

EDITED BY TIYA MILES AND SHARON P. HOLLAND



Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds



THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN INDIAN COUNTRY

*principles
together, and they sang, and they danced;
then, they made relatives*

Francis Nyamathi
©Lafayette 2000

Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds



Crossing Waters,



Crossing Worlds

The African Diaspora in Indian Country

edited by TIYA MILES *and* SHARON P. HOLLAND

Duke University Press Durham & London 2006

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Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Carter & Cone Galliard

with Quadraat Sans display

by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication

Data appear on the last printed page of this book.

Chapter 11, Tamara Buffalo's "Knowing All of

My Names" is reprinted from *International*

Review of African American Art 17, no. 1 (2000).

For Sun Old Man

CONSTANT, BRILLIANT, WISE

For Mary Scout's Enemy and Alfonso Ortiz

WHO WELCOMED ME



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Foreword

“Not Recognized by the Tribe”

SHARON P. HOLLAND



Chicago, June 2004

A beginning is always a failed enterprise, as much of what needs to be said — all that “counts” — is inevitably truncated, marginalized, or left behind altogether. With this in mind, I begin this text with an ending to a long journey in search of Elleanor Eldridge. In spring 2001, Jennifer Brody came to me with *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, a text written in 1838 by Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall. Eldridge claimed that her maternal grandmother, Mary Fuller, was Narragansett, while her grandfather was a former slave named Thomas Prophet. We were fascinated by both the intellectual and the pedagogical challenges this text would provide and began the arduous task of piecing together Eldridge’s story — a journey that eventually led to our essay in this collection. What follows is a scene from one of those trips — a place where the “Indian” and the “African,” to echo Whipple’s language, haunt the edges of colonial history *and* herstory.

I arrived at the Providence, Rhode Island, airport at 10 o’clock in the morning after barely making my flight from Chicago’s O’Hare. I waited in line for my Ford Focus, only to find that the rental-car company had no more compact cars available but could give me a brain-bucket Mazda Miata for the same price. If I wanted to wait ten min-

utes, I could have the Ford. I had played that game before — ten minutes is always thirty minutes, at least. I took the drop-top and headed south on I-95 to Charleston, Rhode Island. I was elated. I had not been on a road trip to Indian Country in about a decade. I had forgotten a few things; questions like, “How do you get to the — — reservation?” are often met with blank stares by rental-car employees. I figured out from the map that Route 138 eventually meets Route 112, and I would find the tribal offices somewhere on that last leg. As usual, I shot past the offices and inquired at Charleston Town Hall and then the Narragansett Indian Health Center before I doubled back to the tribal offices. I found it at the last junction I passed and pulled into the parking lot.

The front desk was empty, but a woman who looked like a childhood friend of mine told me that Shirley Champlin-Christy, tribal records administrator, would be in on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of that week. I thanked her and headed back to my car. I returned to the long stretch of road between the Narragansett Tribal Offices and Providence. Since the subject of our research, Elleanor Eldridge, had been born in Warwick, Rhode Island, on March 26, 1785, I decided to swing by the Warwick Town Hall to begin my search for any documentation of her birth. I found Prophets, Bakers, and Eldreges, but no Elleanor Eldridge or her maternal grandmother, Mary Fuller. I took a few random samplings of the deaths and marriages of several of the above and found that almost all of the “natural order” and “promiscuous” references to the name “Fuller” led me to the Reverend Edward T. Fuller, who had married an awful lot of people in Warwick’s early days. The reverend was indeed promiscuous. I wrapped it up for the day and headed into Providence to meet Rebecca Schneider and follow her five miles out to her home, a bungalow at the end of a cove that looks onto the bay and the wider ocean beyond the point. I slept well, with a gentle breeze flowing through the window that reminded me of Cape Cod at night.

I returned to the Narragansett community to meet with Shirley Champlin-Christy, to check the tribal rolls, and to inquire specifically about Mary Fuller, reported by Frances Whipple (Eldridge’s biographer) as the Narragansett grandmother of Eldridge. Previous experience with reservation rolls, and the stories of other scholars researching African and Native American confluences, had taught me that bringing my discovery to the attention of the official tribal records clerk would

not be easy. I knew that the Narragansetts closed the rolls when they were formally recognized in 1987. I also knew that a recent casino deal in the making would make my attempt at “authenticating” Mary Fuller’s Narragansett family all the more difficult. I decided to tell Shirley Champlin-Christy about my project and my purpose and let her do the talking. I would learn a lot about Narragansett family names and the current political climate from her response to my inquiry.

