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DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Place is constantly being reconstituted, yet few studies look at how that change occurs over time. This dissertation analyzes portrayals of Oklahoma in fiction to explore how the representation of place in Oklahoma evolved. My primary question is whether contemporary literary works perpetuate formative narratives established by Edna Ferber and John Steinbeck, or seek to supplant them with alternative versions of the formative stories of Oklahoma. I analyze eleven contemporary novels by seven award-winning Oklahoma women authors and compare them with Ferber's *Cimarron* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, both of which are characterized as place-defining in geographic literature. My finding is that place images of rural settings, poverty, violence, racism, Christianity, self-reliance, family and community are portrayed by writers in both time periods. The theme of displacement replaced mobility in the contemporary novels. Books in the contemporary time period also frequently feature characters engaging in art. These findings indicate that place images evolve slowly with much overlap between the two time periods.

Chapter 1
Setting the Stage: Placing Fiction in the Geographical Imagination

*Written language seems to me as a landscape.
Land bound up in words. I pick up stones or
rocks in travel as text that I can read.*

*There is a map you open like a book. There
are books you open like a map.*

*There is a map you decide to call a book.
A book of the territories you've traveled. A
book in the in-between places you've lived. A
map is a meaning you hold against the
unknowing. The places you speak in many
directions. (Glancy 2005, ix)*

Fiction

Diane Glancy's poem expresses the idea that language and our understanding of place are inextricably linked, yet they remain enigmatic. One of the most compelling statements I have encountered in a professional geography article reads similarly: "words can call places into being." These words, penned by Yi-Fu Tuan (1991), caught my imagination and made me want to explore this concept of humanist geography more completely.

Prose written about a place is one of the most powerful modes of establishing ideas about place in the human imagination. Novels stimulate the imagination persuasively because they take the reader inside the heads of the characters, and place the events of the story in a comprehensive context that includes a strong

emotional pull. For example, more than sixty years after its publication, *The Grapes of Wrath* still influences the way Oklahoma is perceived by people outside its borders and the way its residents perceive themselves.

Evidence of the enduring influence of *The Grapes of Wrath* can be found in recent literary programs, which I claim authorize and institutionalize selected place images for popular consumption. In 2006, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)¹ initiated a program called The Big Read, which was designed to restore reading as a central activity in American culture (National Endowment for the Arts n.d.). The Big Read was established in response to a 2004 report showing that the percentage of Americans who read books regularly had declined between 1992 and 2002 (Hill 2004)². Communities that participated in The Big Read selected a book from a list of classics that included *The Grapes of Wrath*. A complete list of the books from which The Big Read's sponsoring agencies could choose is contained in Appendix A. A sponsoring agency

¹The NEA is an independent public agency established by the US Congress in 1965 with the mission of supporting excellence in the arts and bringing art to all Americans.

²It is unclear what caused the decline. Television viewership and movie-watching also declined during the same period, and the categories that had the highest percentage of readers corresponded to the most intensive users of the internet, so they do not seem to be competing.

held events that included a kickoff, where participants received a copy of the book and registered for a discussion time. Three Oklahoma library systems participated in the 2007 Big Read: The Norman branch of the Pioneer Library System, the Stillwater Public Library, and the Lawton Public Library. All three Oklahoma library systems chose to have participants in the program read *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Big Read was not the only program encouraging Oklahomans to read as the state's 2007 centennial drew near. The Oklahoma Humanities Council and the Oklahoma Department of Libraries were the primary sponsors of the Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma program, which was billed as a statewide literary celebration to mark Oklahoma's centennial. Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma was an official centennial event active from 2003 to 2007. From 2004 through 2007, one book about Oklahoma was selected for all Oklahomans interested in participating in the program to read and discuss. The final selection was made by internet voters choosing from a slate of six books that sponsors had nominated. Each Literary Six-Pack contained three fiction and three nonfiction books to choose from. All four books voters chose were from the fiction

category: *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* by Billy Letts in 2004, *Walking the Choctaw Road* by Tim Tingle in 2005, *The Saints and Sinners of Okay County* by Dayna Dunbar in 2006, and *Fire in Beulah* by Rilla Askew in 2007 (Oklahoma Department of Libraries n.d.b). Appendix B lists all of the books included in the Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma Literary Six-Packs. Voters may have favored fiction because novels allow people to engage with place on a more fundamental level than nonfiction. Also, for the average reader, fiction is both accessible and emotionally satisfying (Farr and Harker 2008).

Another phenomenon that promotes reading as an important cultural activity is Oprah's Book Club. In 1996, the immensely popular television talk-show host, Oprah Winfrey, established a book club. From 1996 to 2003, she selected contemporary novels for her audience to read. Selection by Oprah guaranteed a place on the bestseller list for the novel (Farr 2005).

Both The Big Read and Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma have an objective in common with Oprah's Book Club: making the act of reading a social event that reinforces the emotional elements of a book. Emotionalism is often criticized by literary critics (Rooney 2008), but it is

this capacity of connecting with the reader on both an intellectual and emotional level that allows novels to play such an important role in shaping the place images held by large numbers of people.

The Oklahoma Book Award is a similar program promoting books and reading, and it is the primary source I used to identify potential authors whose works are appropriate for this study. The Award is given by the Oklahoma Center for the Book, which was formed in 1986 by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries (ODL) as an affiliate of The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. The mission of the Oklahoma Center for the Book is to “promote Oklahoma authors, celebrate the state’s literary heritage, and encourage reading for pleasure” (Oklahoma Center for the Book 2009).

The criteria for an author to be considered for an Oklahoma Book Award include writing about Oklahoma, living in Oklahoma, or having lived in the state in the past (Oklahoma Department of Libraries n.d.a). The entries are judged by a panel of judges who have expertise in the writing and publishing fields (Oklahoma Center for the Book 2009). Since its inception in 1990, nine awards have gone to men and ten have gone to women.

Appendix C lists the recipients and titles of the awards for fiction from 1990 to 2008. Nine of the ten novels written by women were set in Oklahoma, while only three of the nine novels written by men were set in Oklahoma. This disparity led me to decide to explore the representation of Oklahoma in literature by women who have recently won the Oklahoma Book Award.

The next task was to identify themes in the most influential early novels of Oklahoma with which to compare those of contemporary novels. To find the most influential early novels, I consulted Shortridge's study of place-defining novels written between 1800 and 1950 (Shortridge 1991). He identifies *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck and *Cimarron* by Edna Ferber as the two most influential in shaping Americans' vision of Oklahoma. Shortridge asserts that novels like these not only influence the images of places but also associated economic development and planning activities. Negative perceptions of place can influence migration patterns and, over time, economic development (Shields 1991). But in order to change the image of a place, one must first understand what that image is and how it was created.

Place

“Place” is both one of the most central concepts in geography and one of the most difficult to conceptualize. Geographers, and social scientists in general, have long been obsessed with finding the rules and overall processes that transcend place, and have come to accept the idea that the unique characteristics of place condition the response of localities to politics and social change (Daniels 1992). Entrikin suggests that narratives of place redress the imbalance between subjective and objective science:

The apparent insignificance of place in modern life and the concomitant insignificance of the study of place are related to the confidence that moderns have in the objective view of the theoretical scientist. Our technological control of nature emphasizes the global, the universal, and the objective, and the success of the manipulation has led to the application of the same perspective to human society. Such a view is unable to capture the moral uniqueness of the individual agent and the source of agency in the local, the particular and the subjective. (Entrikin 1991, 26)

Entrikin thinks that it is a mistake to try to uncover universal rules and theories of place that will operate regardless of location. It is the unique qualities of places and their inhabitants, qualities that by definition are not reproduced in another location, which

makes the study of place worthwhile. Place, however, is not a static system.

One of the most important concepts that must be understood when studying place is that place is constantly being reconstituted. The characteristics that form our understanding of a specific place are continuously contested or reinforced by the events that occur in that location. Doreen Massey makes the argument that space is the location where events converge to form something unique. She theorizes three elements: space is a product of interrelations, space is the sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity, and space is always under construction (Massey 2005, 9-10). An example of this is that different stories of history or identity may occupy the same space.

I like how Massey theorizes space as an open-ended system and as a "simultaneity of stories-told-so-far" (Massey 2005, 9), but I prefer to use the term "place" with all of its emotional and ambiguous baggage. Privileging the term "space" does not make the conceptualization less complicated. Space and place cannot exist separately from one another, and using the more abstract term removes the immediacy from the

concept: place is personal, space is an idea.

Ultimately, a personal, emotional connection to a spatial location must be made for it to be a site of political action. However, it is not the intent of this study to provide a new framework for conceptualizing place. The goal of this study is to examine the officially authorized images of a specific place to understand how images are continually constructed over time.

Purpose

This dissertation explores the way in which contemporary portrayals of Oklahoma in award-winning fiction either build on or replace previous themes established by earlier novels. How do contemporary Oklahomans choose to portray their home state and how does that compare to previous portrayals? Do contemporary literary works either perpetuate formative narratives established during colonization and the era prior to World War II, or do they seek to supplant them with either alternative versions of those formative stories or entirely new stories.

As noted earlier, the Oklahoma Book Award is the primary vehicle I used to select books for this study. However, using the Oklahoma Book Award as a selection

tool limits the scope of the project to institutionally authorized versions of Oklahoma. Since the Oklahoma Center for the Book, which awards the prize, is housed in the Oklahoma Department of Libraries, which in turn is part of the State of Oklahoma, its selections are authorizations by the state. On the positive side, this imprimatur gives the versions of Oklahoma portrayed in these books potentially greater longevity partially because the books are placed in databases maintained and advertised by the state. Undoubtedly, there are other portrayals of Oklahoma in contemporary literature, but the lack of advertising and codification by the state make them less likely to influence images of the state, for better or worse.

For the purpose of this study, the authors I chose must have lived a portion of their lives in Oklahoma and used Oklahoma as the setting for their work. Authors who qualify based on those criteria are primarily female, including Billie Letts, Rilla Askew, M.K. Preston, Eve Sandstrom, Diane Glancy, LeAnne Howe, and Linda Hogan. I compare the themes in their novels with those in the books by Steinbeck and Ferber to explore how the

authorized place images of Oklahoma have evolved over time.

Novels written by the authors were read carefully for narratives, iconography, metaphors, and overall themes that convey place images and other characteristics imparted by these texts. Before I delve into the analysis, however, I more closely examine the relationship between geography and literature in the academy. The next section describes the methods that geographers have typically used to explore literature, and it defines the methods that I used to analyze the texts.

Literature & Methods

Geographers have a long history of using artistic works both as primary and secondary sources for studying geographic phenomena. Tuan encourages geographers to explore the role of language in the creation of place. Literature is one of the sources that can be used as data in his narrative-descriptive approach to studying place construction. The narrative-descriptive approach integrates the interpretive and explanatory capacity built into language, but avoids heavy reliance on social theory to explore the construction of place. This allows

the characteristics of the place being studied to be the center of attention, rather than theory (Tuan 1991). Examining the broader themes within works of fiction provides insight into the place in which the story is set.

The use of literature as resource for geographic research can be traced to the early 1900s. Most scholars attribute the first legitimate use of literature in a research article to climatologist Hugh Robert Mill's description of a cyclone from a novel called *The Conqueror*. For Mill, the author's description of experiencing the cyclone provided supplementary information imparting to students a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of a cyclone than weather charts and statistics could provide. Only limited use of literature as a resource occurred over the next several decades as geography moved from regional description to quantification, which privileged mathematical approaches to theorizing questions. It was not until the 1970s, with increased focus on humanistic approaches to research, that the use of literature as a resource for geographic studies blossomed. It became recognized as a research sub-theme in 1977 with publication of the first extensive

review, *Landscape in Literature*, by Christopher Salter and William Lloyd, which was produced as a resource paper by the Association of American Geographers (AAG).

Literary geography remains a small, but stable, research sub-theme within geography today, and has evolved from using literature as an objective source of information to exploring the subjective symbolic interpretation of landscape (Noble and Dhussa 1990). The next sub-sections discuss the elements of texts geographers use to explore sense of place in fiction that are useful for this study.

Narrative & Description

As Gary Hausladen (2000, 3) states in *Places for Dead Bodies*, "People read to escape, but they cannot escape from the descriptions and impressions of places that are such an integral part of the plot." Geographers use the explanatory power of descriptions within the text to transform setting into place. Hausladen (1995, 1996) postulates that establishing a sense of place is central to a novel's credibility. Narrative description and dialogue serve to ground the reader within the setting of the story. For example, crime writers frequently set a series of novels in a particular place, which gives readers and researchers insight into how images of the

social milieu and physical characteristics change over time (Hamilton 1991, Daniels and Rycroft 1993, Kadonaga 1998).

In addition to narrative description, the narrative structure of the plot is critical to the understanding of the place that the author is constructing. Familiar structures like well-known myths have cultural resonance that give readers access to the subtext of the plot (Jackson 2002). The structures of the plots of experimental novels have been used to mimic a place and give the reader a sense of inhabiting it (Brosseau 1995). Geographers also use the structure and pacing of the plot to provide insight into concepts of mobility and resistance to the status quo (Cresswell 1993).

American Indian writers, among others, frequently use non-chronological forms to subvert the dominance of Western culture. For example, Velie (1993) uses Bakhtin's chronotope to analyze the trickster novel. Chronotope, which literarily means "time space," is the name given by Bakhtin (1981) to the relationship between time and space in literature. In trickster novels, time appears vastly different from how many people expect it to be represented. It does not obey the linear rules that are

usually considered normative. Refusal to obey linear time and space aligns the form of the novel with another trickster trait, resistance. Novels with these characteristics “unsettle colonization through trickster strategies of insubordination” (Horn 1999, 127). Non-linear narratives can also highlight cultural differences between American Indian and non-American Indian readers. By compelling readers to experience time in the novel in an unfamiliar sequence, many readers are positioned as outsiders struggling to make sense of a world structured with different rules.

Metaphor

The literary device of metaphor is one of the most powerful tools geographers use to decipher the power relations and subconscious motivations of the characters in the popular novels that they examine. According to Carvalho (2007, 37), “literary representations of place construct obvious as well as latent systems of power relations which then can become part and parcel of the reader’s subsequent way of seeing places.”

Metaphors are used extensively by writers who write from a feminist perspective (Shurmer-Smith 1994, Rundstrom 1995, Smith and Allen 1997, Zeleny 1997,

Rebolledo 1997, Wenner 2006, Carvalho 2007). For example, women are frequently equated with organic or fluid entities. Zeleny (1997) explores the use of seeds as metaphor for women in the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The main character, Rukmani, plants her first crop at the same time she is experiencing her first pregnancy. The events culminate in a successful harvest and the birth of a daughter. Carvalho (2007) demonstrates how Laura Restrepo uses a river as a metaphor for the life path of the main character in *La novia oscura*. In both of these books, the main character's adaptability represented by this type of metaphor is a central way in which she exercises power in her environment.

Iconography

Iconography is the use of symbols to convey meaning. For example, in police procedurals and mysteries, the protagonists are often icons used to establish and critique the stereotypes of the communities they inhabit. The use of iconography in geography to study place in literature is well established. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (1988, 1) edited an oft-cited volume, *The Iconography of Landscape*, that explores the use of iconography to imbue landscape with meaning. They write that the "meaning of verbal, visual and built landscapes have a complex interwoven history." This means that a

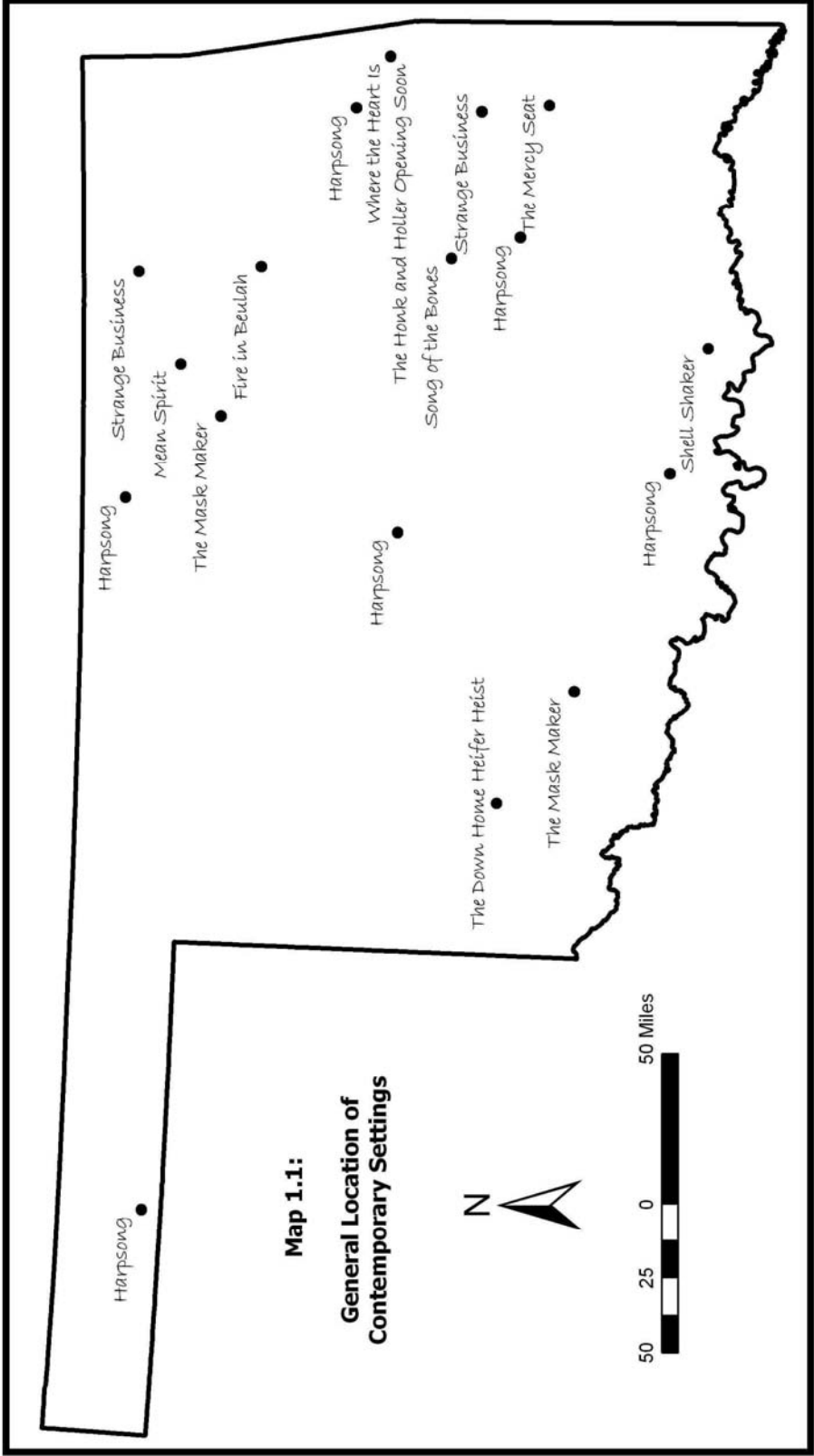
mountain depicted in a painting or described in a poem is no less real than a mountain on the landscape. Both the mountain and its images elicit culturally conditioned responses.

In Oklahoma's literary landscape, the most powerful iconic figure has been that of Tom Joad. However, Tom Joad is not the only iconic figure that makes an appearance in the formative fictional texts about Oklahoma. The rugged individualist personified by Yancey Cravat in *Cimarron* and the pioneer woman personified by Sabra Cravat also continue to resonate today.

Structure

This dissertation uses the literary devices of narrative, metaphor, and iconography to analyze eleven novels by seven award-winning Oklahoma authors who have richly characterized the lives of Oklahomans. In addition to this introduction, the dissertation has six additional chapters. Chapter Two, "Oklahoma in the Early Twentieth-Century Imagination: Boom to Dust," explores the themes of the novels *Cimarron* by Edna Ferber and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Chapter Three, "Wal-Mart Meets Christian Virtue: Small-town Oklahoma in the Middlebrow Novel," explores the works of Billie Letts, who has won

the Oklahoma Book Award twice. Chapter Four, "Mysterious Oklahoma," examines the works of award-winning mystery writers Eve Sandstrom and M.K. Preston. Chapter Five, "Strange Business: (Re)Writing Oklahoma History," explores how a contemporary writer, Rilla Askew, seeks to redefine the past with alternative histories. Askew has won the Oklahoma Book Award three times, first in 1993 for a collection of short stories called *Strange Business*. Her second was in 1998 for a dark novel of migration called *The Mercy Seat*, and the third was in 2008 for *Harpsong*, which is set during the Great Depression. Chapter Six, "Writing the Past, Adrift on the Plains and Invoking the Trickster: the Stories of American Indian Women," explores the works of Linda Hogan, Diane Glancy, and LeAnne Howe. Chapter Seven, "(Re)Writing Place in the Twenty-First Century," concludes by examining common themes found in all the novels and comparing them to themes found in pre-World War II novels. Map 1.1 shows the general locations in the state of each of the settings of the contemporary novels.



Chapter 2

Oklahoma in the Twentieth-Century Imagination: Boom to Dust

Background

Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* is a book that describes the relationships among men, women, and the land in the areas of Oklahoma newly opened to non-American Indian settlement. Ferber was born August 15, 1885, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, into a family of Jewish Hungarian immigrants. After a stint as a newspaper writer, Ferber took up writing fiction. At the time she was researching *Cimarron*, she had recently won a Pulitzer Prize for her 1924 novel, *So Big* (Brody 1996). Ferber visited with many Oklahomans and spent time in the Oklahoma Historical Society's collections doing research while preparing to write *Cimarron*. *Cimarron* became a best-selling novel in 1930, and was subsequently made into a movie (Greene 1974). The success of the book may have led to at least one woman's irritation with Ferber. Elva Shartel Ferguson, editor of the *Watonga Republican* newspaper, remarked:

Her statement that she is indebted to no one person for her data that her characters are fictitious and not to be confused with real persons or events, etc. True, the story I told her was twisted and turned in many ways, but the story is there, as everyone knows of the

real experiences of my life realizes. ...The wagon trip to Oklahoma, the founding of the newspaper, the description of the town, the events surrounding my family and the newspaper were used in my own words as I told her the story. The character of my husband was easily recognized in connection with the early days of the newspaper. (Ferguson n.d.)

