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Future of the African American Past:

Who is Black America?

### Tracing African American Life in Native American Spaces

There was no such thing as a “New World” when explorer Jean de Léry coined the phrase in reference to the Americas in the 1550s.<sup>i</sup> Rather, the lands that we now know as comprising the territory of the United States were old worlds peopled by hundreds of indigenous societies with populations reaching close to five million.<sup>ii</sup> European explorers and colonists – foreigners in what to them were uncharted lands – had to recognize and navigate the indigenous communities with which they came into contact. So too did the peoples of African descent who found themselves tossed about the waves of a terrifying ocean below the decks of slave ships. When African people were dispersed around the world through the vehicle of the brutal trans-Atlantic slave trade, they landed not just in the Old World of Europe proper, and not just in Spanish, English, Dutch, and French colonial settlements in present-day U.S., Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, but also in the ancient cultures and communities of Native North America. The social, spatial, political and cultural formations of already present indigenous American people were complex, long-standing, and like those in all human societies, changeable. People of African descent who found themselves in Native American spaces faced the necessity of interpreting peoples and cultures that were not African and not European, but

that in many cases, were drastically changing as a result of the European presence. African American history in the space that is Native America yields new information and deeper understanding about the diversity, dignity, and resilience of black community life on this land.

Across the eastern seaboard, into the Deep South, and even in the West, black and native people met in a series of encounters that became consequential for the story of African American life. In the English colonies of Virginia and South Carolina established in the 1600s, black people were enslaved along with Native Americans on tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations and farms.<sup>iii</sup> In Puritan New England, enslaved black men were brought onto farms and into households where native women labored as indentured servants; these men and women formed couples that would alter the makeup of indigenous villages of the Pequots, Mashpees, Narragansetts, and Wampanoags. Black and native men worked whaling ships together, further diversifying the native communities back on land.<sup>iv</sup> In the aftermath of the catastrophic conflict between British and native people known as King Philip's (or Metacom's) War (1675) captive indigenous men were sold into slavery on ships that crossed the Atlantic to the Caribbean and Europe.<sup>v</sup> In French and British colonial Detroit of the 1700s, enslaved people from the Sioux, Pawnee, Ottawa and other nations stood alongside Africans as they worked the ships that plied the dangerous Great Lakes and packed weighty bundles of beaver skins for the lucrative fur trade. As the centuries passed and the concept of racial hierarchy hardened, as systems of American slavery solidified and white settlers pushed ever farther into indigenous land bases, thousands of African-descended people entered the towns of Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws and Seminoles in the Southeast; these southern Indian nations would, to varying degrees, develop plantations of their own cultivated by black men and women held as slaves.

Often we refer in shorthand to a configuration called “the black community,” and black people in the U.S. do indeed share a common narrative with bold outlines that draw individuals together into an unceasing drama of trial and triumph. But when we begin to define the chapters of that narrative and examine the fine print on each page, African America is illuminated as a richly variegated population in ways that scholars and artists are continuing to trace. Gender, class, region, ethnicity, color, sexuality, and religion are the predominant categorical lenses through which we analyze African American diversity. An additional lens should be *indigeneity* – given that a significant proportion of the black population possesses native “roots,” which I am defining broadly here as: a.) historical patterns of experience within native societies, b.) ancestral and family ties with Indian people, and c.) persistent cultural narratives and mythologies about both of the above (such as the often vocalized belief in – forgive me – the “black community” that long straight hair is a sign of Indian “blood”). Today, those native roots within the black population have grown into far flung, thick-leaved trees in the South, Oklahoma, New England, California, and almost anywhere that a conversation is opened about black families and their oral histories. How many times have you heard an older black family member, or a friend, or students in a classroom ponder the possibility of native ancestry, especially Cherokee or Blackfoot ancestry, especially traced through or to a grandmother?

