

AKERS, Domna (*Choctaw Nation*)

Department of History
University of Nebraska
USA

BIO

I am a woman of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I hold a Ph.D. in American History, and am an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Since I was a child, I heard the stories of our forced dispossession from our ancestral homes in Mississippi, and permanent exile to Indian Territory, 700 miles west of our homelands. My grandmother related stories and oral traditions that kept alive the account of my 5th great grandmother, who walked from Mississippi with her 3 children and husband. The Choctaws have many living memories of this period in the 1830s which have been ignored or dismissed by scholars who have written accounts of what they call “Indian Removal.”

When I was a young child in third grade in public school in Oklahoma City, my teacher began a unit about “The Greatest American Presidents.” She began with George Washington, and for days we drew pictures of him chopping down a cherry tree, heard the myth about him never telling a lie, and were regaled with descriptions of his heroics and leadership of the new American Republic. Next came Thomas Jefferson, who, we learned, “bought” the Louisiana Territory from the French, thus doubling the land mass of the United States. The next week my teacher moved on to the third “great” president: Andrew Jackson. As she talked, I became more and more troubled as it slowly dawned on me that she was speaking of the man reviled among the Choctaw as the great devil, Black Heart (Losa Hattak). She stated that when he became President, Americans needed more land, so he “asked” the Choctaws and Cherokees to move West in order, she said to “protect” them from the rough American frontiersmen. She said we signed treaties exchanging our homelands “willingly,” and were “delighted” to move West, like the white people would later do, to a beautiful area more lovely than our homelands.

I had been passing as white- never speaking Choctaw in school, never acknowledging my heritage, never speaking of “Indians” as I had been instructed by my family to do. I was told that to admit I was Choctaw would be suicidal to my academic and social opportunities. In 1960 Oklahoma, the prejudice against Indians was both very pervasive and overt.

Despite my quiet nature, when I heard the great Devil, Black Heart (Losa Hattak) spoken of as the Hero of the Common Man and Protector of Indians, I was astonished. I will never forget the horror I felt when I realized that this was the same man who had killed many of our people, who cheated us and forced us off from our beautiful homelands, and who turned his back while we starved to death in Indian Territory. This was the man whose policies killed almost a quarter of our people. Yet here was my beloved teacher speaking of him in almost reverent tones.

To her great surprise I jumped up from my seat and ran out the classroom and home to my grandmother, with tears streaming down my face. I sought out Aishki and when I could speak, I said, “Grandmother, do you know what the white people think of Black Heart, the great devil who killed so many of us?” In that moment, I realized that although I could “pass” I would never be one with the white people. I determined then to work toward the reconstitution of American history to include the history of Indian people from our own perspective.

ABSTRACT

Indigenous Scholars and Collaboration with Tribal Nations: A Roadmap to Joint Projects

This paper discusses the creation of a collaborative project by an Indigenous scholar who works in collaboration with Native American tribes to facilitate the revision of mainstream American history. Traditionally, the dominant society has told the story of American history from a Eurocentric perspective, ignoring and dismissing the perspectives of Native people. In this paper I will discuss a major academic project that will, in collaboration with the Choctaw Nation, create the first in a series of books and websites that will finally tell these stories from a more balanced perspective. This corrective will be accomplished using oral traditions and the many stories preserved over the generations of what Euroamericans call “Indian Removal” in addition to traditional historical sources.

Indian Dispossession and forced exile was the central weapon in the arsenal of the American conquest and has long been mythologized as merely a sad tale of an inevitable process—the expansion of Euroamericans across the continent of North America. This project begins to redress the nation-building mythology that constitutes mainstream American history, and attempts to reposition Dispossession and genocide of Native peoples as the central event in the creation and expansion of the American Republic.