Although questions of originality are often debated with respect to novels, they are not of central concern here. But we may sympathize with Ferguson's experience when she was checking into a hotel in Ireland. The desk clerk was excited to meet an Oklahoman and showed her a copy of *Cimarron* thinking the connection might impress Ferguson. Certainly, it provides evidence that the book was known well beyond the confines of the United States (Ferguson n.d.).

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. Like Ferber, he was an established writer when he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although the novel is closely associated with the culture of Oklahoma, it was not written with the intent of describing the state in a holistic manner. It was written as a social statement provoked by Steinbeck's witnessing the deplorable treatment of migrant farm workers in his native California. Oklahoma was used to provide a context for California's exploited farm workers, but Steinbeck did not explore other aspects of the region beyond this

narrow view. In truth, although a large portion of those workers came from Oklahoma, many came from other places, and with backgrounds unrelated to tenant farming (Gregory 1989).

For his information, Steinbeck relied heavily on Thomas Collins, who managed the Farm Security Administration camp in Kern County, California, and on interviews with migrant workers. If Steinbeck visited Oklahoma, it was not recorded. Commentary published in the journal he kept while writing *The Grapes of Wrath* specifically debunks the myth that he traveled from Oklahoma to California with a migrant family (Steinbeck 1989). The fact that Steinbeck gave places in eastern Oklahoma physical descriptions reminiscent of areas in the western part of the state tends to support the idea that he did not conduct research in Oklahoma.

In spite of the geographical inconsistencies and a focus limited to the lives of tenant farmers living in California, the sheer magnitude of the book's popularity along with its literary excellence gained him the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. The 1940 film version directed by John Ford and starring Henry Fonda was enormously popular as well. The book, movie, Pulitzer, and Steinbeck's Nobel Prize for literature in 1962 all contributed to the long-

lasting iconic status of the Oklahoma portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* follows one family's trek from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression, *Cimarron* portrays the lives of an Oklahoma family from the time of an 1889 land run until about 1920. In both books, several themes that portray to readers the underlying culture of the region are readily identifiable, including: mobility, individualism, Christian virtue, family and community, violence, and poverty.

Mobility

Moving to improve the quality of one's life is a longstanding value in American society. When the Joads set out for California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, they had visions of cottages with orange trees in the yard waiting for them at the end of their journey. In *Cimarron*, when the Cravats move from Kansas to the newly-opened Indian Territory to start a newspaper, they do it for the excitement of being a part of something new. They chose to make the move, rather than being forced to take to the road, as the Joads were. Their reasons are expressed by the character Yancey Cravat:

It's the last frontier in America, that new country. There isn't a newspaper in one of those towns -- or there wasn't when I left. I want to go back there and help build a state out of prairie and American Indians and scrub oaks and red clay. (Ferber 1930, 26)

For the Cravats, the end of the road eventually met their expectations. The beginning was more difficult than anticipated, however. The shortage of water, haphazard construction of the early buildings, and general lawlessness were eventually overcome, and they created a town much like the one they left behind.

For the Joads, on the other hand, there was no end to the road. They moved to California not because they wanted to migrate, but because conditions in Oklahoma would no longer support them. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Oklahoma is no longer a vibrant untamed place attracting the individual with the expectation of a better life. It has become a barren, hostile place forcing its residents to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Self-Reliant Individualism

Individualism is closely tied to migration. The individualism portrayed in the novels comes in many forms, all with a common bond: the need to be self-reliant even if it means breaking social rules. For the character of Yancey Cravat, individualism is expressed in

the need for adventure and living outside of social norms. Once Oklahoma Territory becomes too settled, he often leaves home for long periods of time in search of new experiences.

Individualism is also found in the determination of Sabra Cravat, who instead of going back to her family in Kansas during Yancey's absences, stays in Osage and makes the newspaper into a greater success than her husband had. Sabra takes an active role in shaping the environment of the territory into a community similar to the one she left behind. One minor female character expresses the role of women in the west as follows:

The difference in America is that the women have always gone along [on adventures]. ... When Ladye Guinevere had pinned a bow of ribbon to her knight's sleeve, why, her job was done for the day. He could ride off and be killed while she stayed home and stitched a tapestry. But here in this land, Sabra my girl, the women, they've been the real hewers of wood and drawers of water. (Ferber 1930, 35)

In Ferber's book, women gain influence over the environment not only within the home, but also in the community at large. Sabra eventually becomes a United States Congresswoman.

The tenant farmers of *The Grapes of Wrath* migrate to California in the belief that they will be able to the

have a certain degree of autonomy when they reach the west coast. Their goal is to earn enough money to buy land and be independent. It is a crushing blow when that dream turns out to be unattainable.

Family and Community

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, women play a central role in the maintenance of the family. On the road to California when Tom wants to stop and find work to earn some money while the rest of the family continues to California, Ma Joad has the following response:

The eyes of the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the Power. She had taken control. "the money we'd make wouldn't do ne good," she said. "all we got is the family unbroken. Like a bunch a cows, when the Lobos are ranging, stick all together. I ain't scared while we're all here, bus I ain't going to see us bust up. the Wilsons here is with us, an' the preacher is with us. I can't say nothing if they want to go, but I' a-goin' cat wild with this here piece of barn-arn if my own folks bust up." Her tone was cold and final. (Steinbeck 1939, 169)

As soon as the Joads arrive in California they start losing family members. Connie abandons Rose of Sharon almost immediately. Later, Tom has to separate from the family when he is hunted by the law for fighting back against the man that kills the preacher. The one period of respite the family has is when they move into the community of Weedpatch Camp. The government camp is a

self-sufficient, resident-operated facility that does not allow workers living there to be harassed.

The narrative of *Cimarron* follows the construction of the community of Osage from raw prairie. The new settlers bring their ideas of what a community should be and reproduce the relationships and institutions in the new town. In her role as editor of the local paper, Sabra exerts influence on which institutions are appropriate. She promotes ladies' clubs and recipe exchanges, and uses her position to root out elements, like those who participate in prostitution, that run counter to her ideas of a good society.

Christianity

Upon arriving in the Oklahoma Territory, one of the first things the settlers in *Cimarron* do is start planning a church and holding religious meetings in makeshift accommodations until the church can be completed. There is a moralistic undertone illustrated by the attempt to exile the town prostitute because of her bad influence; however, for the most part Christian virtue is shown in the support of one another in times of need. Likewise, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters pool their resources to assist each other's survival.

Race Relations

Cimarron also illustrates the relationships among the different races inhabiting Oklahoma at the time. Through most of the book, Sabra is unabashedly racist, expressing paternal and disapproving attitudes toward both American Indians and Blacks. Yancey is a champion of the American Indians. An early passage illustrates their attitudes:

In one way or another, at school, in books and newspapers of the time, in her father's talk with men and women of his own generation, Sabra had picked up odds and ends of information about these silent, slothful, yet sinister figures. She had been surprised even incredulous at her husband's partisanship to the redskins. It was one of his absurdities. He seemed actually to consider them as human beings. (Ferber 1930, 31)

Sabra is horrified when her son marries an Osage woman. However, once her grandchildren are born, she eventually comes to see Indians as people. The book also portrays the relationship between the Osages and Blacks. When a Black man and an Osage woman have a child together, all three are brutally murdered.

Race relations are not explored in the portion of *The Grapes of Wrath* set in Oklahoma. This is not a theme Steinbeck was interested in, unlike Ferber, who wrote from a more comprehensive regional perspective. Steinbeck

was focused on dramatizing the plight of migrant workers in California.

Violence

Other than the murder of the Black man, the Osage woman, and their child, the violence depicted in *Cimarron* is what would be expected in a stereotypical western novel. For example, there is the shootout on Main Street that removes the last of the outlaws from the town and allows the citizens to begin to remake the lawless Unassigned Lands into the more civilized society that would become the State of Oklahoma.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the poor migrant farm workers are continually in danger of experiencing violence. Any attempt to resist exploitation is met with ruthless measures by the authorities. For example, the character of Casey the preacher is murdered by local thugs when he speaks for the rights of the migrant workers.

Poverty

Poverty and homelessness enter the scene as defining characteristics of Oklahoma in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joads are driven from the land they sharecropped by changing economic conditions and drought. They travel to

California with the expectation of a better future. Unfortunately, they fall prey to the industrialized farming system which keeps them moving from place to place in search of low-paying jobs.

In *Cimarron*, although the Cravats had few possessions when they arrived in Oklahoma, they soon prosper. Even the Indians, who at the beginning of the book were described as poor and dirty, become prosperous because of oil by the end of the book.

For the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, there was no respite. Readers are left with the feeling that the Joads have no hope. The self-reliance and individualism that characterized the Oklahoma of the Cravats has been ground down by the migrant labor system associated with industrialized farming in California.

Continuing Legacy

Because of their popularity, these books have had lasting impact on how Oklahoma is perceived by people living outside the state. While novels are not the only aspect of culture that form images of place, they have a longer life than many other forms. For example, both books are still in print and both movies are available on DVD. Because it won a Pulitzer Prize, and because John

Steinbeck later received the Nobel Prize, *The Grapes of Wrath* has undoubtedly been the more influential of the two despite the fact that only about a quarter of the book is actually set in Oklahoma.

The examination of these two books focused upon the social characteristics of place because that is one of the strengths of using imaginative sources. They add a unique human perspective. When people read these books, they form an image of the setting that goes beyond verifiable information. For example, the fact that the state is actually a mosaic of prairie and forest landscapes settled in the south by migrants from southern states and in the north by migrants from northern states bears no relation to the images that have had an impact all these years. Literature takes readers into the daily lives of individuals and allows them to make value judgments about characters and places that are often independent of facts.

These books were written at a time when rural living was undergoing a profound change. The readily arable land had been settled; in the case of Oklahoma, settled too densely (Egan 2006). In *Cimarron*, there is optimism that the land will provide sustenance. For the more

adventurous, it even becomes too civilized and boring. The challenges of migration and settlement are successfully overcome.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, mechanization has created a distance between people and the land. The tenant farmer is no longer needed to farm the land. The landowners buy tractors to farm large tracts and hire people not previously connected to the land to operate them. Steinbeck (1939, 36) expresses this alienation as only a Nobel Laureate can:

And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumpled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection to the bread. The land bore under the iron, and under the iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses.

Such images provide the mark against which many contemporary conceptions of Oklahoma are measured. Images associated with *Cimarron* and *The Grapes of Wrath* have acquired symbolic significance. For example, a recent study of poverty in Oklahoma is titled *Dancing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth and Low-wage Labor in Oklahoma* (Maril 2000). Tom Joad, the central character of *The Grapes of Wrath*, has become an icon for the downtrodden.

Characters portrayed in *Cimarron* also have iconic resonance in the present. In memorializing on the landscape the history of the State of Oklahoma as it approached its centennial, Oklahomans chose to reach farther back into their history to the iconic figures of the rugged individualist and the pioneer woman striking out to tame new land; that is, to literary archetypes like Yancey and Sabra Cravat.

An example of one of the most ambitious projects is the Oklahoma Land Run Monument in Oklahoma City. The figures in the monument represent "the timeless appeal of adventure and the struggle of man against man and man against nature" (Ray n.d.). The monument is situated between the North Canadian River, which has been renamed the Oklahoma River in that reach, and the Bricktown neighborhood. It features over forty statues depicting participants in a land run.

Both books elaborate a foundation myth for single motherhood and the high incidence of divorce, which has become a facet of Oklahoma society (State by State Divorce Rates 1994). While they did not divorce, women in both books are abandoned by their husbands, Rose of Sharon permanently, and Sabra intermittently.

When people read *Cimarron* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, images emerge based not only upon its physical features. The main characters depicted in both books are decent hard-working people who look after the well-being of their neighbors; however, the economic and social structures of Oklahoma changed profoundly between the two time periods. The Oklahoma of *Cimarron*, while untamed and dangerous in the beginning, was gradually reshaped into a place where its citizens prospered and took part in the national scene. It was a dynamic and exciting place to live. The Oklahoma of *The Grapes of Wrath* was a hostile, barren place that could not support its citizens.

Chapter 3
Wal-Mart Meets Christian Virtue:
Small-town Oklahoma in the Middlebrow Novel

This chapter explores place images in the work of Billie Letts. Two of Letts's novels have won the Oklahoma Book Award: *Where the Heart Is* in 1996, and *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* in 1999 (Oklahoma Department of Libraries n.d.a). *Where the Heart Is* won a nationwide audience in 1998 when Oprah Winfrey selected it for inclusion in her book club. The selection catapulted the novel to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and culminated in its being made into a motion picture, which opened to a nationwide audience on April 28, 2000 (Internet Movie Database Where n.d.b).

The work of Billie Letts falls into a category of literary works described as middlebrow. My favorite definition of a middlebrow novel comes from Cecilia Konchar Farr:

Middlebrow is not what you usually read in English classes or find on the Great Books list. But it is also not what you hide under your bed and replace with Michael Ondaatje on your nightstand when your smart friends visit. It's what you read with your book club or with Oprah. (2005, 35)

The term middlebrow, as related to literary culture, was coined in the 1920s to describe books that fall

somewhere between literary novels of the “highbrow” and the formulaic mass produced pulp fiction of the “lowbrow.” It is most frequently associated with books written by women (Homestead 2009). Middlebrow writing as practiced by women is associated with the reader’s empathy to characters they feel are “real,” which draws them deeply into the imagined world of the book (Radway 1997).

Middlebrow fiction is often marketed in a way that reinforces the approachability of the characters (Homestead 2009). This is certainly true of *Where the Heart Is* and its association with Oprah’s Book Club. For the dinner discussion of *Where the Heart Is*, Oprah chose to forgo the glamorous intimate dinner in her high-rise apartment that had been the backdrop of other book discussions in favor of a lunch at the counter of a local Wal-Mart (Hall 2008).

This reinforcement of the popular national appeal garnered by being selected by Oprah also makes *Where the Heart Is* a candidate for being a place-defining novel as defined by Shortridge (1991). Selection by Oprah’s Book Club gave the novel a wide national audience. All of Oprah’s selections spend several weeks on the New York

Times bestseller lists. *Where the Heart Is* spent thirty weeks on the list (Farr 2005). *Where the Heart Is* has a “strong regional presence” (Shortridge 1991, 282), small-town Oklahoma is a crucial part of the setting. The third and most difficult to gauge is the public’s receptivity of the novel. The fact that *Where the Heart Is* was well received enough that Twentieth Century Fox produced a movie based on it indicates that the story struck a chord with Americans that Hollywood believed would be marketable (Internet Movie Database n.d.b). *Where the Heart Is* spent five weeks as one of the top ten grossing films United States (Internet Movie Database n.d.a).

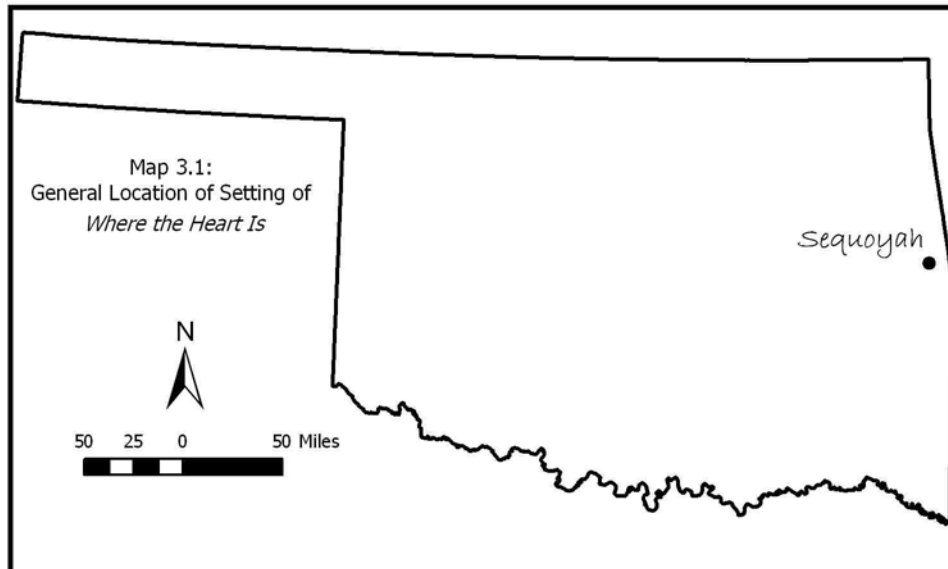
Billie Letts was born in 1938 in Tulsa, Oklahoma (Edgar et. al. 1996). She attended Northeastern State University in Tahlequah for two years before she married. At age thirty, she completed her bachelor’s degree at Southeastern Missouri State. She went on to get a master’s degree at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant, and spent most of her professional career working as an English teacher in that community (Chastian 2000, Vnuk 2009). That experience gave her insight into the structure of small-town Oklahoma, which became the topic of her two novels.

Letts was heavily influenced by Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In her 1995 novel *Where the Heart Is*, when Novalee goes into labor, she asks Forney to find a knife, commenting that "They put a knife under Rose of Sharon . . . when she was in labor. A knife . . . to cut the pain" (Letts 1995, 89). The novel also has much in common with the formative literary middlebrow novel of Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* and its heroine, Sabra Cravat, who in spite of being frequently abandoned by her husband, Yancey, transforms the early landscape of Oklahoma from wild prairie to an orderly replica of the cities in the south and Kansas that formed her idea of home (Kenaga 2003).

Now that the works of Billie Letts have been situated in the literary landscape, the remainder of this chapter uses the literary devices of narrative, metaphor, and iconography to explore place images of Oklahoma within the books. The main questions I address are as follows: and how can their situation be used to illuminate contemporary place images? What is their relationship to the people around them and what does this tell us about the environment in which they live? What,

if any, iconic imagery was used to enforce a sense of place?

Where the Heart Is



Where the Heart Is opens with seven-months-pregnant, seventeen-year-old Novalee Nation being abandoned in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart in Sequoyia, Oklahoma, by her boyfriend Willie Jack Pickens. Novalee and Willie Jack are moving across the country from Tennessee to California. Novalee views the move as a migration in search of a better life. She believes that at the end of the journey she and Willie Jack will have a house without wheels on the water where they will raise their child.

She dreamed of all kinds of houses—two-story houses, log cabins, condominiums, ranch houses—anything fixed to the ground. She had never lived in a place that didn't have wheels under it. She had lived in seven house trailers—one a double wide, a camping trailer, two mobile homes, a fifth-wheel, a burned Winnebago and a

*railroad car-part of a motel called the
Chattanooga Choo Choo. (Letts 1995,7)*

But Novalee's dream of a stable life is shattered when she is left homeless in Sequoyah, Oklahoma. On the day she is abandoned, she meets three people who each give her something of value which will enable her to survive and even thrive in her unexpected home.

The first person is Sister Husband, a white woman, who welcomes her and begins teaching her the meaning of home and family. The second is Moses Whitecotton, a black man, who teaches her the value of self-esteem and becomes her mentor as she begins to discover and explore her own talents. The third is Benny Goodluck, a Native American boy, who gives her a buckeye tree which acts as a catalyst starting her on her journey toward learning the skills she will need to become a part of the community and rooting her to the land.

One of the reasons Billie Letts chose to use Wal-Mart as a major setting in her book is because it is one of the few places where people of culturally diverse backgrounds can meet (Letts 1995). In small-town Oklahoma, where many of the businesses on Main Street are boarded up, the phrase "going to town" has been replaced by "going to Wal-Mart." Another reason Letts chose Wal-

Mart is that it has everything you would need to survive for an extended period of time on the premises (Letts 1995). When it becomes clear to Novalee that she has been abandoned, she squats in Wal-Mart for the next several weeks until her baby is born.

The buckeye tree becomes the key to Novalee's survival and a metaphor for her life. She remains isolated in the in Wal-Mart until the tree becomes ill. In her quest to save the tree, she begins the journey that ultimately saves her life. She goes to the library to research the disease destroying the tree, which introduces her to the value of education. Her research also introduces her to Forney Hull, who encourages her curiosity and supports her interest in further education. At the library, she learns that unless she plants the tree in a place that is well situated for its needs and allows it to grow roots, the tree will die. With Sister Husband's permission, Novalee plants the nearly dead tree in the flower bed at her trailer home and begins the process that integrates her into the community of Sequoyah.

The flower bed would have been shaded by the buckeye tree if it had had any leaves. The last one had fallen off a week after the tree was planted. But Novalee thought it still might

make it. She did not know why she thought that; it was a little less hardy than a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, but she had hope. (Letts 1995, 83)

Against the odds the tree survives, and as the tree takes root, so does Novalee. She gives birth to her child, gets a job, buys her first car, finds her vocation as a photographer, and starts attending college. When the trailer is destroyed by a tornado, Novalee and the tree both survive. After the tragedy, she is able to replace the trailer with her life-long dream, a house without wheels.

