

RESPONSE

NEW TREES, NEW MEDICINES, NEW WARS: THE CHICKASAW REMOVAL*

Linda Hogan

Chickasaw Nation Writer in Residence

TRAIL OF TEARS: OUR REMOVAL

121

With lines unseen the land was broken.
When surveyors came, we knew
what the prophet had said was true,
this land with lines unseen, would be taken,
and we'd never see pay.

So, you who live there now,
don't forget to love it, thank it
the place that was once our forests, the ponds, the mosses,
the swamplands with birds and more lowly creatures.

As for us, we walked into the military strength of hunger
and war for that land we still dream.
As the ferry crossed the distance,
or the walkers left behind their loved ones,
think how we took along our cats and kittens, the puppies
we also loved, and the horses, so many,
one by one stolen, taken by the many thieves
along the trail. We took clothing, dishes,
thinking there would be something to start new life,
believing justice lived in the world,
So have compassion for that land at least.

Every step was one away from the songs,
old dances, memories, some of us dark and not speaking English,
some of us white, or married to the dark, children of the translators

the half-white, all of us watched by America, all of us
longing for trees for shading, homing, rooting,
even for food along this way.

You would think those of us born later
would fight for justice, for peace,
for the new land, its trees being taken.
You would think
the struggle would be over
between the two worlds, in this place
that is now our knowledge
our new belonging, our being,
and we'd never again care for the notion of maps
or American wars, or the god of their sky,
thinking of those things we were forced to leave behind,
moving country, stolen home,
the world measured inch by inch, mile by mile,
hectares, all measurements, even the trail of our tears.

122

With all the new fierce light, heat, drought
the missing water, you'd think
in another red century, the old wisdom
might exist if we considered enough
that even before the new beliefs
we were once whole,
that now our bodies and minds remain
the measured geography.

L.H.

NEW TREES, NEW MEDICINES, NEW WARS: THE CHICKASAW REMOVAL

We do not want the land of any red people; the United States have land enough.
(Andrew Jackson, US President)

In spite of President Jackson's words, promises, and a stack of treaties with us, he forced through The Indian Removal Bill in 1830. Tribal nations from the entire country were to be removed into what is now called "Oklahoma," beginning with the major Southeastern Indian nations. At the time, the new location was known only as "Indian Territory." The U.S. government's plan was to eventually place all the indigenous peoples into this territory and to build a large fence around it so none could leave or escape.

Removal began almost immediately with our sister nation, the Choctaw, and

continued with smaller parties of other tribes. Nearly all of the removals were difficult, some by water, some by land, but all crossing the Mississippi River. After one boatload of people drowned, water travel was not a frequent choice. The Cherokee Removal is the most documented, for they declined to leave. The people were finally forced to leave at gunpoint, rounded up and penned in stock pens. This took place at the time gold was found in Cherokee country. New laws were enacted, so they could not take their case to court or appeal to the federal government for their own safety. Their removal is the most well documented one, with a great loss of life, but certainly not the only tragic journey to the new lands. All the forced removals resulted in deaths and trauma.

As for us, the Chickasaw, we prolonged our departure. Our leadership had journeyed to the new region more than once to find suitable lands. Finally, after several trips across the great artery of water, the Mississippi River, an appropriate location was found. After it was inspected, however, the chosen new land was found to be in a region that was not yet taken from Mexico. So, when finally had to leave, our new home was land we leased from the Choctaw. We were the only people who had, as yet, no permanent location.

123

With colonization beginning in the 1500s and our people later captured and enslaved in the West Indies, we had all been through numerous and continuous wars with the arrival of each European country. Nearly a hundred tribes became extinct. We warred with each wave of Europeans, then took sides between them, and then fought one another as they created conflicts between tribes. In addition, the land of the Chickasaws was in a coveted location, at the center of trade routes both by water and land. It was also the richest land in what is called the Great American Bottom.

We had food sources in the forests, our own gardens and field, and from the waters of Mississippi, Alabama, and parts of Tennessee. We had communities in other diverse locations that were already ceded to the American government.