Our talk was illuminating. Although she could remember no one in the vicinity named “Fuller” or seeing that name in the rolls, she did remember that the tribe had researched the Prophet, Profit, or Proffit line. (Thomas Prophet was Eldridge’s maternal grandfather.) We engaged in a little dance: Ms. Champlin-Christy simultaneously protected the tribal rolls with reiterations of the five family names (Wilcox, Champlin, Stanton, Noka, and Sekatau) and expressed a bit of fascination with the documentation about Fuller’s self-identification that I had brought with me. She was so intrigued by Mary Fuller that she called the tribal historian, Ella Sekatau, who was at home sick that day. I also spoke with Ms. Sekatau, and she offered that the tribe had indeed researched the Prophet/Profit/Proffit line through a Susannah who had the “Profit” surname but could find no definite relation. Ms. Champlin-Christy and I continued our discussion, focusing on the proliferation of claims to Narragansett bloodlines that turn out to be false, or undocumented. I floated the possibility that Mary Fuller might have been taken from a Narragansett or Wampanoag family, placed in foster care or an orphanage, and raised by Baptist missionaries. She said that the scenario was a remote possibility, but if that were the case, it would be the first. We were guarded and intrigued. We liked talking to each other, so we eased into a conversation, sharing bits of our family narratives and getting to know each other. She then asked me about my family, and I told her about my grandmother’s secret and her revelation to me: that my grandfather’s mother was an “Indian from Alabama” and that he left Georgia one day and passed for black for the remainder of his life. She asked me what my grandmother looked like, and I replied, “She looked like you: same hair texture, same almond-shaped eyes, same brown skin, and I loved her dearly.” Ms. Champlin-Christy paused, smiled, and nodded. Across decades and generations, we silently acknowledged our losses. I left with promises to share my subsequent findings and with the hope of a return to her offices sometime in the early fall.

Unwilling to go home immediately, I found Federal Hill, a predominantly Italian neighborhood in old Providence. I got a thinly sliced sopressata, a good Italian cheese with bite to it, and crusty bread at Roma's. I walked down the block to the wine shop and bought a nice Italian blend — sangiovese, merlot, and cab. Rebecca and I ate a light dinner with salad and salmon and firmed up dinner plans for Wednesday night: dinner for four at 7 o'clock, William Yellow Robe, Wendy Walters, Becca, and me. I slept well under an open window with a Cape breeze.

Our dinner that night was magical: good weather, good food, good talk. William (Bill) Yellow Robe and I smoked and talked at length about African and Indian connections, about our families and the persistence of racism at home and abroad. Piqued by the project I was in the early stages of investigating, he told me about Debbie Spears-Moorehead (Narragansett) who could help me with my research. He dialed her on his cell phone, and Debbie and I began to chat. We agreed to meet the next day at the Warwick Public Library in the early afternoon.

Why I didn't get directions to my destination, I'll never know, but I arrived about an hour late. Who knew that the access road by the airport would also lead to the library? In any event, I apologized to Ms. Spears-Moorehead ("Call me Debbie"), and we set to our task. I showed her the document from 1753 with Mary Fuller's name on it, and we looked for "Thomas Green Burying Place" in the index of historic cemeteries of Rhode Island. We set off to find numbers 115 and 31, among others. As we traveled from one poorly marked and totally obscured gravesite to another, I witnessed a small part of Debbie's endless fight to protect the burying place of her family members. One construction crew had excavated a new housing development and placed a wall of dirt fifteen to twenty feet high at the border of one gravesite, casting a shadow over headstones, as if a storm were hovering in that place and nowhere else. We investigated the locations of a few gravesites near the airport. Many of the historic cemeteries are located *behind* private property and required us to knock on doors to gain access to them.

