Cherokee Perspectives on Indigenous Rights Education (IRE) and Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) as Decolonizing Praxis

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Cherokee Perspectives on Indigenous Rights Education (IRE) and Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) as Decolonizing Praxis

Tiffanie Hardbarger (Cherokee Nation)*

Abstract

In response to the long and harmful legacy of extractive research done on Indigenous peoples and the erasure and devaluation of Indigenous knowledge, pedagogy, and lifeways within Western educational settings, many educators and scholars are seeking to implement decolonizing methodologies into research and educational strategies. Utilizing research conducted alongside research conducted alongside

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Cherokee students during an undergraduate/graduate course (2016-2018), this paper explores how the use of Indigenous Rights Education (IRE) in tandem with Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) provide pathways to navigate the difficult work of engaging with the underlying epistemological tensions that undergird U.S. settler society. In this article, a female Cherokee/EuroAmerican scholar perspective speaks to thematic narratives from student reflections that illustrate the how such approaches provide spaces for raising critical consciousness and decolonizing praxis.

Keywords: decolonizing methodologies; Indigenous Participatory Action Research; Indigenous Rights Education; community sustainability; Indigenous knowledge systems

Introduction

As a Cherokee/EuroAmerican educator and researcher, the question I continually wrestle with is, “How do I (and can I) conduct research and teach in a way that honors the intent of decolonizing methodologies?”

In response to the long and harmful legacy of extractive research done on Indigenous peoples and the erasure and devaluation of Indigenous knowledges, pedagogies, and lifeways within and due to Western educational settings, educators and scholars are seeking to implement decolonizing methodologies (Aikman & King, 2012; Battiste, 1998; Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Gaudry, 2011; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2012; Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy, 2014; Wilson, 2008; Zavala, 2013). Mainstream Western research and educational paradigms and approaches dominate what is labeled as “good” research, leading to “valid” or “real” knowledge, and as Smith argued (2012). Those following such paradigms (historically positivist), are considered

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1There are multiple theories on how the term Cherokee (or Tsalagi in the Cherokee language) came into being, as it was not crafted by the people themselves. Cherokee people have historically called themselves aniywiiya, meaning Real People, or anigaduwagi, meaning people of Kituwah (or Keetoowah).
knowledge “experts.” In response, teaching and research methodologies based on an Indigenous paradigm\(^2\) (or lens) can be decolonizing practice. These make explicit the responsibility of researchers to honor Indigenous worldviews throughout their work, with Indigenous communities as the most important stakeholders and owners of their own knowledges and resulting data, the ultimate goal being knowledge that leads to action valued by the community (Barnhardt, 2005; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Gaudry, 2011).

In other writing (see Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019), the growing interest in utilizing modified Participatory Action Research (PAR) as decolonizing methodology and what I term Indigenous PAR (IPAR) was explored. In addition to PAR, Indigenous researchers have noted a need to develop theory, practice, and methods that are unique and do not seek comparison to mainstream research (Foley, 2003; Wilson, 2008), including PAR approaches. As noted by Gaudry (2011),

this new movement to Indigenize research has been busy articulating anticolonial worldviews that are grounded in Indigenous knowledges and producing overtly political research, challenging colonial domination and occupation of Indigenous homelands. In many ways, this form of research is quickly becoming the ideological grounding for grassroots action in Indigenous communities (pp. 16-17).

Aligned with Gaudry’s call, IPAR, and building upon Transformative Human Rights Education (THRED), Indigenous Rights Education (IRE) engages with tenets of human rights-based education and the underlying tensions surrounding Indigenous knowledge systems and differing epistemologies in order to “transcend the crisis narrative” and to inspire new generations of “resistors, negotiators, and actors” (Sumida Huaman, 2017).

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\(^2\) A paradigm is the “set of assumptions, ideas, understanding and values (usually unstated) that sets the rules of what counts as relevant or irrelevant; what questions should be asked and should not be asked; what knowledge is seen as legitimate; and what practices are acceptable.” (Ife, 2013, p. 47)
Utilizing research conducted during a mixed undergraduate/graduate course titled “Community & Cultural Sustainability” at a regional university in northeastern Oklahoma (2016-2018), and building upon decolonizing teaching and research methodologies, this article engages the following questions: How does the use of Indigenous Rights Education (IRE) alongside Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR), particularly through photovoice, provide pathways of awareness for Indigenous youth to navigate the difficult work of confronting the underlying epistemological3 tensions that undergird U.S. settler society? Moreover, how do such teaching and research approaches assist in perpetuating Indigenous knowledge systems and lifeways for increased individual and community well-being?

The significance of IRE/IPAR approaches is outlined and then linked with personal and student reflections on the operationalization of these approaches. The potential implications, challenges, and opportunities of such approaches are interwoven with thematic narratives regarding impacts on student viewpoints and actions toward personal and community transformations. As the stories of Indigenous students told in their own voices are often excluded in the realm of development policy and practice, this article seeks to bring forward those experiences through highlighting photovoice method. Blending (auto)ethnography and Indigenous research methodologies (Alexander, 1999; Mclvor, 2010; Whitinui, 2014), this article also offers my reflections as a female Cherokee/EuroAmerican educator and scholar attempting to embody decolonizing methodologies through my teaching and research approaches. As such, in this introduction, I share my positionality as a junior scholar utilizing decolonizing approaches in my research and as a collaborator alongside Cherokee students.

3 “Epistemology deals with questions of what knowledges are and how they are acquired—in other words, the nature, scope, and sources of knowledges” (Breidlid, 2013, p. 2).
Positionality

“Every step I take forward is on a path paved by strong Indian women before me.” (Wilma Mankiller, first female Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation)

As a researcher, I am explicit regarding my positionality in relation to my students and research participants (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). According to Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008), scholars must ask how and why they have decided to research a particular topic, where the research fits into their lives, and what factors have influenced their worldviews (p. 22). I see myself as both Insider and an Outsider to my community, and the words of Herr and Anderson (2015) ring true for me—“Each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect...we may occupy positions where we are included as insiders while simultaneously, in some dimensions, we identify as outsiders” (p. 55). On the days I need encouragement, I wear my Water Spider earrings given to me by a friend to draw courage from grandmother spider’s strength in the face of obstacles. Even though I may sometimes feel inadequate, she reminds me that we all offer unique characteristics that can result in positive benefits for our community.

