

As Monacan poet Karenne Wood held the audience of Jefferson's West suspended in our world at the beginning of the bicentennial in January 2003, so did Osage poet Carter Revard at St. Louis at the ending in September 2006.



LIVING IN THE HOLY LAND

By Carter Revard, Poet, Osage Nation
Presented at Lewis & Clark:
Currents of Change, Saint Louis, 2006

Forty score and seven years ago,
give or take a few Heavenly Days,
our Osage forebears brought forth,
on this continent, a new nation,
conceived in liberty and dedicated to
the proposition that all beings are created equal.

We had come down from the starry heavens
into this holy land, and we met here the mighty
Middle Waters, rolling evermore,
the Waters who come down from the Mountains of the West
and the Mountains of the East
and the Great Lakes of the North,
who move continually into the great
Waters of the South: we met them here,
the waters who make clean this Middle Earth,
the moving waters at their priest-like task
of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

and when we met, Wi-zhin, our Elder Brother, said,

Here stands Wah-shah-she,
whose body is the waters of the earth,

and the Water spoke to our people
in the liquid tones of a bird, saying,

O Little Ones,
if you make your bodies of me,
it will be difficult for death to overtake you,
and you will make clean and purify
all that comes to you. When you come from
your home in the sky to make
the flowers grow, Grandfather will paint
your face with many colors,
and smile upon the Little Ones.

When we heard this, our Elder Brother turned,
and we spoke together, saying,
Now our people shall be called
Wah-shah-she, we shall become
the Ni-U-Kon-Ska, People of the Middle Waters.

We sent ahead, then, our messengers,
who traveled through three valleys, that were not valleys,
and in the fourth valley we met
those other great beings, of whom also
we made our bodies, so that we might live
to see old age, and live into
the Blessed Days, Hom-ba Tha-gthin:
the strong older beings of Earth and Water and Sky
who taught us how to live in the holy land:
beings among whom we established
our sacred center and set up there
our House of Mystery; beings who gave our sacred names,
the Mountain Lion, the Golden Eagle,
the Cedar Tree, the Deer, Black Bear
and Thunder and the others of our clans; beings whom we then set
in heavenly order around each earthly place
where we dwell, where we dance,
where we give names, deliberate and counsel,
where we decide on war or peace,
where those of us in need are given food and medicine.

HO-E-GA,

we named our center, meaning this earth that was
made to be habitable by separation from the water, meaning
this camp of our people when ceremonially pitched,
meaning this life proceeding from all the powers of all
the cosmic beings:

We set our lodges in concentric rings and kept
an order in our towns, we made
our community of Sun and Stars and Earth
and Waters, a Nation meant to move like them,
always in good ways, in lasting order,
so when we dance and when we sing we mean
a harmony like those of Sun and Stars and of
the always moving Waters,
the circle of the years and times, the circle of
the always living beings in this universe:
we give our children names so they may join
and move with us in this our dance,
while in their names and in our songs our story
will stay alive and say: we are Wazhazhe,
those who have names, those who give names,
those who are the nation
we have become.

And yet, ten score and three years ago,
a great change came,
it was brought home to us that here
we had no continuing habitation: a French dictator in Paris
had sold to a Virginia slaveowner in Washington
this holy land with all its Middle Waters.

Soon after, there passed by here the first few scouts
of many millions on their way
to the Pacific's golden shores.

We sent our messengers to Jefferson under
the Stars and Stripes, they traveled
with Chouteau as our friend, almost to
the Atlantic Ocean's shores,
where they saw Jefferson,
a powerful and mysterious being:
he met our messengers, called himself their father,
promised we would be friends,
but would not let our friend Chouteau
be made our Agent. He named instead
the Redhead, William Clark,
who made an offer we could not refuse, and turned
Missouri into a state of slaves. So, our Diaspora began,
the young Republic's presidents had crossed
the Mississippi like the Rubicon and soon, like Augustus Caesar,
they ruled an Empire, while we moved on into

a western place, by whose waters we sat down and set our Drum
under a willow arbor, and we wept,
remembering Missouri even as we sang.

Then the Empire fought
a great Civil War between their North and South,
with us between them, shot and robbed by both,
and when that war was done the squatters came,
the swarming masses came on iron roads and killed
the buffalo and stole our corn and fouled the river where
we drank and bathed, and they and the Great White Father
and Sherman's Army said that land was theirs, so we
must move again—and so we did: we walked our trail
of tears into the Indian Territory and there
we made new centers for our bands,
we found new visions, and with the buffalo gone
the Longhorns came, and we let them fatten on our prairies,
we set our lodges along Bird Creek and along Salt Creek
and we survived and sang,
survived with song: we lost our elders, lost our ceremonies,
yet we brought back the Drum, with Kaw and Ponca help
we sang again.

And then the Oil Men came,
their rivers of black liquid gold washed away
too many of our people, too many of our ways,
the Oil Men made us rich they said,
and the rivers of Oil, the rivers of
Firewater, almost washed us away,
but every year we sing, we set the Drum
at the sacred Center of the holy land,
and we dance to stay alive, with all
our footsteps prayers, with feathers in our moving fans
and on our moving bodies
to help our songs rise up to Wahkontah
that we may live, that we may yet remain
a sovereign Nation in this holy land.