We finally hit the access road that circled the airport. The houses directly across from the airfield were abandoned and boarded, with signs saying "Property of TCG Airport" on front doors and windows. I felt as if we were trespassing twice—on the future property of the airport and on the memories of the families, then and now, displaced



Notice posted on a house on the perimeter of TF Green Airport in Providence, Rhode Island. The airport sits on what used to be Lincoln Farm, where in the nineteenth century a community of Afro-Native peoples lived and worked.

by the word “expansion.” We then drove around to cemetery number 31, which was located on airport property. Debbie parked her car precariously on the side of the narrow road, and we walked to the fence to take a closer look. We stood in silence as we linked our hands in the fence and tried to decipher the writing on the gravestones. Debbie explained that we needed the airport’s permission to visit the cemetery. Our look was a bit forlorn until we noticed an opening in the gate. We were elated; we rushed up to the entrance and almost simultaneously stopped dead in our tracks. When we looked down, our brown arms signaled a specific warning to us both: We were brown people about to trespass on airport property in Bush’s America. Post-911, post-Patriot Act, we could be detained indefinitely if we trespassed on government property. The feeling was overwhelming. Although we tried to laugh it off—“What were we thinking?!”—it was bittersweet, and I wanted to cry.

On the way back to my car at the public library, we passed the houses with the airport-property signs pasted across their thresholds, and the feeling came back to both of us. The next morning, I entered airport property with my government-issued driver’s license in hand and boarded a plane for Chicago. I realized that the only *free* access I would

ever have to the mystery of Mary Fuller's burial would most likely be from the air, moving at a hundred miles per hour with the scene below me a complete blur and the G-force of the Airbus 320 pulling me back to the ground.

Note

The title of the foreword is taken from a phrase in Ann McMullen's groundbreaking essay "Blood and Culture: Negotiating Race in Twentieth-Century Native New England" (Brooks 2002, 261–91). My meditation is in conversation with that piece and its claims, in particular, as well as with the collection as a whole. My respect for the work of that collection and the insight that McMullen's essay offers is great.

Preface

Eating Out of the Same Pot?

TIYA MILES



Ann Arbor, Michigan, March 2004

In 1998, I was a dissertation fellow at Dartmouth College working on a historical project about an African American slave named Doll and her Cherokee owner and “husband” called Shoe Boots. Although I had turned to supportive senior scholars for advice and counsel, I often felt intellectually isolated at this time of my life, as though working on the overlapping experience of people from two marginalized populations located me on the outskirts of academic discussion, even in African American studies and Native American studies. I yearned for conversation with thoughtful colleagues who could offer intellectual companionship as well as critique, and I discovered, after sharing a panel at an American Society for Ethnohistory meeting with another graduate student working on Afro-Cherokee history, that I was not alone. Soon thereafter, with the steadfast partnerships of that fellow student, Celia Naylor, and the local community organizer Stephanie Morgan; with the support of a committee of advisers made up of Dartmouth faculty and staff; and with inconceivably generous funding from Dartmouth College, I co-organized a national conference titled, “‘Eating Out of the Same Pot’: Relating Black and Native (Hi)stories.”

The name of the gathering was derived from an interview conducted in 1940 by a University of Oklahoma master’s student Sigmund

Sameth. In the interview, a black man formerly held as a slave by Creeks compared his experience with that of African Americans enslaved by whites, saying, “I was eating out of the same pot with the Indians, going anywhere in this country I wanted to, while they was still licking the master’s boots in Texas” (Sameth 1940, 56). Although I did not foresee it when I selected the quotation for our title, this Creek freedman’s expression of intimacy with Indians, the very people he had been enslaved by, foreshadowed an aspect of tension, contradiction, and deep feeling that would mark the conference. Equally surprised, I suspect, were the scholars, artists, activists, community members, and students who attended the event from across the United States and from Canada and Mexico.

Many of the attendees were people who identified as “black Indians” and were seeking new knowledge as well as a community of belonging. A small minority of people within this black Indian group introduced themselves with names like Chief Sitting Sun and Little Arrow and wore clothing and accessories that approximated various forms of American Indian apparel: headdresses, deerskin, beads, and feathers, thus enacting stereotyped performances of Indian identity that would contribute greatly to an underlying discomfort shared by most in attendance. Many other participants were academics in the fields of African American and Native American history, literature, and political thought. A number of the attendees identified as African American or Native American and had long held a personal interest in the topic. And, of course, a significant number of the two hundred persons present occupied subject positions in more than one of these categories. The combined presence of so many different kinds of people with discrete orientations to and stakes in the subject of study sparked impassioned debate, subtle rebukes, impromptu soliloquies, and refined academic questions.

