

## Volume 3 Issue 2: Editorial

# Introduction to the Indigenous Special Issue of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*

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The genesis of this special issue of Native American working-class writings occurred in 1961 when I was born in Hobart, Oklahoma, the seat of Kiowa County, Oklahoma which was originally and remains Kiowa-Comanche-Apache and Caddo-Wichita lands. My mother was the daughter of an enrolled Absentee/Western Delaware man, my grandpa who raised me, who was also descended of Scots, Scots-Irish and Welsh peoples. My grandmother, mostly Scots-Irish, was a close descendant of the Chism family—of the extended family of Jesse Chism, himself Scots-Irish and Carolina Cherokee, as was my grandmother—although she was not a half-blood like Chism. I am aware that some readers will not find this family history very interesting, but, where I come from, ‘who are your people?’ is an essential question to answer, an early and enduring form of a statement of positionality.

I was a Head Start child of a mother who didn’t finish high school and a father who did, and who, shortly after high school graduation ceremonies attended in a borrowed suit, found himself a bomber in the Korean War. My father’s father’s family was mostly Dutch; his mother, as our family story goes, was the child of a Creek girl sent out to service in a white man’s home—a girl who was raped by the man she worked for. Her daughter, my grandmother, was adopted by neighbors, white neighbors. I am not the descendant of an Indian Princess, Cherokee or otherwise.

After the divorce, my mother took me and my brother back home to Wewoka, Oklahoma. Wewoka (the name might be familiar from the Sterlin Harjo film, *Barking Water*, the translation from Mvskoke of Wewoka), founded by Black Seminole John Horse, is the capital of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma—the boundary of Seminole County is contiguous with the pre-existing boundary of the Seminole Nation. In fifth grade, in our public school, all of us studied, through a Johnson-O’Malley grant, the Mvskoke language, the language-group of the Seminoles and Creeks.

Because I was from a working-class (sometimes poor) family, most of my friends were African-American, Indian, and other marginally-white kids—all of us were all working-class and poor. Those we called ‘upper-class’ in our small, rural hometown were actually middle-class, as I learned once I went to college at the age of thirty-seven. In our town, class-lines were often deeper than color-lines. When I went back to my hometown for the first time in years, for my thirtieth high school reunion, the class-lines were still there, palpable, almost visible like a fluorescent-yellow

highway-stripe dividing the room. Those of us who were from working-class and poor families hung out on one side of the shabby, small-town country club building and, on the other side were the white kids of middle-class families—the Soc’s (pronounced sōsh-es—short for ‘socialites’) as we said then and as Oklahoma writer S.E. Hinton wrote in *The Outsiders*<sup>1</sup>.

There were few crossings of the class-line at the reunion—football players of all colors and classes met each other in the middle of the room—literally—then returned to their corners as if the bell had rung in a boxing match. I crossed once to visit with a man who, in 1977, was the only boy who’d go to prom with me, my next-door neighbor. He was working-class, too, at the time but ran with a ‘better’ crowd and eventually became a state representative. He reminded me that he loved poetry in high school and that he was not surprised that’s what I’d done with my life. After our short conversation, I, too, returned to our side of the room. I was finishing my Ph.D. that year at the age of forty-eight, yet, my friends and I, most of us anxious or resentful (or both) about returning to the mean class-divisions of our youth, put a sign on of our side of the room to announce our opinion of the entire affair: ‘The Kiss My Ass Table.’ It was the only integrated table in the room. It’s strange to me that next year, for our fortieth reunion, I’ll be the ‘Distinguished Alumna.’ Class-consciousness still runs through my body like a river through rock.

Regardless of my complicated heritage, I know exactly who I am: a more-or-less ethnically-typical ‘white’ Okie of my generation in southeast Oklahoma—a detribalized, lost-language mixed-blood, working-class person—Scots-Irish, three tribes, no card. I am vehemently *not* a wannabe—I knew and know too many tribally-embedded Indians and understood well-enough, even at a young age, their histories and contemporaneous struggles and the privilege granted by my white-ish, green-eyed body.

I became more aware of what privilege meant by readings in graduate courses, by engaging in long discussions with friends of color, by being made a semi-official captive of Comanche and Pawnee families, and, most of all, by driving my Southern Cheyenne partner (father of my only son) and our many Indian friends around Oklahoma and always being the one who went into the quick stop late at night to buy beer (it was dangerous for them to do so). By bailing my son out of jail more than once for ‘walking while Ind’n.’

All of this is to say that I always, in my limited way, thought of Native people as ‘working-class’ people. Certainly all the Indians I knew growing up were—the height of class/race-crossing that I witnessed until I left the county was that some Natives and African-Americans (two racial categories that overlapped in southeastern Oklahoma) became school teachers or nurses. I am aware, now, that this is not always the case, but, given the statistics on the poverty rate among Native peoples in the United States, it’s not far off the mark, either.

The re-distribution of wealth is an old tradition among many Indigenous peoples—as Michael Harkin notes in his essay in this issue on the Heiltsuk people of British Columbia, it’s called ‘potlatch’ in the Pacific Northwest. My son’s people, the Southern Cheyenne, call it, in English, a ‘giveaway.’ African-Americans in Harlem participated in communal giving through rent parties so that friends and neighbors would be able to avoid both eviction and the embarrassment of

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<sup>1</sup> Hinton, S.E. 1967, *The Outsiders*, New York, Viking Press.

charity. I have no doubt that there are many other similar traditions in working-class and Indigenous communities.

Therefore, in order to ‘give back,’ to amplify the voices of the many Native and working-class people who have sustained me and fed me and welcomed me, I have chosen to use my privilege by serving the Returning the Gift Indigenous Literary Festival (both 1992 and 2017), by editing an Indigenous literature special issue of *World Literature Today*, and by editing this special issue of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*. I also view the writings by the authors in this issue as a form of ‘giving back.’

In this issue, Ruby Murray shares a flash memoir that reveals schisms of class-status among her people, the Osage. Todd Fuller gives a passionate poetic report on the radical act of working to establish tribal colleges, particularly the Pawnee Nation College — his wife and children are Pawnee. Brian Hosmer interrogates the role of Indigenous arts and crafts as working-class phenomena. Kim Shuck, a Cherokee woman and current Poet Laureate of San Francisco, distills her family’s urban, Native, working-class experiences into powerful poetry. Theodore Van Alst (Lakota) also writes from the perspective of an urban Indian in his heart-wrenching short story, ‘By the Slice.’ Terry Easton and Castiel Dixon consider Native working-class constructions in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*. James Mackay offers a reading of Santee Frazier’s working-class Cherokee poetry as well as an interview with Frazier.

My only regret for this project is that I wish I could have engaged more Native people in writing about their working-class lives for this issue. I hope this is only a beginning to a continued presence of Native peoples in working-class studies. We, the working-class studies people, recognize you, the Indigenous peoples of the world, and are actively listening for your voices.

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