We loved our forests and our fields. When the early elders said they knew the sound of the wind in old growth forests, and that its song was different than the wind in newer forests, we can be certain that our people had listened, seen, touched, and known the trees most intimately. Our Chicaza ancestors lived with great trees, surrounded by the sounds of wind through the branches. They knew the sight of sunlight flickering through leaves, and the feel of rain dripping from evergreens only to evaporate and fall again in the long-leaf pine forest regions. Large numbers of birds flew in and out of the forests and migrated along the rivers and waterways. These once included the ivory-billed woodpecker, and clouds of passenger pigeons, even the crows which ate the insects off plants growing in the fields. We lived with the night calls of animals, the sounds of running waters, and in a close relationship between humans and the natural world.

Our minds and hearts were formed by this world. Forests and wetlands, long reeds in marshes, areas of prairie with plants and flowers blooming in waves one after the other, long grasses moving together like waters attracting buffalo and deer, all of

utmost significance to our survival.

The people of that living time had full consciousness of the relationship between plants and themselves, plants with other plants, and even the plants with animal species. All of these made up one singular community.

With an abundance of food sources, we shared and traded with others. We had a system of trade and barter. We built homes and decorated them with a medicine wheel painted on the floor, the walls painted with artwork and woven mats. We created lives that made room for our own traditions and ceremonies as well as the religious beliefs and education systems imposed upon us by the Americans.

Our history went millennia into the past, but in spite of wars and other acts of violence toward us, the most momentous occasion for us was the forced removal from our homelands.

We held out as long as possible before we had to leave. We began our migrations late and the last party left for Indian Territory during 1837-38.

124 Our own familial part of our tribe left from near Holly Springs, Mississippi. A few years ago I was a guest writer there in the location now belonging to the Audubon Society. After all these years, I still felt an emotional connection for this place, a feeling for the land.

We descended from the mound-building, architecturally brilliant Mississippians, who built the city of Cahokia and numerous other structures, including animal effigy mounds, such as the great Serpent Mound. Some smaller mounds remained near Holly Springs on what is now private property.

One night while in Holly Springs, I walked into the dark woods among the trunks of trees, hearing only the autumn leaves beneath my feet. I stopped when I heard a small animal run across the leaves and I had an experience that can't be explained. I saw a great light in the close distance to my right. I remained, looking at it a long time. At first I wondered if there might be a fire, then thought perhaps a town existed closer than I knew. But when I turned toward the sound of an owl, then looked back, the light had disappeared.

The next morning I was looking through the library and I came across some words about the last night our group of people camped. It was in that same location where I had seen light. There they prepared for their removal over land and across the great river, the Misha Sipokni, once named The Long Person.

That night, people rode about on horseback and carrying torches as they organized the start of the long journey of wagons and horses. It had to be decided who would lead and in what order the people would leave, with special attention to the elders, and to those with children, or the sick. As it happened, some of the torches lit dead trees on fire. Because of the weather and climate, the fire did not spread through the rich, moist forest, but according to the book, the fire of the dead trees could be seen from long distances.

Another story that remains always in my mind is how the Chickasaw people, on the night before leaving their homeland for unknown territory, were seen touching

the trees, “their old friends,” gently touching the leaves, weeping into them to say good-bye. The trees were a beloved people. The forests about Chickasaw settlements had always been well tended and cared for, as were as the gardens, berries, and the many medicinal plants. These forests, the gardens, and the waters had long produced food in plentiful supply, all without depleting the land. It was a sophisticated agriculture that had been passed down over centuries.

Now the people were headed to a location where the plants and medicines were unknown. Everything about the environment and the knowledge of plants would have to be newly learned.

★

When we speak of our removal, I’ve noted that we speak of it as if we experienced it ourselves. My writing students always wrote about this event, and each piece of writing about this journey was written in the present tense. I have found this same way of speaking about history with all my indigenous friends and acquaintances from other first nations, as well. We use the words “we” and not “they,” and speak of our histories in the present and I have come to think that for us these times are still alive and still taking place. History is present. Time is a variable. While the Indian past seems long ago to other Americans, it is a constant in the daily minds of our own people. It is even more so for those of us who have what we call “traditional minds,” who care for The People and the traditional manner of caring for our environment because we know this land is a living being and we walk on the blood of our histories.