My Cherokee ancestors traveled by foot and wagon in 1838 to a region in the U.S. known as Indian Territory during their forced migration by the U.S. government. This migration was referred to as the “Trail of Tears”5. Their detachment6 ended only miles away from where both my maternal and

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4 From our oral story, “The First Fire”. Grandmother Spider is also central to other stories, such as teaching us how to make our first clay pot.

5 For more information on the Trail of Tears, see: https://www.britannica.com/event/Trail-of-Tears

6 After being held in detainment camps, my family traveled with the Benge Detachment from Fort Payne, AL to Indian Territory (near present day Stilwell, OK) arriving in 1838. There were 17 detachments (i.e. groups) total that left from various locations in the SE on the forced removal from our homelands by the Indian Removal Act of 1830.
paternal family has resided ever since. My grandpa Albert (Galugi) spoke the Cherokee language, like all of his ancestors before him. However, his children and grandchildren were not allowed to be taught anything “Cherokee,” including the language. This was a deliberate choice by my EuroAmerican (English/Irish) paternal grandmother. I will not attempt to speak for her, as she has passed on, and I cannot inquire as to her exact reasoning. After speaking with family members, it appears that the systemic racism prevalent at the time, as well as conflicting religious beliefs, guided the choice to sever children and grandchildren from our Cherokee language and the lifeways of our ancestors\(^7\). While I had only women of Cherokee ancestry proceeding my grandpa Albert, this legacy ended with my paternal grandmother Peggy. Although I am deeply grateful for my amazing grandmothers and great-grandmothers, I am also saddened that I never had the opportunity to learn from the Cherokee women in my family.

I have spent the majority of my life living in and visiting Adair and Cherokee counties\(^8\). I grew up in the local area, and now as an adult, I have returned to my undergraduate alma mater as a faculty member. It is in this context that I teach and conduct research - in the halls of my old high school and university classrooms of my young adulthood. As a citizen of the Cherokee Nation with a familiarity of the social, political, and geographic terrain and as someone who grew up in the area and plans to remain connected, I must remain accountable for my actions and the way I go about building and maintaining relationships. This attention to integrity and

\(^7\) It seems that this was not an uncommon practice as a number of my students, ranging in age across three decades, have similar stories. Some students noted their grandparents wanted to protect them from the oppression, marginalization, and prevalent racism that resulted in their experiences as children being punished at school for speaking Cherokee and limited job opportunities in an already economically disadvantaged time and geographic area.

\(^8\) As noted by Carroll (2015), “in a particular five-county area of the Cherokee Nation due to the rural, tight-knit Cherokee settlements that have maintained degrees of historical and cultural continuity since arrival in the area after Removal...where the cultural, linguistic, and religious aspects of Oklahoma Cherokee peoplehood are lived and grounded” (p. 30).
accountability is not only for myself, but also for my family, my community, and my students (Kovach, 2010; Rowe, 2014).

When I was growing up on a farm a few miles outside of Stilwell, Oklahoma, my family fished and hunted deer, turkey, pheasant, rabbit, and squirrel. We foraged for wild onions in the spring (to be cooked with eggs), hickory nuts and mushrooms in the fall. Despite such activities, that are considered “cultural” activities that many Cherokee families engaged in, ceremonies and language were not practiced or even acknowledged. My Cherokee ancestry does not appear on my physical body. My hair is red like my grandparents with Irish and English ancestry. Therefore, I am not what some term “identifiable” Cherokee; I am “white passing”9. It is for these reasons that I physically appear (and even often feel) like an Outsider, and I do not speak the Cherokee language (I am a very new learner), and I was not taught much as a young person about cultural practices. As an adult, I have been seeking out these connections and knowledge, not only for myself and my family, but also for the many others like me cut off from our Indigenous languages and cultural practices. The more that I seek to connect, the more I am reminded of my Insider/Outsider status. The questions I am now traversing and deconstructing surround the feelings of being removed from Cherokee language, relationships, and knowledge, thus making me often feel ashamed that I do not have more knowledge to guide me in these efforts.

My Cherokee ancestors spoke the Cherokee language and participated in cultural values, relationships with each other and our environment, and our ceremonies. They endured violence, dislocation, oppression, racism, grinding poverty, and developed resilience. Their resilience is why I am here, regardless of my appearance and in spite of being cut off from the language and knowledge they carried. Even though I have Cherokee ancestry, there are

9 I understand my white-presenting/passing appearance provides particular privilege that is not afforded to others who are identifiably Indigenous/Cherokee. The blatant everyday racism, police brutality, grossly disproportionate incarceration rates, and missing and murdered indigenous girls and women (MMIGW) all speak to the danger of being “other than white” in settler colonial nations (e.g. Canada, Australia, U.S.). These realities cannot, and should not, be ignored.
times when I feel deeply connected to my heritage and other times that I do not, such as when a Cherokee speaker tries to talk to me in the language and I feel loss and shame. As an aware adult, I do my best to reconnect and to offer what I am able. I find balance in thinking of myself as lifelong learner and teacher, and as a bridge-builder. In a personal conversation with American Indian historian Donald Fixico (Shawnee/Sac and Fox/Muscogee Creek/Seminole), he mentioned Indigenous scholars and some allies as being “cultural bridge-builders” between Indigenous communities and mainstream society. I believe there is a reason why I have the viewpoints I do, why I feel compelled to do community-based PAR research with Indigenous communities, and why the dominant research paradigms espoused in graduate school felt “off” and unsettling.

