

Black Lines, White Spaces: Towards Decoding a Rhetoric of Indian Identity

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Finding Home, Finding an Identity

Home. It is an idea so iconic to civilization that people over the centuries of human communication have struggled to define its essence.

Often conceived as a geographic location or a physical space, “home” can also embody a connection to culture, community, and identity. And, with just as much force, “home” can represent a defining experience that only shifts into crystalline focus against a background of dislocation, loss, and peril.

Language, in one of its many empowering acts, can help us find our place in the world. We look to language not only to carve out our space in the world, but also to help define it. Rhetoric, as a construct for using language, helps define its contours, its import and its narrative. As Aristotle defined it, rhetoric explores all of the “available means of persuasion.” If this perspective is applied to territorial newspapers that began and flourished during the 19th century pre-statehood era of Oklahoma, what might we find?

This micro-study of one such newspaper, *The Indian Chieftain*, argues that the role of these newspapers—perhaps the pre-eminent role—would shift from that of information broker to persuasive tool, even when the outcomes were not favorable to Native Americans. But, as participants in the discourse of the times, Indian newspapers were vital players in an exchange that reflected deep and enduring national issues. The ink-defined lines of their pages contributed to the spaces, figuratively and physically, that Oklahomans embodied.¹

Background

One feature often overlooked in tragic story of Indian Removal in the early 19th century, when the “Five Civilized Tribes”—those Indians who belonged to the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole nations—were relocated to their new territory in what is now Oklahoma, is that they were accompanied by thousands of men and

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the support of the Gaylord Family Professorship in making time and resources available to research this article, as well as the search assistance given by staff of the Oklahoma Historical Society’s Research Center in Oklahoma City.

women of African descent, who were their slaves. These slaves had little or no control over their destinies and found that their own futures were doubly compromised by the hardships of their removal and their servitude (Bartl 1996).

In a process of cultural homesteading, all these new residents established socio-cultural spaces created from a unique geography of multiculturalism. An eclectic assortment of Indian and African American newspapers gradually appeared, beginning with the *Cherokee Advocate* published in 1844. Eventually, more than 100 separate ethnic newspapers sprang up, stretching from the early years of territorial settlement into the 20th century, which form a unique, but virtually unexamined archive of Indian and African American writing in Oklahoma.

As historical vehicles, newspapers present a glimpse into the lived times and experiences of a social group, of society. Observed facts are reported and elite opinions displayed, determined by the writers' language skill and access to the powerful printed page. Taken collectively, these writers construct a forum of discussion and debate, made transparent by the historic contexts in which they appear. And the cumulative stories from these newspapers present a text of being and identity that is unique in its formulation, and an important component of the Oklahoman and American story. One cannot fully comprehend the cultural evolution of this 46th state without them, and they offer great potential for understanding how people who were considered to be social outcasts evolved into distinctive cultural communities that survive today.

What Is a Newspaper?

In their study of 19th-century journalism in the nascent United States, Betty Winfield and Janice Hume attempt to excavate the patterns of historical referents used in select newspapers. By doing so, they argue that there are certain concepts that reside in the public record and, as such, help sustain public memory. Among other ideas, the authors assert that the dominant news patterns of the majority press excluded Native Americans, African Americans, women, and newly arrived immigrants. In the absence of real news about groups marginalized socially and politically, the remaining historical record of such groups became invisible.

Defining newspapers can be a complex enterprise, made more challenging by the shifting parameters of this medium. The place of the newspaper—indeed, even the form of the newspaper—is a contested idea in the 21st century, impacted by the vagaries of technology, economics, and audiences. In the 19th century, while the technologies may seem stagnant, the environs that defined this mass medium reflected the flux of the times. By the last decade of that century, a rhetorical battle for the dominant character of the future state of Oklahoma was in play, shaped in no small part by the newspapers that emerged. For Indian-identified news, the way of knowing the community evolved through strife and conflict between the Indian nations and the states that surrounded them. As Ellen Cushman argues, the contemporary sensibilities about “Indian-ness” became negotiated through kinship relationships, aligning the authenticity of the Native experience with a defining context of tribally ascribed attributes (Cushman, 2008).

American Indian and African American newspapers took root in this uncertain soil. These papers proliferated throughout the region, dotting the territorial landscape with textual voices reflecting the region's transition from territory, to tribal nation-spaces, to statehood. In leading newspaper and journalism histories, these titles are all but invisible. For instance, Beradi's in-depth survey of Black newspapers in the American West omits the state of Oklahoma entirely. David Dary's comprehensive study of journalism in the "Old West" gives more attention to those periodicals considered to be Indian newspapers, but they are subsidiaries to the main narrative of how Western newspapers aided conquest and expansion of the American borders (1998). To be sure, the authoritative presence of newspapers contributed much to the stability of these evolving regions, including offering viewpoints from communities "foreign and domestic," to paraphrase the 1690 title of America's first newspaper edited by Benjamin Harris. But perhaps expansion and growth did not look the same to those who created the first communities in the state and region.

The geography alone of the archived Euro-American newspapers, from 1836 through the first two decades of the 20th century, shows the evolution of a identity and land. From historical maps showing the "Five Tribes" dividing the entire state, to one showing a split between "Oklahoma Territory" and "Indian Territory," the shifting borders trace how communities were formed.

