Mould, Tom and Rae Nell Vaughn, editors. *Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers*.

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Rev. by Michael S. Martin

The Pearl River—a natural feature that, along with the Nanih Waiya mound in Central Mississippi, prominently features in Choctaw storytelling—straddles the border of Louisiana and Mississippi. At the same time as I was reading *Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers*, I drove over a wide and high bridge that straddles the southernmost part of the Pearl River, surrounded by meadows and marshes, and envisioned the history behind this waterway. Several Choctaw stories collected in this volume, including "Manlike Creature," a tale about a benign humanoid "with a tail," have the northern portions of the Pearl River, near Jackson, serve as their setting (137). The stories in the volume foreground the sacred Nanih Waiya mound, the place where Choctaw creation myth says the tribe began. Several such stories, including "The Little People in Nanih Waiya Cave" and "Doors in Nanih Waiya Cave," center on an individual, whether a grandfather or uncle recalled in the story or otherwise, who encounters a parallel world or the infamous "little people" who live in the mound (152-53).

I mention these points on the Pearl River and Nanih Waiya in this review because Southeastern Indigenous placehood and practices are crucial for understanding both the storytellers and collected stories featured within this landmark volume. *Choctaw Tales* was originally published in 2004, but this expanded version is noteworthy both because nearly fifty new stories have been included and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians tribal archivist Rae Nell Vaughn now serves as a co-author along with Ball State University anthropologist Tom Mould. The revisions are centered on, as stated in the preface, "collaboration, recognition, and awareness of what has been present from the start" in the Choctaw storytelling tradition (xviii). Mould is as

"within the tribe" as much as any non-Choctaw could be. Mould, in the introduction, recalls being "settled round the kitchen table," talking to Choctaw storyteller Harley Vaughn, and eating "fried catfish, buttered cabbage, black-eyed peas, and hominy"— all staples of a Southern diet (11). He is even featured as a character in one of the Choctaw stories. Mould lived with these storytellers for years and comes across as a close confidante bordering on being "family." But the process of re-creating these stories is a collaborative effort, spanning decades for this individual volume, and centuries for the Indigenous storytellers acknowledged within individual biographies in the first hundred pages as ethnographic source material. The storytellers featured include still-living members of the Choctaw Nation such as Jessica Miller and four members from the Willis family (Gladys, Hulon, Linda, and Travis), as well as ancient, historical speakers such as nineteenth-century tribal leader Peter B. Pitchylln. Mould and Vaughn lament, in the introduction, that many of the storytellers have recently passed because of COVID or for other reasons.

After a very long, but necessary, prefatory section of nearly one hundred pages, the primary source material, that is, the stories themselves, begins; they are categorized into seven sections. The prefatory section includes, in "Commentary and Context," a discussion of two important facets of Choctaw storytelling in Native language: *shokhannōpa* and *hopáki ikhāna*. *Shokhannōpa* refers to "group[ing] of stories," stories that may be disparate, under one umbrella: "humorous stories and animal tales" (80). Meanwhile, *hopáki ikhāna* can be defined alternately as "*talk of the elders*," "historical legends," or "old stories" (85; italics in original). This Indigenous context for storytelling helps guide the would-be reader into the storytelling and genre distinctions within the seven sections that follow: "Creation Stories and Myths," "Supernatural Legends and Encounters," "Historical Tales" (*hopáki ikhāna)*, "Prophecy," "Jokes and Tall Tales," "Animal Stories," and "Stories in Choctaw." Of particular interest to the modern reader—or at least this modern reader—

is the range of stories featured within the "Supernatural Legends and Encounters" section, which includes "memorate" forms of stories marked by the speaker as having "*personal* encounters with the supernatural" (79; emphasis added).

This story cycle features several malevolent entities that the speaker or someone they know has encountered, or the story of the supernatural being has been heard thirdhand, including one that Jeffie Solomon (1997) recalls of the *Kashikanchak* creature. The *Kashikanchak* is not explicitly described, though it successfully lures children and, in this story, subsequently tries to kill them (128). Other beings, such as the *na los falaya*, are portrayed as humanlike, but with "shriveled" features and "long, pointed ears" (136). The *na los falaya* can mimic human voices and try to bewitch "hunters [while] in the woods, far from their homes" (136). The supernatural creatures section is noteworthy for providing portrayals of pineland topography around Choctaw tribal grounds, for having the same creature (*na los falaya*) featured in multiple tales, and for including creatures also known in European-American folklore, such as the Choctaw version of Bigfoot (*no losa chito*) (148-49). "Supernatural Legends and Encounters," along with the preceding section, "Creation Stories and Myths," feature some of the oldest stories recorded in this collection, with several coming from the nineteenth century. Many of the "Animal Stories" feature either an explanatory motif—"How the Rabbit Got a Short Tail," for instance (238)—or an explicit moral lesson, such as the imperative not to trust someone or something just because of pretty looks, as seen in the "shiny and yellow" cat from "Mouse, Rooster, and Cat" (257). Some of the animals featured in this section, including panthers and wolves, recall a moment in Mississippi environmental history when such predators were part of the Pinelands region. Some of the Choctaw storytellers are from Southern Louisiana, in the Bogue Chitto area (*chitto*, or "big," has Choctaw origination) and Lacombe, which are in the eastern part of the state. As someone who

has camped at Bogue Chitto, hiked the pinewoods there, and heard coyotes howling late at night, I wonder whether these animals are some of the offspring of the ones the Choctaw heard and saw hundreds of years ago.

My only critique of the volume is in the presentation of the stories, which are not precisely ordered chronologically. The editors seem to link the stories by theme (the *no la chito* story cycles, for instance) rather than year of recording, though a chronological order would have provided a better sense of storytelling and subject matter evolution over time. But the value of the volume, both in terms of Choctaw history and Choctaw lived experience in modernity, is astounding and hard to quantify. For instance, many of the stories featured in the "Prophecy" section tell of the advent of technology, whether with cars, electricity, or televisions and phones, but from an Indigenous perspective. In "Cars, Roads, and Changing Values," Odie Mae Anderson recalls, in 1997, a story told by her father and his friend about the time when "brick houses" would be built and "paved" roads expanded—what Anderson suggests is a future vision for an "interstate" (208). The collection, too, acts as both an extension of, and yet also a corrective for, previously-collected Choctaw stories that were done by sympathetic—yet ultimately from an outsider status—White ethnographers such as George E. Lankford.

The book comes across as a textual palimpsest of sorts, with copious amounts of editorial material, including both annotations to the stories and a notes section after the primary source material. Moreover, the annotations offer a sort of history of both Choctaw scholarship in itself, including tribal speeches recorded by nineteenth-century Christian missionaries (310-11), prominent twentieth-century ethnographies, and new animal tales that were part of the learning repertoire of the Bilingual Education for Choctaws of Mississippi (BECOM) (311). One slight problem I encountered with the usability of these annotations is that the chapter in question is

annotated with endnotes, but no corresponding pagination. As a whole, *Choctaw Tales* also extends across Indigenous forms of knowledge, language, and learning outside of, though conversant with, Western practices and beliefs. Vaughn, an important figure in Choctaw culture who previously served as Chief Justice of the Choctaw Supreme Court, records and annotates some of these tales with Mould, too. A final, primary source section retells many of the preceding creation stories and animal tales entirely in Choctaw language. Importantly, proper attribution as well as brief biographical sketches are given for Choctaw elders and tribal members who provided the source material for the recorded folklore. This revised edition should be of significant interest to scholars working in Southeastern Native American Studies, Southern Studies, or Folklore Studies.

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