125

Those of us who survived the history, and who live now, have lived through the terrible experience of our migration. There are numerous books written now, by native peoples, on historical trauma and post-traumatic stress in the younger generations. So when we speak of it in the present tense, it is truly a fully felt experience. Someone, some lives from the past, still live in our blood and the body and the spirit remember this event. Although it is my research that tells me about our foods and medicines in the southeast, another part has lived it. It is now our elders who have learned the medicines in the new land, now the state of Oklahoma, a word from our language meaning Red Land, including a linguistic turn that also means “people.”

★

My grandmother and grandfather, both Chickasaws, were youths at the time of the massacre at Wounded Knee. It took little time for news to move from place to place. The violence against the unarmed Lakota people was a transforming event for Indian people across the land. After that, many knew that to continue with our own ways and traditions would result in death. The next generation was the one who grew up

with more emphasis on learning English and on being Americans.

When I was young, our tribal dances were outlawed. So was the practice of traditional religions until 1978 when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was first set into law. This took place in a country with freedom of religion written into its articles of creation. Yet, hidden away in the hills outside of town, the dances continued, as did the language and other ways of knowing, and perceiving the environment in a way that had been greatly different than the way our lands were treated by the Americans.

Yet, as this piece of my work on our migration reveals, it could be the story of any of today's people being forced to flee their homes. It happens daily, the stories of refugees in other countries and their many losses, the forced removal of tribal people from their lands by continued colonization and warfare.

126 FIRE OF COLD, TRAIL OF BAD LIGHT

It is 1837. The fire of coldness is all around us even in the warmth of sun. We are leaving the fields where we worked to grow corn, beans, squash, gasses, and the many other plants. Our people are leaving the great mother that is our home, even though many of us have learned the American ways. We know how to write and to read English. We have learned their way for our survival.

Leaving old Town, Old Fields, Old Grounds Once, Long Town. Leaving cedar trees, hickory, black walnut, and a world already changed to plantations, we are leaving our great mother where the red birds and animals of night dwell about us. We are leaving the places where we once laughed, Olale, the old word for laughter.

Chickaza, we loved the trees. We said Goodbye to them the night before we left our homes, still wearing our old turbans, walking away, riding wagons, taking with us all that we could. We touched the beautiful leaves, the spirit of trees, the sacred trees. Then we entered their darkness and passed through. We passed away from the mounds of earth made by the old ones still inside our blood.

I saw those who had been our friends for many years before this wretched time. Now they are new strangers. They turned against us so quickly. Even the paling of our skin, the lightening of our blood didn't save us from being forced to leave, and how all have turned from us so suddenly, so fully.

The loss is more than can be spoken in words, and yet we know to stay would be to lose our lives, our children, and theirs, the future of all our people.

We are so innocent preparing to leaving. We take along our puppies and baskets with kittens, our famous Chickasaw ponies, small and stocky, a special breed that was desired throughout the southeast, shipped up the river on flatboat for trade and sale. We take cooking pots, dishes, furnishings we might need for beginning new lives. We take our lives and souls with us, but our spirits reside in this land, all of it. It dwells in us.

We are leaving our homelands, preparing for the trail across land to another territory, one unworkable, one not yet created, one of hostility. We are leaving the birds we have so loved and the knowledge of their ways, the migratory pathways along their river routes. Leaving our home, the land-starved are moving in before we have even packed. For them, our world belongs to them. We are leaving the trees that have cared for us, sustained us with food and the perfect light for all our remembered lives. Leaving we say goodbye to the trees, our old friends, to the leaves, and we are weeping and speaking our own language to the trees.

The night before leaving, we ready ourselves. No sleeping. When the red morning dawned, smelling of smoke, we move toward a new future. The next morning, we are walking.