There were moments during this gathering in which participants arrived at public epiphanies that revealed emotional undertows of understanding and connection, but just as often, suspicion and resentment arose between “black Indians” and “red” Indians; academics and community folk; scholars of color, white scholars, and scholars of color who “looked white”; “wannabes” and “should-have-beens”; and, in the words of one participant and contributor to this book, “Super Indians” who felt they had the authenticity and authority to define the identities of others. One such moment became emblematic for me of the depths of division between some Native and Afro-Native people.

In a plenary-session lecture, a renowned Cherokee studies scholar described the history of Cherokee slaveholding while offering the example of an exceptional black slave who was freed and adopted by Cherokee clan members. Immediately after making her remarks, the speaker left the conference to keep a prior commitment. During the discussion that followed the lecture, and in the absence of the speaker, a Cherokee graduate student engaged in debate a woman who expressed an Afro-Native identity and was wearing a shawl and feather in her hair. The woman voiced the concern that the lecture deemphasized the injustice of Cherokee slavery. While she was speaking, the graduate student stood and interrupted, asking, in what was clearly an antagonistic tone, "Where are you from?" The graduate student then proclaimed that he was a Cherokee from Oklahoma. He raised his voice and pointed a finger at the woman while admonishing her not to speak about "his people." The woman answered in a rather unusual form, asking repeatedly, "Why do you want to hurt me? Why are you trying to shut me up? Tell me your story." The man responded to her by shouting, "We did not sell our own people; we did not sell our own people. Don't speak about my people." When an Afro-Cherokee woman in the audience stood and proclaimed that the graduate student was not the only person who had the right to speak about Cherokees and that his story was not the only story, the graduate student cursed and stormed out of the meeting hall. The woman who had made the original comment began weeping. The audience was stunned.

After I had recovered from my own shock, I interpreted this scene as encapsulating key and recurring tensions between Native Americans and "black Indians." The woman had adopted a mode of Indianesque dress that, while probably well intentioned, suggested a lack of close and current cultural knowledge of a particular Native tribe. The graduate student refused to entertain the idea that this woman who appeared to be African American could also be a Native American person. He also seemed uninterested in the documented history of Cherokee enslavement of blacks and denied that blacks could ever be considered part of the Cherokee populace. And finally, both the Indian man and the Afro-Indian woman were at odds with each other over a historical reality encouraged and coerced by white settlers and U.S. Indian agents and a retelling of that history by a Euro-American scholar. While the conflict seemed to be bilateral, it was in fact triangular, holding in tension Indian experience, black experience, and an invisible, structuring white presence.

I was not the only person to be startled and saddened by this heated exchange. Afterward, I felt all the more determined to lay bare the landscape of black and Indian relationships and the impact of oppressive systems of colonialism and slavery on those relationships. In the four years since that gathering, I have sought to understand what it is that draws African Americans to Native America in the past and the present, that divides Afro-Native people from other Native Americans, that propels blacks to claim Indian ancestry while at times dishonoring living indigenous peoples and cultures, and that leads some Native Americans to refuse a response to the call of their African-descended kin.

The writings in this book, contributed by presenters and audience members of the Dartmouth conference, as well as by scholars and creative artists who submitted pieces at a later date, continue a conversation begun many months ago. It is my hope that the work collected here will lend insight, immediacy, and a greater depth of understanding to the intersectional and interdependent lives of “the first and forced Americans” (Moraga 2002 [1981], xvi).¹

Note

- 1 The feminist theorist Cherríe Moraga uses this phrase in a parenthetical comment and attributes the wording to a friend: “We recognized and acknowledged our internally colonized status as the children of Native and African peoples (‘the first and forced Americans,’ as a friend once put it).”