In order to reach a finer grained understanding of the composition of black America, we must see these historical patterns, contemporary communities, and cultural narratives of black lives in native spaces -- and consider the ways in which a black-white binary, and indeed, a red-white binary, has often occluded our interpretive vision. By offering indigeneity as a lens

through which to refract black life as part of the project of drawing a picture of black cultural complexity, I do not suggest that this lens ought to be rose-colored. We cannot deny, nor should we, that the largest populations of Native American and African American people were brought together by the forces of colonialism and slavery, nor that the children and families birthed of black and native unions came into being and persisted in the context of injustice and suffering. In the 1600s and 1700s, black people, like their European captors, were newcomers to North America whose livelihood depended on indigenous land takings. Native American southerners owned approximately five thousand African American slaves between the late 1700s and 1865, and narratives of those formerly enslaved people reveal a catalogue of familiar abuses, as well as an indication that native slavery was, in some places and times, more flexible than American slavery.<sup>vi</sup> Black students at Hampton Institute under the direction of Booker T. Washington in the late 1800s learned that they stood on a higher level of civilization than their native classmates.<sup>vii</sup> Black male soldiers in the U.S. military, known by Indians as “buffalo soldiers,” participated in the policing of native people on western reservations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries.

But despite the wrongs perpetrated and harms endured in this tangled web of exploitation and survival, African Americans have recalled experiences in native places in words like those of the Cherokee Freedman quoted by historian Celia Naylor: “born and raised among these People, I don’t want to know any other.”<sup>viii</sup> And Native American studies scholars are beginning to think through the ways in which African American relationships to settler colonialism were distinct from those of Euro-Americans. Jodi Byrd, a Chickasaw literary scholar and colonial studies theorist who has acknowledged her own nation’s role in holding blacks as

bondspeople, determined that a separate word, “arrivants,” is needed to capture the difference between black dwellers and white “settlers” on native lands.<sup>ix</sup> Today, descendants of these “arrivants” carry knowledge of past and present existences within indigenous spaces. We can trace those lives, however faintly at times, in documented histories as well as in cultural memories.

The field of African American history has long been conscious of the import of indigenous space in African American lives. In his 1920 article titled “The Relations of Negroes and Indians in Massachusetts,” Carter G. Woodson wrote: “One of the longest unwritten chapters in the history of the United States is that treating of the relations of the Negroes and the Indians.” In perhaps the earliest detailed historical investigation of this topic, Woodson set out in this work to remedy that erasure. Publications on this subject by Carter G. Woodson and his peers, James Hugo Johnston and Kenneth Porter, appeared mainly in the *Journal of Negro History* from the 1920s through the 1930s.<sup>x</sup> But after a wave of scholarship in that journal, this line of questioning fell into the footnotes with the exceptions of colonial historians like Gary Nash and Peter H. Wood, who examined black and native intersections, and William Loren Katz, who penned the popular history, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*, originally aimed at a young adult readership.<sup>xi</sup> While African American history turned to important studies of black slave culture, the black family, and black politics in the 1950s through the 1980s, documenting African American life in Native American spaces mostly became the purview of ethnohistorians. These scholars, working on Native American history and cultures in a field that had developed out of the research needs of the federal Indian Claims Commission, noted the existence of slavery among southern Indian tribes in the 1970s and 1980s. While valuable to African

American history, these ethnohistorical studies focused on Native American historical actors and the structuring relationship between Indian tribes and colonial and federal powers. With a few outliers, such as anthropologist Jack Forbes's book *Africans and Native Americans* that pointed to an "American diaspora" in the context of the slave trade, such studies shined a light on the fact of black *presence* in native spaces, but with little description or interpretation of black experience, subjectivity, and action.<sup>xii</sup> The turn of the twenty-first century ushered in a plethora of full-length, scholarly studies of the places where blackness and Indianness meet. Books by historians with one or two feet firmly planted in African American history, like Celia Naylor, Barbara Krauthamer, Fay Yarbrough, Malinda Maynor Lowery, and Arica Coleman have investigated African American lives and identities in various slaveholding tribes and in states like Virginia where contact was greatest.<sup>xiii</sup> These scholars' questions and examinations have been invigorated and animated by new directions in slavery and critical race studies, related to gender and sexuality, "rival geographies," informal economic networks, the textured fabric of kinship and community, scientific racism, migration, and citizenship.<sup>xiv</sup> Native American history scholars, too, find their way more clearly now to seeing black lives in indigenous places, such as Andrew Lipman who ends his new book, *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast*, with the words of an Afro-Native poet.<sup>xv</sup>

In the early twentieth century, in the throes of the early years of African American historical scholarship, black studies scholars argued that investigating indigeneity was integral to an understanding of black life in America. It has taken us, the inheritors of this intellectual tradition, a bit of time to fully realize that vision. One future direction of the black past, then, is to continue drafting Carter Woodson's "unwritten chapter" on the "relations of the Negroes

and the Indians,” by exploring causes and consequences that will unveil the multiple meanings of “America” in the term “Black American.”