The tornado that destroys the trailer that Novalee lives in with Sister Husband takes Sister Husband from her as well; however, by that time Novalee has learned the lessons that Sister Husband has to impart to her. In the book, Sister Husband represents home and community. She is the first person to approach Novalee after she is abandoned. She welcomes Novalee to Sequoyah and invites her to visit her home. While Sister Husband is portrayed as devoutly Christian, she thinks that religion should be taken in manageable doses. She gives the Bible away one chapter at a time because, as she explains to Novalee:

"... Folks read too much of it, they get confused. Read a little and you just get a little confused. Read a lot and you're a lot

confused. And that's why I give out a chapter at a time. That way, folks can deal with their confusion as it comes. (Letts 1995, 19)

Novalee's mother, Momma Nell, sees Novalee on the news after she gives birth to her daughter, Americus, in Wal-Mart and comes to Sequoyah to check up on her. Novalee gives Momma Nell the money well-wishers have given her so she can secure a place for Novalee to live when she leaves the hospital. Momma Nell steals the money and leaves town. After her mother abandons Novalee at the hospital, Sister Husband takes her in and gives her a home.

She knew then that Momma Nell wasn't coming; knew she and the money were gone. But Novalee had no place to go... and so she waited. They were still there and straight up two o'clock when Sister Husband's Toyota came ricocheting up the curb and screeched to a stop. Like a shepherd coming for lost sheep, Sister rounded up Novalee and Americus, herded them into the covered wagon, then raced away, heading for safety... heading for home (Letts 1995, 110).

When Sister Husband is killed by the tornado, she leaves her estate to Novalee, which provides her with the money to build a home. Sister Husband has also helped Novalee find acceptance in a community that will help her achieve her goals. The following passage illustrates Novalee's integration into the community by that time:

...But it was a home, a home without wheels, a home fixed to the ground.

She had designed the house herself. Four rooms and a bath, and a deck that circled the buckeye tree. Some thought she'd never be able to build it for twenty-six thousand dollars, the money Sister had left her. She did though. But she had a lot of help.

Moses did the foundation work, Mr. Ortiz the framing. Benny Goodluck and his father laid brick; Forney and Mr. Sprock did the roofing. Mrs. Ortiz hung paper and Certain made curtains. (Letts 1995, 265)

Novalee is an iconic example of a concept Dunbar-Ortiz (1994) identifies as "special to God." Characters with this attribute are easily forgiven their transgressions. After weeks of living in Wal-Mart and borrowing what she needed to survive, Novalee's debt is forgiven and she is given a job at the store, which assists her on her journey to become self-reliant.

The second person that Novalee met on the day she came to Oklahoma was Moses Whitecotton. He is a photographer who shares his love of the art form with Novalee. The desire to improve her photographic skills is what first propels Novalee onto a college campus to attend a workshop in photography. As Novalee's skill at photography increases, so does her self-esteem.

While Novalee eventually becomes self-reliant, her path is not without difficulty. After giving birth to

her daughter Americus, Novalee receives hate mail from fundamentalist Christians condemning her for having the child outside of marriage. Later in the story, the child is kidnapped and abandoned in an outdoor nativity scene by a fundamentalist couple who tell the police that God told them to have the child baptized.

Violence in *Where the Heart Is* is perpetrated on women and children. Novalee's best friend, Lexie, walks in on her children being raped by her boyfriend, and when she attempts to defend them, he beats her so badly she is left permanently scarred. She relates her despair at the situation to Novalee:

"How did a man like Roger Briscoe find me? How did he find me and know he could do such a thing to me? To my kids?"

"What do you mean?"

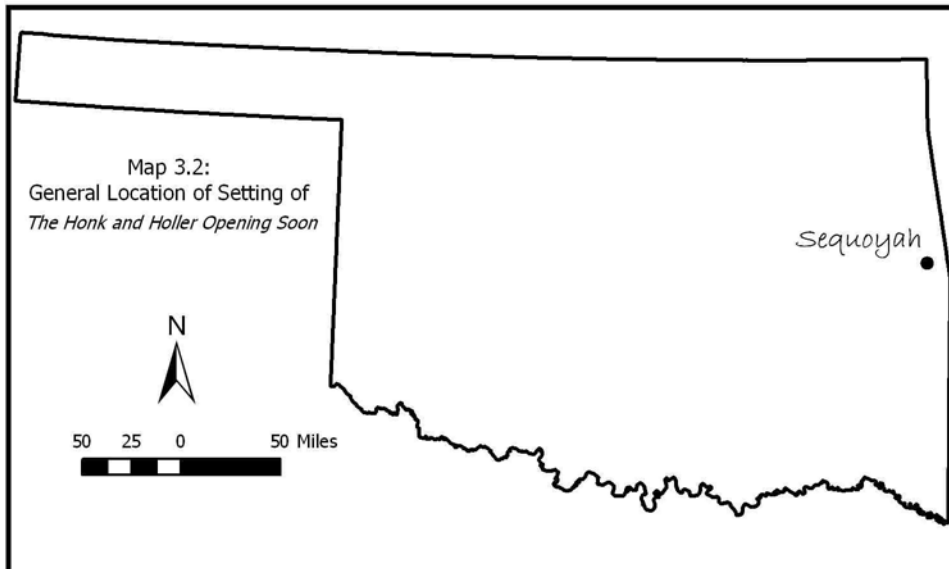
"He had to be looking for women like me, women with children, women alone. Women who were stupid." (Letts 1995, 290)

The violence against poor women and children underscores the perils of living on the margins. In Billie Letts's Oklahoma, limited resources make poor women vulnerable to exploitation by predators.

The story of Willy Jack continues in tandem to Novalee's as a foil to the progress she makes in building a life for herself. Willy Jack does not make it to

California until years later. First he ends up going to prison in New Mexico. For a brief period after he is released from prison, Willie Jack becomes a successful country western musician. The song he wrote was about feeling Americus's heart beat the day he abandoned Novalee. But his failure to form bonds eventually leaves him homeless, the opposite of Novalee.

The Honk and Holler Opening Soon



The Honk and Holler Opening Soon is set again in Sequoyah, OK, primarily in the diner from which the book gets its title. Caney Paxton, the main character, is an agoraphobe confined to a wheelchair. He is unable to leave the confines of the diner where he lives and works. At the start of the book, which is set in 1985, he has been in the dinner for twelve years. Caney is a Vietnam

veteran who became paralyzed in a fall from a helicopter during the war.

Molly O, who took him in as a child after the death of his aunt, is his waitress and caretaker. Caney and Molly O's safe, if somewhat stagnant world is turned upside down by the arrival of two rather odd characters at the beginning of the story.

The first to arrive is Vena Takes Horse. We first see Vena hitchhiking across country, and she arrives in Sequoyah aboard an eighteen wheeler:

...Before the rig had even stopped rolling the passenger door of the cab opened and a woman in a short yellow dress, a faded jean jacket and red cowboy boots climbed out

*. . .
Caney had known her kind, could tell what she had been... the girl in third grade who went without eating rather than line up for free lunches, the one who stood alone in the corner of the playground, staring down an alley at something no one else could never see...the girl who at fourteen smoked in the bathroom and inked H-A-T-E into the back of her hand...the girl in high school who had drifted away long before senior pictures ever made it into the yearbook. (Letts 1998, 24-25)*

Caney hires Vena to be a carhop. When he does that, he starts on the path to healing. It is Vena who persuades him to leave the restaurant for the first time in twelve years.

The second person who arrives unexpectedly is Bui Khanh. Bui Khanh is a refugee from Vietnam who has come to the United States in search of a better life for his family. He is working to save enough money to bring his wife to America. Caney hires him to cook.

Both Bui and Vena are initially homeless. Vena lives in a bus on the back of Caney's property until threat of rape makes her take Caney up on his offer to sleep on his couch. Bui squats in the basement of an AME Church until he is shot.

Bui Khanh is shot by a white man who is immediately killed by Caney's gun-shy horse. As Bui recovers, other characters of diverse cultural backgrounds compete for the privilege of caring for him during his convalescence.

The story is also an example of community, as diverse citizens of Sequoyah come together to complete the restoration of the bus Bui was working on when he was shot. He was trying to fix the bus so that he could shuttle members of the AME congregation around on Sunday to thank them for allowing him to stay in the church:

But much of the talk following Sam's funeral took place out back where a half dozen men, black and white, were working to restore Caney's bus.

Reverend Thomas, Brother Junior and Sister Grace's husband, Jennings Washington, had

brought parts pirated from their wrecked Sunday bus, while the others—Bilbo, Soldier and Hooks contributed some tools, a couple of good tires and a steering wheel Quinton had found at the junk yard north of town.

But they had all brought their enthusiasm for helping Bui repair the bus, a project they'd learned about while they waited together at the hospital Monday night. (Letts 1998, 245)

Conclusion

Billie Letts's books leave us with several lasting place images of Oklahoma. The first is the role of Wal-Mart in small-town life. For inhabitants of Billie Letts's fictional town of Sequoyah, Oklahoma, Wal-Mart plays a central role. Babies are born there and life-altering confrontations take place within its doors. It overshadows even the church as a destination and meeting place, perhaps because of its secular appeal. Billie Letts has the following to say about her use of Wal-Mart:

Many small towns in our part of the country have central meeting places, the social centers of the towns—churches, high school gyms, football fields, and increasingly so, the Wal-Mart store, which has changed not only business on main street, but the very rhythms and movements of these communities. So, for my story, the Wal-Mart in Sequoyah Oklahoma was the most likely place for Novalee to encounter Sister Husband, a white woman, Moses Whitecotton, a black man, and Benny Goodluck, a Native American boy. (Letts 1995, 362)

The second image is of towns inhabited by poor uneducated single mothers struggling to make decent lives

for themselves and their children. In an interview in the back of the edition of *Where the Heart Is* printed for Oprah's Book Club, Billie Letts says the following about her character Novalee Nation:

Oklahoma has a high rate of teenage pregnancy. As a result, we have many single mothers, either recently divorced or never married. I've known many of these young women—students in my college classes. They often hold marginal jobs as waitresses, motel maids, nursing home workers. They are poor and uneducated, often victims of alcoholic, redneck, small town he-men. But these are Ma Joad's children—they keep coming, keep trying. And Novalee Nation is among the best of them.
(Letts 1995, 362)

Related to this image is the exploitation of these young women at the hands of predators. In *Where the Heart Is*, Lexie Coop's family is devastated by a pedophile. In *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, Vena Takes Horse must be constantly vigilant to avoid attack by Sam Keller.

Both religion and country music are identified as characteristics of Oklahoma culture by Stein and Hill (1993). In Letts's novels, both of these traits are viewed with an element of suspicion. The characters associated with county music are not reliable. Willy Jack abandons Novalee. Brenda, Molly O's daughter, repeatedly steals money from her mother and runs away from home.

Likewise, Christianity receives mixed reviews. The negative portrayal of Christianity is of fundamentalists, who believe their religion gives them the right to judge other and even do criminal acts in the name of God. The most positive portrayal of Christianity is in *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, when the congregation of the AME church takes Bui Kahn in after he has been shot. The book indicates that Christianity in moderation is good; after all, Sister Husband hands out the Bible one chapter at a time.

In Billie Letts's novels, concepts of community and family are intertwined. The characters in the novels do not have traditional families. Their families become the people they live with and watch out for. They also pull together in times of hardship, like the shooting of Bui Kahn or the tornado that took Sister Husband's life.

As is expected in the middlebrow novel, the main characters have resolved enough of their issues by the end to live more fulfilled lives. This reinforces the cultural characteristic of up-from-the-dust self reliance identified by Dunbar Ortiz (1994). Novalee can support herself and her daughter and is willing to consider a relationship with Forney. Caney is able to leave the

confines of his diner and Vena can stay in one place. They have all managed to transform Oklahoma into a home.

The image of Oklahoma projected by these two books still hearkens back to the images imprinted on the collective consciousness by *The Grapes of Wrath*. Poverty, homelessness, fundamentalism, racism, and an anti-intellectualism typified by country music are used to portray Oklahoma, as are community support, family, Christian kindness, and a self-reliant toughness which all enable the state's residents to survive hardship and tragedy with grace.

Chapter 4 Mysterious Oklahoma

This chapter uses mystery novels to explore place images of Oklahoma. While there are several Oklahoma writers who are well known for writing mysteries, only two mystery authors won the Oklahoma Book Award during the study period of 1990 to 2008 with stories set in Oklahoma: Eve K. Sandstrom won for *The Down Home Heifer Heist* in 1994, and M. K. Preston won with the *Song of the Bones* in 2004 (Oklahoma Department of Libraries n.d.a).

In his book *Places for Dead Bodies*, Gary Hausladen identifies four literary devices employed by writers in the mystery genre that are helpful to geographers using literature to explore place (Hausladen 2000). These devices are narrative description, dialogue, iconography, and attention to detail. Description is more revealing than narrative structure for exploring mysteries, as books written in this genre follow a fairly standard plot line that begins when the body drops and ends when the perpetrator of the crime is unmasked and life is restored to normal (Jackson 2002).

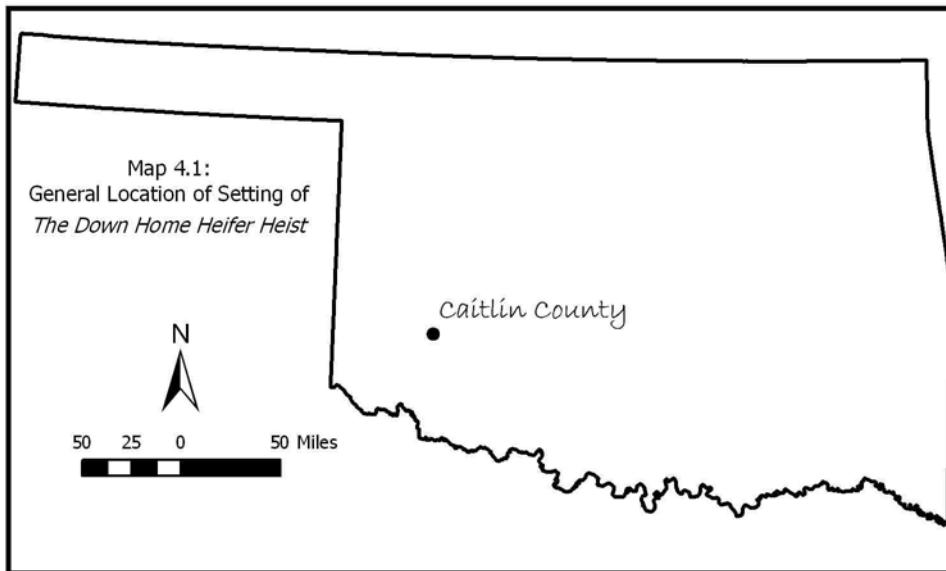
Although mysteries follow a fairly structured plot trajectory, the issues addressed by novels with female protagonists often differ from the themes in traditional

male hard-boiled detective fiction. While there is a value placed on self-reliance in these books, communal values are often embraced over individualism. The violence is also often less graphic (Pepper 2000).

Because mystery novels are often written in series, they provide the reader an opportunity to learn about how regional characteristics and the social interactions of the characters who inhabit the place where the novel is set change over time (Kadonaga 1998). With each book, the reader becomes more emotionally attached to the characters in the stories as they are developed more fully with each novel. Series books are akin to developing a friendship over time. Both of the novels which won the Oklahoma Book Award are part of larger series (Oklahoma Department of Libraries n.d.a).

The remainder of this chapter uses description, metaphors, and iconography to identify place-images of Oklahoma in the mystery series written by Eve Sandstrom and M.K. Preston.

Death on the Range: Eve K. Sandstrom's Death Down Home Series



As indicated above, the 1994 winner of the Oklahoma Book Award was Eve Sandstrom's *The Down Home Heifer Heist*. This is the third book in a mystery series set in fictional Caitlin County in southwestern Oklahoma, which focuses on the characters of Nicky Titus and her husband Sam. Sandstrom is a native Oklahoman who continues to make her home in the state. She worked as a reporter, columnist, and editor for the *Lawton Constitution* for more than 25 years before she retired to pursue writing fulltime. She is very familiar with the locality in which she has set her novels (Sandstrom n.d.).

The heroine of the Down Home series, Nicky Titus, is an outsider who grew up on various army bases around the world. She moved to Oklahoma with her husband Sam

when his father was permanently disabled and his brother murdered. When Nicky married Sam, the couple had no intention of making a home in southwestern Oklahoma. He was a member of the military police and she was a professional photographer. The move to Oklahoma was precipitated by a strong sense of familial responsibility. Nicky Titus's vantage point as an outsider allows Sandstrom to describe the world which her characters inhabit in a more detailed way than she might otherwise be able to. The reader comes to understand the social structures of southwestern Oklahoma as Nicky learns her place in them.

The Down Home Heifer Heist uses ranching as an integral part of the mystery the novel seeks to unravel. As with many mystery novels, the place is critical to the story (Geherin 2008). This is certainly true as the motivation for the murder that initiates the mystery is an interrupted cattle theft. Sandstrom's vivid descriptions of the ranching community through Nicky's eyes allow us to better understand the world which the Tituses inhabit.

The reader is introduced to the economic intricacies of modern ranching culture through the depiction of the clothing of the murder victim, Joe Pilkington.

Joe Pilkington had been dressed for death in hunter's insulated coveralls of glowing orange.

His colorful garb was a symptom of his ranch's position on the economic edge. Most ranchers wore insulated coveralls of brown or tan to work in the fields. Orange was reserved for hunting, Joe had probably been forced to make his hunting rig do double duty because he couldn't afford two sets of coveralls.

(Sandstrom 1993c, 2)

His murder took place as he returned home early from his night job at a machine shop in a neighboring town, not from a hunting trip. As the book progresses, it becomes clear that for Joe Pilkington, the job in town was secondary to the running of his ranch. It was Joe's need to care for his cattle in the face of an impending snow storm that sent him home early from his job and into the path of the cattle thieves who murdered him. That the running of ranch takes precedence over other aspects of his life is underscored by his wife's resentment of Joe's commitment to the ranching life. Her response, when asked if she intended to hold Joe's funeral service in the neighboring city of Lawton rather than in the town of

Holton, the county seat of Caitlin County, gives evidence of Athena Pilkington's attitude toward ranching.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Pilkington's voice grew shrill. "I couldn't do that to Joe! He loved Holton! That dump! The goddamn farm! The mud and the dust and the dirt. He rolled in it like a hog! He didn't care what I thought, where I'd like to live! He didn't care if the gossips in that stupid Podunk town closed my business up. He didn't mind me having to drive sixty miles to work!"

... "He didn't care if we never saw each other, if I was gone all day and he was gone all night! And weekends he was out on his shitty tractor! Oh, no! I couldn't have Joe's funeral in Lawton. It will be right here in Holton, America! The center of his teeny-weeny little universe! I wouldn't inconvenience Joe's fellow farmers, just because he died! Those people were a lot more important to him than I was." (Sandstrom 1993c, 48)

Not all ranchers in the area live on the brink of bankruptcy like Joe Pilkington. Joe's neighbor, Dr. Franklin Mullins, is quite prosperous. Mullins is what Nicky's father-in-law, Big Sam, refers to contemptuously as a Rexall Rancher, although he refrains from calling Mullins that because they are close neighbors and it would not be polite. For Mullins, the ranch is a hobby enabled by his successful career in Oklahoma City. He lives in the city the majority of the week and spends his weekends on the ranch. The high-paying city job allows him to hire experienced people to do the day-to-day work

on the ranch. A major focus of his interest in the ranch is to raise perfectly conformed cattle to compete in livestock shows.

Big Sam Titus, Nicky's father-in-law, is one of a handful of ranchers that is able to make a good living for his family on the land, primarily because he has a very large operation. Even successful full-time ranchers frequently hold positions outside the ranch. Big Sam was a county commissioner prior to his son's appointment to fill a partial term as sheriff. He also holds a position as a member of the Board of Directors of the Sooner State Cattle Growers' Association.

Sam Titus, Nicky's husband, holds a job outside the ranch as his primary vocation; however, family obligations keep him connected to the ranch. He left the ranch to pursue a career in the military, returning to the ranch only when his father was disabled and could no longer manage the ranch on his own. Big Sam would like his son to give up his job in law enforcement and become a full partner in the ranch.

Both of the Titus men represent archetypical characters. Though disabled, Big Sam is the quintessential rugged individualist who makes his living

on the land through determination. His family lost its land during the Great Depression, but he managed to buy it back and through frugal management expand his holdings to more than 3000 acres. Sam Titus is the reluctant prodigal son. He came home to help his family when they were in trouble, but he keeps a connection with his desire for a life other than ranching by serving as the local county sheriff.

In literature, women's characters are frequently linked metaphorically to the land; however, the women's characters in *The Down Home Heifer Heist* are less tied to the land than are the men's characters. The women all have jobs outside the ranch that they value and that help contribute to the well-being of the household. Their attitude toward ranching indicates whether they are perceived positively or not. Nicky understands that her husband's sense of duty towards his family and the Titus ranch are a core part of his identity, which makes her a positive character. Her attitude towards ranching is contrasted to that of Athena Pilkington, the widow of Joe Pilkington. Athena hated living on the ranch and resented the time that Joe spent working the ranch and his job in town to support the ranch. For women, the key

to trait for living comfortably in rural southwestern Oklahoma is the understanding of the centrality of the ranch in the life of the rural Oklahoma family. They must also have the flexibility to carve out a place for themselves in it without conflict. Instead of becoming bitter about the change from being an officer's wife stationed in Europe to being a sheriff's wife in rural Oklahoma, Nicky adapts by becoming a photographer of southwestern landscapes and by an occasional crime scene photograph for the sheriff's office. The following passage describing Nicky photographing a pond in the Wichita Mountains illustrates her feeling about the landscape:

It was equally beautiful from this side, almost greeting-card pretty, a blanket of wild flowers covered the foreground, and on this side of a big pool of open water was surrounded by patches of water lilies. Across the lake, the vegetation grew in tiers. Cattails stood along the bank, silhouetted against the line of low willows, which in turn stood against tall trees. The mountain loomed behind the trees and those dramatic clouds sailed above the mountain. There was hardly any way I could miss the composition. (Sandstrom 1993a, 172)

Rural life in *The Down Home Heifer Heist* is not idealized. Most of the characters are clearly living on the margins; however, ranching is a way of life that they value and are willing to sacrifice to maintain. The

mystery at the heart of the novel is set in motion when one of the characters, Buck, violates the rules of rural society in a way that jeopardizes his position on the Mullins Ranch. He allows a prize calf to die by failing to treat it for a common ailment, then covers up the death of the animal by dyeing the coat of a flawed animal to impersonate the dead calf. Dyeing the coat of a show calf is against the rules in livestock shows. Buck's ruse is discovered by an outsider who blackmails him to use his position in the Sooner Cattle Grower's Association to scout for cattle to steal. This transgression makes him vulnerable to additional corruption, and after Joe Pilkington comes home to discover Buck and his accomplices preparing to steal his cattle, the bodies start to pile up.

