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## CAAS Welcome Reception



**F**aculty, staff, students, and friends of CAAS all came together at the annual CAAS Welcome Reception on October 9th, where new faculty and staff are traditionally welcomed by the CAAS community. The reception included short introductions by CAAS Director Kevin Gaines, as well as a tour of the Lemuel Johnson Library.



# An Interview with Associate Professor Tiya Miles

(Tiya was interviewed by V. Robin Grice, a long-time staff member in CAAS who manages the Center's Lemuel Johnson Library.)

**R**obin: How did you first come to study African American history in relation to Native Americans?

**Tiya:** I had harbored a personal interest in the subject matter for quite some time, but I began to focus on it intellectually in graduate school. It was in a seminar on Native American history that I first learned about the wide range of relations between Blacks and Indians in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century South. Before that course, I had only heard positive stories (circulating in oral history and African American folklore) about Blacks running away from slavery to find safe haven in Indian communities. I was surprised and dismayed to find out, in that class, that some Native Americans had held Blacks as slaves and that anti-Black prejudice (stemming from the history of slavery, racialization, and colonialism) persisted in some Native communities. I determined then to find out more about this history and to research and write about stories I uncovered in a way that was both historically reliable and potentially inspiring for contemporary relationships between and among African American, Native American, and Black Indian communities.

**Robin:** Many African Americans have Native American ancestry or at least assume they do; do people ever approach you with family stories that have been passed down which speak to this? If so, are you surprised by the anecdotal evidence that still exists about these long-ago relationships?

**Tiya:** When I present my research in public forums, I am always amazed by the number of people who want to speak afterward about their family histories and about stories of Native American ancestry passed down through the generations. Often, people's interest in their own family history is what draws them in the first place to lectures and panel discussions about African American and Native American



interconnection in the past. While I listen with genuine interest to these family narratives and share any research tips that I can offer as well as the titles of useful books (such as Angela Walton Raji's, *Black Indian Genealogy Research*), I do sometimes worry that people are privileging romanticized versions of family oral history over what the evidence tells us about the diversity and difficulties of Black and Native historical relationships. Nevertheless, I am open to surprises, and I sometimes hear stunning stories that do indicate unexpected kinds of evidence or connections.

**Robin:** Can you talk about if/how your work with students in the classroom has influenced your research interests or scholarly work?

**Tiya:** Working with students within and outside the classroom is a continuing source of inspiration for me. Students have fresh and sharp ideas about the subjects we are studying that often lead my own thinking in new directions. My favorite class to teach at Michigan is my CAAS 495 Senior Seminar: Re-Envisioning American Slavery. Working with students in this class over the past four years, and planning the site visits that we routinely take to Underground

Railroad sites in Michigan (and once, to the Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio) has energized me as a scholar and a teacher. It was during one of these trips for CAAS 495 that I began to develop what will become my third book project: a study of abolitionism in the Midwest that centers on the life story of Michigan resident Laura Haviland. I also found tremendous satisfaction, in 2005–06, when students in my CAAS/AC course, Blacks, Indians, and the Making of America, worked on original research papers about the history of Black slaves on a plantation owned by wealthy Cherokee Indians that is currently operated as a state historic site in Georgia. Those research papers became chapters in a public history booklet, written and edited by my students, that is available at that state historic site (called the Chief Vann House), at the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem,

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North Carolina, and online. It was only after working with my students on this very successful public history project that I felt committed to writing a history on that same plantation.

**Robin:** You have a new book coming out. What's it about?

**Tiya:** My next book, which will be published in the summer of 2010 by the University of North Carolina Press, is a multiracial history titled, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story*. The book reconstructs the textured lives and complex cross-cultural interactions among enslaved





Blacks (from Africa, the U.S., and Indian country), Cherokees (rich and poor), and Euro-Americans (Moravian missionaries, government officials, and skilled craftsmen) in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. All of these groups lived or worked on a large plantation called Diamond Hill, developed by Cherokee entrepreneur James Vann at the turn of the nineteenth century and preserved as a Georgia state historic site today.

**Robin:** In addition to being the new associate director here in CAAS, you're also the director of Native American Studies (NAS) in the Program in American Culture. Talk about that work.

**Tiya:** My work in Native American studies and African American studies dovetails not only intellectually, but also in my administrative responsibilities at U-M, which creates a welcome sense of wholeness for me. As the director of Native American Studies, I have the privilege of working with faculty and students who are dedicated to advancing scholarship on Native America and committed to improving the lived realities of Native people in Michigan and beyond. Over the past few years, in addition to being engaged in our individual research projects, faculty and students in NAS have been working with partners across campus to address issues like the contested dioramas of Native American scenes located in U-M's Exhibit Museum of Natural History and the indigenous human remains held by

U-M's Museum of Anthropology. There are many times, in my role as director of NAS, when connections back to my Black studies scholarship occur to me. Like many other people in CAAS and in a wider community of African and African Diaspora studies, I have felt deeply pained by the story of Sarah Baartman (the so-called "Hottentot Venus"), who was paraded in London and Paris in the early 1800s and whose most private remains were kept in a French museum's collection for over a century. It was through my knowledge of Sarah Baartman's story, my deep sense of sadness about her inhumane treatment in life and after death, and my intense relief at her return to South Africa in 2002, that I was able to feelingly connect with the extreme distress that many Native people in Michigan feel about human remains from the area currently being held in our campus museums. Like others, I was relieved to learn that the Office of the Vice President for Research has organized a blue ribbon advisory panel to study the issue of the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and U-M's collection of human remains.

I will add, finally (and I am so glad that you asked this question), that I am stunned, at times, in doing this campus-wide and community work with my NAS colleagues, at how unaware the public seems to be of troubling and stereotyped representations of Native Americans in American popular culture.

It often occurs to me that while certain images of Black people and racial epithets about Blacks would be frowned on in public discourse, similar representations of Native Americans are accepted or go unnoticed by many. It is part of the charge of Native American studies as a field of intellectual enquiry, as it has been the charge of Black studies, to document, analyze, and expose the marginalization and dehumanization of wrongfully stigmatized populations.

**Robin:** While the demands of an academic career at an institution like U-M require a great deal of individual passion, what are other requirements for success?

**Tiya:** Before I went away to college, I had no idea that being a professor was a job that someone could have. Now, even with all of its demands and stresses, I think that working in the academy must be one of the most wonderful jobs in the world for people who love to learn, think, write, and engage with others about ideas. I suspect that most academics rely on extensive support networks in order to accomplish their teaching, research, writing, mentoring, and academic service responsibilities. I certainly do. Without family members, mentors from within and outside of U-M, incredible graduate student research assistants, understanding friends, and fantastic babysitters who themselves were U-M students or alums, I would be lost. I am grateful that I do not have to do this alone. I don't think anyone could.