

Falling Through Class

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Abstract

This flash essay responds lyrically to the contradictions of class identification for a citizen of the Osage Nation in northeastern Oklahoma associated with social changes resulting from the discovery and exploitation of oil and gas resources.

Keywords

Osage Nation, tribal energy resources, fossil fuels, energy tribes, military life, fathers, daughters

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Wah zha zhi have immense pride in our history and our strength as negotiators, warriors and entrepreneurs. Osage ancestral lands stretched across thirteen states, from southwestern Colorado down to northwestern Louisiana and up the Ohio River Valley, before we were constrained to a reservation in northeastern Oklahoma.¹ Standing beside a map of the territory that looks like an elephant with its trunk extended toward the Chesapeake Bay, our elder Eddie Red Eagle says, ‘We controlled a lot of territory.’ He gestures to the elephant’s trunk. ‘I think that narrow piece was a lot broader. How did we do that? Wahoin. Everybody working together.’ Wahoin refers to the way we address each other, acknowledging the importance of our kin and relationships.

I think of the ways people talk to and about Natives. Too many people have said to me, ‘You all were hunters and gatherers. You didn’t have a written language, right?’ The implication being that we were primitive, like cave people, not really evolved. They talk about the oral tradition with a bias toward written language, as if sophistication, scientific knowledge and philosophy cannot exist without it. With our background as members of a sovereign nation, as diplomats managing traders across a vast territory, Osages have been a proud people. Some even say, haughty.

¹ See Osage ancestral lands <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/who-we-are/historic-preservation/ancestral-map> See also, <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov>, the Nation’s website, and www.osagenews.org.

In Oklahoma as a child, I rode before my eldest uncle on his horse on the reservation. He was a rancher more connected with horses than people all his life. He was born in 1898, before the oil wealth had flooded the reservation. My father was the youngest, born a decade after the Osage oil resources were divided between 2,229 tribal members as directed by the US Congress when traditional Osages lost their battle to hold all of the reservation in common.

My uncles received oil money, which meant they raced thoroughbred horses and ignored our elders' warnings about drinking. The small houses in Indian Camp held chandeliers and gilt framed portraits. My aunt was a professional archivist, a historian; my father studied geology before he enlisted for World War II.

'It's not easy being Osage,' Herman Mongrain Lookout, an esteemed Osage elder, says. We live surrounded by mega-rich ranchers who want to control all of Osage County, to obtain the mineral rights under the rolling hills where cattle graze on lush blue stem grass. The town of Pawhuska has waxed and waned from the days when Osages camped by Bird Creek, to the years when the boom and Osage money spawned a five-story flatiron building filled with lawyers and guardians. These days a row of dusty, empty storefronts is giving way to shops for tourists. We Osages have intense family relationships and consider ourselves likely to hold grudges. There seem to be more than the usual number of bitterly remembered lawsuits, the rancor associated with inheritances.

Almost a century after the boom of the 1920s when the *New York Times* and other national newspapers and magazines were filled with images of blanket-wearing Osages in cars driven by chauffeurs, we remain an energy tribe. The Osage have a friendly relationship with TransCanada, a pipeline company, at the same time we supported the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's effort to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline from endangering their land and waters.

We live a split screen reality, now as then. Oil reserves bind Osages together, but they also fracture families and create rivalries between shareholders of mineral rights and non-shareholders, between on-reservation and off-reservation Osages. I lived outside the Osage Nation as a child growing up on military reservations in France and Japan. I spent more time outside the United States than in. As the eldest daughter in an Osage/Afro-Caribbean family, I understand community stratified by color and class and rank.

For our family the delineations of class by type of labor disintegrated – fractionated like our headrights, divided between my parents' family backgrounds, the changing nature of work, the history of Osage oil money. My father was born when oil revenue was soaring. He was a child, when his eldest brother, a generation older, was a work-hardened rancher. In our house, my father spent his time inside, not hunting dove or coyote as his brothers did. Not focusing on making money, but reading, as if his inner life was sufficient. For a while he cooked gourmet food, preparing Sunday evening snacks after a mid-day meal served on a damask table cloth, an artifact of being brought up staunchly Methodist. He spent more time reading than anything else, besides forty hours of work plus commute. He was steady as a metronome. He wasn't mechanical and didn't fix things—it's Osage to buy new when something breaks. His admonition to buy the best is also Osage. After a settlement, or a large quarterly payment, someone will ask, what did you buy that was really nice? Meaning a piece of fine furniture or a car. Being frugal isn't familiar.

Our world doesn't correlate easily to theories of class. Osage need a finer mesh to acknowledge the differences between occupation, income and education, between gender and culture across generations. Osage are rooted in ranching, raising animals and leasing grassland. We are blue-collar oil industry workers, as well as oil and gas producers. In the military, my father, an officer, and by extension our family, his dependents, were white collar. After US President Eisenhower trimmed the officer corps following WW II, my father served as an enlisted man in the Quartermaster Corps. We were Osages, who grew up outside of the country in a military family that was neither rich nor middle, but some of each at the same time.

Author Bio

Ruby Hansen Murray is the winner of the 2017 Montana Nonfiction Prize and awarded fellowships at Ragdale and Hedgebrook. Her work appears in *World Literature Today*, *CutBank*, *About Place*, *The Rumpus*, *Yellow Medicine Review* and *Indian Country Today*. She is a writer and photographer, who received an MFA from The Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. A citizen of the Osage Nation from the Hominy District with West Indian roots, she lives along the Columbia River.