutional needs of Diné College, rather than the whole of the tribal nation and the non-Native public at large.

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