**Historical Context and Setting**

*EuroAmerican hegemony*[^10]

The course that is the subject of this article serves as one point of entry for discussion of IRE/IPAR focused on Cherokee community and cultural sustainability. In the development of the course I considered the cycle of praxis, as well as the ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives of Cherokee young people[^11] in the tribal jurisdiction of the Cherokee Nation and United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians (UKB)[^12]

[^10]: *EuroAmerican/Western epistemology*: term meant to “identify the hegemonic Eurocentric knowledge system, which originated in 16th-century Europe and together with industrial capitalism produced a specific kind of knowledge that is embodied in modern science...with its mechanistic view of the world [it] is founded on the Cartesian-Newtonian version of science as something universal and objective.” (Breidlfd, 2013, p. 1)

[^11]: Although more students participated in the projects, only twelve Cherokee students provided qualitative data, six males and six females, the majority ranging in age from approximately 20-26. From a Cherokee perspective, this age range still falls under the term “youth” or “young people”.

[^12]: The UKB claims this same area as their jurisdictional territory. There were students involved that are enrolled members of the UKB. Therefore, when the 14-county tribal
in northeastern Oklahoma.

The Cherokee, like other Indigenous peoples around the world, have had their communities intentionally dismantled through Western/EuroAmerican hegemony enforced through ongoing settler colonization and, more recently, through neoliberal ideology enacted through corporatized capitalism, development at all costs, and the inequities produced by neocolonialism as a form of globalization. Central to any discussion of Cherokee community and cultural sustainability is acknowledgement of these factors, which continue to guide policies and practices that impact Indigenous communities in the U.S., including political discourse that defines “truth,” “progress,” and “modernization” associated with normative Western approaches to education, religion, economic development, environmental/land management, language, social behaviors, appropriate parenting, and gender roles. I am aware that it is within this broader context that Cherokee communities function, and my role as an academic also fits within this context. Educators, researchers, and those working in multiple fields (e.g. social work, community development, health and well-being) with peoples and communities that have a past or ongoing relationship with racism, marginalization, oppression, and colonization/settler colonialism must be aware, reflective, and reflexive of the historical context in which they work as well as the role of internalized oppression and violence.

Educational Setting

Though many non-Native Americans have learned very little about us, over time we have had to learn everything about them. We watch their films, read their literature, worship in their churches, and attend their schools. Every third-grade student in the United States is presented with the concept of Europeans discovering America as a

jurisdiction is referenced it’s done so to denote the shared, if contentious, claim between the Cherokee Nation and UKB.
"New World" with fertile soil, abundant gifts of nature, and glorious mountains and rivers. Only the most enlightened teachers will explain that this world certainly wasn’t new to the millions of indigenous people who already lived here when Columbus arrived. (Wilma Mankiller, 2004, p. 43)

My classes take place in the building that was formerly the Cherokee National Female Seminary, the first of its kind west of the Mississippi. This institution, along with the many other Cherokee Nation-run schools in the area, was taken over when the Cherokee Nation was, once again, dissolved and its assets “sold” when Indian Territory became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. I occupy this space where many Cherokee women, past and present, obtained their formal schooling, taught, and advocated for the Cherokee people. I now utilize the office that Wilma Mankiller occupied in her role as the first Sequoyah Fellow of the university in 2009. When I was offered this office, I remember feeling grateful to share the same space occupied by former Chief Mankiller, so I have tried over the years to learn more about her life and especially her aspirations for the Cherokee people.

Decolonizing Indigenous Research Methodologies: Research as Relevant to Self-determination and Raising Critical Consciousness

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR, an orientation within the scope of qualitative and critical research, stems from the broader legacy of activist scholarship and can thus be traced to historic anti-colonial movements particularly in Latin America and other regions in (what is considered) the ‘global South’ (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Zavala, 2013). At its core, PAR seeks to “improve the quality of life of the people being studied by involving them in the research process and by using their knowledge in the search for relevant solutions to relevant problems” (Davis & Reid, 1999, p. 757). PAR and its many resulting iterations, including
CBPR\textsuperscript{3} (community based participatory research) (Castleden & Garvin, 2008), have been utilized across the globe to address the needs of marginalized populations for democratic participation, civic engagement, wealth and power inequality, combating prejudice and discrimination, and anti-colonial resistance (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). PAR strives to value and respect the lived experiences (\textit{vivencia}) of the community by not only reimagining the way knowledge is gathered, but also how it is presented and shared with and for the community.

PAR has been utilized with different populations, and what has interested me has been Youth PAR\textsuperscript{4} (YPAR) (Childers-McKee, 2014) and drawing from a variety of participatory methodologies and creative techniques (e.g., photography, collage-making, digital storytelling) depending upon the specific group involved (McIntyre, 2000). Whether participants are youth or adults, guiding elements often include the following: the process of collective investigation (action and reflection) builds the capacity of the people involved; participants rely on their perspectives and knowledge as their conceptual framework to understand and “answer” the issue/research questions, they have decision-making roles in the process; and the process leads to the desire to take individual and/or collective action (Childers-McKee, 2014; Driskell, 2002; McIntyre, 2000; Stanton, 2014). Aligned with praxis, many PAR studies embed community engagement in the research by creating interactive websites, hosting public events, and involving community members in the research process. This approach acknowledges the importance of community input and recognizes the value of community knowledge and experience.

\textsuperscript{3} Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is also used as an umbrella term to describe research that has very similar/if not the same goals as PAR such as intentionally focusing on the co-creation of knowledge, maintaining good long-term relationships, an iterative process, examining power dynamics and desired action or social change (Gill, Yan, & Francis 2018).

\textsuperscript{4} YPAR has been increasingly utilized with youth as a critical and collaborative framework to raise “critical consciousness of social justice issues that confront their school and community...that foster[s] positive interethnic relations” (Childers-McKee, 2014, p. 48), to explore \textit{theories of change} embedded in the process of Indigenous youth resistance (Tuck 2009, 2013), and to “develop culturally relevant theories, which are typically determined by working closely with research participants to identify the most effective ways to answer particular research questions” (Castleden & Garvin, 2008).
community presentations or events, and exhibiting work at art shows, to name a few (Childers-McKee 2014).

*Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) and Indigenous Rights Education (IRE)*

The impacts of mainstream Western research on Indigenous peoples is well-documented. Historically, researchers from outside Indigenous communities and ignorant of Indigenous epistemologies have been extractors and purveyors of knowledge gleaned from people involved in their studies, thus filtering relevance, validity, and significance of “knowledge” through their own lenses and based on Western determinations of what constitutes “good” research. Most often, knowledge is disseminated for an academic audience only, with little regard to community impact, reciprocity (of returning the results/data/materials), or the long-term relationship with the community itself. Additionally, researchers often operate with a normative ethnocentrism that places Western/EuroAmerican science and research methods as superior, therefore not allowing other ways of knowing, learning, or interacting to take place when working in Native communities (Davis & Reid, 1999). As a result, Indigenous scholars have worked to develop conceptualizations of research that are distinctively Indigenous while not seeking validation from the “hierarchical structure of male-dominated EuroAmerican ethnocentricity that is prevalent in most social science theory” (Wilson, 2008, p. 16).

In contrast to extractive research done on Indigenous peoples for the behalf of others, research with Indigenous communities must be guided by relevant epistemologies and ontologies, as well as respect, a deep intent to honor sacred knowledge, reciprocity, responsibility, relationships, and relationality (e.g. *relational accountability* and *relational validity*) (Datta, 2015; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Rowe, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Over the past twenty years there have been a number of influential works on decolonizing and Indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa, 2011; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Kovach 2005, 2010; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Such methodologies seek to encourage hybridity instead of dualism or
dichotomies\textsuperscript{5}, expose hidden colonist assumptions that undermine local-based practices, critically examine and deconstruct of dominant EuroAmerican Western paradigm, examine hierarchical (capitalist/anthropocentric) relationships, highlight assumptions embedded in Western scientific knowledge, operate from a standpoint of traditional ecological knowledge’s (TEK) value and validity, and construct meaningful action (including research and teaching) (Bhabha, 1985; Detta, 2015; Gaudry, 2011; Said, 1993). As noted by Smith (2012), decolonizing methodologies operate “between the indigenous agenda of self-determination, indigenous rights and sovereignty, on one hand, and, on the other, a complementary indigenous research agenda that was about building capacity and working towards healing, reconciliation and development. Paulo Freire referred to this as praxis (theory, action and reflection), and Graham Hingangaroa Smith has called it indigenous transform[ational] praxis\textsuperscript{6} (pg. xiii).

Using PAR with youth in Indigenous communities is seen as a “promising” methodology especially when built upon a foundation that is appropriate for the community and cultural context (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013, p. 317). As I utilize PAR within Indigenous community contexts and strive to adhere to an Indigenous research paradigm linked with decolonizing methodologies, I propose IPAR\textsuperscript{7}. There are a number of overlapping goals in Indigenous research methodologies and PAR including the decolonization of knowledge, hierarchy, and power relations. I conceive of IPAR as working within these tenets:

\textsuperscript{5}Recognizing differences in epistemologies does not mean that one has to overtake another (as in the case of Eurocentric colonization), rather it is through multiple epistemologies where understanding, appreciation, and respect can take place (Goldbard 2006, Carm 2014, Bang & Medin 2010). It cannot be assumed that all members of any community will see the world in the same way, assuming such perpetuates “unhelpful binaries” between ‘assimilated/Westernized/modern’ and ‘authentic/traditional’ ways of thinking and being.

\textsuperscript{6}Smith (2005) envisions \textit{indigenous transformative praxis} as an overlapping continuous cycle of \textit{conscientization} [critical consciousness], resistance, and transformative action.

\textsuperscript{7}Although I use the term IPAR to denote Indigenous PAR, DPAR “decolonial PAR” has also been utilized (Tuck & Guishard, 2013).
• Participatory research approaches (PAR, CBPR, Action Research) intentionally encompassing ontological and epistemological underpinnings salient to participants’ worldview (specific to the context);
• Anti-colonial/decolonizing (situated) framework and theories that include Indigenous ways of knowing;
• Well-defined and co-developed guidelines and protocols that clearly state modifications between mainstream PAR (and other participatory) and Indigenous/local-serving elements, explicitly identified assumptions, and collaborative protocols in line with the cultural and/or community context honoring both the process as well as outcomes.

While my proposal for IPAR is focused on shifting dominant research paradigms and acknowledging Indigenous research methodologies that are richly locally-based, there is a need to acknowledge the role that rights discourse can play in research. This is where I see similarities between Indigenous Rights Education\(^\text{18}\) (IRE) and IPAR approaches as they seek to build upon Indigenous values, principals, and intentions toward honoring and perpetuating Indigenous knowledges, approaches, epistemologies, protocols, and languages in education and research, respectively. For example, the co-creation of knowledge, including power relations and relationship between researcher/teacher and participant/student, is key to IPAR and IRE. While IRE takes up the call of Transformative HRE (THRED) to rethink both definitions and practices of human rights education, the framework “indigenizes” it by centering Indigenous peoples and their families, their particular histories and geographies, cultural and environmental contexts, and daily renewals of cultural practices as their

\(^{18}\) Drawing upon Sumida Huaman (2017), I understand IRE as bringing the aforementioned perspectives into human rights education practices (i.e. THRED), being that IRE goes further to intentionally center on the epistemological positionings, knowledge systems, relationality, educational considerations, local priorities, and discourses on place rights of a specific Indigenous peoples.
human rights and in accordance with community-based efforts grounded in
everyday sustained actions of resurgence.

**Pedagogy and Research**

*Course conceptualization*

My discussion of IPAR and IRE as frameworks for teaching and research is centered on recent university course development and resulting
data collection. The course content drew from an Indigenous and Cherokee
paradigmatic orientation, including the core value of *responsibility*
(especially related to communal values, the stewardship of land, water,
other-than humans, and knowledge), as well as from transdisciplinary
literature, and relied upon narratives that would emerge from the
participating students\(^{19}\). Attempting to honor an Indigenous/Cherokee\(^{20}\)centered paradigm requires outlining the interwoven relationship between
colonization and Indigenous knowledges and self-determination in regard to
individual and community well-being. As noted by Wilson (2008), “students
should have the choice of studying ‘Native’ issues that are researched and
presented from an Indigenous paradigm” (p. 19). I would add that
Indigenous and non-Indigenous students have a right to such courses,
materials, and spaces for such educational and research opportunities to
engage in the cycle of praxis (education/theory, action, and reflection).
Additionally, rather than reinforcing modes of deficit-thinking or becoming
stuck in a problem-focused dialogue, we walked through the hard emotions
and realities surrounding the long-term and continued harm being done to

\(^{19}\) Rather than term “participant”, I intentionally use “student” to reiterate the fact that
these individuals were operating from the perspective of a student in a graded course in a
university classroom setting and institution.

