

Coming and Going in Oklahoma Indian Country

Oklahoma is a relatively young entity. It was born in 1907 from Native lands that had been set aside by the United States government for the massive warehousing of native peoples. (By *Native* I mean indigenous peoples.) Then it was settled by immigrants hungry for land and opportunity, and by African freedmen and slaves who arrived with European immigrants, native peoples, or on their own. I was born of the Muscogee Creek Nation, in Tulsa, or “Tulwa”, meaning town, and “ahassee” meaning something old in the Mvskoke language. We were halfway between statehood and the end of a century, and by then the state had formed quite a diverse, even rowdy, collective story. This ongoing story continues to unfold in this land we call “Oklahoma.” Our imagination is infused by all forms of life here, from stones, to mountains and rivers, and skies, and we are given much to sustain us from the physical gifts of this earth. What is Indian Oklahoma is Oklahoma. We are all in this dynamic and ever-changing story together. It is your story, our story, and my story.

For this series I have chosen a selection of books by Oklahoma native writers who make story and song trails that lead to and from the collective memory field of Oklahoma. These books range from short story, memoir, poetry, to personal essay. They are among the best of contemporary native literature. They are part of our family.

For each of these writers, being from Oklahoma is central to their identity, to their voice, to why and how they write. All are Oklahoma-born except for one, and all continue to have close ties to the state, no matter how far they roam. All have been residents. Each of these writers is from one of the so-called “Five Civilized Tribes,” southeastern tribes who were forced from their homeland to Oklahoma on the “Trail of Tears” where we promised to live in perpetuity in these new lands, with no U.S. interference. We know how that promise played out, and the story continues to unfold in contemporary cultural and political reality here in Oklahoma.

Culture can be likened to a person, a being. It is dynamic when there is movement in and out, like breathing. I like to think of this process--the act of writing, publishing, readers reading, then retelling the story or remembering the song, as how we take care of the generations who follow, how we take care of each other, how we contribute to what is now known as *Oklahoma*. Our words, stories, songs, and art are how those who follow will know who we are and are how they will remember us.

These are the selections:

Eddie Chuculate, Muscogee Creek and Cherokee, Cheyenne Madonna

Joy Harjo, Muscogee Creek, Crazy Brave

Joe Dale Tate Nevaquayah, Yuchi and Comanche, Leaving Holes

Linda Hogan, Chickasaw, The Woman Who Watches Over the World, a Native Memoir

LeAnne Howe, Choctaw, Choctalking on Other Realities

I first met Eddie Chuculate when he was a creative writing student at the Institute of American Indians Arts. His reputation was as a fine story maker, whether it was writing fiction, or being a journalist which he was before and after he was a student. He has bounced between Dubai, Santa Fe, the Bay Area and always winds up at home outside Muskogee, Oklahoma. The first short story in his fine collection Cheyenne Madonna, "Galveston Bay, 1826" won one of the most prestigious literary prizes for the short story, the O. Henry Award, an annual American award given to short stories of exceptional merit. I like beginning the readings with this story, one of the best short stories in American and indigenous American literature.

This story is essentially about joyriding. Joyriding has always been an occupation of the young, and 1826 wasn't any different. Old Bull and his friends set off south on horseback for the "Great Lake" that had been heard of in stories, but not seen. It is what we now know of as the Gulf of Mexico. Like any great adventure you don't always find exactly what you are looking for, because if you knew what it was, you wouldn't sacrifice your ordinary and familiar existence to find it.

The theme remains similar throughout the stories: someone leaves a known world and returns to a changed world, whether they are a high school kid living with grandparents and hanging out in the summer, or a world famous Indian artist returning to hardscrabble memories. Chuculate's a kind of journalist of the soul as he investigates the broken heart nation of Indian men. What I especially appreciate about Chuculate is that the world is exactly what it is, with no romantic savage junk, and no temporary life preservers.

In the second story "Yoyo" he writes, "A turtle, its carapace shining black and streaked with yellow, began to emerge from the water and climb its way up the steep clay face. It grabbed Jordan's attention from the other side of the pond. Stretched out on the grass with his German shepherd's head in his lap, he had almost fallen asleep watching the clouds overhead like silent ships, but the turtle caught his eye...(it) slipped and flipped over and tumbled back down to the edge of the water, right side up. It waited awhile,

then poked its tiny red-eyed head out and began again, stubbornly going nowhere in plenty of time.” His stories will take you to lots of these beautifully written “nowheres.”