Buck's background is impeccable by rural Oklahoma standards with the exception that his father lost the family ranch and moved out of the county. Lack of ties to the land and his ambition to acquire land of his own make Buck vulnerable to the influence of the outsider with a scheme to make money fast:

There was nothing wrong with his education-- the master's degree in farm and ranch management. His background was respectable conservative ranching family; he

worked his way through college. He had old-fashioned courtly manners, the yes ma'am was rare in a man in his early thirties.

Buck was also openly ambitious. He worked two jobs, he'd told Sam, to save money toward buying his own place some day. He wanted to get into breeding registered cattle on his own. Big Sam respected Buck. "He's got the know-how and the want-to," he'd told me. Then he added his highest accolade: "He's a hard worker."
(Sandstrom 1993c, 13)

In addition to landlessness, the lack of family ties is generally portrayed negatively in Eve Sandstrom's novels. Buck has no family living in southwestern Oklahoma, nor does he have a wife or girlfriend. While he expresses an interest in dating Nicky's sister-in-law Brenda, Brenda feels that Buck's interest is less in her and more in gaining an opportunity to become a partner in the Titus ranch. Before his exposure as a thief and murderer, Brenda's family would have had no objection to him, as his education would have made him an asset to the ranch. Buck's failure to become integrated into the traditional family structure is another transgression against the rural values portrayed in the book.

Family is central to the social structure of southwestern Oklahoma. Even though he has no affinity for ranching, Nicky's husband Sam returns home and stays to assist in running the ranch when his father is

severely injured. Sam's placing the needs of family above his own is contrasted to Buck, who has extensive knowledge of ranching, but without the responsibility of family the connection does not tie him tightly enough to the community to keep him from violating its rules. This distrust of the well-educated single is not limited to Buck. The villain in the first book of the Down Home series was a single woman with a Ph.D. in ornithology. In her case, economic hardship played a vital role in making her vulnerable to decisions that lead her outside the law. As with Buck, on the surface she seemed tightly grounded in the community. She was first introduced while visiting Big Sam in the hospital where he is in a coma. A coma, we learned later, that she put him in when he discovered her plot to swindle an oil company. It is not considered strange that she would be in the room bringing a pie to comfort the anxious family--in fact, it is a community duty that people are accustomed to seeing her provide.

Johnny Garcia, the Titus ranch hand that Buck tries to frame for the murders, is single at the beginning the book but winds up being the person with whom Brenda is actually interested in having a relationship. At the end

of the book, they are going to marry and move to Stillwater to go to college.

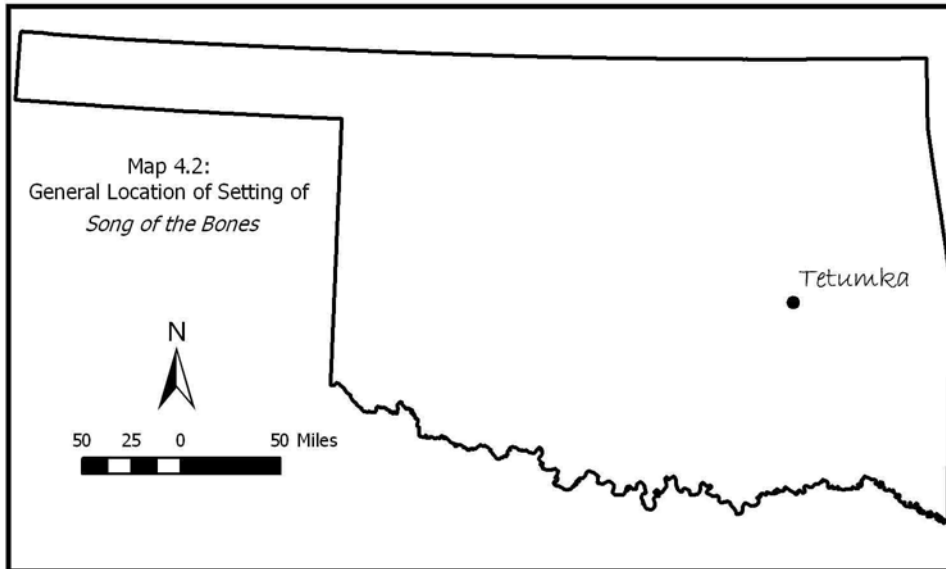
The most vulnerable characters in this book are those without financial resources. Daniel Bibb concocted the rustling scheme to get money to finance the start of a music career. Buck is initially resistant to the idea of stealing cattle, but eventually joins in the scheme not only because Daniel is blackmailing him, but to acquire the money to buy land.

The story in *The Down Home Heifer Heist* is more dominated by masculine characters than the previous books in the Down Home series. The first book of the series *Death Down Home*, focuses on the Titus family following the attack that incapacitated Big Sam. The second book, *The Devil Down Home*, focuses on Nicky's interaction with the women of the community. *The Down Home Heifer Heist* is the book that won the prize, however, which seems to indicate the masculine elements of southwestern Oklahoma's ranching life resonate more with the people who select the winner of the Oklahoma Book Award than do the Maid and Matrons Society of *The Devil Down Home*.

While Eve Sandstrom's writing style is light on metaphors, the straightforward narrative form underscores

the straight-talking western character of Caitlin County. The people in her books say what they mean and do what they say they will.

Murder in a Small Town: the Oklahoma of M.K. Preston's Chantalene Morrel



Ten years after *The Down Home Heifer Heist* took the prize, *Song of the Bones*, by M.K. Preston, won the Oklahoma Book Award for fiction in 2004. M.K. Preston grew up on a wheat farm in central Oklahoma and currently lives in Edmond. In addition to winning the Oklahoma Book Award, *Song of the Bones* won the Mary Higgins Clark Award (Preston n.d.).

Song of the Bones is set in Tetumka, a very small wheat farming community in southeastern Oklahoma. As

Preston describes it, Tetumka is more a wide place in the road than a legitimate town:

Chantalene stood on the crumbled sidewalk in front of their office while Drew climbed into his red pickup and drove away. Half a century ago, in Tetumka's more prosperous history, their office had been a creamery. Her eyes scanned the other two establishments that now made up the main drag: the post office, and the general store. She wasn't given to sighing but she sighed now, awash in that left behind feeling she always got when Drew went to town without her if you could call El Rio a real town. It was the county seat, but it was still rural Oklahoma. (Preston 2004b, 20)

None of the characters in *Song of the Bones* live in the actual town. They all live in farms that surround the community. The marginality of the location is reinforced by the time it takes to get the police to respond when the proprietor of the general store is murdered. It takes hours for the police and medical examiner to arrive and claim the body.

The heroine of *Song of the Bones*, Chantalene Morrell, juggles three jobs: legal assistant to a tax attorney, cultivating a truck farm, and attending college at East Central University in Ada while doing investigative work for her friend on the side. The primary plot in *Song of the Bones* revolves around determining who Billie Ray Patterson really is. Initially

Drew and Chantalene were engaged by Thelma Patterson to find the husband who had abandoned her more than twenty years before so she can remove him from the deed to her land and enter into an oil lease. In response to an advertisement Drew placed in a Tulsa newspaper, Billie Ray comes to Tetumka to find out why they are searching for him.

The narrative arc of the story borrows from the legend of Martin Guerre, which is about a French soldier who impersonates another soldier so well that he is accepted by the man's wife and family. As Billy Ray is waiting to talk to Drew about why Drew is searching for him, a farmer who owns land adjacent to Thelma's comes into the law office and recognizes him as Billy Ray. But after Thelma meets him and allows him to stay at her house, she determines that this is not the man she married. Chantalene believes Thelma, while Drew does not, which adds to tension in their relationship.

The disagreement over the legitimacy of Billy Ray's identity is not the main reason for the tension between Drew and Chantalene, however. Drew wants to marry and have children, while Chantalene is not ready to settle down. She has lived her whole life in rural Oklahoma and

wants to live somewhere else for while. She has also always felt like an outsider in the community in which they live. Drew lived in New York City for 10 years after he went to college, much to his father's dismay. Farmers' sons are supposed to take over the family farm, not become lawyers and live in New York City. Drew's decision to leave left him estranged from his father. He has moved back to Oklahoma to remodel the farm house several years after his father's death. Like the younger Sam Titus, Drew is the prodigal son returned home.

Chantalene's status within the community is much more ambiguous than Nicky Titus's is in the Down Home series. Although Nicky is an outsider, she is granted immediate legitimacy based on her marriage to Sam. Although Chantalene grew up in the community, her father was believed to have committed suicide after raping a disabled girl, so she grew up in foster care without the benefit of family, which caused the community to look at her with a certain degree of suspicion. Chantalene's relationship with Drew grants her a new-found respectability in the tight-knit community that views those who are different with suspicion. The exchange below illustrates her change in status.

... "Hey! Somebody want to take my money?"

One of the ditto brothers looked up from his cards. "Hi Chantalene just help yourself. Register's open."

Amazing how much respectability she'd earned by working with Drew. Two years ago, these fellows would've kept a suspicious eye on her while she was in the store. Now they ignored her, like anybody else. It was disappointing. (Preston 2004b, 67)

Respectability is not necessarily tied to gender, as the following dialogue among card-playing farmers at the general store illustrates:

"I can't believe she took him back," one of the brothers said.

"Why not? Would you want to live out there by yourself the rest your life, if you was her? Keepin' up an old place like that's a lot of work, and Thelma's no spring chicken anymore."

"She always did all right. Besides, unless Billy Ray's changed, he's likely to be a lot more work for instead less."

"Yeah, but he's still look good-looking dog," Grant drawled and her feet will stay warm at night a cold winter night." (Preston 2004b, 67)

Thelma Patterson is recognized be a capable farmer who does not need a man to take care of her; she has retired from farming to become the postmistress of the small community. She is also an accomplished electrician who rewired Drew's house when he moved back to Oklahoma.

The typical western male icon does make a cameo in Preston's book. In her quest to determine if Billie Ray is who he says he is, Chantalene receives the assistance

of a retired sheriff from Las Padres, New Mexico, named Watson Wilson. Watson Wilson is an iconic western sheriff. However, Chantalene is not a character that needs a man to rescue her. She is a very self-reliant woman, an iconic example of the modern independent woman. At the conclusion of the mystery, Chantalene saves herself and Thelma from the man who had kidnapped and planned to kill them. In an interesting juxtaposition, Preston has the minor character of the sheriff from New Mexico waiting with the Oklahoma law enforcement officers who are searching Thelma's house for clues to her disappearance. When Thelma and Chantalene return on their own after escaping the murderer, he greets Chantalene with approval in a metaphorical passing of the torch from the old West to the new West.

Conclusion

While the classic western male icon of the strong independent cowboy personified in modern imagery by the Marlboro Man is present in both series, the most fully developed example is either in or nearing retirement. In the Down Home series, Big Sam Titus is the iconic western male who made his living from the land while supporting his family. Big Sam is a very traditional western man

that his neighbors can depend upon in a crisis and whose advice they solicit.

The next generation of men in the books is conflicted about whether to take up the mantle of their fathers. In the case of Sam Titus, he has no desire to become a rancher, but he does have strong sense of familial responsibility tying him to southwestern Oklahoma. Drew Sanders in the Chantalene Morrell series came back to Oklahoma of his own accord, but remains somewhat ambivalent about the prospect of continuing as a farmer." . . . farming is not as noble as I remembered it. And it's a hell of a lot less profitable." (Preston 2004b, 252)

The women in the books are portrayed as strong and independent. They have complex relationships with the men in their lives and do not need them to rescue them, but they are happy when the men are there to support them when the adventure is over.

At the end of these books it is not clear whether either heroine will stay in Oklahoma or move to a place where more economic opportunities are available. Community and family ties make rural Oklahoma an attractive place to live; however, limited economic

opportunities make the communities difficult to make a living in. *Song of the Bones* ends with Drew and Chantalene sitting on the porch of her house discussing whether they will move to New York where Drew has a job offer or stay in Oklahoma.

She smiled, her eyes still closed. "I can't think about that today Rhett," she said in her best southern drawl. "Let's think about it tomorrow."

Drew's hand found hers and he resumed his rocking.

"No problem." (Preston 2004b, 253)

Chapter 5
Strange Business: (Re)Writing Oklahoma's History

There are voices in the earth here, telling truths in old stories. Go down in the hidden places by the waters, listen: you will hear them, buried in the sand and clay. Walk west in the tall grass prairie; you'll hear whispering in the bluestem. Stand here, on the ragged range of a mountain in southeastern corner; you can hear the sound rising on the south wind, sifting in the dust through the crowns of the cedars: stories told in old voices, in the pulse of bloodmemory; sung in the hot earth of the ceaseless thrum of locusts and nightbirds whillowing, beneath the faint rattle of gourd shells. One story they tell is about longing, for this is a place of homesickness. The land has become home now, and so the very core of this land of sorrow. You can hear it longing for the old dream of itself. Like this continent. This country. Oklahoma. The very sound of it is home. (Askew 1997, 1)

Rilla Askew opens her novel, *The Mercy Seat*, with the passage above. Askew is one of the most prolific and frequently honored contemporary writers whose work uses Oklahoma as its setting. While Billie Letts's stories focus upon contemporary society, Rilla Askew's novels explore the uncomfortable aspects of Oklahoma's past. Her works actively interrogate the traditional ideas of Oklahoma's past as understood through Manifest Destiny and the novels of John Steinbeck with alternative narratives of Oklahoma's settlement and early history.

Askew is not the only author who has undertaken the production of a more complex historical narrative as a project. Contemporary historical novels are frequently much more complicated than a nostalgic journey through a linear past. According to Wallace, they are "a complex engagement with the ways in which representations of history change over time and their relations to the structures of power" (Wallace 2005, 204). Wallace further explains the point of view of the contemporary historical novel as follows:

The novels of the 1990s, like those of the 1980s, contest the idea of a single unitary or linear history. They emphasize the subjective, fragmentary nature of historical knowledge through the rewritings of canonical texts, through multiple or divided narrators, fragmentary or contradictory narratives, and disruptions of linear chronology. (Wallace 2005, 204)

Women writers of the contemporary historical novel frequently use many points of view to narrate the story and have a tendency to experiment with the flow of time in ways that call into question the fixity of historical truth.

In a sense, it is by interrogating the male-centered past's treatment of women at the same time as seeking to undermine the "fixed" or "truthful" nature of the historical narrative itself that women can create their "own"

(counter)histories. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2005, 3)

This trend of contemporary fiction authors writing complicated historical narratives provides a space for the present to interact with past. These writers produce history with a modern eye that can tell stories that were not valued in the past and share the project of “problematizing the very nature of the authored and authorized character of historical narrative” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2004, 138).

Author Rilla Askew was born in the Sans Bois Mountains and grew up in Bartlesville. She has a B.F. A. in theater performance from the University of Tulsa and an M.F.A in creative writing from Brooklyn College. She has taught writing at Syracuse University, the University of Central Oklahoma, Brooklyn College, and the University of Oklahoma. She splits her time between the Catskills in New York and Oklahoma (Askew n.d). Her books are grounded deeply in the Oklahoma landscape and character, which she seeks to problematize and provide depth not found in other writings about the state. In an interview, she said the following about the character of Oklahoma women who have their roots in southern culture:

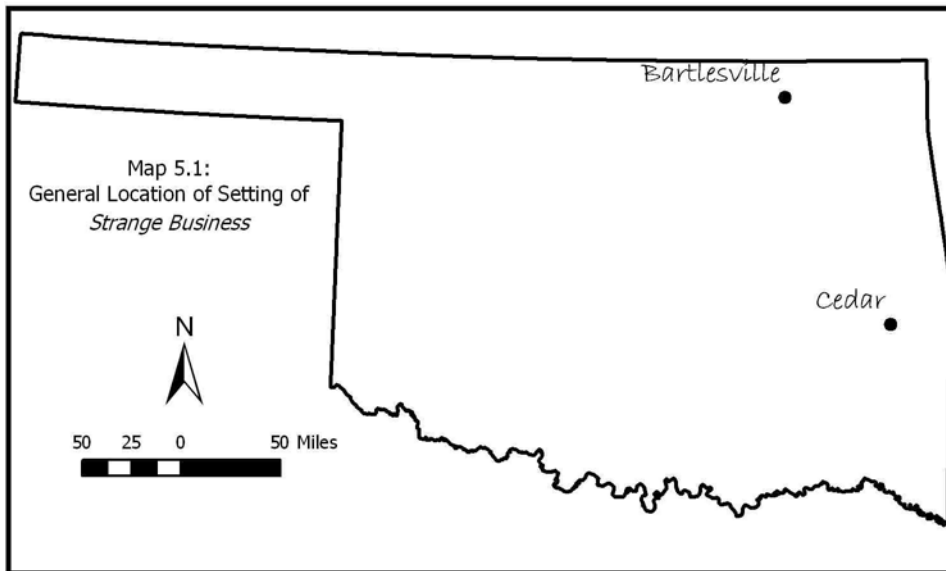
There is a deep impulse to help within us and a great sweetness, "a niceness," if you will. Now how deep that goes is another question. There's a certain way of being self-effacing and helpful that is genuine and that at the same time has its dangers for the woman herself, because it keeps her from being her fullest, truest self.

I deeply admire Oklahoma women and the Oklahoma female character, but there's something I distrust about the niceness. I think that it's because I own it myself and having it was a part of my negating my intellect, my sense of myself as an artist. (Askew n.d.)

Rilla Askew writes complicated stories about complicated characters to which the word "nice" almost never applies.

The remainder of this chapter examines the narratives, metaphors, description, and iconography in Rilla Askew's novels. It explores how the characters came to be in Oklahoma, how they interact with others in the Oklahoma Askew constructs, and, finally, it examines themes which Askew uses to inform her narrative.

Strange Business



Rilla Askew first won the Oklahoma Book Award in 1993 for her collection of short stories entitled *Strange Business*. While it does not attempt to re-inscribe the narrative of major historical eras as her later books do, it uses the form of short stories to describe events from multiple points of view. The stories shift back and forth between Bartlesville and the small town of Cedar in southeastern Oklahoma. In each of the stories, the main characters come to recognize something about themselves that surprises or makes them uncomfortable. All of the stories, except for the first, "The Killing Blanket," are set in the late Twentieth Century, starting in 1961 and ending in 1986. "The Killing Blanket" won the O Henry Award for short fiction in 1993.

The first story, "The Killing Blanket," is set in 1892 and tells the story of Silan Lewis, who is executed for assassinating a fellow Choctaw. He killed the man during what he believed to be an uprising against the elements of the tribe that were supporting the allotment of Choctaw land. He is executed by his friend Sheriff Tecumseh Moore.

... My grandfather knew then that he knelt on the death blanket with his killing hand on his friend's mouth because the Choctaw had not known how to turn back that good trick of the white man. They hadn't known how to keep him from turning the people against themselves.

Not long after the death of Silan Lewis the United States government passed a law allowing allotments and carved up the Nation. Not too long after that the land was all gone out of people's hands. Like some of 'em said, there wasn't any choice anyhow.

Well this story's an old one.

It happened a long time ago.

Back when our words of okla humma called us red people and had not yet turned over to mean the white man's land. (Askew 1992, 8)

The second story, "Ways without Words," is set in 1961 and is told from the perspective of young children. It focuses on the rite of passage encapsulated in the children's being able to approach a disabled man without fear. The uncomfortable truth in the story is that a small town can turn on you in a heartbeat. When Hamp, the crippled man, is rumored to have attempted to assault a

woman, the town turns on him. He is left in total isolation without really knowing why. No one ever confronts him. It is never made clear in the story whether the accusations were substantiated or not: the rumor is enough to destroy his life.

The story "In the Town of Ramona" explores the feelings elicited by a first date in a small town. As the main character, fifteen-year-old Lyla Mae, starts to get comfortable with the boy's his arm around her waist, she looks around at the crowd at a local baseball game and has a realization.

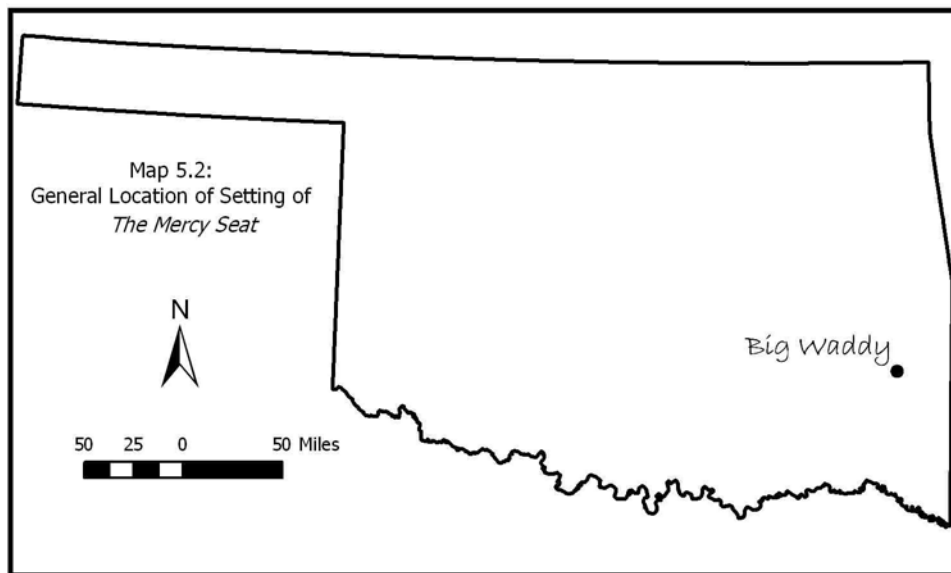
... There is no way to shake off the feeling that she knew these people. That she'd known them all her life.