\(^{20}\) It is for this reason that I utilize “Cherokee/Indigenous” to demarcate the perspective of
coming from a particular worldview that may have various elements of influence. All
narratives presented are from Cherokee students, and many were involved in our Cherokee
Cultural Studies degree; therefore, this understanding was utilized as the core basis and
framework.
our peoples and environment. Once voiced and discussed, I then provided discussion prompts to look at potential solutions (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson 2008). This focus on the process of decolonization to voice issues for awareness and healing, along with remaining focused on potential, is an especially important aspect when working in communities with ongoing racism, oppression, and legacies of colonization/settler colonialism.

With this belief, I framed a course built upon interrelated and universally-understood concepts such as environmental justice and community and sociocultural sustainability. However, I noted in the course description in the syllabus and discussed at-length with students, that the intent for the course was to introduce complex real-world challenges and opportunities currently facing Cherokee and Indigenous populations whereby students were able to engage their personal agency within the cycle of praxis. As a result, major course topics included the following, and drawing upon a comparative approach, exploring dominant (Western/EuroAmerican) and Indigenous Knowledges, epistemologies, and approaches:

- deconstructing commonly accepted terms like, “community”, “progress,” “development”, “sustainability”, “sustainable communities”, and “well-being”;
- defining and understanding the importance and impacts of, and honoring multiple knowledges, epistemologies, and learning and research paradigms, including differing ways of viewing relationships (to land, natural resources and one another);
- considering resurgence and sustainable self-determination, Indigenous Planning/Indigenous Led Community Development (governance, economic systems, etc.), perspectives on sustainable development, sustainability, and community characteristics and well-being (i.e. history of sustainable development, dominant rhetoric and practice and Indigenous and alternative conceptualizations; sustainable land, water, and food systems including food sovereignty, Traditional Ecological Knowledges, and land management practices.)
- exploring historical and modern impacts of colonialism and neoliberalism on Indigenous peoples, including globalization, settler
colonialism, dominant approaches to economic development, environmental development practices on Indigenous communities, climate change and Indigenous community/nation responses;

As a class, my students and I did not intend to provide answers to complex issues, but rather to engage tough questions regarding sustainable self-determination and resurgence (Corntassel & Bryce, 2011) at internal community and personal levels, as well as more broadly in the U.S. and globally. We examined cases primarily from the Americas (U.S., Canada, Central and South Americas), but I encouraged students to keep their own course visions and research projects “Cherokee-centered”\(^\text{21}\), in order to privilege their local Indigenous knowledges, relationships, experiences, values, and attitudes. To accomplish this, we utilized Clint Carroll's *Roots of Our Renewal: Cherokee Environmental Governance*\(^\text{22}\) (2017), a book by a Cherokee author written about Cherokee Nation environmental governance policy.

*Research Approaches: IPAR and Photovoice*

In addition to my approach to Indigenous critical pedagogy, which I understand in relation to IRE, my students and I also engaged in research. My conceptualization of the research process focused on the cycle of decolonizing praxis, relying heavily on Laenui’s Process of Decolonization (2000) through five phases: 1) *Rediscovery and Recovery*, which is the exploration of “identity through the reclamation of...history, culture and language” (p. 3), and possibility of resistance manifested through the process of *conscientization* (Freire, 1970); 2) After the realization of the

\(^{21}\)This is intended to be grounded in a Cherokee epistemology, not an academic endeavor, yet some literature that was utilized included (Hardbarger, 2016; Stremalu, 2011; Lefler 2009; Altman & Belt 2008, 2009)

\(^{22}\)Cherokee environmental governance, is defined as “the process by which Cherokees make decisions with regard to the human relationship to the non-human world” (pg. 33); noting that “Cherokees have much work ahead of them in this regard due to colonial acts that disrupted Cherokee relationships to the land and led to significant environmental change” (pg. 35). Much of the additional literature for this course can be found at Hardbarger, 2016.
situations fully infiltrates a person or community's psyche, phase two manifests as *Mourning*, which is an “essential phase in healing” (p. 4) which leads to considering how change could manifest; 3) the most crucial phase, or *Dreaming* (imagining a decolonized future), leads to 4) *Commitment* (to a direction or action); and 5) *Action*, or active strategy based on consensus of the people. Critical to note is Laenui's observation that colonization, and by extension decolonization, is a messy process with dynamic phases, sometimes out of order, occurring simultaneously, and even 'jumping' from one phase to another over time. The “messiness” of the decolonization process was clearly played out and embodied during the research process.

The course utilized IPAR, and based on my experience with photovoice, my students and I modified this method in consideration of a Cherokee worldview, including community mapping and conceptual mapping. The community mapping activity took place early in the semester to provide some grounding for students to locate themselves and our communities, and we utilized conceptual mapping as a culminating project to illustrate their understandings of Cherokee community cultural sustainability. While these elements were integrated into the pedagogy, this article focuses on the photovoice research component due to its centrality in the process, as well as my belief that this particular method allows for honoring the intent of IPAR in a unique way. Photovoice enabled participatory and culturally appropriate elements, such as consensus building/governing by consensus, which fits well with a Cherokee consensus-driven governance practice. Photovoice is an effective research approach with youth when discussing sensitive and difficult topics (Haque, et al 2018) and has been utilized with Indigenous peoples elsewhere.