I placed my memoir Crazy Brave after Chuculate’s short story collection because the stories within it intimately occupy Oklahoma, as do Chuculate’s, but from within primarily a domestic sphere in low to middle class neighborhoods in the Tulsa area, Tahlequah, and then to Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The memory field, however, roams about poetically in time even as the story unfolds chronologically. Memory is not just in the past; it occupies the present even as it shapes the future. My perception of where we are in time shifted when I considered time via generations. Then the late 1800’s, before statehood, when my great (times seven) grandparents settled here from the trail, is just seven generations away, which is a household with a great-great grandparent, great-grandparent, grandparent, parent, child, grandchild, and great-grandchild.

Writing the memoir took me fourteen years, because I spent much of that time running from where the book naturally wanted to begin: with my chaotic childhood in Tulsa. I wanted to begin where the book now concludes, after I begin my career of becoming a poet, writer, musician and performer. My mother was Cherokee, and my father Muscogee Creek. I am an enrolled member of the Creek Nation. Historical trauma can be difficult to write, and the reality of it touches our intimate lives. It is not the burden of just us natives, but of all Oklahomans, all Americans.

Every project, every book teaches you something you didn’t know, or why would you be compelled to create? Crazy Brave reminded me that children are sophisticated beings with awareness that flows deeper than parental bedrock. If I have a favorite moment in the book, it would be close to the end, when my daughter-to-be appears to me in a dream and asks to be born. “This is not a good time,” I tell her. By the way, the title of the collection comes from my surname common among Creeks and Seminoles in Oklahoma, *Harjo*. I’ve been told it means “so brave you are crazy.”

Probably one of the more challenging texts, and one of the most brave is the book of poetry by Joe Dale Tate Nevaquayah, Leaving Holes. One of things I always tell inexperienced readers of poetry is to listen as you read, as if you are listening to a song. Listen with your heart, follow the rhythm, images, and always the sound sense. Do not back away with fear of getting the exact meaning correct. In poetry you need time to mull over the small world the poem makes. Poems are often the convergence of many memories, many kinds of memories.

We are convoluted human beings and poetry mirrors the complexity. Nevaquayah is both Yuchi and Comanche. They are very different cultures, one is Plains and has a different kind of relationship with the land, the other more southern woodlands. The land has everything to do with the language sense, which always finds its way into the poetic sense if one is anywhere within walking distance of their culture. And then you add the contemporary American culture to the mix. It's all here in Nevaquayah's poetry. I think some of his poems are star messages tapped out on silver cords (the Yuchi are known for their star knowledge) ascending from death dreams of a dying country. For in real time, or poetic time, death is always close to life.

"Hominy and Meat" is one of the signature poems of the collection. It is earthy, of a life lived close to the bone, at the suffering edge of society. It is not pretty poetry, and the moment of grace light that holds the center of this poem is the smell of hominy and meat, a memory of hominy pounded by his grandmother. And even that image is challenging. The hominy is "whitened ogre teeth", and grandmother's hands are "purple and veinous." This is not your typical warm domestic scene with grandmother that speaks of nourishment. Nevaquayah is singing a song that can only be born from a cheap rented room, far away from the embrace of everyone who loves him. (And there are many of us who love this man and his poetry.) The poem speaks of a devastation from racism, and other losses of place and spirit.

The short poems that follow are haiku-like honor songs for various individuals. They are much lighter and the threaded images are nourishing. They remind me of flute songs, songs to call a love and songs to open and close the day. (Nevaquayah comes from a family well-known for their flute making and playing.)

The "Poem for Sonya Thunder Bull" is especially beautiful:

The imprint of birds' feet
scatter,
leaving the flecks
with which we muse the darkness.

It is only the wind
forgetting himself.

We remember.

Nevaquayah never strays far from Oklahoma. He stays right here, to speak from the raw center of the world. When we consider historical trauma, and how each generation

must take the story and remake it so it will not destroy their children, or even themselves, then these poems become in essence shields, like those painted by the Kiowa poet, novelist, and painter N. Scott Momaday.

Linda Hogan, the Chickasaw poet and writer is one of the most beloved environmental writers in the country. She grew up in Colorado, and in childhood returned many times to her grandparent's home in Oklahoma with her father, a Chickasaw man. Her most poignant poetry and stories speak to these times in Oklahoma, where horse drawn carts were still in use, where water was drawn from springs, and where spoken stories were the primary source of knowledge--not television, movies, the Internet, or cellphones. In this world, time can breathe. In this world, there is a flow to the communication between the earth, her waters, the animals, birds, people, and the elements. "This world was my foundation," says Hogan. "It became my life, my identity as a woman."

Hogan's The Woman Who Watches Over the World is a collection of short personal essays that she calls "a native memoir." She takes on the authority of the watcher, someone who witnesses history from a vantage point, then speaks and/or sings it. Like every writer in this series, Hogan juggles with historical trauma against the unspeakable awe of what it means to be human in the beautiful lands of this state, of this planet.