It wasn't just the familiar color of their skins and eyes and hair, or the way the women wore their skirts too long and their hair in styles that should have disappeared in the fifties. It wasn't that any man or boy down that long row could have changed places with anyone for daddy's uncles and cousins who still lived at Cedar. Or that her daddy's hometown—any Okie small town she'd ever been through, in fact, held a population of people exactly like these, lounging in front of the courthouse, sitting in their pickups at the Sonic Drive-In.

It was something different, something cold and troublesome, like watching a person come toward you from the other side of the dark window, and then, when you get close, finding out it wasn't somebody else at all, but just yourself coming toward you. Just your own common reflection. (Askew 1992, 49)

Lyla Mae makes the boy take her home early from the date and never goes out with him again. She has no desire to embrace the future she sees reflected in her fellow Okies.

The Mercy Seat



Rilla Askew's second book and first novel, *The Mercy Seat*, is a modern version of the tale of Cain and Abel set in Indian Territory in the late 1800s. *The Mercy Seat* is an alternative history of the settlement of Oklahoma. The title, *The Mercy Seat*, comes from the book of Exodus. The mercy seat sat on top of the Ark of the Covenant. Every year the high priest would sprinkle sacrificial blood on it to remove the guilt of the sins of the people. In this story, the Biblical Cain and Able are the brothers Lafayette (Fayette) and John Lodi. They flee

from Kentucky to Indian Territory in the middle of the night with their families to avoid prosecution for patent infringement. John is a master blacksmith and gunsmith who, at the urging of his brother Fayette, fabricated a copy of a very rare gun. They're going to Indian Territory because they believe that they will be outside the reach of the law there.

John's wife, Demaris, is violently opposed to the move to Indian Territory. As they go west, she becomes angrier and more distant. In Arkansas she falls ill, so John Lodi's family stops to give her time to heal. Fayette and his family continue on to Indian Territory without them. Demaris represents traditional settled values and Western civilization:

Your mama was married in a dress of white linen and there were 73 guests at her wedding, and on the night we all left Kentucky, when she had to leave behind the cherry chifforobe her brother Neely made her as a wedding present, it was another aspect that helped crush her heart.
(Askew 1997, 57)

Demaris dies in Arkansas rather than set foot in Indian Territory. After she dies, the Lodis continue their journey to Indian Territory.

The Lodis do not find Indian Territory empty and lawless:

The land was settled. It was tamed, mostly. There were farms with smoke rising and crops plowed under to wait through the winter, the earth split open and brown. (Askew 1997, 98)

They bring death with them into this land. The night they cross into Indian Territory, it is discovered that all of the children are sick with scarlet fever.

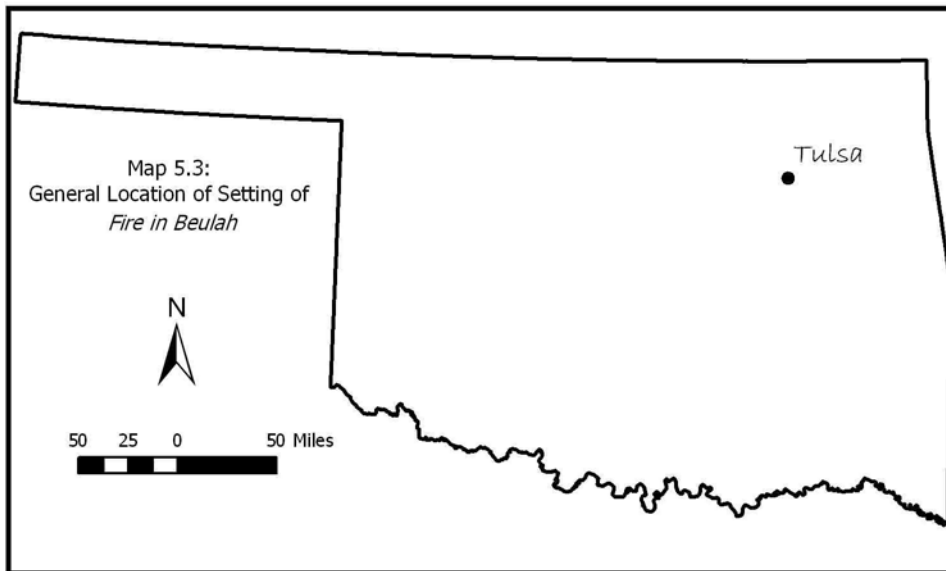
For a while the Lodis try to find sanctuary in Indian Territory, but eventually the violence they brought with them overtakes them. The story comes to an inevitable ending when Fayette comes to kill his brother John Lodi, but is killed by John's family instead. Fayette represented the unethical driving force which sent the family westward. In killing Fayette, they break with that imperative and try to forget the motives that bought them to Indian Territory. His blood is the sacrifice given to the mercy seat. Unfortunately, the mercy seat requires more blood, and John is shot in the back by one of Fayette's sons a few years later.

Most of the story is told from the point of view of Mattie. Mattie is an eleven-year-old child with an implacable will. Mattie is history: relentless in her march forward, indifferent to the well-being of the people in her path. When she decides that is time to

leave Arkansas, she tortures the black wet nurse who came to take care of her baby sister after her mother's death, because she believes the woman has put her family under a spell.

Mattie's voice is not the only voice that narrates the story. Her Aunt Jessie tells some of the story, as does Thula Henry, a Choctaw woman who cures Mattie from falling sickness. Askew breaks into a fragmented narrative style to relate the events surrounding Fayette's death with eye-witness accounts from several townspeople.

Fire in Beulah



While it was a finalist, Rilla Askew's second novel, *Fire in Beulah*, did not win the Oklahoma Book Award. It did, however, win the Gustavus Myers Award, which "commends works published in a given year which extend our understanding of the root causes of bigotry and the range of options we as humans have in constructing alternative ways to share power" (Gustavus Myers Center n.d). It was also selected as the final book that Oklahomans read together as part of the centennial series Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma in 2007 (Oklahoma Department of Libraries n.d.b).

Fire in Beulah wraps a fictional story around the events of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 by telling the story both from the perspective of a white family and a

black family whose fates are intertwined by the events surrounding the riot. The majority of the narrative, while written in third person, shifts between the points of view of central characters Althea Whiteside Dedmeyer, a white woman from rural Oklahoma who has married a wealthy oilman, and Graceful Whiteside, a black woman from Greenwood employed by the Dedmeyers as a maid, with an occasional shift in focus to one of their family members. At the beginning of the book, Althea does not see Graceful as a person.

Certainly she'd never thought to ask Graceful's surname. Like so much that never occurred to her, the idea that the girl even had a last name never crossed Althea's mind. If anyone had asked--a neighbor, say, or someone from the Auxiliary, which of course never happened, Althea would have dismissed the question with a shrug her shoulders. Graceful's family name would be some dead president's, more than likely Washington or Jackson or Lincoln or Johnson. She never thought about the girl's life, or family, where she'd come from. Never dreamed there was anything more to the girl's existence than her slow placid movements and the vague stirrings of unease she produced in Althea. (Askew 1997, 24)

The text does not focus on Graceful's perceptions of the world around her until she steps for the door of the Dedmeyer house. Graceful gives little thought to and has little insight into the white world. While she moves through it out of necessity, it remains alien to her:

Just as she never knew what showed on her face before Mrs. Dedmeyer, or what the whitewoman thought she saw, Graceful didn't know that her surface presented an image far different from what she felt: her bearing was serene, almost haughtily dignified as she glided evenly along the rough-cobbled street. Whitewomen stared at her from their scraggly yards, but she paid no attention to them or their pale squawly children, caught as she was in the clamp of fear and rage and the urgent need to go home. (Askew 2001, 74)

The focus of the narrative indicates the freedom of a character to express herself in the setting of the novel, which gives the reader insight into the power structure of the world being described.

At times the narrative passes from the third person narrations of Althea, Graceful, and their families to the first person of other characters. The one who is given the most to say is the Creek midwife who delivers Japheth after his mother is kicked in the stomach by a calf. She appears at crucial junctures in the story, personalizing it and giving a sense of history and morality that is absent from Althea's character. The second voice is that of an anonymous black woman in Arcadia, and the third voice is the white mob as it takes shape and becomes an unstoppable personality of its own which burns through the city.

Both Althea's and the Graceful's worlds are shaken to the core when Althea's brother, Japheth, arrives unexpectedly at her home less than a week after the lynching of a white man in Tulsa. Althea knows that her brother is evil and his presence in her home terrifies her; however, he knows all of her secrets, which renders her powerless to evict him. Althea's brother is racism and violence personified. The day he arrives at Althea's house, he rapes Graceful. He continually creates mayhem around him. In one of the most shocking scenes of the book, Japheth attends a masquerade ball dressed as a lynched man. While there are other scenes which portray the graphic racial violence more directly, the casual wearing of the costume to a party causes consternation among the white guests and a quiet walk-out by the black domestic servants.

When Althea sees Japheth at the party, her first impulse is to find Graceful and flee the party with her. When she goes to the kitchens looking for Graceful, she is baffled by the distrusting and resentful attitude of the Black domestic servants she encounters:

Here was the gulf fixed. The people stared at her across the expanse of gleaming kitchen, which was in fact a chasm, a great cleft in the world. Althea couldn't conceive that her

brother's appearance in the upstairs ballroom had any larger significance than the personal horror it was to her own soul: the questioning whine had been a mystery to her, its source unfathomable. Furthest of all from her imagining was the living, breathing memory of the men and women before her, who, for their part couldn't dream of the ignorance of the disheveled whitewoman standing in the middle of the kitchen floor. They disbelieved her, they suspected her, they lowered their heads in fear, or glared at her in rage from their unfractured, unsuppressed, long night's memory of lynching, beating, torture, black bodies burning. They knew well that the lynched man was a sign for black eyes saying, Hearken, nigger this shall be your sons, look here, bow your heads, niggers, we do not need a nigger in hand to warn you uppity Greenwood niggers: get down off your high horse, do not think you can be like white folks, do not think you can be equal, self-sufficient, rich. (Askew 2001, 230)

At the end of the book, after surviving the riot and its aftermath, Graceful and Althea take leave of each other.

"He's going to be a real talker," Graceful said. She took the edge of her apron and wiped his chin. "Aren't you, Theodore?" she said, and smiled at the baby. Althea realized it was the first time she had ever seen Graceful smile.

"Theodore? Is that what you named him?"

"Hedgemon Theodore Jackson, Junior," Graceful said. She looked in Althea's eyes. "After his daddy." Her face showed nothing, but in her tone, in the very lack of expression, was the specific truth neither could speak, and not just one truth, but many truths, passing back and forth between them, so powerful, so full of hurt and love and sorrow, that Althea, feeling the skin tighten across her face, the great welling in her chest, turned and began to pace the kitchen, patting the baby's back as if

he were fussy, though he was still making repetitive little cooing sounds.

"What's the name of that town again?" she asked sharply over her shoulder.

"Boley," Graceful said.

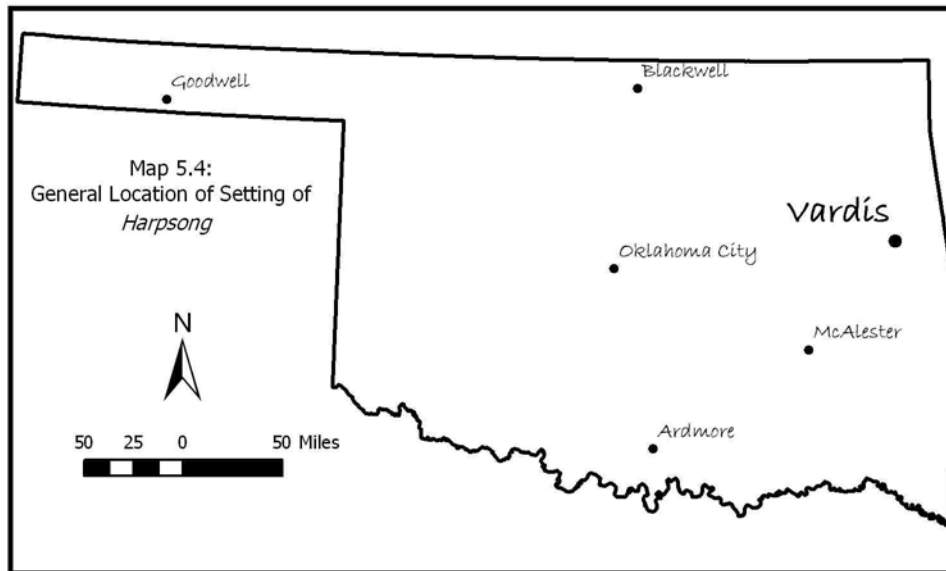
"Boley." Althea stopped near the back door. She looked out past the screen. The leaves on the great elm were already turning yellow. "Down by Okemah," she said softly.

"Yes, ma'am. Twelve miles west."

It might as well have been twelve thousand, Althea thought. She could no more go to Boley, Oklahoma, to see her nephew than she could fly to the moon. That was one of the truths that had passed between them. When Graceful left this morning, they would not see each other again. (Askew 2001, 373-374)

While, by the end of the book, the two women have gained a better understanding of what motivates the other and actually see each other when they look at each other, the distance that separates their worlds remains insurmountable.

Harpsong

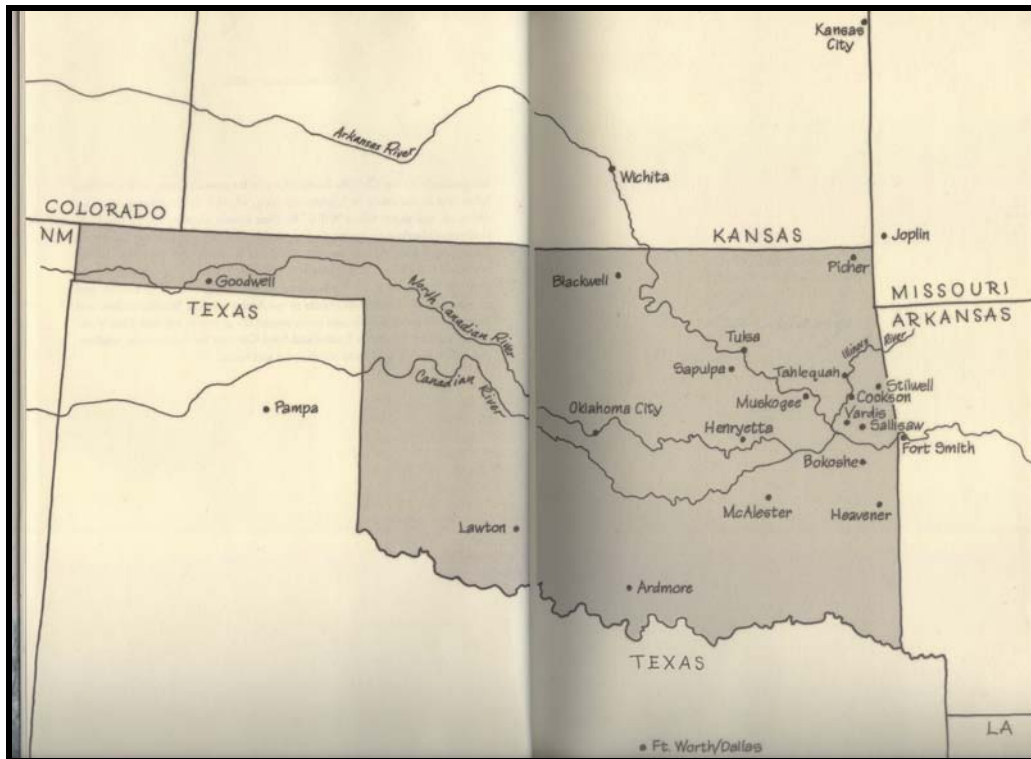


Harpsong was published in 2007, the year which marked 100 years of Oklahoma's statehood. The driving force behind the creation of *Harpsong* is Askew's dissatisfaction with the Oklahoma of the Dust Bowl as portrayed in the work of John Steinbeck. Rilla Askew feels Steinbeck got voice of the Oklahoma wrong. His characters did not speak in the way Oklahomans of the time did. In an interview, Askew said the following about why she chose the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma as a subject:

The new book is set in the 1930s, and of course that's a troubled, iconic era for Oklahoma. We've lived in the shadow of The Grapes of Wrath these many decades, and I both wanted to demythologize the era and set a few things straight. Mr. Steinbeck just got a few things wrong, you know. (Askew n.d.)

Harpsong begins and ends in eastern Oklahoma, which is more accurately and richly constructed than it is in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The story travels the breadth of the state to bear witness to its situation during that difficult era of history.

As with Askew's previous novels, the story is narrated from multiple points of view. In this text, however, Askew limits herself to three voices. The majority of the story is narrated in first person by Sharon Singer. Sharon is the daughter of a sharecropper who, at only fourteen years of age, runs away from the home to marry Harlan Singer. The story follows them as they ride the rails and hitchhike the breadth of Oklahoma. The frontispiece of *Harpsong* maps out the Oklahoma that Harlan and Sharon come to know during the course of the book. It is interesting that the linear features on the map are rivers rather than the rails on which Sharon and Harlan spend so much time. Water is the most important element of life during the Dust Bowl.



Map 5.5

The frontispiece of *Harpsong*. It spans the fold of the book.

The second narrative voice that Askew uses is folksay. In the folksay portions of the book, the citizens of the Oklahoma recount the stories they have heard about Harlan Singer that create the myths which surround him. The character of Harlan Singer is conflated with the images of many of the iconic figures of Oklahoma history. He is first described in the folksay narrative in the following way:

Folks say he was born the same year the state was, 1907, but you won't find a public record to prove that, or deny it. Some say he was a first cousin to Tom Joad and a second-cousin-

once-removed to Pretty Boy Floyd's family in Sallisaw—except the Joads weren't real Okies, they were a made up clan, and it is certain that the Floyds never claimed him. You'll even hear it told from time to time that he was kin to our most famous favorite son, Will Rogers, but that's just a tall tale. To be honest the Oklahoma son that Harlan Singer favored most was the one from Okemah, but we disowned that Okemah boy on account of he was a Communist they say, and anyhow, Singer had vanished into the hills by the time Woody Guthrie began to make a reputation. (Askew 2007, 7)

Folksay is the communal voice of Oklahoma. It witnesses the events that surround Harlan's life, and gives it external meaning in context of the history of the state.

Askew gives the heading "deepsong" to the third narrative voice she uses to relate the story. This voice is the stream of consciousness of Harlan Singer.

after he'd understood deep within himself that he had no mother and no father, that, from now on, he was alone. and then he found jesus and he was not alone again. and then he lost jesus and went on the road with the bootblackboy from muskogee, willie jay jefferson, guitar and harp in perfect tuning all the way across america, in peafields and migrant camps all the way to california, where white men bashed wille jay's skull in, and the singer fled, hiding in the dark recesses of clattering railcars, home to the secret timber, and that was where calm bledsoe found him, half dead, and fed him, and taught him to hunt. (Askew 2007, 79)

The three voices together retell the story of Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl and recount the legend of Harlan Singer.

Both Harlan and Sharon are children of Oklahoma, born and raised in the Cookson Hills near Sallisaw. Harlan is an orphan cared for by the community in an offhanded, somewhat begrudging way, until he decides to go on the road. Sharon is part of a large sharecropper family.

Harlan and Sharon spend the duration of their marriage traveling the region in search of a mysterious man named Profit. To Harlan the Profit symbolizes redemption, and the character is imbued with religious symbolism. Profit saves Harlan's life three times and teaches him the skills he needs to live on the road. The spelling of his name has the dual connotation that if the Dust Bowl and Great Depression were to lift and people were able to make a profit on the land, the region would be redeemed.

In the quest to find Profit, Sharon and Harlan cross the state many times and bear witness to the impact that the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression have on the people and the state. The state is by no means depopulated. They see many different types of lives and strategies for survival. They see squatter camps along the banks of the North Canadian River in Oklahoma City, farmers barely

getting by in the middle and western part of the state, and the rabbit culls of western Oklahoma. They go through small towns with open businesses on Main Street. They even rob a bank that has not yet closed.

Harlan and Sharon's journey is not romanticized. They spend most of their time dirty and hungry, so hungry that Sharon miscarries because of starvation. It is the starvation and loss of the baby that leads to the bank robbery. When they are riding the rails, they must be constantly vigilant to avoid being beaten by railroad bulls, guards hired to keep people off the trains.

In one of the final events that Sharon and Harlan take part in, Harlan tells the coal miners participating in a hunger siege at the courthouse in McAlester that the only sin a merciful God can't forgive is to give up hope. Most of the people Harlan and Sharon meet along the way have not given up hope. They may be hanging on by their fingernails, but they are still surviving.

Conclusion

Rilla Askew's stories are deeply grounded in the Oklahoma landscape and character. She uses a complex narrative style to problematize the traditional concept of a unitary linear history. She confronts uncomfortable

truths about the history of Oklahoma from the points of view of women and minorities, whose voices have been frequently overlooked in traditional romanticized and nostalgic narratives of Oklahoma history. With each successive book, the project of (re)writing Oklahoma history in a consciously postmodern way has become more formalized not only in the shifting voice of the books, but in the typesetting of the books as well.