Developed by Wang & Burris (1997), the method draws from Freire’s (1970) critical consciousness, as well as feminist methodologies, community-based documentary photography, and is founded upon health promotion

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23 Castleden & Garvin (2008) utilized modified photovoice with the Huu-ay-aht First Nation and found that, “photovoice was an effective method for sharing power, fostering trust, developing a sense of ownership, creating community change and building capacity” (p. 1401).
principles (Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000). Photovoice uses photography and participant interpretations of the photos to enable recordings and reflections of community strengths and concerns; promotes critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs. The goal of the culminating action plan of such projects are often to reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). I view IPAR-modified photovoice as adhering to these elements noted above, however the audience and action plan can be modified to fit the specific needs of the group/community. For example, the goal of IPAR Cherokee projects have been directed at an individual, local and “everyday” level, with the Cherokee people and local families/communities as the intended beneficiaries.

Process & What We Learned

My students were given the following overarching research project instructions: “Draw upon the instructional materials, lectures and class discussions, your own knowledge and experiences, along with conversations with your friends, families and communities to reflect on the meaning of community and cultural sustainability (i.e. “Indigenous-led community development”) from your perspective.” We crafted photovoice toward praxis while navigating the realities of a typical university semester and class scheduling and taking advantage of the space for student-led presentations at the university Symposium held annually in April. Students exercised agency in what was photographed and how the narratives and photographs were shared with the class and the wider university and Cherokee community.

The student-led nature of the research process meant that photographs could be people, landscapes and the environment, animals, natural resources, foods—really any element could be brought into the discussion (as long as consent was garnered from human participants and the photo and accompanying narrative was vetted for potential violation of sacred spaces, items, or topics. I continually encouraged them to reach out to their families and social networks to learn, share, and think though the
concepts we were discussing in class. The research encouraged dialogue with elders and knowledge holders, which brings together crucial people (the knowledge keepers and a coming generation of Cherokee leaders) to (re)imagine the regeneration of land, culture and community in a community-based Cherokee context. Students explored their understandings and visions of Cherokee beliefs, values, and lifeways, as well as the relationship between cultural continuance and sustainable communities, cultural knowledge, and experiences (Barnhardt & Kawagley 2005; Breidlid, 2013). We drew on the idea that “community is defined or imagined in multiple ways as physical, political, social, psychological, historical, linguistic, economic, cultural and spiritual spaces...[understanding that] the community itself makes its own definitions” (Smith, 2012, p. 128–129).

Three autonomous research projects were developed through the courses (2016, 2017, 2018) as models regarding explorations of salient Cherokee cultural lifeways that reveal what we need to perpetuate as Cherokee people to maintain strong and sustainable communities, according to student perspectives. My role as a co-collaborator across the course years remained consistently to be a guide: First, we discussed photovoice methods, consent, ethics, and knowledge-sharing throughout the course and leading up to the inception of projects24. Second, using consensus decision-making, students selected guiding research question(s). Third, each student took photographs in the local area based on the guiding research question(s). Fourth, students each selected three to five photographs to present. Using a storytelling method, they presented the photos by “telling the story” behind each photograph and its relation to the guiding research question(s). Next, the group identified recurring themes from the presentations using a consensus decision making process. Finally,

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24 There was a clear process in place for consent at multiple junctures (e.g. informed written consent for subjects of photographs giving permission for photographs to be used for public exhibition, student consent for their photos and quotes to be used on slides, etc.). A university IRB was also obtained to access the written student assignments.
using consensus decision-making, the group co-created a presentation for the university's public Symposium on the American Indian.

**Qualitative data**

Utilizing teaching and research methodologies that adhere to the goals of IRE and IPAR, I illustrate how these combined approaches provided pathways of engagement and awareness for teaching and research with Indigenous students. This is critical as we navigate the difficult work of engaging with the epistemological tensions that undergird U.S. settler society. Alternative teaching and research approaches that focus on perpetuating Indigenous knowledge systems and lifeways increased individual and community well-being.

After the Symposium was completed, students were asked provide written personal reflections on their experiences, future action, and feedback to improve future photovoice projects. Students were also asked to write in-depth reflections to capture research and course learning reflexivity. Based on prompts, students were asked to consider their learning experiences, encounters with distinct viewpoints or unexpected knowledge gained, and pre-existing ideas that influenced how they approached notions of community and sustainability. A number of themes emerged, which link research and teaching approaches situated through IPAR and IRE with student reflections on their lives and communities.

**Decolonizing Praxis: Consensus Decision Making, Community Building, and a Spirit of Gadugi**

I plan to look at the world around me differently and realize that we can always overcome colonization by just the little things we do. Ceremonial dances, gathering food, land, family and community. (Student quote, 2017 course)

The intent of the course was to engage decolonizing pedagogies and research through explicit consideration of Indigenous knowledge systems
and Indigenous-led conceptualizations of rights (IRE) and IPAR. As one student from the 2018 course stated, the photovoice project “acted as a microcosm” of what was discussed in class. Based on student narratives and my role as a co-collaborator in these projects, I observed students embodying decolonizing praxis (Freire 1970, Smith, 2005) through these manifestations:

- **Embodiment of Cherokee cultural communal values** such as *gadugi* and the traditional Cherokee governance method of consensus decision-making, resulting in a sense of shared community and inclusion;
- **Raised critical consciousness** surrounding interconnected topics relevant to Indigenous communities (locally and globally) and their conceptions of salient aspects of Cherokee lifeways and decolonization;
- **Reflexive engagement** with personal and cultural identity;
- **Inspired thinking about pathways of action** to engage in their home communities and taking responsibility;
- **Increased agency** through visual and narrative expression and feeling heard.

### Embodiment of Cherokee values

In a commentary made in 1993, when Wilma Mankiller was the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, she said—apart from leading the charge to build health facilities, daycares, and services for women and girls—she wanted to,

> work with my own people to trust their own thinking again, and to believe in themselves again, and to look to themselves for solutions to problems, to trust what we know and to try and preserve that in some

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25 My role in the research was one of a co-collaborator walking along side (Ife, 2013; Ledwith & Springett, 2010; Wilson, 2008) my students, to provide guidance, and to seek guidance from knowledge holders, elders, and fluent speakers, when needed.
way. ...in our own little communities we still have a sense of interdependence\textsuperscript{26}.