We need to remember that memory is immense, and that the width and length of memory that is the State of Oklahoma or even the United States is less than a hair's width in an eternal swath. Hogan reminds us how, before the Trail of Tears, it was said the Chickasaws were beautiful and impressive in appearance and manner. And before the people were forced to leave their homelands, "We touched the trees and leaves and said goodbye to the land and stones and wildlife."

As Hogan introduces this memoir story collection, she notes, "Self-telling is so rare for a native woman." This is true. Several years ago the editor of a collection of short native autobiographical essays complained to me that no native women were responding, only men. Women usually speak from within domestic circles, and overall we are taught within our cultures not to put ourselves forth in a manner that causes undue attention. Hogan notes that she was empowered to speak, because she needed to answer students' questions about how she survived her life.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard stated, "Memory is a field full of psychological ruins." In her memoir, Hogan adds, "For some that may be true, but memory is also a field of healing that has the capacity to restore the world, not only for the one person who recollects, but for cultures as well. When a person says, 'I remember,' all things are possible."

In this memoir you will find the stories of an unusual love relationship, the rescue of sea turtles, of found “lost years”, a return to an Oklahoma home with her father, a near death in a horse accident. Each one of these stories becomes about healing a world that some say is too broken to fix. If you believe these stories, you might understand that stories can be a kind of spiritual glue, and understand that whatever happens, we are all connected.

Finally, we come to the indefatigable Choctaw writer, poet, educator, speaker, former stock market broker, force of nature, LeAnne Howe. I forgot to add, humorist! Howe is funny, and we all understand that humor can lift the heaviest of burdens. Howe has not stopped traveling since she was born in McAlester, Oklahoma to her birth mother, a Choctaw woman, and handed over to the Cherokee woman who became her “basket mother” because she held her in her arms like a basket. She literally traveled from one nation to another in that moment.

Choctalking and Other Realities is a series of travel stories beginning with Howe’s personal origin story about growing up in Oklahoma. Howe calls her writing a *tribalogy*, which is the “process of render(ing) all of our collective experiences into a meaningful form...whether it is fiction, poetry, a play, or history. American Indian writers and storytellers create tribalogy to inform ourselves and the non-Indian world about who we are.” Wherever she goes, she brings it all back home, back to the beginning in Oklahoma where she worked as a young mother in a diner near the airport.

In these memorable essays, Howe steps all over protocol in Japan despite her best efforts at politeness and considers vampires in Romania even as she finds home in countries in the Middle East. Though she veers a long way from Ardmore, Oklahoma she is not really that far at all, because the story roots can reach that distance and even farther through time. And for her, time is another kind of country. The Choctaw origin story and Walmart are hanging out somewhere near each other together.

And in these essays Howe marries that down-home wit and wisdom to a sophisticated, literary voice that can say *hello* and find a home in many languages. I’ve been told that is how our old ones used to be.

So you have quite a storytelling journey ahead of you, with some time out for songs, which is what I sometimes call poetry. What is Oklahoma but a series of stories, one layer over another? Some call it history; some call it art. It is where we have been and where we are going.

This theme was developed by Joy Harjo. Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a member of the Mvskoke Nation, and belongs to Hickory Ground ceremonial ground. She left home to attend high school at the innovative Institute of American Indian Arts, which was then a Bureau of Indian Affairs school.

Harjo began writing poetry as a member of the University of New Mexico's Native student organization, the Kiva Club, in response to Native empowerment movements. She has written eight books of poetry, including her most recent, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, which was shortlisted for the Griffin Prize and named the American Library Association as a Notable Book of the Year, a memoir *Crazy Brave*, which was awarded the PEN USA Literary Award in Creative Non Fiction for *Crazy Brave*, two award-winning children's books, a collaboration with photographer/astronomer Stephen Strom, an anthology of North American Native women's writing, several screenplays and two plays. She was awarded one of the country's most prestigious awards for poetry, the Academy of American Poets Wallace Stevens Award for her achievements in poetry. Her first play, *Wings of Night Sky, Wings of Morning Light* will be published by Wesleyan University next year. She has also produced several award-winning CD's of original music and is at work on a musical play, *We Were There When Jazz Was Invented*, which will change the origin story of American music to include southeastern Native peoples. and a new album of music. She has begun research and writing on her next memoir which will be a historical memoir linking her generation with the seventh generation which includes her grandfather Monahwee, who with the Red Stick warriors was part of Tecumseh's Great Alliance. She is a co-founder with tribal members Kenneth Johnson and Sandy Wilson of the Mvskoke Arts Association, an organization to support and encourage Mvskoke arts and culture. She holds the John C. Hodges Chair of Excellence at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

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