Acknowledgments



The seed for this book was planted at Dartmouth College, and I remain deeply grateful to the faculty and staff there for the freedom and support I received as a graduate student fellow-in-residence to conceptualize and plan the Dartmouth conference. The ideas sparked at that event took several years and many conversations to germinate. I am likewise grateful to the African American Studies Department and the International and Area Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley, which invited me to attend intensive workshops on the African diaspora. I am thankful to the faculty and graduate student participants of the Westerbeke Ranch Diasporas workshop, especially David Charandi, Gina Dent, Ruthie Gilmore, Bethuel Hunter, Pablo Idahosa, Suzette Spencer, and Rinaldo Walcott, who took my thinking in new directions. Thank you, also, to Sara Kaplan for her research assistance at the start of this project. I am appreciative also for Judith Byfield, Phil Deloria, Robin Kelley, and Amy Stillman who have no idea how important their thoughts and actions have been to the formation and completion of this project. Thank you, most importantly, to the talented and dedicated contributors who made this book possible.

I am thankful beyond words to my dear husband, Joseph, whose input never fails to enliven and sharpen my ideas. Thank you to my darling babies, Nali Azure and Noa Alice, for coming right on time,

and to my generous family, who gave so much of their own time to help care for the girls in their infancy.

And finally, thank you to Auntie Sharon for saying yes, for taking care of business, and for nurturing this book along through difficult times.

TIYA MILES

This book began with my first essay in the field, “‘If You Know I Have a History, You Will Respect Me’: A Perspective on Afro-Native Literature” (1994). It has been a decade since that work began, and along the way I have been grateful for the encouragement and support of several: Paula Moya and Robert Warrior in those early years; Melinda Micco for her kind support during the early stages of my research in the field; Dartmouth College for hosting the first scholarly gathering of Afro-Native Americanists; the University of Illinois at Chicago for its generous support with research funds for trips to archives and to Ann Arbor for collaborations; and Robyn Wiegman, whose critique is always welcome and never fails to enrich. I am also grateful for the support of family and friends: Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Crowder (mom and dad), who encourage me to keep it up; Lila Karp, who is always the voice in my ear; the Chicago crew, who provide the meaning of the word “community”; and finally, Jennifer D. Brody, who helps me keep it together and who tolerated the long nights and the times when I just had to say it out loud.

When we began this project, we thought that the book was going to be the “baby.” Little did we know that our intellectual endeavors had their own tiny orbit. A big thank you to my coeditor, Tiya Miles, for bringing us the next generation, literally and figuratively. This work would not have been possible without your meticulous care and your patience. Thanks for bringing this project to me.

SHARON P. HOLLAND

Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds





Muskogee Reds Baseball Club, an African American sports team in Indian Territory, 1907. *Used by permission of the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries.*

Introduction

Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds

TIYA MILES AND SHARON P. HOLLAND



The African Diaspora in Indian Country

No outsider knows where Africa ends or America begins.

— LESLIE MARMON SILKO (1991, 421)

In the eyes of neighboring slaveholders, Diamond Hill was a splendid plantation—glistening with fields, gardens, livestock, springs, out-buildings, a store, a school, and a pillared, two-story brick home that was the first of its kind in the region. Two of the enslaved black women who lived and labored there in 1811 attracted the notice of a nearby Euro-American missionary. In a diary, the missionary told the following story about Betty, “an African woman” who “had the misfortune fourteen days ago of having her house burned down in the absence of her husband. . . . A deeply rooted superstition caused her not to hurry and put out the fire even though she saw it right away in the distance. Betty claimed that in her country such appearances of fire are often created by witchcraft, and if one looked at it, it would all disappear.” Betty’s relative, named Crawje, was similarly described by the missionary as “a poor, completely ignorant heathen from Africa [who] did not even understand English.”¹ While the diarist, a devout Moravian Christian named Anna Rosina Gambold, saw these two women as unfortunate due to the evidence of their African subjectivity, as twenty-first-century

thinkers interested in cultural continuity, change, and exchange across the African diaspora, we might interpret the women's fractured stories in a different light. Betty's and Crawje's experience, though filtered through Western eyes, reinforces our realization that African beliefs and practices persisted in North America, even as they were transformed and reconstituted in the gristmill of forced displacement and enslavement.