Mankiller’s life work has been portrayed through films\textsuperscript{27} and writing. She left behind a lasting legacy that inspires gadugi, the Cherokee term for collective self-sufficiency. One of the impacts of her leadership was the laying of a water line so that a Cherokee-serving school and community could have running water. The Bell water line project began with the recognition of an issue, consensus building and decision making, and realigning a community’s spirit to the power they possess to make a difference in their own community without the help of outside funding, political oversight, or a bureaucratic style approach. Mankiller believed in community resilience, empowerment, hard work, and creativity, and the ancient Cherokee communal value of gadugi. This history has inspired my own notions of community development and sustainability and guided my intentions in my teaching to be community-based and focused on transformative praxis from a Cherokee cultural standpoint, where the cultural value and practice of gadugi is foundational.

The course drew out similar student conceptualizations of gadugi, which requires working together and making decisions by consensus (a process based on mutual respect with everyone, male and female, having the agency to speak and an equal chance to be heard) and is a traditional mode of Cherokee governance. A group working together to achieve one goal is the definition of gadugi. As noted by a student in the 2016 course,

Throughout the photovoice project process I got to see visual, firsthand accounts of what my classmates value as Native American people. A lot of our values and views were the same in the...[overall] themes, but interestingly our views and takes on the individual themes were different. The great thing about this course and this project alike is that though some of our views differed, we learned from each other and no one got upset with anyone.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{26} See Reference section for details on full commentary and how to access.
\textsuperscript{27} See The Cherokee Word for Water film for one example of depictions of Mankiller’s work.
\end{quote}
The ability to listen to peers share personal information, cultural knowledge and perspectives, along with the sense of community-building and camaraderie, was seen as one of the most positive aspects. Although the process was difficult, student reflections allude to feelings of connectivity and building community. As noted by a student in 2018 course, “the camaraderie and sense of community we had together as a class working as a small-scale representation of what the class was about was the best part for me.” The students noted they most enjoyed the part of the process where photographs were shared and discussed, and themes were decided upon by consensus of the entire group:

I was surprised at how organic and easy the whole project flowed together. At seemed as if there were no egos involved, which was pleasant to experience. It was true teamwork. Everyone talked, and everyone listened, a very rare experience nowadays... I don't think any one of us contributed more than the others in bringing it into being. It was truly OUR research question and OUR project. (Student quote, 2018 course)

During presentation of the photographs, students found commonality between themselves and other students. Notions of cultural identity and experience expanded from individualized, or even family-centric, to recognition of shared connection. Recognizing common ties related to Cherokee cultural lifeways and values raised student consciousness centered on inclusivity, part of a larger shared cultural worldview. As one student said (2017), “As a group we developed the theme by looking at the pictures from everybody and we noticed there was a reoccurring theme, family and community.”

Raised Critical Consciousness

Students demonstrated growing awareness of interconnected topics that impact Indigenous communities at local and global levels, as well as shifts in perception on these topics from prior to taking the course to finishing the course. As one student from the 2016 class stated:
This class has provided an interesting domain that has opened and revolutionized the way the students of the class, me included, think and act throughout our daily lives. The aspects that I drew in to the most were the cultural and environmental destruction and changes in the community we face as Indigenous people today...Prior to the course, I had a vague understanding of the word sustainable...I knew that the ways of lives of many indigenous people were changes and torn apart but I didn't understand the true meaning of it. In terms of the destruction of indigenous cultures, I thought in the past tense.

This student also reflected on a call to action, which is central to the praxis goals of the course:

One of the most important things I came to understand throughout this course is that each one of us, as individuals, hold specific knowledges. Each of us are to use our knowledges for the benefit of others. Also, each of us are not to try and be experts in all areas of knowledge because we need to depend on each other for certain things. Another very important thing that I have learned is the true meaning of responsibility. Responsibility, despite school teachings, is not a singular word with a cut and dry meaning. Responsibility is packed full of different aspects that we are to take care of and that are interconnected.

Students also used analogies with regards to the teaching and research impacting their ability to better “see”, “have new eyes”, or have increased “sight”, to “look at things differently,” and I found these descriptors especially interesting since we utilized photography. For example, students stated,

I looked more into what was being presented. I was able to see more than what was in front of me, I thought in a more in-depth way and tried to see more than what there was. There is so much more meaning to pictures whenever you look deep into them. (Student quote, 2016 course, my emphasis)

[The process] allow[ed] my eyes to be opened to new concepts that have always been right in front of me...I think that in itself speaks volumes to the project because everyone was awakened to these facts. After the guiding questions and overlying theme was developed the
rest of the project seemed to flow very easily. I believe this is because we, the class, became aware that these concepts and ideas were right in front of us, making photographing the images very simple. (Student quote, 2016 course, my emphasis)

Reflexive Engagement with Personal and Cultural Identity

There is a spectrum of consciousness and differing levels of personal, family, and community cultural engagement. I view having an opportunity to learn Cherokee language and lifeway in families and communities as a “privilege,” one that I was personally denied growing up, as were many others for reasons stemming from trauma, racism, lack of family ties, etc. This course brought out facets of Cherokee identity and, for some, articulation of complex factors and insecurity surrounding identity. Most of the students grew up in northeastern Oklahoma, or at least lived there for a number of years, yet there was a wide spectrum of experiences related to cultural knowledge and identity. Internal struggles and insecurities regarding belonging, cultural identity, depth of cultural engagement and knowledge (including language ability), as well as physical appearance were all mentioned. Even those heavily committed and engaged in Cherokee language learning expressed the personal challenges of the path of being a second language learner. Some students drew a level of insecurity from the assumption that their peers knew more about being Cherokee, were better

28 When conceptualizing “identity”, both for myself as an individual as well as a scholar, I utilize Weaver’s (2001) work on cultural identity, “those who belong to the same culture share a broadly similar conceptual map...[although] people can identify themselves in many ways other than by their cultures...a composite of many things such as race, class, education, region, religion, and gender. The influence of these aspects...is likely to change over time. Identities are always fragmented, multiply constructed, and intersected in a constantly changing, sometimes conflicting array”. (p. 240). However, being considered Cherokee today is markedly different from demarcation based upon a matrilineal clan system (or being adopted into a clan), where having a clan was the sole defining factor. This differs greatly from the modern system of citizenship based upon blood quantum and proof of ancestry using roles (i.e. Dawes Role, Baker Role).
connected to family knowledge holders to obtain that needed guidance, had more refined language skills, and were therefore “more” Cherokee.

