



DISCUSSION GUIDE

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR THE PLAY
DIRECTED BY CAROLYN DUNN
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**“And so now I ask, who
is more savage? A
Nation who makes
laws and abides them,
or a country who makes
laws and refuses to
enforce them?”**

MARY
KATHRYN
NAGLE

- What stories about Indigenous people have you been taught in school?
- Have you benefited from a system without questioning who that system was built for?
- Do you think the descendants of people who made harmful choices inherit responsibility for those choices?
- Have you ever considered how your identity might affect your access to safety and justice?
- Have you ever questioned who is or isn't protected by the systems you trust?

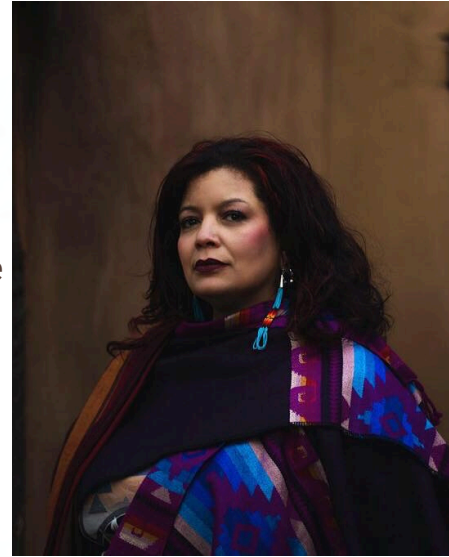
OUR STORIES HOLD POWER. OUR PAST IS THE BLUEPRINT FOR OUR PRESENT AND OUR FUTURE.

by Carolyn Dunn

When I first saw Mary Kathryn Nagle's play *Sovereignty* in 2018 at Arena Stage, where the play was commissioned, I was struck by the concept of retelling this period of Cherokee history juxtaposed with the story of a fictionalized modern descendant of the infamous treaty signers of the Treaty of New Echota. I can't help but feel, knowing Mary Kathryn, that *Sovereignty*'s main character, Sarah Ridge Poulson, is based upon her. Like the character, Mary Kathryn is descendant of the Ridge family, an attorney educated at prestigious educational institutions, who works on cases specifically dealing with attacks on tribal sovereignty. Like Sarah Ridge Poulson, Mary Kathryn has worked tirelessly to implement VAWA in Indian Country, and lobbied for the passing of the VAWA in 2013 and subsequent re-authorizations in Congress. This story personal on so many levels: the story of a family that sacrificed everything for the Nation they loved, and fought for the survival of the Nation under the onslaught of colonization and dispossession.

As a Cherokee descendant (not citizen, but a descendant) I grew up knowing of the stories of the Treaty of New Echota signing, and how the Ridge family, by the time the treaty was signed, were wealthy, enslaving plantation owners who had adapted to the western way of life. Major Ridge, his wife Susanna Wickett, and other family members, had long allied with the new American way of life, taking advantage of economic opportunities that would place them amongst the Cherokee wealthy elite. The Ridge, as he was known, and Sehoya, as Susanna was known, sent their children, including John Ridge and Sarah Ridge, later Sarah Paschal Pix, to be educated in missionary schools and formally trained in a western educational system. My own Cherokee ancestors, educated, slave-owning, wealthy plantation farmers, had lived much-less famous parallel lives in modern-day Georgia.

The modern narrative of the treaty signers, or Ridge Treaty Party, is that they "sold out the Cherokee Nation and started the Trail of Tears". The Ridge family history has always been told that the treaty signers felt that relocating the Nation to new lands would allow the Nation to continue to govern itself, to maintain the sovereignty of the Cherokee Nation government and court systems away from U.S. colonial state and federal interference. The wounds left between the Ridges and Chief John Ross and his allies after the Treaty of New Echota would fester in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) until the factions of the Nation were faced with the breakup of tribal lands after the Civil War, and further through the Dawes (General Allotment) Act of 1887 through Oklahoma statehood in 1906.



The break-up of the Nation into smaller factions before, during and after the Trail of Tears, and the reunification of some of those factions to the larger Nation is a result of the signing of the Treaty of New Echota. Literal blood feuds between factions continued throughout the 1800's: John and Sarah Bird Ridge's son, John Rollin Ridge, would later be accused of killing (in self-defense) one of his father's alleged assassins, escaped the Cherokee Nation for California where he established an illustrious career as a novelist and journalist. Elias Boudinot's brother, Stand Watie, a New Echota treaty signer, had escaped an assassination attempt on the same day Elias was killed. Stand Watie would later become a Confederate general in the Civil War, opposing Chief John Ross' attempts to stay neutral and later support the Union. The political and personal schism between the families cast the Ridges as traitors and John Ross and his allies as the Nation's stalwart defenders. But this play casts a very different interpretation of the Ridge family's actions and motivations behind signing the treaty.