With the exception of Mattie, who migrates to Oklahoma as child, all of Askew's characters are born in the state and for the most part they are a complicated set of anti-heroines. Mattie is the antithesis of the pioneer woman; Althea is an unrepentantly self-centered social climber who keeps her past as a sharecropper's daughter secret even from her husband. Sharon, while "nice," persuades Harlan to commit the crimes which ultimately lead to his death. Only Graceful is relatively free of deep character flaws.

On the male side, Harlan is a complicated figure that evokes several iconic figures of Oklahoma history: Tom Joad, Pretty Boy Floyd, Will Rogers, and mostly Woody Guthrie. The one iconic figure noticeably absent in Askew's work is the cowboy/ heroic settler. The violent

Cain and Able of the Lodi bothers is her answer to that myth.

The most prevalent theme in Askew's books is violence. In *The Mercy Seat*, Mattie maims her sister's wet nurse, and is complicit in her uncle's death. Her uncle is himself a violent drunk who has set out to kill his brother. Just as they brought scarlet fever, the migrants brought the infection of violence with them to Indian Territory.

In *Fire in Beulah*, Japheth rapes, kill, and instigates mayhem at any given opportunity. The story also recounts lynching, a violent act that a large number of prominent citizens of Tulsa took part in at the beginning of the book. Violence pervades the entire society in *Fire in Beulah*.

In *Harpsong*, the violence is committed against the poor and the homeless. It is typically committed by people hired to protect property, such as the railroad bulls or sheriffs. There is also violence against animals. In one particularly graphic scene, rabbit culls are described. Rabbit culls occurred in western Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl. Large numbers of animals were rounded up and clubbed to death.

Askew also uses relatively obscure Christian motifs as metaphors. The mercy seat is an Old Testament concept, which she uses as a metaphor for the land of Oklahoma at the time of settlement. The mercy seat requires a sacrifice of blood to expiate sin.

Japheth is one of the sons of Noah. After the Flood each of Noah's sons is portrayed as being the father of different races. Japheth is the progenitor of Europeans. In *Fire in Beulah*, Japheth embodies the violence of European expansion and the violence of the Europeans against other races.

The lasting place images from Rilla Askew's work are tinged with unease. She has settlers entering a bucolic Oklahoma of small American Indian farms and towns, bringing with them violence and death. She shows us the vibrant middle-class African American neighborhood of Greenwood, and then burns it to the ground. Its inhabitants scattered, some of them to the all-Black towns, such as Boley, where they hope to avoid the white world altogether. In *Harpsong*, Sharon lives, but Harlan dies alone in the Cookson Hills.

Chapter 6
**(Re)Writing the Past, Adrift on the Plains, and Invoking
the Trickster: the Stories of American Indian Women.**

The story depends on who is telling it. A colonizer will say that the people disappeared, though their descendents are still living in the same area and they are going to school with their children. The descendents of the Anasazi are my granddaughters and will be their children, yet they are cataloged as "disappeared." If it can be postulated that a people came to a natural end, the land was abandoned, then colonizers will assume a right of ownership. (Harjo, 2000, 38)

In the poem "there is no such thing as a one-way land bridge," Joy Harjo expresses the importance of the storyteller's relationship to the event being portrayed in the narrative. Until recently, the story of the nation or state, in the case of Oklahoma, has been told primarily from the point of view of the Western colonizer. This is beginning to change. A rapidly growing body of American Indian literature, published mainly since the late 1960s, exists and merits examination (Owens 1992). A study of place and women's literary imagination focusing upon Oklahoma cannot be complete without exploring the contributions of American Indian authors. The works of three novelists with Oklahoma ties will be examined in this section: Linda Hogan, Diane Glancy, and LeAnne Howe.

Linda Hogan is of Chickasaw descent; however, her prize-winning novel, *Mean Spirit*, depicts the situation of the Osage tribe when vast quantities of oil were discovered on their lands.

Diane Glancy is of mixed German and Cherokee descent. The heroine of her novel, *The Mask Maker*, is also of mixed ancestry; however, she is a Pawnee.

The final novelist whose work will be studied in this chapter is LeAnne Howe. Howe is an enrolled member of the Choctaw tribe. Her novel, *Shell Shaker*, relates the current situation of the Choctaw Tribe to events that occurred at the time of initial Choctaw contact with Europeans.

Following some commentary, this chapter situates American Indian women's novels within a geographic and literary context. It also explores what each of the novels reveals about Oklahoma as a unique place. Questions essential to the understanding of the American Indian sense of place include: How do American Indians fit into the social milieu of the setting, and what is their relationship to the land?

Emergence of alternative viewpoints in literature reflects the underlying philosophy of the time in which

the work is written. Guy Reynolds examines the changing motifs in women's writing in *Twentieth Century American Women's Fiction: a Critical Introduction* (1999). As the century has progressed, women have begun using magical realism to convey an alternative sense of reality. In the works of writers such as Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, the ordinary and supernatural worlds interact with each other. Ghosts and dreams play a role in the everyday world. Reynolds describes this blending of the mundane and the supernatural as a means of expressing of a complex racial identity through which a hybridized world is created. Other scholars interpret the use of dreams as a dialogue that allows the marginalized female ethnic voice to be heard in opposition to that of the dominant white male culture (O'Connor 1991).

Elaine Showalter points out that the melting pot metaphor previously used for describing American identity is being replaced by that of the patchwork quilt. This new metaphor is reflected in the expansion of women's writing along many separate paths in a contradictory multi-cultural trajectory. While an interesting path for contemporary American women's literature to progress along, it makes defining a single tradition difficult.

There are identifiable "common threads" in the divergent creative works of women. One of them is the rejection of Oedipal impulses to destroy their ancestors as described by Harold Bloom in his book, *Anxiety of Influence*.

Women's projects reject the destruction of their progenitors and instead build upon the foundation created by them. Each multicultural voice contributes a previously untold element of the story of women in America (Showalter 1991).

In recent decades, American Indian women have begun to publish works that communicate their stories to people outside of their communities. Paula Gunn Allen explores the feminine elements of American Indian traditions in her seminal book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Allen 1986).

Before contact with European cultures, many tribe kinship rules were matrilineal. Women played important roles in passing on tribal traditions, stories, and rituals from generation to generation. In Pueblo Indian tradition, the Keres Yellow Woman mediates the change of seasons for her people. In other stories, women learn from nature, which is often personified by a masculine character, the skills required to survive in the world. They impart that

knowledge to their tribes; the women are key to the transmittal of knowledge. In these stories, ritual is often a central element. In the case of the Yellow Woman and the change of seasons, the story is not completely understood outside of ritual. American Indian literature is often structured to convey the feel of ritual.

Indeed, the underlying cadence of the American Indian novel is often governed by ritual. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* takes her protagonist through a healing process that makes him one with the land and integrates his alienated spirit back into the tribe. Robert M. Nelson envisions using ritual to form a deep bond between the land and the tribe as a cure for the disease of postmodernism. According to Nelson, finding a cure for alienation sets the protagonists of post-war American Indian literature apart from canonical postmodern literature (Nelson 1993).

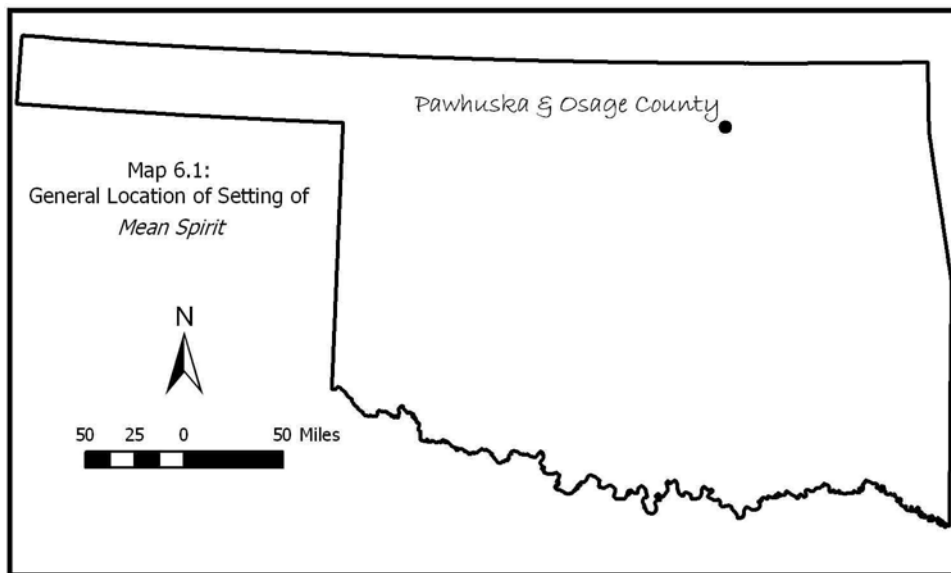
Krumholz treats ritual in a different way. Ritual in American Indian literature can create a liminal space both inside and outside of everyday life. In this space, the supernatural interacts with the mundane. Liminality permits a gradual immersion of the reader into this multidimensional world, subverting the tendency to reject

the unknown as it subtly moved into familiar territory (Krumholz 1994).

Recent American Indian fiction also sets out to redress the exclusions of the past. In *Fools Crow*, James Welch recounts the events leading up to the massacre of 173 members of the Blackfeet tribe in 1870 from the perspective of the Blackfeet. The American Indians in American Indian historical novels differ greatly from those portrayed in traditional western American literature (Chester 2001). In white literature, American Indians are often an ominous and unseen presence. When they do appear, it is to attack with a sudden merciless savagery. In *Fools Crow*, the day-to-day lives of the Blackfeet are emphasized. The relationship of the Blackfeet to the land is underscored by description and by the use of native place names instead of those bestowed upon the land by white settlers. This use of description specific to the Blackfeet permits alternative voices of the New West to stand in opposition to traditional understanding of American western expansion. Recent research in western studies examines the place of women, American Indians, and other ethnic groups in the nation's past (Comer 1999). A similar need present an

alternative view of historical events, which took place in Oklahoma in the early part of the Twentieth Century, is at the center of the first novel examined in this study.

(Re)Writing the Past: *Mean Spirit*



In one way or another, at school, in books and newspapers of the time, in her father's talk with men and women of his own generation, Sabra had picked up odds and ends of information about these silent, slothful, yet sinister figures. She had been surprised, even incredulous, at her husband's partisanship to the redskins. It was one of his absurdities. He seemed actually to consider them as human beings. (Ferber 1930, 31)

Linda Hogan's novel *Mean Spirit* stands directly in opposition to the portrayal of the Osage American Indians in *Cimarron* quoted above. Hogan portrays the events of the Osage oil boom during the 1920s. The latter part of

Ferber's novel, *Cimarron*, is also set during that time period. While Ferber becomes more sympathetic to the Osage toward the end of her book, the Osage have no direct voice in telling their story. In Hogan's novel, the events are recounted from the perspective of the Osage tribe rather than related from experiences of white settlers. The novel is based upon the actual events surrounding the murder of an Osage woman named Anna Brown (Miller 1990).

Mean Spirit begins with the murder of Grace Blanket, a beautiful and very wealthy Osage woman sent by her mother to live among the white settlers and learn their ways. The river spirit told Grace's mother, a river prophet, that disaster was coming. Grace grows into a wild, but in many ways traditional Osage woman. The first oil discovered on Osage land is discovered on Grace's land. While the discovery of oil on Grace's property leads directly to her death at the hand of oil speculators, that discovery saves much of the Osage land from being submerged by a reservoir planned by the American government. When oil is discovered, the land previously thought to be worthless has value to the white world.

Grace's daughter, Nola, escapes the murder plot and is taken under the protection of the Graycloud family and its matriarch, Belle. However, because of the Osage's unequal status in the white world, the Grayclouds are unable to stop the child from being appointed a white guardian by government agents and being placed in a boarding school. As soon as Nola is old enough, she marries the son of her guardian because she believes that this is the only way she can protect her life. The bleakness of Indian life is encapsulated in the description of the house where Nola was born.

Those people who drove past Grace Blanket's boarded-up house grew silent on her stretch of the road. The house was stark. The boards nailed across the door looked as if that part of the world had closed down forever. ... Up the road from Grace's sunburned roses, was an enormous crater a gas well blowout had made in the earth. It was fifty feet deep and five hundred feet across. This gouge in the earth just a year earlier had swallowed five workmen and ten mules. The water was gone from that land forever, the grass, once long and rich, was burned and black. (Hogan 1990, 53)

This description of the land is analogous to the condition of the American Indians. Fear of capricious rules keeps the Osage isolated from white society. When they interact with the white world, they never know what to expect. Part of the annuities owed the Osage were

often withheld for contradictory reasons: one month, it was because you are of mixed blood; the next month, it was because you are full-blooded Indian. Because money and the trappings of wealth coveted by white society have no value to the Osage, they treat these objects with disregard, which is sometimes used as a justification for adult Osages to be declared incompetent and given white guardians. Murders are rampant in the novel. Grace Blanket and the workmen swallowed by the earth are not the only ones who meet a violent end in the red dirt of Oklahoma.

There is no sense of completion at the end of *Mean Spirit*. Even though the white oil speculator John Hale is exposed as Grace's murderer, he is not convicted of the crime. A mistrial is declared due to jury and witness tampering. Distrust and confusion plague the Osage. Nola, in her dazed grief, kills the white boy she married for protection because she believes he intends to kill her for her oil rights.

Her family takes her to the traditional village of the Hill People and decides not to tell her that she was mistaken about her husband's intentions and that he had been a good person who married her because he loved her

and wanted to protect her from white oil speculators such as John Hale. Nola's guardian, while at times an ambiguous character, is murdered when he finds out that John Hale was killing American Indians for insurance money.

At the end of the story, the Grayclouds are forced to flee their land. Oil was discovered under it and the white man married to Moses Graycloud's sister decided to murder the family by placing a bomb in their house so that he could claim the land for himself. The Grayclouds get out of the house before the bomb goes off, but Moses kills his brother-in-law in the struggle. The Grayclouds flee, because they do not believe that Moses would be given a fair trial in white courts.

They looked back once and saw it all rising up in the reddened sky, the house, the barn, the broken string of lights, the life that they had lived, nothing more than a distant burning. No one spoke. But they were alive. They carried generations along with them, into the prairie and through it, to places where no road had been cut before them. They traveled past houses that were like caves of light in the black world. The night was on fire with their pasts and they were alive. (Hogan 1990, 375)

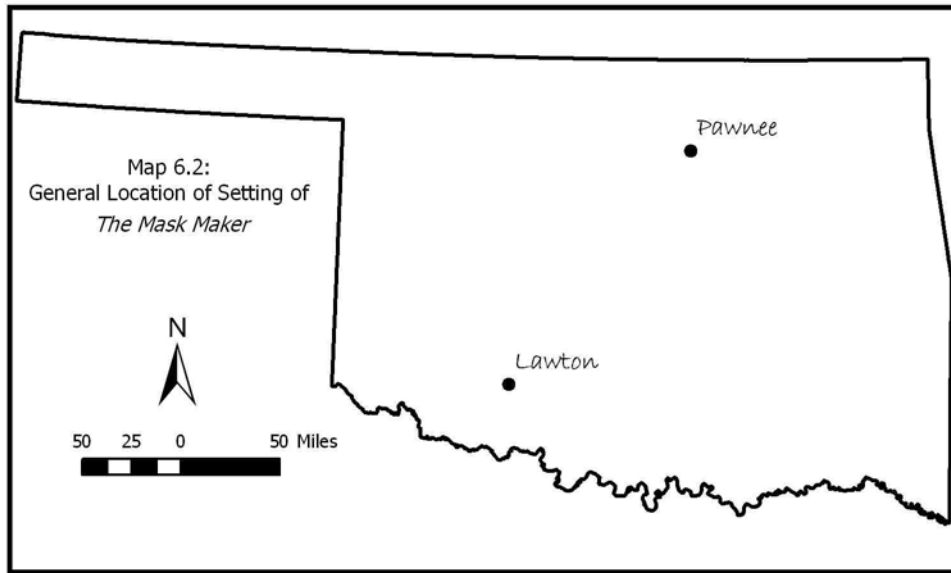
There is defiance to the white world in the passage. They may be forced to abandon their home, but they will survive. The only protection seems to be in living

entirely separately from the white world in the village of the Hill People. The Hill People hide the village magically from those they don't want to find it. As the village becomes more and more distant from the town American Indians, there is a feeling that it will disappear into myth like Avalon in the Western European tradition.

While *Mean Spirit* cannot change history, it does reflect a change in how Oklahomans choose to see their past. It shows the dark side of Manifest Destiny, which destroys anything that stands in its way without regard to the values and rights of those who inhabited the land before it was desired by white men and women. Some whites, represented by Nola's guardian and husband in the book, spoke against the exploiters and tried to defend the Osage from corrupt practices, such as insurance fraud. Like Nola's husband and guardian, they were most likely distrusted by those they were trying to protect as well as those they were attempting to thwart. The deaths of Nola's husband and guardian, her guardian at the hands of oil speculators and her husband by her hand, provide an apt metaphor for the futility of trying to intervene

in the unfettered greed and paranoia that characterized the early years of the oil boom in Oklahoma.

Adrift on the Plains: *The Mask Maker*



The 2003 winner of the Oklahoma Book Award was *The Mask Maker* by Diane Glancy. The heroine of *The Mask Maker* is Edith Lewis, an itinerant artist who works for the Oklahoma Humanities Council. Every week Edith travels to a different school in Oklahoma to teach students art. At the beginning of the novel, Edith is traveling to Lawton, Oklahoma, for a five-week stint as a visiting artist.

While Edith is proud to be making her living making and teaching art, the status of a traveling art teacher mirrors the ambivalence that Edith feels about her place as a mixed-blood woman in the world. When she first arrives in Lawton, she is given a room that is dusty and

unused. The other teachers tell her that art had been cut from the budget many years ago. The marginalization of her profession is a metaphor for her marginalization as a mixed-blood woman.

She felt she was an artist in a place without art. A misfit in a practical world. But art was truth. It was revenge. It was masks that held her on the road. She had a car full of them. The masks told a story. But Edith hated words. (Glancy 2002, 3)

Like Edith, Glancy is a woman of mixed ancestry trying to make sense of the world where she does not quite fit.

*... And I want to have a sense of self as whole even though fragmented. It gives voice.
This is often where I struggle. Part of me came across the sea from Europe to Virginia, then west in a wagon to the Missouri/Kansas border where my mother's family settled. The other part of me walked 900 miles on foot during the forced migration of 17,000 Cherokees from the East to Oklahoma. (Glancy 1987, 171)*

This statement from a 1987 essay Glancy wrote for an anthology titled *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* gives some insight into the identities that exist in Oklahoma beyond the white farmer or businessman. There are alternative visions of Oklahoma as a place, and the writers who hold them are beginning to tell their stories.

Mobility plays a large role in Edith's life. It gives her a degree of financial freedom, but it also separates her from her family and makes her insecure about her place within her community. Edith's mobility is similar to that described by Cresswell (1993). In his analysis of the novel *On the Road*, Cresswell theorizes mobility as a way to resist traditional American expectations of settling down with a family and a house in the suburbs. For the character of Edith, mobility is both a rebellion against her traditional female role within society and a hope to better her future by earning a living doing art.

The car was a mask with two headlights for eyes. The travel, also, was a mask that hid her. She wasn't always sure where she was going, but she was going. (Glancy 2002, 131)

In addition to being the way she earns her living, Edith uses masks to mediate her world, which she often finds overwhelming and difficult to live in. Unfortunately, her obsession with masks also drives a wedge between Edith and her family. Her house is overflowing with them. She does not want strangers to come into her home because she is afraid of what they will think; she fantasizes about covering her house with masks. Edith is a very conflicted character who is

uncomfortable in both the white world she travels to during the week and the Indian world she lives in on the weekend.

Much of her conflict is tied to her feelings for her ex-husband. She does not want a life with him, but she cannot break away and start a new life with another man or be entirely comfortable being alone. Her friend Bix wants her to make him a house mask, hoping that she will understand that he wants her to stop traveling and stay with him in Pawnee.

For Edith the mask is without words. At the beginning of the novel she is enraged when the other teachers want to have the students write stories about their masks and give them words.

"I don't want the masks to be a vehicle for words. I am a mask maker, not a maker of masks for which words are written"...

"Words squirm around the truth," Edith told Luz. "Words divide truth into subtruth or almost truths. I don't like words. I've heard them all my life. (Glancy 2002, 65)

As her residency in Lawton continues, Edith begins to see that giving words to the mask can be an act of healing and empowerment. She tells an emotionally injured Indian student in a class of delinquent students:

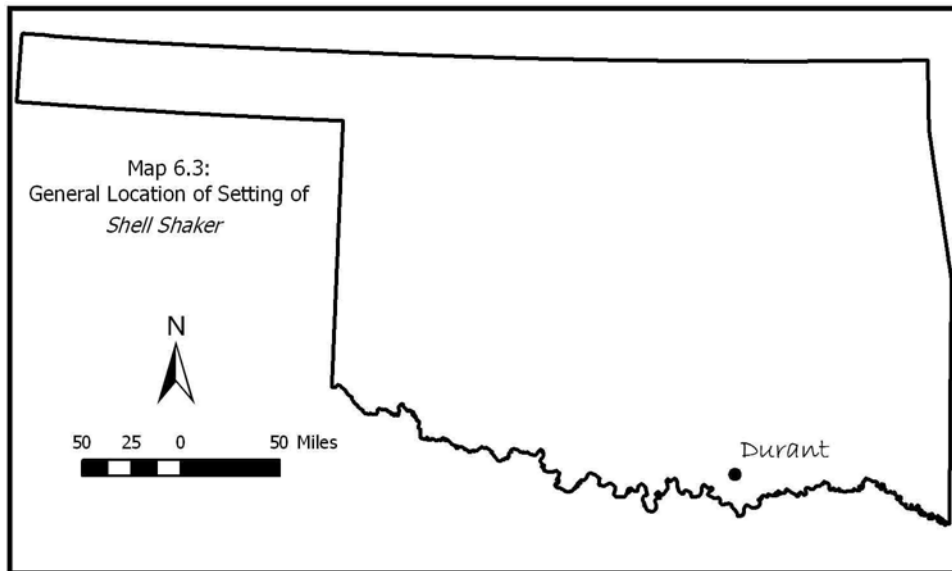
*"Put you feelings in the mask," Edith said.
"It's always had to talk-like when you come in*

out of the cold. I remember wanting—maybe I stood in front of the hardware store wanting a mask that I couldn't have because I didn't have a quarter or whatever it costs. Masks are a repair of those memories. You have stories without a mask to tie them to. Think of a mask that will look like the story you have to tell. Think of a landscape as you place your mask in a story.” (Glancy 2002, 95)

There is no simple resolution for Edith. At the end of the book, she still chooses to travel and she is beginning to get the respect for her individual skills that was lacking in her marriage and family life. The acting program at Cameron University requests that she make masks for a play that they are producing. She still lives in the marginal world of the mixed-blood Indian, but she recognizes she can own the choices she makes and, while far from content, she is less angry at the end of the story than at the beginning.