That was one of my biggest takeaways from the project, how many of my classmates had the same questions and feelings and ideas. I was surprised because I assumed... they knew more than me simply because of where they live and who they grew up around. (Student quote, 2018 course)

I have learned not to be so restricted in the way that I think, such as being afraid to ask questions about my culture because I'm afraid of being seen as an outsider, I would rather learn than [to] go on feeling like I don't belong to something. (Student quote, 2018 course)

These students speak to challenges of participation and action when young people are insecure in their Indigenous identity and how teaching and research can bring these realizations to the fore while providing a safe space for sharing.

*Inspired Thinking About Pathways and Action: Interaction and (Re)Connection with Land and Water, Traditions, Values, and Language*

Action most often mentioned by students referred to continuation of traditions, renewal, new interactions with community, and connections with land and water, traditions, values, and language. As noted by Wildcat et al. (2014), “settler-colonialism has functioned, in part, by deploying institutions of western education to undermine Indigenous intellectual development through cultural assimilation and the violent separation of Indigenous peoples from our sources of knowledge and strength – the land” (p. II). Student agency to engage the natural world reinforces Cherokee interconnection, kinship, and gratitude. Further, the ability for young people to interact and focus on a particular place provides an opportunity for a place-and-land-based focus during the research process (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). For example, one student generally explained,

“I plan on being more involved in my culture and trying to be one of the people to help preserve and perpetuate my heritage” (Student quote, 2018 course).
Moreover, the course requirements, including research, encouraged spending time and being in presence with elders and family members to share knowledge, which in Cherokee culture allows for all involved to (re)connect with language, foods, ceremony, land, and water. This was one of the most impactful elements of IPAR, provoking renewed and continued interaction with Cherokee lifeways (i.e. cultural knowledge, practices, traditions, values, relationships, language, connection to community). As one student mentioned,

“I think the biggest unexpected experience I had...was how much I actually cared about what happened in my community and that it made me sad that I was doing so little to participate in it” (Student quote, 2018 course).

At the same time, as an educator, I see that expectations of immediate and individual or collective action need to be tempered if there is not enough time for students to go through a more extended process of education and reflection over an appropriate amount of time. I found inspiration that students expressed intended action, small everyday acts, or even new or renewed awareness for the need for action.

*Increase Agency: Self-Expression and Feeling Heard*

Student panel presentations at the *Symposium on the American Indian* allowed interaction with fellow students, faculty and staff members, scholars, and community members. Students shared insights about themselves, their families and communities, and their traditions. In this sense, the public outcome of photovoice serves many purposes—centering knowledge holders as experts in their own experiences, feelings, and agency to make social change. The audience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, bears witness to these truths and becomes part of the educational and research process. The narratives can be uncomfortable, reaffirming, thought-provoking, educational, or a variation of all of these characteristics. Many

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The 2018 presentation was recorded and will be housed in the university Special Collections archive.
students noted the presentation experience as being integral to their development:

My favorite part about the photovoice experience was taking audience questions and listening to their comments. It gave us a chance to expand on our presentation and to demonstrate that we knew what we were talking about...I was so happy at the positive feedback we got from the people afterwards too. It let me know we succeeded in capturing their attention and getting our message through. (Student quote, 2018 course)

Another student added,

It was refreshing for us as student[s] and young people to be able to express and explain ourselves and have people actually listen to what/why we said it. (Student quote, 2018 course)

Key features of IPAR using photovoice are narratives and photography as testimonials of everyday lives and perspectives of Cherokee young people, and this process functions in direct rejection to dominant narratives and generalized stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

I think my future, my classmate’s futures, our futures are promising and bright. I think a good crop of young indigenous leaders are developing and are going to change the way we live, for the better. One of the biggest and most important things that we have learned in reference to the future is awareness. We are now becoming aware of the problems we face, and the steps needed to fixing the problems. This to me is one of the most important things taken from the course, the fact that our generation can make a difference. (Student quote, 2016 course)

Themes of loss of connection to knowledge, language, and lifeways were expressed throughout each of the courses, and yet, there were resounding collective notes of hopefulness, awareness, and (re)connection as noted by the student whose words help me to conclude this article. I have
argued that teaching and research can be decolonizing practice and intervention, raising awareness of the linkages and broader context on issues relevant to Indigenous communities at a local and global level, inspiring young people to (re)connect on multiple levels. The power of research and teaching approaches like Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) and Indigenous Rights Education (IRE) is that their utilization across local contexts requires operating from specific epistemological orientations defined by the community or group, therefore addressing local realities, goals, and centering the pedagogies and methods on culturally relevant processes and outcomes.

After facilitating multiple projects with Cherokee high school, and now university students, I believe the use of IRE/IPAR can serve as underlying mechanisms for Laenui’s observations, allowing for healing and connection to manifest individually and collectively. The importance of healing in order to face today’s challenges is certain; it is intense and urgent. The difficult process of awareness and healing must take place, especially for Indigenous youth, as they are on the receiving end of the loss of our knowledge keepers, our languages, global environmental destruction, and the continued breakdown of the relationships, values, and responsibilities that guided the Cherokee people sustainably for millennia. I concur with Cajete (2015), a Tewa scholar who argued that there is a deep need to “unravel” internalized oppression, to “re-instill time-tested Indigenous values through the reassertion a pedagogy of Indigenous community” (my emphasis, p. 59).

There is a need to further develop these approaches in practical ways and to offer them as part of the array of options available to educators and researchers, as well as through other researcher and teacher training programs within Western educational institutions and Indigenous and decolonizing community-based contexts. The possibilities for student outcomes are replete, and I hope that by providing the example of my students’ and my work, that we encourage additional dialogue and open conversations regarding decolonizing praxis from local perspectives.
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