The African women described here did not live in the slave quarters of a Southern plantation on the U.S. mainland. Nor did they live on the Georgia or Carolina sea islands, recognized for their protective encircling of African cultural ways. Rather, Betty and Crawje lived their lives among Native Americans in the Cherokee Nation of the Southeast. They were members of a community of nearly one hundred black slaves, some of whom spoke African languages to the exclusion of English and Cherokee, and many of whom acted in ways that the ethnocentric missionaries described as "crazy" and "wild." (Norton 1970 [1816], 67–68).² Black men and women on this plantation, one of the largest in the Cherokee Nation before Indian Removal, did things in an "African manner."³ In so doing, they had a subtle but discernible influence on the Cherokees around them. Cherokee adults sometimes attended dances in the slave quarters, and Cherokee children who were being educated at the mission school socialized with black children, "riding around the bush with the Negro boys" to the extent that the missionaries feared the Indian children would be led astray.⁴ The adaptation of Cherokee cultural ways by enslaved blacks on Diamond Hill is even more apparent, in their fluency in the Cherokee tongue and their use of Cherokee healing techniques in times of illness.⁵

The death of Crawje, Betty's relative, is a moment that encapsulates the Afro-Indian border crossings that occurred in this place and in many elsewhere that traversed Native America. At Crawje's burial, a stricken Betty "wailed terribly according to the customs of *this* country."⁶ Betty, a woman who is described in the missionary diary as African by birth and behavior, apparently expressed her mourning as a Cherokee would at the loss of a loved one.

The example of Diamond Hill, a famous Cherokee plantation that has been restored today as the Chief Vann House State Historic Site in Georgia, illustrates ways that people of African descent transported and transformed cultures, created intersectional communities, and built metaphysical as well as physical homes on Native lands and within

Native cultural landscapes. In the process, they altered their interior worlds as well as those of Native peoples. Africans in Indian Country, like Africans in other parts of the Americas, have “exchanged their country marks” with the indigenous peoples with whom they came into contact (Gomez 1998). However, the persistent presence, symbolic resonance, and multifaceted meanings of African-derived peoples and cultures within the spaces of Native America often go unrecognized.⁷

Over the course of four centuries, thousands of black people, dispersed from Africa through the traumatic vehicle of the transatlantic slave trade, were relocated to Native lands and among Native populations in the “New World.” In the aftermath of slavery in the United States, many others freely migrated to Indian Territory of present-day Oklahoma to escape racial injustice and violence. Indian country became, for these displaced Africans, both a literal and a metaphorical home.

The major purpose and goal of this book is to articulate in new ways this space where black experience meets Native experience—to live in it, so to speak. Our proposal is simple: that Native America *has been and continues to be* a critical site in the histories and lives of dispersed African peoples. Indeed, the very language of “New World” communities and “New World” cultures that has become commonplace in African diaspora studies as a means of differentiating peoples of the diaspora from peoples who remained in the African homeland takes as an implicit and undertheorized given the European colonization of Native America.⁸ By focusing on the (re)production of personal and tribal histories and the production of cultural forms in the context of African diasporic presence in indigenous North America, *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds* provides a means to unpack this assumption, as well as others.⁹

As African Americanists in the main, we also wish to open a dialogue with scholars in Native American studies, to ask not only how Native place and presence have affected black life, but also how black people and cultures have influenced indigenous America, for better and for worse. We are interested in discovering what intimate conversations and negotiations took place between blacks and Indians in the long years after their first encounters; what political issues, strategies, and conflicts emerged out of their shared experience; and what creative works and cultural productions were inspired by their coming together. Overall, we seek in this book to raise and engage the central

question: What happens when key issues in African diasporic experience, such as migration, freedom, citizenship, belonging, peoplehood, and cultural retention and creation, and key issues in Native American experience, such as tribalism, protection of homelands, self-determination, political sovereignty, and cultural-spiritual preservation and renewal, converge?

Freedom Dreams: African Americans in Indian Territory

As slaves they had long been aware that for themselves, as for most of their countrymen, geography was fate. . . . And they knew that to escape across the Mason-Dixon Line northward was to move in the direction of a greater freedom. But freedom was also to be found in the West of the old Indian Territory.

