

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, RED DIRT:
growing up Okie. NY: Verso Press,
Four 1997

Patrimony

Which side are you on, brother,
Which side are you on?

FLORENCE REESE

By 1950, four million people or nearly a quarter of all the people born in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas or Missouri lived outside that region. A third of them settled in California, while most of the others moved to Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington. The best-known part of this trek westward is the period of the Dust Bowl, the thirties, when the majority of the migrants first camped, and then settled mainly in the agricultural valleys of California, but Oklahoma settlers had already been moving west ever since they began homesteading in Oklahoma in the 1890s. During World War II many of the Central Valley Dust Bowl migrants moved nearer the defense plants, particularly around Los Angeles, while a half-million more Southwestern migrants, dubbed 'defense Okies,' arrived to take war-time jobs. The great majority of them maintained ties back home.

The core group of those designated as 'Okies' are descendants of Ulster-Scot – 'Scotch-Irish' – colonial frontier settlers. Usually the descendants of Ulster-Scots say that their ancestors came to America from Ireland, but their trek was more complicated than that. The Ulster-Scots were a people born and bred of empire. They were

Protestant Scottish settlers in the English colony in northern Ireland where the indigenous Irish inhabitants were Catholic.

During the early 1600s, the English crown conquered northern Ireland, and declared a half-million acres of land open to settlement under English protection; the settlers who contracted with the devil of early colonialism came mostly from western Scotland. Scotland itself along with Wales had preceded Ireland as colonial notches in the belt of English expansion. The English policy of exterminating Indians in North America was foreshadowed by the English colonization of northern Ireland. The Celtic social system was systematically attacked, traditional songs and music forbidden, whole clans exterminated while the entire population was brutalized. A 'wild Irish' reservation was even attempted.

By 1630, the new settlers in Ulster – 21,000 English and 150,000 Lowland Scots – were more numerous than English settlers in all North America. In 1641, the indigenous Irish rebelled and killed 10,000 settlers. Yet the Scottish settlers continued to pour in, with the largest number arriving between 1690 and 1697 after King William's victory at the Battle of the Boyne. They formed a majority of the population in some areas from which the indigenous Irish had been removed.

So the Ulster-Scots were already seasoned colonialists before they began to fill the ranks of settlers to the English colonies in North America in the early eighteenth century. Before ever meeting Native Americans the Ulster-Scots had perfected scalping for bounty on the indigenous Irish. The Ulster-Scots were the foot soldiers of empire, and they and their descendants formed the shock troops of the 'westward movement,' that is, of the expanding United States continental empire.

Ulster-Scot immigration to North America represented a mass movement between 1720 and the War of Independence. Most of them headed for the western borders of the colonies and built communities on the frontier, where they predominated. During the French and Indian War of 1754–63 the English armies and colonial militias were largely made up of Ulster-Scots. By the time of US independence, Scots, mainly Ulster-Scots, made up around one-sixth of the population of the thirteen colonies, and, in some states like Pennsylvania, a third. During the Revolution most Scottish settlers –

Lowlander and Highlander, older settlers and newcomers – remained loyal to the English Crown. The Ulster-Scots, however, were in the forefront of the struggle for independence and formed the backbone of Washington's fighting forces. Most of the names at Valley Forge were Scots-Irish, my ancestors. They saw themselves, and their descendants see themselves, as the true and authentic patriots, the ones who spilled blood for independence and spilled rivers of blood to acquire Indian land, who won the land by 'blood-right,' leaving bloody footprints across the continent. The books written about the frontier settlers fill libraries, but none fulfill the dream of Oscar Ameringer, immigrant from Bavaria and US Socialist Party leader during my grandfather's Wobbly days:

I wish someone would look up the names on the roster of Washington's army at Valley Forge and trace the bloody footprints of their descendants across the North American continent until they were washed up and washed out on the shore of the Pacific. What an all-American Odyssey it would make! What a great history of the Rise and Fall of American Civilization.

During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, first- and second-generation Ulster-Scots continued to move westward into the Ohio Valley, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. They were the predominant element in the westward population movement, maintaining many of the Scots ways, with non-Scots settlers tending to be absorbed (like Daniel Boone, whose heritage was English and Welsh). Ulster-Scots were overwhelmingly frontier settlers rather than scouts, explorers or fur traders. They cleared forests, built log cabins, and killed Indians, forming a wall of protection for the new US and during times of war employing their fighting skills effectively. They restlessly moved three or four times before settling at least semi-permanently.