I have worked with Mary Kathryn over the years as a director and actor on several productions of her plays, including *Sliver of a Full Moon*, *Manahatta*, and the 2019 Tulsa premiere of *Sovereignty*. Over the years, Mary Kathryn has tackled major themes in Indian Country as both a lawyer and a playwright: the missing and murdered women, children and relatives crisis, the passing of the Violence Against Women Act in 2013 with the Native Provisions attached, how land was seen as a resource by non-Native colonial powers and how Native peoples fought hard to hold onto the land as the place of emergence, and the connection between land theft and violence again Native women. What emerges as another storyline in her plays is the sovereignty of women's bodies and the sovereignty of our Nations, and the ability of our Nations to protect us against outside intrusion and to face justice for crimes committed against Native peoples by non-Natives, specifically against Native women and children. When the character of Jim Ross says to Sarah Ridge Poulson in *Sovereignty*, "Look, I know this is personal to you," he is not only talking about the crime that was committed against a Cherokee woman in the present day, but crimes that were committed against Cherokee women in the past and how those crimes were and are an attack on tribal sovereignty. The sovereignty of the body, the sovereignty of the mind, and the sovereignty of the Nation is what's at stake here in this play. "Sarah. There's a reason the Georgia Guard instructed its men to rape our women," her ancestor Sarah Bird Ridge tells the modern-day Sarah Ridge Poulson. "Without us, Cherokee Nation ceases to exist."



Using the Ancestors to tell the story of their fight to protect tribal sovereignty through protecting the women illuminates the modern-day Sarah Ridge Poulson's fight to protect Cherokee women and children through modern-day sovereignty. There are moments in the play where the past, present and future collide. Our Ancestors are always with us to protect us. By using the Native storytelling methodology of time-bending in this way, Mary Kathryn allows the character of Sarah Ridge Poulson to enter into the world of her Ridge Ancestors, knowing that in her blood she carries on the fight her Ancestors gave their lives for. By hearing and seeing their stories firsthand, Sarah comes to understand that like her great-great-grandfather, John Ridge, she has a duty to her Nation and to her family to protect the fragile sovereignty Native peoples have, and the right to protect their people against crimes perpetrated against them by non-Natives who, because of current laws, are unable to pursue legal action against those non-Native perpetrators.



The parallels in Sovereignty between John Ridge and Sarah Ridge Poulson are no accident. I have interpreted them as the same character, but in different time periods. John Ridge was highly educated, studied law, but was unable to practice law because he was a Cherokee Indian. He was also a poet who studied classics and was by all accounts a loving father to his five surviving children with his wife, Sarah Bird. Both John and Sarah appear in this play and anchor the love story in Sovereignty. In the play, they fight her parents to marry, as they did in real life, on account of Sarah Bird being White and John being Indian. Sarah gave up her entire family to become John's wife and was adopted into the Cherokee Nation, ensuring her children would carry Cherokee Nation citizenship. By all accounts the strength of her character and her love for her husband helped the real-life Sarah Bird Ridge survive the aftermath of the treaty signing, and it is because of her strength five of the surviving Ridge children lived through the dark days after they relocated to present-day Arkansas from Indian Territory. In the play, John begs his wife's forgiveness for putting their lives in danger by signing the treaty. "Forgive me," he says, "for putting my Nation above my family." Sarah tells him, "Your family is your Nation." The fight for the Nation, the fight for sovereignty, is the fight for the family. Their descendant Sarah Ridge Poulson continues that fight, for her family, and for her Nation. We are so lucky to witness this fight, and to know this story, and to continue to fight for sovereignty of our bodies, our families, and our tribal Nations.



Additional Resources To Watch

OSIYO: VOICES OF THE CHEROKEE PEOPLE

<https://osiyo.tv/episodes/>

MANKILLER

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6977446/>

A SACRED THREAD

<https://www.pbs.org/video/a-sacred-thread-jj9rrm/>

Book Corner

BY THE FIRE WE CARRY BY REBECCA NAGLE

<https://tinyurl.com/2bzpyhvvz>

TRAIL OF TEARS **THE RISE AND FALL OF THE** **CHEROKEE NATION** BY JOHN EHLE

<https://tinyurl.com/45ffu28r>

VOICES OF CHEROKEE **WOMEN** BY CAROLYN ROSS JOHNSTON

<https://tinyurl.com/4f4e3jmy>

THE ROUND HOUSE BY LOUISE ERDRICH

<https://tinyurl.com/3ypbhbyy>

THE REMOVED BY BRANDON HOBSON

<https://tinyurl.com/ed2xppdb>



Additional Resources

To Listen

FIRST AMERICA

<https://tinyurl.com/3hdr35ap>

SIYO FROM THE REZ

<https://tinyurl.com/bdd6e47m>

WE ARE RESILANT

<https://tinyurl.com/4enrtuhe>

NATIVE AMERICA CALLING

<https://tinyurl.com/4a64ebzu>



Misc.

CHEROKEE NATION | VIRTUAL FIELD TRIP

<https://tinyurl.com/je7svfhx>

NATIVE KNOWLEDGE 360°

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>



Move the Mission Forward

Our mission is to create a performing arts experience that is socially engaged, professionally managed, and creatively inspired.

Now that we've introduced you to "Sovereignty" we encourage you to join us in fostering meaningful conversations within your loved ones. Share your reflections on the play's themes, engage with others to deepen your understanding, and consider how you can contribute to creating safe spaces for more open dialogue.



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Museum of the
Cherokee People

THANK YOU

Our deepest gratitude to the Cherokee
Preservation Foundation for their support of this
project and making it possible for us to bring the
show up to the Qualla Boundary!



Unto These Hills Outdoor Drama