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<sup>i</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin, 2001) 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Population numbers for indigenous North American north of the Rio Grande vary, ranging between one and seven million. Demographer Russell Thornton estimates five million for the present-day contiguous U.S. and an additional two million for Canada and Greenland combined. Russell Thornton, “The Demography of Colonialism and ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Native Americas,” in Russell Thornton, ed. *Studying Native North America: Problems and Prospects* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 17-39, 19.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1974), 115. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Omohundro Institute, 1998), 6, 479, 481-482. Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South 1670–1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Mandell, “The Saga of Sarah Muckamugg: Indian and African American Intermarriage in Colonial New England,” in Martha Hodes, ed. *Sex, Love Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 72-90. Tiffany McKinney, “Race and Federal Recognition in Native New England,” in Tiya Miles and Sharon Holland, eds. *Crossing Waters, crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 57-79.

<sup>v</sup> Andrew Lipman, *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 220-221.

<sup>vi</sup> Numbers of black slaves among southern Indians: Gregory Evans Dowd, “North American Indian Slaveholding and the Colonization of Gender: The Southeast before Removal,” *Critical Matrix* 3 (fall 1987): 1-30. Michael F. Doran, “Negro Slaves of the Five Civilized Tribes,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 68 (September

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1978): 335-50. Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>vii</sup> Donal F. Lindsey, *Indians at Hampton Institute 1877-1923* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>viii</sup> Naylor quotes Joseph Rogers, a Cherokee Freedman who returned to the Cherokee Nation too late to be enrolled after the Civil War. Celia E. Naylor, "Born and Raised among these People, I don't want to Know Any Other: Slaves' Acculturation in Nineteenth-Century Indian Territory," in James F. Brooks, ed. *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 161-191, 182.

<sup>ix</sup> Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxx. Byrd credits the Caribbean (Barbadian) poet Kamau Brathwaite with the origination of this term, xix.

<sup>x</sup> C. G. Woodson, "The Relations of Negroes and Indians in Massachusetts," *The Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 1 (January 1920): 44-57, 45. J. H. Johnston, "Documentary Evidence of the Relations of Negroes and Indians," *The Journal of Negro History* 14, No. 1 (January 1929): 21-43. Kenneth W. Porter, "Relations Between Negroes and Indians Within the Present Limits of the United States," *The Journal of Negro History* vol. 17, no. 3 (July 1932): 287-367, 296. Also see the companion piece to this article: Kenneth W. Porter, "Notes Supplementary To 'Relations Between Negroes and Indians,'" *The Journal of Negro History* vol. 18, no. 3 (July 1933): 282-321. Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade," *Minnesota History* Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec. 1934) 421-433, 424.

<sup>xi</sup> Wood, *Black Majority*. Gary B. Nash, "The Hidden History of Mestizo America," in Martha Hodes, ed. *Sex, Love Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 10-34. Gary B. Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early North America* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992). William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* 1986; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 2012).

<sup>xii</sup> Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 47.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Celia E. Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Fay A. Yarbrough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation: Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Barbara Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Arica L. Coleman, *That the Blood Stay Pure: African Americans, Native Americans, and the Predicament of Race and Identity in Virginia* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Forthcoming work by African American history scholars like Kendra Field and Sakina Hughes will contribute even greater nuance.

<sup>xiv</sup> Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7. Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Kendra T. Field, "'No Such Thing as Stand Still': Migration and Geopolitics in African American History," *Journal of American History* (2015) 102 (3): 693-718. David Chang, "Where Will the Nation Be At Home? Race, Nationalisms, and Emigration Movements in the Creek Nation," in Miles and Holland, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds*, 80-99. Nancy Bercaw's book manuscript in progress, "The Anatomy of Freedom: African American and Indian Bodies in Post-Emancipation America," will greatly extend the extant literature on black-Indian scientific racism.

<sup>xv</sup> Lipman quotes from the poem "Drift" by Olivia Bush-Banks (Black-Montaukett, Long Island); *Saltwater Frontier*, 11-12, 251.