The majority of Ulster-Scot settlers were cash-poor and had to indenture themselves to pay for their passage to North America. But once settled they came to predominate, not only as soldier-settlers, but also as contributors in the fields of medicine, religion and education. Perhaps most important, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Scottish Presbyterian church was the largest, strongest and most influential church next to New England's Congregationalist Church.

Ulster-Scot membership in the Presbyterian Church waned on the frontier, but the new evangelical sects retained some Calvinist doctrines, particularly the notion of the people of the covenant, commanded by God to go into the wilderness to build the new Israel.

Many descendants of the frontier trekkers moved on from Kentucky and Tennessee to Missouri and Arkansas (including Daniel Boone himself in his old age) and then moved on to Oklahoma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was the trek of my ancestors. Breaking every treaty with the Indians, the federal government allowed the settlers to overrun Oklahoma and Indian territories. Millions of landless farmers made the Run to stake their claims, but only a fraction acquired land, or held on to it. In 1898, the Oklahoma settlers showed their appreciation – a third of Teddy Roosevelt's 'Rough Riders' who invaded Cuba were recruited from Oklahoma Territory.

But Oklahoma was where the American dream had come to a halt. For nearly three hundred years, the English Crown and then the United States had offered free or cheap land to British and Ulster-Scot settlers, then to Germans and Scandinavians, then to Polish and Czech peasants. If a farming family fell on hard times or wanted greater opportunity, they picked up and moved on, homesteading newly 'opened' territory. By 1880 all the arable land of the continent was owned – much of it by large operators – and millions were landless. While many of those pushed off the land poured into the cities to work, most stayed in rural areas as tenants, sharecroppers, migrant farm workers, cowpunchers and miners, and later as rough-necks and roustabouts in the oil fields.

Okies and other descendants of the trekker culture do not think of ourselves as foot soldiers of empire, nor is that the image of us that dominates the popular imagination. We consider ourselves to be the true native-born Americans, the personification of what America is supposed to be, and we know that means being Scots-Irish original settlers, those who fought for and won the continent.

Okies are thus the latter-day carriers of America's national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempts to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settler into an 'indigenous people,' believing that they are the true natives of the continent, much as the South African Boers regard themselves as the 'true' children of

Israel, established by a God-given Covenant.

But it is not that simple: Potent memories inform my broad theories and conclusions. I cannot forget my grandfather and his time, the Wobblies and the Green Corn Rebellion. Therein lies a truly valiant history, a history little known to its millions of descendants, a history usable only if celebrated in the context of acknowledging the lie of the origin myth, and only if class is central to our future identity as the Okie subculture. Country music, evangelism, romanticism, patriotism and white supremacy have been able to coalesce my people – the descendants of the original settlers – as a people united despite class differences or social roles, mirroring Black, Latino, Asian and Native American nationalisms, which exhibit similar contradictions and limitations.

So who was I then, who were we and what were we anyway? Poor whites? Half-breeds? Hicks? Hillbillies? Rednecks? White trash? I don't remember identifying with those terms that were used to refer to people like us; on the contrary.

White Trash: I believe the first time I heard that term was when I saw *Gone with the Wind*, referring to some pretty creepy people, dirt poor, sneaking, conniving, violent tenant farmers, or perhaps migrant cotton pickers. At the time I saw the movie my father was alternately a tenant farmer, migrant cotton picker and ranch hand, but I did not for one minute identify with those whom the planters and the enslaved Africans called 'white trash.'

I identified with Scarlett, with the O'Hara family, the original Scots-Irish settlers. The fact that my father's ancestors were original Scots-Irish old settlers was what made me feel superior. And those characterized as 'white trash' in *Gone with the Wind* were surely also descendants of Scots-Irish old settlers. Their sons would die fighting to defend the very slave-owning ruling class that kept them poor. Their greatest heroes had been Confederate irregulars during the war and afterwards mythologized outlaws like Jesse James.

Often I asked my mother why my father's family name, Dunbar, was shared by a black person. In English class we read the poems of African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. I hoped my mother would say he was a relative of ours because I loved his poetry. But she said that my Dunbar ancestors were 'Scotch-Irish' and had once owned huge plantations and many slaves and that slaves took the

names of the masters.

'How do we know we're related to the masters and not the slaves?'
I would ask.

'Because you are white.'

We Okies are those tough, land-poor losers whose last great hope in the American dream was born and died with the 'opening' of Oklahoma and Indian territories. Our great shame, like all 'white trash' and colonial dregs, is poverty, that is, 'failure' within a system that purports to favor us. The dregs of colonialism, those who did not and do not 'make it,' being the majority in some places, like most of the United States, are evidence of the lie of the American Dream.