Edith had started behind, far behind. She was now on the road ahead. The tornado of her will alone propelled her. Her vision, her masks, the way she saw them, made them, explained them, got others to make them also. She was a manifest destiny of her own making. America, move over. She could take the defeat handed her, some of it by her own hand, and turn it around. She was no longer marked absent, tardy, disinterested, disappearing. (Glancy 2002, 137)

Invoking the Trickster: *Shell Shaker*



The final work by an American Indian woman that I explore in this chapter is the novel *Shell Shaker* by LeAnne Howe, which was published in 2001. LeAnne Howe is an enrolled member of the Choctaw tribe. *Shell Shaker* received the 2002 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation (La Ronge 1997). The Before Columbus Foundation is a non-profit educational organization that promotes the dissemination multi-cultural literature. The winners of the American book awards are selected by other writers (Before Columbus Foundation n.d.). *Shell Shaker* was a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award the same year that *The Mask Maker* won. While the primary setting of the book is contemporary Oklahoma in the vicinity of the town of Durant, the story flows freely back and forth through

time and space, exploring the experience of the Choctaw Tribe of Oklahoma during the early period of contact with French and English traders in the lower Mississippi Valley in the eighteenth century, as well as their experiences operating casinos in Oklahoma the 1990s. The relationship of the central characters mirrors both the power relationships between men and women within the tribe and the relationship of the Choctaw people to the dominant American culture.

LeAnne Howe uses several devices that have been identified as hallmarks of contemporary American Indian writing. The first device is that of a trickster character. The trickster is associated with resistance. Most tricksters have the following characteristics common: "he plays tricks and is the victim of tricks; he is amoral with strong appetites, particularly for food and sex; he is footloose, irresponsible and callous, but somehow almost always sympathetic if not lovable (Velie 1993, 122)."

Language can also be used in a subversive manner in American Indian texts. Non-linear narrative form can highlight the cultural difference between American Indians and non-native readers. Repetition mimics the

oral tradition, and the use of un-translated words forces readers to face gaps in their knowledge (Rhys 2001). Dee Horne points out that the silences are critical to comprehending American Indian literature. "The silent language of physical metaphor is a story in itself" (Maracle qtd. in Horne 1999, 51).

The choice to stand in opposition to traditional knowledge of historical events and the roles of women in those events is central to American Indian feminist writing. In her ground-breaking book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua writes of indigenous woman silenced by the servitude and betrayal of colonialism "stoking her inner flame," waiting for the time when she can tell her stories without fear of violence (Anzaldua 1987, 45). The desire of American Indian women to connect with a past silenced by colonialism is eloquently illustrated in the following poem:

*Grandma we all need partially deaf & busy
with weaving listens
 through a thick blanket of years & sore
feet
 nods
I cry about everything they did to me how
horrible & can't stand another
while brown wrinkled you smile at me like the sun
coming up
 I stand next to you, pass wool absently you
lay aside the wrong colors
 without comment*

*I'm simply
Grandchild
babbling your sympathy warm & comforting as
dust
I sit in your lap your loom pushed aside
you feed me fry bread with too much maple
syrup
I pull you braids you cradle me deeper in
your legs folded to make
a basket for me
Grandma who died long before I was born
Come Back
Come Back (Chrystos 1984, 153)*

Mirroring the theme in Chrystos' poem, the fiction of many contemporary women American Indian writers seeks to fill an historical void by filling silences caused by colonial tactics of assimilation with stories providing an alternative history for the dispossessed and marginalized countering prevailing cultural norms. In that tradition, LeAnne Howe begins her novel by retelling of the story of the foundation of the Choctaw homeland in the Mississippi Valley. The grandmother central to this story connects modern Choctaws to a fount of dormant feminine power.

Shell Shaker opens with Shakbatina telling the story of Grandmother, the first shell shaker. Many years before when the Spanish first came to the land of the Choctaw, Grandmother strapped turtle shells to her ankles and danced for days, until the shells cut into her skin

and the earth was stained red with her blood. She sang of her husband's bravery and prayed for her people's deliverance from destruction at the hands of Spanish invaders. The power of the dance and the sacrifice of her blood persuaded the Autumnal Equinox to take pity on her. He taught her to tie the shells so that they would not cut her, and gave her a song to sing when she needed his help.

After the Autumnal Equinox gave Grandmother his promise of help, her husband, Tuscalusa, and the village warriors went out to divert the Spanish from the village. But the Spanish were too strong, and Tuscalusa and his warriors were slaughtered. Upon Tuscalusa's death, Grandmother knew that the women and children must flee or become slaves of the Spanish. She gathered her six sisters and sang the song that the Autumnal Equinox had taught her. Grandmother and her sisters were transformed into birds, and they flew west to find the homeland of the Choctaw in the Mississippi Valley.

This myth of the foundation of the Choctaw homeland is significant on several levels. Howe illustrates that in the traditional cultural structure of the Choctaw, both men and women had significant roles to play in the

survival of their people. The warriors gave their lives and the women sacrificed their blood to gain the knowledge required for survival. The myth also binds the women close to the land, as only through blood sacrifice and ritual were they able to learn from the forces of nature. Holding the Autumnal Equinox sacred indicates that the Choctaw value balanced relationships.

Grandmother of the Birds acknowledges that she has learned the song taught to her by the Autumnal Equinox with the following statement:

*"Itiluaichi," Autumnal Equinox, on your day
when I sing this song you will make things
even. (Howe 2001, 2)*

In the novel, it becomes clear that the phrase "make things even" refers not only to the relationship between the Choctaw and the white colonizers, but also the relationships between men and women.

After the social structure of the pre-contact Choctaw is defined by the telling of the story of the first shell shaker, Shakbatina relates how the balance was destroyed in her own time, 1737. Shakbatina's oldest daughter, Anoleta, was accused of killing a woman of the Chickasaw tribe. Both Anoleta and the Chickasaw woman shared the same husband, a warrior named Red Shoes. Red

Shoes had ties by birth and marriage to both the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes. Because of these ties, he also had contact with both the French and English traders who were active in the area. These connections made Red Shoes one of the most powerful traders in the region; however, Red Shoes was corrupted by his power and his contact with the English traders and was no longer loyal to either tribe. Red Shoes killed the Chickasaw woman to further an English plot to turn the tribes against one another and steal their lands. When Anoleta's family was unable to convince the Chickasaw and their allies that Anoleta was innocent of murder, Shakbatina, ravaged by a disease caught from the English traders, made her tribe agree to trade her life for Anoleta's. Only the sacrifice of the life of a member of Anoleta's tribe would avert war between the two tribes.

Before she was executed by the Chickasaw, Shakbatina makes Anoleta swear that she will fight Red Shoes and the English. Red Shoes had become a spy and agitator for the English and balance could be restored to the tribe only through his death. It is Anoleta's duty as a member of the *Intek Aliha*, the Sisterhood, to maintain the balance. Anoleta prepared a meal of poisoned meat for Red Shoes,

but he is warned that she planned to kill him and he departed without eating. Many years of war ensue, culminating in the death of Anoleta and her youngest sister, Haya, along with many of their relatives. The middle sister Neshoba escapes with Anoleta's daughter, Chunkashbili, who is the progenitor of the Billy clan which is the focus of the part of the story that occurs in the 1990s.

The use of assassination by the sisterhood as an accepted means of protecting the tribe is illustrated by the following conversation between two male members of the tribe:

... "The horsefly is on his way here. Every day Red Shoes' mouth grows bigger. A truer Osano I've never known."

"It is time that we make certain that he never hungers again," say Koi Chitto in a voice that come out of his gut. "In one of the towns I visited I was told that he would consider anyone his enemies who attacked the Chickasaws. He specifically mentioned the Red Fox village. I think he wants a war."

"That was before the "Inkilisk okla" stopped trading with him," laughs Nitakechi. "Do not trouble yourself with the horsefly. I've heard that the Intek Aliha are cooking a special meal for him. That should cure his hunger pains...." (Howe 2001, 102)

After Anoleta's failure to kill Red Shoes, the women of the tribe lose their traditional power and the *Intek Aliha* was not called upon to fix the problem again. This

marks the beginning of a loss of balance that must be redressed by the Billy clan in the 1990s.

In the Eighteenth Century portion of the story, women are closely associated with the land, making it difficult for the Choctaw to understand that Red Shoes could murder his Chickasaw wife to start a war because:

Women were the land. "Intek Aliha," the sisterhood controlled the rich fertile fields which sustained the people. Killing a woman for her land was like killing the future.
(Howe 2001, 10)

Equating women to the land ties the fate of the Choctaw to that of the treatment of the women. The Choctaw do not fare well when they permit themselves to be influenced by a culture that does not respect the role of women, and according to Howe, the English "map their lands with the graves of women" (Howe 2001, 10). The death of Shakbatina and Anoleta's failure to root out the corrupting colonial influence within the tribe by assassinating Red Shoes signals the beginning of the destruction of the tribe by colonial forces.

The thread of the novel set in the twentieth century opens with the heroine, Auda Billy, suffering the aftermath of being raped by Redford McAlester, the current chief of the Choctaw tribe. The rape has a dual

meaning. It is not only the literal rape of Auda Billy by Redford McAlester, it is the rape of the Choctaw by present-day corruption and the remnants of colonialism. Redford McAlester is stealing money from the tribe's casino profits and from the percentage that is supposed to be paid to the Mafia, which financed the construction of the casino. How the rape is dealt with in this story is central to the recovery of the Choctaw people. A voice tells Auda that the spirits of the ancestors have returned and that she can "use any fire" (Howe 2001, 25). The ancestors have announced their return with huge wildfires scorching the outskirts of Durant. Auda puts on a red dress--red is the color of warriors--and shoots McAlester in the head, then passes out and wakes with no memory of the crime. When Auda is arrested for the chief's murder, her mother Susan Billy confesses to the crime and is arrested as well.

After Auda and Susan's arrest for the murder of the chief, Susan's brother Isaac sends word to Auda's sisters, Adair and Tema, and her aunts, Dolores and Dovie Love, "in the Indian way." The women converge on the Billy household to protect Auda and Susan and initiate the rituals required to insure that McAlester does not

return to perpetuate more mischief on the Choctaws in the future. With the arrival of these women, the *Intek Aliha*, the sisterhood, is reborn.

Susan Billy's confession is not only a literal confession. It is also a demonstration of female solidarity and a resurgence of tribal responsibility. Auda did not murder the chief in an act of individual revenge: McAlester's execution was initiated and supported by tribal ancestral spirits to protect the tribe from the repercussions of the chief's thievery. As the reincarnation of Anoleta, Auda is given the chance to fulfill her destiny and complete the task she failed in the distant past. When Auda succeeds in killing the chief, she reasserts feminine power and gives the tribe an opportunity to rectify the injustices caused by McAlester's corruption on their own terms.

For the purpose of analysis, I have broken *Shell Shaker* down into its component parts chronologically; however, the novel consciously defies conventional linear time. Time in the novel is fluid, as the characters live simultaneously in past and present. While action in the present rectifies mistakes and misjudgments made at the time of initial contact with western Europeans, the flow

of time is not one direction. Characters in the past are dimly aware of their future selves, and contemporary characters often see the past unfolding. The porcupine trickster seems to be able to defy the conventional concepts of time and space completely.

The trickster plays an integral role in the progression of the novel. The trickster in *Shell Shaker* is a woman. She is a porcupine spirit who goes by the name of Sarah Bernhardt, and plays tricks on all of the characters, both Choctaw and white. Her ultimate trick is taking the stand at Auda's trial and casting the blame for the chief's murder on McAlester's Mafia partners, as they are no longer around to contradict her, because the trickster caused an accident which resulted in their death. Auda is freed. In this way, the trickster in *Shell Shaker* is more consciously constructive than most tricksters portrayed in American Indian stories. In the epilogue, the trickster confirms that Auda did kill McAlester to rectify her failure to do so in the past; however, the trickster placed her hands between Auda and the gun so that there would be no powder burns to conclusively convict her.

One of the most important elements of the structure of *Shell Shaker* is the ensemble cast of characters. While it can make following the plot difficult, it is an integral part of the story. *Shell Shaker* is not about the healing of one person, but of the tribe. It is necessary for each member of the tribe to do his or her part in bringing about the desired conclusion for the community to be healed. Much of the current damage is caused by a lack of communal accountability. A communal discussion of issues in open council is the traditional way in which the Choctaw make decisions. After being criticized in a council meeting by Susan Billy, Redford McAlester disbanded the council, further isolating himself from the Choctaw people.

Sense of community is also underscored in the design of the retirement homes where the trickster Sarah Bernhardt resides. The young Choctaw men, Hoppy and Nick, are surprised at the benign and pleasant environment in which they encounter the trickster spirit. Isaac, a Choctaw elder, explains to them the concept behind the layout of the community.

"Small cottages every so many feet, where old people can bring all of their belongings and animals and live in peace. ...Say, Where'd you expect Divine Sarah to live, in a shack

somewhere, all by herself? That's not our way. Auda wanted these [retirement] communities to be situated like our old towns once were."
(Howe 2001, 67)

As the Choctaw are a communal people, the wrongs of their past cannot be righted by a single individual acting heroically. Only a community can heal the scars of the past by acting together in harmony with tradition. The portrayal of this structure intentionally subverts the ideal of individualism prevalent in dominant white American culture.

While *Shell Shaker* presents a romanticized version of Choctaw culture, it illustrates two important themes within contemporary American Indian literature. The first is the empowering of the feminine. The second is the use of subversive language and structures to undermine the normative colonial ideals. Howe's work entwines the two themes. The resurgence of feminine power is the primary vehicle for reasserting the Choctaw's control of their destiny in her story. The loss of female power was a precursor to the descent into colonial oppression.

Howe also consciously takes on popular stereotypes of American Indians as noble savages or alcoholics to create characters connected to both modern society and

the unique cultural values of their tribe. LeAnne Howe's Choctaws are not anachronistic. Auda has a Ph.D. in history, Adair is a very successful stockbroker based in New Orleans, and Tema is a successful actress in London and New York. Redford McAlester met his Mafia contacts when he attended Harvard. The challenge they face is integrating their tribal cultural values into successful lives in the contemporary world. It is not the money or the influence of the white world that dooms Redford McAlester. These things are not portrayed as inherently evil, as illustrated by the character of Adair being very successful financially and Tema being happily married to an Englishman. It is McAlester's greed and narcissism, which isolates him from the tribe, and that isolation seals his fate.

In the 2001 forward to the 2002 edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Gloria Anzaldua points out that the categories of race, sex, and class are too limiting, and that most people exist in the liminal spaces between those categories. With her Choctaws struggling to retain their cultural values in the face of contemporary consumerism, Howe has created a cast of characters that mediate these

borders without sacrificing integrity. The Oklahoma inhabited by Howe's characters is a liminal place on the border between nations, where American Indians are beginning to reassert their power after years of colonial oppression. It is a liminal place where the veil between the mundane and the supernatural is thin.

Conclusion

The three books within this section represent a new voice within the authorized narrative of Oklahoma that was absent from pre-World War II stories: American Indian women writing stories about the experience of being American Indian in Oklahoma. Among the most important concerns of these stories is finding a place in contemporary society. The origin tale of the displacement of American Indians in from Oklahoma society is illustrated by the situation of the Grayclouds in *Mean Spirit*, as the book ends with the family fleeing their home to escape the murderous greed unleashed by the oil boom in Oklahoma. *Shell Shaker* also provides a version of the relocation of the Choctaw from the Mississippi River valley to Oklahoma.

Both *Shell Shaker* and *The Mask Maker* portray the descendants of the dispossessed finding ways to make

Oklahoma home. The healing themes are community and art. Extended family and creativity are portrayed as strategies present-day American Indians use to support themselves through difficult times. Both are portrayed as important to maintaining a healthy society. It is no accident that the human avatar of the iconic porcupine trickster is Sarah Bernhardt, a legendary French actress.

There are several lasting place images that we take away from the novels explored. The first is the Grayclouds fleeing their burning home with oil derricks rising in the distance embodying the *Mean Spirit*, which set the culture of alienation in motion. The second, from *Shell Shaker*, is Auda and her sisters surrounded by their extended family, celebrating her freedom and the liberation of the tribe from the Mafia with food, song, and dance. The final image from *The Mask Maker* is Edith standing in front of a class of young people, teaching them how to express their pain, joy, and secret desires through art.

Chapter 7

(Re)Writing Place in the Twenty-First Century

In this study, I have analyzed several novels by Oklahoma authors to uncover the themes currently in use in authorized narratives of Oklahoma, and how they are similar or different from themes found in popular novels written in the first half of the twentieth century. It was not the project of this dissertation to create a totalizing theory of the characteristics of Oklahoma as a place. Rather, the project was to examine books written by women in a specific time period, 1990-2008, who have a personal relationship with Oklahoma, and to identify the most prevalent themes in those books and compare them to the earlier ones. Whereas the themes remain fairly consistent between the two time periods, the images used to portray those themes have evolved.

Regardless of era, almost all of the books examined for this study offer the following themes as characteristics of Oklahoma: rural, impoverished, violent, racist, Christian, self-reliant, and family- and community-oriented. The recent books also frequently portray characters engaging in artistic activity, and I found that the theme of displacement was more compelling than mobility in the contemporary novels.

Whereas many of the themes in the two time periods remain similar, the tone with which the authors engage the themes is often more complex in the contemporary novels. Also, the style of engagement with these themes is not uniform among the contemporary novelists. For example, Billie Letts uses simple clichéd imagery and the mystery novelists use iconic stereotypes to tell their stories. But Rilla Askew insists on complicating the way history is imagined. And the American Indian writers adopt a different perspective that often includes elements of resistance not found in the work of any of the other writers. The remainder of this chapter will explore the imagery the novels use to represent the themes.

Rural Setting

I expected *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cimarron* to focus on small-town and rural life because that was the nature of most of the state in the early part of the twentieth century. But I found the preference for a rural setting was still apparent in the contemporary novels chosen for recent Oklahoma Book Awards. Whereas the 2000 U.S. Census reported that two-thirds of Oklahomans live in either the Oklahoma City or Tulsa metropolitan areas,

recent award-winning books are set in either a very small town or on a farm or ranch, with the exception of *Fire in Beulah* (Oklahoma Department of Commerce n.d.).

