



IN MEMORIAM

Louis D. Owens
Professor of English and Native American Studies
Davis
1948 — 2002

UC Davis Professor Louis D. Owens, acclaimed novelist and scholar of John Steinbeck and Native American literature, died suddenly on July 25, 2002, in Albuquerque, New Mexico at the age of 54. Several hundred family, friends, colleagues and students mourned his passing at an October 2002 memorial service in Davis.

Friends remember him as a complex and engaging man, an avid fly fisherman and wilderness camper and a superb athlete equally comfortable on long runs and competitive handball and racquetball courts. Considered the leading scholar of Native American prose, Owens received awards for his fiction and scholarly work, saw his novels translated in four languages, and was recently highlighted in a C-SPAN-TV feature on Steinbeck, part of the national centennial celebration of the writer. He was at work on a book of nonfiction memoirs and a study of Steinbeck as ecologist when he apparently took his life.

His academic career spanned two decades and five universities. Owens was the author of five novels (one of which, *Nightland*, won the American Book Award in 1997), four books of literary criticism and a recent collection of essays, *I Hear the Train*. He taught at UC Santa Cruz 1990-1994, and was more recently professor of English and Native American Studies at UC Davis, heading the campus graduate Creative Writing Program, attracting undergraduate and graduate students to both programs.

Gerald Vizenor, professor at UC Berkeley and internationally prominent in Native American literature, remembered him as the "most original scholar in applying critical theory to Native American literature. Louis Owens was also an inspired, original literary artist, a masterful storer, and he was an exceptional teacher and colleague."

"His writing was really important in American literature overall," said Luci Tapahonso, Navaho poet and professor at the University of Arizona. "He challenged people to rethink their approaches — to broaden and deepen the canon of American literature to include Indians from the beginning to the present, and to revive the power of nature and wilderness in our lives and writing. He was a dear, dear friend to everyone."

Owens received his doctorate in English from UC Davis in 1981, returning to the campus in 2000 as a professor, an unusual occurrence to longtime teacher and friend Jack Hicks (UC Davis English). "To encourage intellectual diversity, UC departments rarely hire our own; his coming back was singular by any standard," said Hicks.

"Louis Owens was just peaking in his profession, pulling students from all over the country in only his second year with us," Hicks observed. His many accomplishments included an invitation from Harvard University to spend 2004 as scholar-in-residence and being the subject of a recent scholarly book, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens*, by Chris LaLonde.

One of ten children born in Lompoc to migrant laborers, he spent childhood between Mississippi and the Central Valley, picking beans and living in migrant housing. He wrote of these years in "Finding Gene," an account of visiting his brother, a post-Vietnam war recluse, for the first time in 20 years. They were the only

siblings to complete high school and Louis alone went to college: "My first memories are of Gene and jungle-like woods that grew thick between our cabin and the deep- edged brown water of the Yazoo River. Three, four, five, and six years old, I followed him everywhere, swinging on muskedine vines and eating the acid-sweet purple fruit, climbing pecan trees that we called pee- cans, fishing in the endless, muddy current of the river, jumping in the wire- sided cotton trucks filled with white boles. The washtub where I had to bathe in gray water after him, leaning toward the wood cook- stove on cold Mississippi mornings. The log shed we'd check each morning to see what skins our father had nailed up during the night."

Mentor and UC Davis Professor Emeritus James Woodress said Owens was drawn to the work of John Steinbeck "because Louis came from very poor parents who were farm laborers, and novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* moved him a great deal. He was a very special person to anyone who ever met him." Mentor to many graduate students over several decades, Woodress directed Owens' dissertation *John Steinbeck's Revision of America*. It was published as his first book in 1985, followed by *The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land* in 1989.

While at work on his dissertation, he also wrote his first novel, *Wolfsong*, about copper strip- mining in Washington State's Glacier Peak Wilderness, where he worked for an extended period as a forest service ranger and firefighter. Through this novel, Owens made exploration of his Choctaw and Cherokee roots public, recalled Hicks, then a young assistant English professor. "He asked if I would read it in manuscript. In those pages I found — we all found, since he had never told anyone — that he was Native American. Clearly, to write an entire novel about one's heritage says it is alive in your own life and imagination," Hicks said. "When he had completed the book, being Indian was a powerful force he would share with others."

He defined himself as a "mixed- blood" American and explored the complexity of multiple heritages in fiction and non- fiction. On the occasion of winning the Wordcraft Circle Writer of the Year Award in 1998 for *Mixedblood Message*, he observed that he wrote novels for two audiences: mainstream readers and his Choctaw and Cherokee relatives and peers. He wove layers of Native American metaphor and myth through compelling mystery plots, so that two stories were being told at the same time to two audiences. After his first article on Darcy McNickle in 1985, he quickly became a leading Native American scholar, publishing *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992), now required reading in many college literature classes. Owens' friend and colleague in Native American Studies, Inés Hernández- Avila, says "Louis will always be remembered by Native American scholars as a beloved colleague who helped to expand the field not only through his own work and his mentoring, but through his devoted and consistent commitment to supporting the careers of Native writers, artists, and intellectuals. His immense generosity of spirit will not be forgotten."

A charismatic and inspiring classroom figure and a dedicated mentor, he won many recognitions for teaching, including distinguished teaching awards at both UC Santa Cruz and the University of New Mexico, where he was also presidential lecturer for two years.

"He gave an incredible amount of time to his students, reading their work, meeting with them and navigating the problems associated with scholastic life. It was time offered warmly, in the spirit of camaraderie and friendship," said Spring Warren, a 2002 graduate of the UC Davis Creative Writing Program. "Many, many students were shocked by his death and grieve his loss terribly." Jane Haladay, Ph.D. candidate in Native American Studies, said, "He was known as a warm, soft- spoken, sharp- witted man whose door was always open to emerging writers and scholars, Indian and non. We are honored to have known Professor Owens, and strive to honor him by carrying forward his ideals in Native American Studies scholarship."

Owens is survived by his wife of 27 years, Polly; and his daughters, Elizabeth, 19, and Alexandra, 16, all of Tijeras, N.M.; his father Hoey; his brothers Gene, Troy and Richard; and his sisters Judy, Linda, Juanita, and Brenda.

Inés Hernández- Ávila
W.J. Hicks
Winfried Schleiner