★

127

It is Arkansas now. From land whose waters run into the great river. From behind the trees, eyes watch us pass. They watch everything, waiting for the moment to take the horses, anything that can be carried, taken, later the wagons which remain behind us. The trees are witnesses to these crimes against our lives. The Americans, even though they know what is done to us, have no conscience to guide them.

Still we carry the ancient coals for our new fires, carry them in a box with sand and moss over this trail where people cry.

We have paid for our own removal, but I think how still the land-hungry settlers began moving into our homes while we still were in them, trying to prepare, to pack. Our lives were taken over, our homes with new people inhabiting them, our harvest ready for the taking.

But no matter the payments in advance, no matter how well our leaders calculated our journey and negotiated the delivery of food along the way, the Americans do not deliver the food. We have starvation walking with us. When a delivery has been made, the provisions are rotten and filled with worms. As it turns out, we learn the food has been sitting in a store-house for five years, left over from what was promised other tribes before us.

There are places we are stopped along the way by illness. Epidemics that passed through years back return to us. Smallpox. Cholera. Yellow Fever. Illness arrives as if on the fastest animal.

We are walking and Andrew Jackson signed away my mother's life. He signed away the life of my son I have carried in my tired arms so long my sister says, You have to let him go. Some of us must survive and go on. We are losing so many.

I want to build a grave house over him, I tell her, and she says, We cannot stop. There is no way to do such a thing. We are lucky enough to bury him, and we are. Because soon we leave our dead for the wolves and black big birds to find.

She said, You must walk, even on broken feet, broken land, broken promises, broken

heart. They are calling in more soldiers to keep us moving.

But we want to hunt for food. Hunger has worn us to the bone.

I have become an old woman, getting back up from the ground after I fall, even though it is the earth I love and care for. It would be so easy to remain.

In this cold, I wrap the feet of my daughter with all the cloth I am able to muster, even my own, from my feet, my skirt, and my skin is now so cold as I carry her, so light, and how could she walk one yard more. The winter snow may have been beautiful another time but not here, not now, as we also carry all the broken promises, treaties, signatures on worthless papers. And still all along the way the white Americans watch, offering us nothing. Even the weather is not as cold as they. Seeing how little we have.

The elders are leaving their bodies and as they die, we promise ourselves to remember them always, to hold their knowledge.

128 *When finally we reach water, someone sees the bones nearby and say, The water is sickness to your bodies, my friends. Do not drink it, even with your thirst. Yet we have so little to carry with us. But still there is the water of my tears when we are forced to leave our old people behind with a bowl of water and what little food remains for them.*

History is falling through this path, some of us carrying only our names now.

★

The journey was lengthy. We lost the oldest people with the most knowledge and wisdom. We lost the youngest. And when we reached the meeting place with the other parties of our nation, the water was not fit to drink. And yet the government charged us another \$720,000 for this journey of loss, after we had already paid for foods not provided, and paid the Choctaws to lease their land. It was a journey of genocide for all the southeastern removed, yet no one would have claimed that at the time.

And so we migrated from rich lands to drought-prone grasslands and new forests, a place now called Oklahoma. We arrived as invaders on the lands of tribal peoples already present. This placement of our people resulted in attacks by the Southern Plains tribes. Three forts were built for our protection. We recognized the situation as unfair to the Southern Plains people as well as to ourselves.

In addition, the Chickasaws needed to learn new trees, water sources, and the people lacked knowledge of the new medicinal plants. There were no implements or materials for beginning a new life.

Then, within twenty years, the Civil War began. We had earlier, in need of assistance promised and denied by the Americans, signed a treaty with the Confederate States of the South. This returned to the Southern tribes with a fury just as the people had begun to rebuild their lives.

Once again we were swept through history by the power of words.

NOTE

- * The presenter is from the Chickasaw nation, works there, and hears the stories people continue to tell. From an early age, she also had a mentor in medicinal knowledge, of which she is not a practitioner. This paper was spoken in the oral tradition and was not an academic paper on the researched migration of other peoples. Hogan is working on past Chickasaw writings with an emphasis on environmental history. She is also an author of books including novels, poetry and essays.