The Indian Chieftain: A Micro-Study of Discourse and Identity

William P. Ross is best known as the founding editor in 1844 of the first newspaper in pre-statehood Oklahoma, the *Cherokee Advocate*. He became involved in national politics following the death of his uncle, Cherokee Chief John P. Ross, when he served as Cherokee chief following an election by the National Council on October 19, 1866. After leaving public office in 1867, Ross edited the *Indian Journal*, *The Indian Chieftain*, and the *Indian Arrow* newspapers (Meserve, 1937). As one who could trace his ancestry through both European and Indian lineages, Ross also continued a transactional presence that helped mark the evolving identity of the Cherokee nation, notably, the influence of so-called "mixed bloods—Indians who had both Indian and European ancestry (Baird, 1990, 14). *The Indian Chieftain* newspaper continued to flourish after his death in 1891 until it ceased publication in 1912.

The "Five Civilized Tribes" included the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole nations. This distinction signaled out these tribes' use of written language and the development of national constitutions, but also saluted their adaptation of the "southern plantation system and African slavery" (Bartl, 1995, 165). Evidence of this complicated relationship appears in Indian newspapers, like *The Indian Chieftain*.

One way to trace this is through the use of "identity words" in articles, discovering the words that mark both "Indian" and "African" identities in shared contexts. A sample reading of weekly issues (first four pages) from May 26, 1898 to June 9, 1898 of *The Indian Chieftain* highlight these themes. A chart of these readings would show the content divided into four main categories: news, editorials, syndicated

material (from other newspapers) and other (including ads, personal essays and literary writings). From this sample, a pattern of “identity” words emerged. When Indians were described, they were referred to most often through specific tribal identities—such as “Cherokee” or “Chickasaw.” Another frame of identity words reflected “community” membership, through such group terms as “Five Nations,” “Five Tribes,” and “Indian Territory.” For those of African descent, their presence was marginalized, but undeniable, as references to “Negritos,” “Negroes,” “Chickasaw Freedman” and “coon” appeared.

But a powerful thematic connection runs through these articles as the debate about land ownership, sovereignty, and the future of the Oklahoma/Indian territories lay in the balance. This particular period was significant, for it reflected the intense debate around the Curtis Bill. Formally known as The Curtis Act of 1898, this legislative act eliminated the sovereignty of Native tribes, as a precursor to dissolving the practices of shared land ownership, or the concept of lands-in-common (Bloom, 2002, 522). After a “fact-finding” tour in 1894, Massachusetts Senator Henry Dawes demeaned the Cherokee system by deeming it to be out of sync with the surrounding U.S. culture and emphasis on individual capitalism (Bloom, 2002, 500). Later, Dawes lent his name to a panel known as the Dawes Commission, which eventually parceled out the lands the Cherokee Nation had owned for sale to individual owners.

Even as the national laws and the land surveyors’ tools were organizing to make permanent this seismic shift in how land would now be owned in the territories Native Americans had previously owned, local newspapers attempted to influence the debate. In the issue dated March 31, a cautious correspondent notes that the Curtis Bill, while currently stalled due to national attention on other matters—notably the pending Spanish-American War—might find its way to successful passage through the careful maneuvering of its supporters:

The Curtis Bill is exactly where it was at the writing of my last communication. The only explanation is: It has not been reached. It has, however, by no means, been lost sight of. Those directly behind it, notwithstanding their interest in pending matters of national and international import, are on the alert and watching at every turn, hoping to rush in and secure its passage during a lull in the general storm of excitement that prevails.” (page 1, column 3)

Over a matter of weeks, the Curtis bill moved from apparent stalemate to legislative certainty. Yet, two months after the March article, *The Indian Chieftain* posted a vainly hopeful prediction that the legislation would be ultimately powerless to force the division of Indian lands in the face of united Cherokee opposition. So, in the May 26, 1898 edition of *The Indian Chieftain*, the newspaper noted on the first page: “The Cherokees are not excited over the prospective enactment of the Curtis bill....Until the Cherokees agree to a division it is pretty safe to say that allotment will not take place” Yet, within two short weeks, a front-page headline announced the inevitable: “Curtis Bill passed,” noting U.S. Senate passage “with no changes that will be unacceptable to the [H]ouse” (June 9, 1898). This validation by both Congressional houses settled the debate

about land allotments and territorial sovereignty with a resounding force. The subdued announcement in the June issue let the import of the bill's passage speak for itself.

Newspapers as Persuasive Agents: Writing a New Context

American Indian and African American newspapers proliferated throughout Indian Territory dotting the territorial landscape with textual voices reflecting the region's transition from territory, to tribal nation-spaces, to statehood. This rhetorical reading of one newspaper is a small beginning. Reading these articles through a transactional lens offers a more complex view of Native perspectives. Such a viewpoint allows the text to inform and negotiate new meanings from the medium, as the newspaper asserts itself as a tool for persuasion and not just information. Such a reading excavates new interpretations of our shared social and cultural histories, as well as provides us with fuller reflections upon the evolution of identity and place. Not the least of these was a definition of what it meant to be Indian, in contrast to the near-marginalization of African descendants on the one hand, juxtaposed against the territorial aggression of European and English descendants.

Affirming identity through prose and persistence underlies one theme of the Indian rhetoric—a transcendent survival fashioned by word and persistent survival. As one scholar describes it, “Native Americans have confronted the ultimate persuasive obstacle: as the target of officially sanctioned extermination, they have survived their own nonexistence. And they have done so, to an important degree, because to act is to be, and ritual action *creates* life” (Lake, 1991, 142). Beyond the ties of kinship and blood, and in the face of the dislocation of land and territory, what it meant to be Indian rested upon, in part, a rhetoric of conflict and estrangement. In the short newspaper sample from *The Indian Chieftain*, the front page articles clearly illustrate a persuasive trajectory, ranging from a willingness to fight through public discourse for the Native position, to a sense of strong confidence in their sovereignty and essential rights, to bitter resignation in the face of more powerful agencies. Within these black lines, during these turbulent times, the rhetoric of many identities formed.

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