Table 7.1: Setting

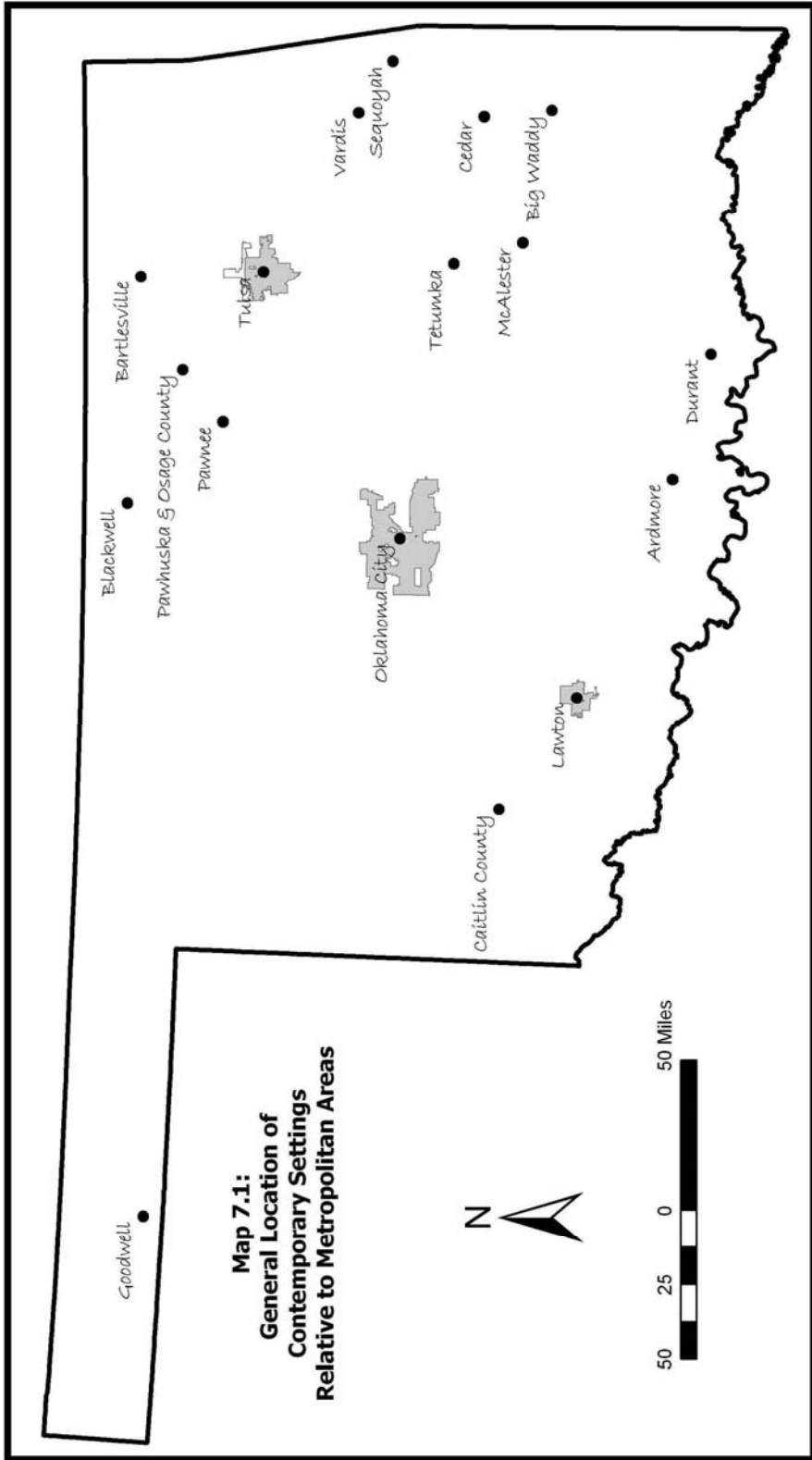
Novel	Setting (Real or Fictitious)
<i>Mean Spirit</i>	Osage County and Pawhuska
<i>The Mask Maker</i>	Pawnee & Lawton
<i>Shell Shaker</i>	Durant
<i>The Down Home Heifer Heist</i>	rural southwest Oklahoma
<i>Song Of the Bones</i>	rural southeast Oklahoma
<i>Where the Heart Is</i>	Sequoyah
<i>Honk and Holler Opening Soon</i>	Sequoyah
<i>Strange Business</i>	Cedar/Bartlesville
<i>The Mercy Seat</i>	Big Waddy
<i>Fire in Beulah</i>	Tulsa
<i>Harpsong</i>	eastern Oklahoma and Rails

Even in *Fire in Beulah*, many of the events leading up to the climatic riot take place in rural Oklahoma and, in the end, the main character of *Graceful* moves from Greenwood in Tulsa to the small town of Boley. The main white character, Althea, grew up along the Deep Fork River and tries to distance herself from her rural upbringing throughout most of the book. Similarly, in the work of Diane Glancy, the small town is not idealized. Neighbors may look out for each other, but it is also the place where a woman can't avoid running into

her ex-husband and his new girlfriend at community events.

Whereas Askew's dark retelling of Oklahoma history and Glancy's work stand as exceptions, most of the books studied here portray rural life as desirable. For example, Billie Letts' version of a small town is a romanticized place where neighbors of all races look out for each other.

In the mysteries, rural life is also more nuanced than that portrayed by Letts, particularly in the Chantalene Morrel Series. But in both mystery series, the iconic western cowboy or self-reliant farmer gives way to the prodigal son who continually contemplates moving away. One of the reasons leads to the next theme in women's writing about Oklahoma: poverty.



Poverty

Almost all of the contemporary books portray characters living on the margins of society because of poverty. But the type of poverty and its consequences are quite different than in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Only Novalee, the Letts character left abandoned at Wal-Mart, comes close to the desperation of the Joads. However, Letts quickly improves Novalee's situation. She is given a home by Sister Husband. Similarly, both the characters of Vena Takes Horse and Bui Khanh in *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* are homeless at the beginning of the book, but they are eventually given shelter by the community of Sequoyah. Billie Letts does not allow her characters to get too desperate.

In the *Song of the Bones*, money is not the motive of the crimes committed in the book. There, the character of Chantalene is very poor and lives miles from the nearest town without a car. In *The Down Home Heifer Heist*, a desire for material wealth greater than that available to many rural residents leads some of the characters to start stealing cattle and, eventually, to murder. Rural Oklahoma is portrayed in both mysteries as a place where many of the inhabitants must struggle to

support themselves financially, and where the landscapes of small towns indicate people are far from prosperous.

Violence

Crimes and violence are expected in mystery novels. However, the only novel of the eleven books studied that does not portray graphic acts of violence is *The Mask Maker*. All the others have at least passing scenes of violence. Some, like *The Mercy Seat*, *Fire in Beulah*, and *Mean Spirit*, include violence at the core of the story. But even in *Where the Heart Is*, the character of Lexie is brutally beaten and her son is raped, and in *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* Bui Khanh is shot. By these books, rural Oklahoma in contemporary fiction is not a place of peace. That violence is countered somewhat by acts of Christian kindness in most of the books where the story is set in contemporary Oklahoma, particularly those of Billie Letts. But this is not the case in most of the novels where the story is set in the past.

In addition, *Shell Shaker*, *Where the Heart Is*, and *Fire in Beulah* all include scenes of rape, an extremely personal form of violence not found in either of the Steinbeck or Ferber books. In each of the three cases noted above, the physical act of rape is also a metaphor

for exploitation. In *Shell Shaker*, the corrupt chief rapes Auda, who symbolizes the communal aspect of the tribe. In *Where the Heart Is*, a middle class man rapes poor children, symbolizing modern society's failure to care for its most helpless members. In *Fire in Beulah*, a white man rapes a black woman, providing a graphic metaphor for the effect of racism on society.

Race Relations

The rape of Graceful by Japheth in *Fire in Beulah* is not only a personal act of violence but it allows Askew to literally give voice to the Tulsa Race Riot. She also provides a nuanced portrayal of the greed, anger, ignorance, oppression, misunderstanding, and casual indifference that enabled the event to take place. This book includes a more comprehensive look at racism in society than either Steinbeck or Ferber, and more than most contemporary novels.

In contrast, the stories taking place in contemporary Oklahoma show race relations between whites, Blacks, and American Indians as less problematic. For example, Letts has people of all races interacting and forming lasting friendships. Her stories consciously create idyllic multiracial communities. For the most

part, characters drawn from different racial categories interact very little in the other contemporary novels.

Self-reliance

Self-reliance is portrayed as a fundamental part of the Oklahoma character in novels written during either of the time periods considered in this study. Sabra Cravat is the prototype for the self-reliant woman, and she has many successors. Self-reliance is developed particularly well in *Where the Heart Is* and *The Mask Maker*. In *The Mask Maker*, Edith Lewis learns that she has control of the choices she makes. Likewise, the character of Novalee Nation in *Where the Heart Is* learns to support herself and her daughter. In addition to the financial aspect of self-reliance, emotional independence is even more important to the development of the characters.

Christianity

Christianity is portrayed in almost all of the books in some fashion. In most of the stories, there are casual references to characters going to church, but they do not occupy a central role in the story. But Letts and Askew weave Christian imagery tightly into their texts. The title of *The Mercy Seat* is itself a Biblical reference, and the story is a modern retelling of the story of Cain

and Abel. In *Fire in Beulah*, the character of Japheth is linked by name to one of the sons of the biblical Noah. In *Harpson*, in addition to being a sharecropper, Sharon's father is an itinerant preacher. The character of Profit also has Christian overtones. In *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, the congregation of the AME Church takes in Bui Kahn. In *Where the Heart Is*, Sister Husband is one of the most developed representations of Christian kindness. She gives Novalee a home and she gives the citizens of Sequoyah the Bible "one chapter at a time." In this same book, moderation in religion is seen as positive, whereas more extreme beliefs are shown negatively. For example, it is fundamentalist Christians who kidnap Novalee's baby.

Family and Community

Family and community are important themes in all of the novels. In the case of American Indian writers, extended families unified around numerous kin are common and portrayed as the norm. In contrast, Letts' families are based on those people with whom characters choose to live and care for regardless of blood relationship. In the *Death Down Home* mystery series, family loyalty and ties draw the characters back to Oklahoma from across the

globe. In most of the books, family ties are portrayed as positive images that provide a sense of belonging and support in difficult times.

Other novels portray more complex family and community relationships. For the character of Edith Lewis in *The Mask Maker*, family and community are social forces pushing for conformity to marriage standards, ones she has no intention of following. And Askew often portrays family as a toxic social force. The two brothers in *The Mercy Seat*, while tied by family bonds, despise each other and eventually both are killed by another family member.

Art

A new theme that did not exist in the pre-World War II novels is art. The Edith Lewis character in *The Mask Maker* is a professional visual artist and art teacher. Nicky Titus, in *The Down Home Heifer Heist*, is a full-time professional photographer, and by the end of *Where the Heart Is*, Novalee Nation is a part-time photographer. Tema, in *Shell Shaker*, is an actress.

Art is a redemptive force for most such characters. The exceptions are the characters involved in country music. Willie Jack, in *Where the Heart Is*, becomes a

country singer, but it does not help him reform his character. Daniel Bib hatches the cattle-thieving scheme in *The Down Home Heifer Heist* to finance a career in country music, and in *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, Brenda repeatedly steals from her mother, supposedly to go to Nashville or Las Vegas to pursue a career singing country music. It may be country music's close association with anti-intellectualism that causes female writers to view it with suspicion.

Images of Displacement

Displacement is not a new theme in Oklahoma literature. For example, Steinbeck's Joad family is forcibly displaced from Oklahoma, and matters only get worse after they fail to find stable employment and a place to live after migrating to California. However, displacement is a prominent concern for many contemporary authors too, many of whom engage it more comprehensively than their predecessors did. In contemporary novels, the metaphor of displacement is given many different voices and in many ways replaces the theme of mobility. In the early novels, migration to a new place was often seen as the best bet for improving a character's life. In contemporary novels, finding a way to alleviate

alienation and to make your current location into home is of greater concern. For example, in Hogan's *Mean Spirit* the Osage have been displaced from their native lands to Oklahoma, and are being displaced yet again, this time from their land in Oklahoma because of the discovery of oil in their territory. In Glancy's *The Mask Maker*, Edith is alienated by her mixed blood status, but Howe's Choctaws in *Shell Shaker*, while feeling alienated and deeply scarred by the past, are beginning to find their place in post-removal Oklahoma by reviving ideas of community that were lost during their forced relocation from Mississippi in the nineteenth century.

Alienation and obsession are also important qualities held by characters in the books by Sandstrom, Letts, and Askew. Both of Sandstrom's main characters are outsiders: Nicky literally, and Sam too because he doesn't quite fit the mold in which his family wants to cast him. In *Song of the Bones*, Chantalene is an orphan who doesn't quite fit into her hometown because of the alleged transgression of her parents. For Letts, people are often perennial outsiders: the abandoned pregnant girl who gives birth in Wal-Mart, and the Vietnam veteran who can't quite reintegrate into mainstream society. And

all of the major Askeew characters are outsiders with deep secrets that eat away at their lives. For the Lodis in *The Mercy Seat*, the secrets lie in the laws they broke before they came to Indian Territory. For Althea, in *Fire in Beulah*, it is her rural antecedents.

For the white settlers who came to Oklahoma during the land runs, Oklahoma was a place of hope and endless possibility. Unfortunately, many more settlers came to the state than it could support, a situation made worse by subsequent oil booms that brought still more people to the state. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, despair became a central theme. Steinbeck's place-defining novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, cemented the idea of rootless exiles as a defining characteristic of Oklahomans in the national imagination.

Contemporary writers do not leave readers without hope for the future. The Choctaws in *Shell Shaker* reclaim their past and present by honoring their communal traditions. The Novalee character in *Where the Heart Is* gets her house without wheels by becoming part of the larger community and by making friends that support her as she learns the skills she will need to make a better life for herself and her daughter.

Final Comments

Contemporary novels set in Oklahoma's past portray different images than novels written in the past. In *Cimarron*, the settlement of Oklahoma was a heroic act. In *The Mercy Seat*, settlement is an act of desperation. In books like *Cimarron*, American Indians are known only through their association with white settlers. In Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, Indians are known through their own agency. They choose to retreat from the white world of that novel because of the capricious way it treats them.

Contemporary women writers no longer represent the past through the idealized lens of Manifest Destiny, nor do they see their ancestors as the downtrodden farmers encountered in *The Grapes of Wrath*. They're willing to come face-to-face with the uncomfortable truth that most settlers were not heroic. Immigrants came to Oklahoma with many motives, some of them less than honorable. And Indians were not savages but people with hopes and dreams for themselves and their families that they wanted to maintain and protect. Their dreams are different than those of the colonizers, but no less valid.

Contemporary Oklahoma writers strive to fill in gaps like these and avoid the omissions in the books of their

childhood that now seem so obvious to twenty-first-century readers. In doing so, those that win institutional awards for good writing contribute to changes, however small, in the longstanding authorized images of Oklahoma. When these books were selected by the Oklahoma Center for the Book as the best fictional stories about Oklahoma, their place-images may have gained an enduring legacy that confirms or amends others developed a long time ago.

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Appendix A - National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Books

The books on the Big Read List include:

- *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya
- *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury
- *My Antonia* by Willa Cather
- The Poetry of Emily Dickinson
- *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- *A Lesson before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines
- *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett
- *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway
- *Sun, Stone, and Shadows* edited by Jorge F. Hernandez
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- *Washington Square* by Henry James
- The poetry of Robinson Jeffers
- *The Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula Le Guin
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- The poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- *The Thief and the Dogs* by Naguib Mahfouz
- *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers
- *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
- *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick
- *Housekeeping* by Marilyn Robinson
- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck
- *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan,
- *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy
- *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain
- *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton
- *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder
- *Old School* by Tobias Wolff

Appendix B: Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma Literary Six-Sacks

The 2004 Literary Six-Pack included the following fiction titles:

- *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* by Billy Letts,
- *Shell Shaker* by Leanne Howe
- *The Strickland's* by Edwin Lanham.

The 2004 nonfiction titles include:

- *The Burning* by Tim Madigan
- *Red Dirt: Growing up Okie* by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz
- *Way down Yonder in the Indian Nation: Writings from America's Heartland* by Michal Wallis

The 2005 fiction titles include:

- *Letter from Home* by Carolyn Hart
- *University Boulevard* by A.B. Hollingsworth
- *Walking the Choctaw Road* by Tim Tingle
- The 2005 nonfiction titles include:
- *Ralph Ellison a Biography* by Paul Burke and Denyvetta Davis
- *Bound for Glory* by Woody Guthrie
- *Letters from the Dust Bowl* by Caroline Henderson

The 2006 fiction titles include:

- *Whose Names Are Unknown* by Sanora Babb
- *The Saints and Sinners Okay County* by Dayna Dunbar
- *Mean Spirit* by Linda Hogan
- The 2006 nonfiction titles include:
- *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside 1904-1920* by Jim Bissett
- *Taking Indian Lands: the Cherokee (Jerome) Commission, 1889-1893* by William T. Hagan
- *Will Rogers a Biography* by Ben Yagoda

The 2007 fiction titles include:

- *Fire in Beulah* by Rilla Askew
- *The Old Buzzard Had It Coming* by Donis Casey
- *Dance of the Thunderdogs* by Kirk Mitchell

The 2007 nonfiction titles include:

- *Cherokee Medicine Man* by Robert J. Conley
- *Ramblin' Man: the Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* by Ed Cray
- *Prairie City: the Story of an American community* by Angie Debo

Appendix C: Oklahoma Book Award Winners - Fiction

- 1990 • Robert Love Taylor, *The Lost Sister*
- 1991 • Linda Hogan, *Mean Spirit*
- 1992 • Robert L. Duncan, *The Serpent's Mark*
- 1993 • Rilla Askew, *Strange Business*
- 1994 • Eve Sandstrom, *Down Home Heifer Heist*
- 1995 • William Bernhardt, *Perfect Justice*
- 1996 • Billie Letts, *Where the Heart Is*
- 1997 • Stewart O'Nan, *The Names of the Dead*
- 1998 • Rilla Askew, *The Mercy Seat*
- 1999 • Billie Letts, *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*
- 2000 • William Bernhardt, *Dark Justice*
- 2001 • Carolyn Hart, *Sugarplum Dead*
- 2002 • Douglas Kelley, *The Captain's Wife*
- 2003 • Diane Glancy, *The Mask Maker*
- 2004 • M.K. Preston, *Song of the Bones*
- 2005 • Will Thomas, *Some Danger Involved*
- 2006 • David Kent, *The Black Jack Conspiracy*
- 2007 • Sheldon Russell, *Dreams to Dust: A Tale of the Oklahoma Land Rush*
- 2008 • Rilla Askew, *Harpsong*

Appendix D: Potential Place-Defining Novels (Shortridge 1991)

Author	Locale	Title and Date
Walter Scott	South	<i>Marmon</i> (1808)
Walter Scott	South	<i>The Lady of the Lake</i> (1810)
Walter Scott	South	<i>Waverly</i> (1814)
Walter Scott	South	<i>Guy Mannering</i> (1815)
Walter Scott	South	<i>Rob Roy</i> (1871)
Walter Scott	South	<i>Ivanhoe</i> (1819)
Walter Scott	South	<i>Kenilworth</i> (1821)
Washington Irving	Hudson Valley	<i>A History of New York</i> (1809)
Washington Irving	New York City	<i>The Sketch Book</i> (1819)
James F. Cooper	Western Frontier	<i>The Pioneers</i> (1823)
James F. Cooper	Western Frontier	<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> (1826)
James F. Cooper	Western Frontier	<i>The Prairie</i> (1827)
James K. Paulding	Northern Frontier	<i>The Dutchman's Fireside</i> (1831)
Joseph P. Kennedy	Southern Frontier	<i>Horse-Shoe Robinson</i> (1835)
Augustus Longstreet	South	<i>Georgia Scenes, Characters, & Incidents</i> (1935)
William G. Simms	Southern Frontier	<i>The Yemassee</i> (1835)
Robert M. Bird	Western Frontier	<i>Nick of the Woods</i> (1837)
Daniel P. Thompson	Northern New England	<i>The Green Mountain Boys</i> (1839)
Nathaniel Hawthorne	New England	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> (1850)
Nathaniel Hawthorne	New England	<i>The House of Seven Gables</i> (1851)
E.D.E.N. Southworth	South	<i>The Curse of Clifton</i> (1852)
E.D.E.N. Southworth	South	<i>The Hidden Hand</i> (1859)
E.D.E.N. Southworth	South	<i>The Fatal Marriage</i> (1863)
E.D.E.N. Southworth	South	<i>Ishmael</i> (1864)
E.D.E.N.	South	<i>Self-Raised</i> (1864)

Southworth		
Harriet B. Stowe	South	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> (1852)
Henry W. Longfellow	Western Frontier,	<i>The Song of Hiawatha</i> (1855)
Henry W. Longfellow	New England	<i>The Courtship of Miles Standish</i> (1858)
James G. Whittier	New England	<i>Snow-Bound</i> (1866)
Bret Harte	Far West	<i>The Heathen Chinees</i> (1870)
Bret Harte	Far West	<i>The Luck of Roaring Camp & Other Stories</i> (1870)
Edward Eggleston	Appalachia	<i>The Hoosier School-Master</i> (1871)
Mark Twain	Far West, Border South	<i>Roughing It</i> (1872)
Mark Twain	Far West, Border South	<i>Tom Sawyer</i> (1876)
Mark Twain	Far West, Border South	<i>Life on the Mississippi</i> (1883)
Mark Twain	Far West, Border South	<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (1884)
Joel C. Harris	South	<i>Uncle Remus</i> (1881)
James W. Riley	Midwest	<i>The Old Swimmin' Hole & 'Leven More Poems</i> (1883)
Helen H. Jackson	Southern California	<i>Ramona</i> (1884)
Edward N. Wescott	New York State	<i>David Harum</i> (1898)
Irving Bacheller	New England	<i>Eben Holden</i> (1900)
Owen Wister	Interior West	<i>The Virginian</i> (1902)
John Fox, Jr.	Appalachia	<i>The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come</i> (1903)
John Fox, Jr.	Appalachia	<i>The Trail of the Lonesome Pine</i> (1903)
Jack London	Alaska	<i>The Call of the Wild</i> (1903)
Gene Stratton-	Midwest	<i>Freckles</i> (1904)

Porter		
Gene Stratton-Porter	Midwest	The Girl of the Limberlost (1909)
Gene Stratton-Porter	Midwest	The Harvester (1901)
Gene Stratton-Porter	Midwest	Laddie (1913)
Rex Beach	Interior West	The Spoilers(1905)
Rex Beach	Interior West	The Barrier(1908)
O Henry	New York City	The Four Million (1906)
Upton Sinclair	Chicago	<i>The Jungle</i> (1906)
Robert W. Service	Alaska	<i>The Spell of the Yukon & other Verse</i> (1907)
Harold B. Wright	Ozarks, Colorado	<i>Shepherd of the Hills</i> (1907)
Harold B. Wright	Ozarks, Colorado	<i>The Calling of Dan Matthews</i> (1909)
Harold B. Wright	Ozarks, Colorado	<i>The Winning of Barbara Worth</i>
Zane Gray	Interior West	<i>Riders of the Purple Sage</i> (1912)
Booth Tarkington	Midwest	<i>The Turmoil</i> (1915)
Edward Guest	Midwest	<i>A Heap O' Livin'</i> (1916)
Sinclair Lewis	Midwest	<i>Main Street</i> (1920)
Sinclair Lewis	Midwest	<i>Babbitt</i> (1922)
Edna Ferber	Great Plains	<i>Cimarron</i> (1930)
Erskine Caldwell	South	<i>Tobacco Road</i> (1932)
Erskine Caldwell	South	<i>God's Little Acre</i> (1933)
Walter D. Edmonds	New York state	<i>Drums along the Mohawk</i> (1936)
Margaret Mitchell	South	<i>Gone With The Wind</i> (1936)
Marjorie K. Rawlings	South	<i>The Yearling</i> (1938)
John Steinbeck	Great Plains	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (1939)
Betty Smith	New York City	<i>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</i> (1943)