— RALPH ELLISON, “Going to the Territory” (1979)

Perhaps more than any other space in the United States, Indian Territory, broadly defined, has held out the promise of home to black slaves and their descendants. By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many African Americans had come to see the Western lands called Indian Territory as a refuge in America, and more, as a potential *black space* that would function metaphorically and emotionally as a substitute for the longed-for African homeland. (If we also consider the African diaspora in New England, we have the making of an expansive understanding of African subjects and Indian country that might shift the prevailing understanding of Indian Territory’s psychic location in the “West” rather than in the East.)

With the abrupt conclusion of Reconstruction in 1877, thousands of blacks made their way from the South to the West, heading for Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Indian Territory. Nell Irvin Painter, Norman Crockett, and other historians have demonstrated that these migrants were seeking escape from the onslaught of white racial violence in a period of escalating attacks and sought to resettle in a location where they could find economic opportunity, preserve their dignity, and make new homes (Painter 1992 [1977]; Crockett 1979). Some migrants headed directly for Indian Territory. Others made their way there after facing disappointments in Arkansas, and later in Oklahoma Territory, where white settlers refused to share the most productive lands and organized violent attacks to prevent blacks from homesteading. Many of

these migrants traveled in desperate circumstances: They were poor, hungry, and besieged by inclement weather as they walked what the historian Lori Bogle has called the “black Trail of Tears” (Bogle 1994, 169).

For black sojourners, Indian Territory shone like a beacon at the end of a long tunnel of racism and exploitation. Out of twenty-eight all-black towns that were founded in the region of present-day Oklahoma, twenty-four were located in Indian Territory on land allotted to former slaves of Indians, while only four were located in Oklahoma Territory in the aftermath of land runs (Carney 1998, 151). The majority of these Indian Territory towns were based in the Creek (or Muskogee) Nation. It is here, in the development of all-black towns in Indian Territory at the end of the nineteenth century, that the language of Indian Territory as the black paradise begins to emerge. It is also here that the few examples of blacks drawing connections between Africa and the Indian Territory can be found.

Black newspapers published in the Creek Nation prior to Oklahoma’s statehood, as well as a rare extant brochure published to attract new settlers to the all-black town of Red Bird, also in the Creek Nation, offer a glimpse into African American views of Indian Territory between 1880 and 1907. As the historian Kenneth Hamilton has pointed out, black towns were business ventures as well as cities of refuge, and newspapers and booster sheets were published by land speculators and town companies to promote the towns and attract new settlers. We can surmise, then, that many of the published representations of Indian Territory found in these sources were edited to project an especially positive view. Nevertheless, the theme of Indian Territory as a liberating space for black people that emerges in these sources is revealing. In a June 23, 1904 article in the black newspaper the *Muskogee Comet*, titled “Unequal Advantages in the B.I.T. [Beautiful Indian Territory],” one writer asserted that “the Creek Nation may verily be called the Eden of the West for the colored people.” Another article in the same newspaper observed: “The Indian Territory is the only place now in the South where the colored voter has a chance to exercise the right of franchise” (*Muskogee Comet*, July 14, 1904). The Kansas newspaper the *Afro-American Advocate*, based in the town of Coffeyville, adjacent to the Creek and Cherokee nations, also emphasized the attraction of Indian country, encouraging black people from the South to “come home, come home. . . . Come out of the wilderness from among those lawless lynchers and breathe the free air” (as quoted in May 1996, 225).

In keeping with this invitation, the town of Coffeyville adopted the slogan “Coffeyville—The Gate City to the Indian Territory” (May 1996, 225).

In 1905, the Red Bird Investment Company published a fifty-page brochure with photographs to boost its all-black town and encourage new settlement. The company’s representation of Indian Territory repeated and exaggerated the utopian image presented by black newspapers. The brochure begins: “A Message to the Colored man. . . . Do you want a home in the Great Southwest— The Beautiful Indian Territory? In a town populated by intelligent, self-reliant colored people?” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 1). The brochure later describes the physical location of Red Bird, insisting that “there cannot be found a more fertile location in the beautiful Indian Territory than the country tributary to Red Bird. . . . To ride through on the railway and watch the panorama unfold itself to your view, is like the realization of a cherished dream of a new home in the great and beautiful southwest” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 17).

In preparation for the publication of the brochure, the Red Bird Investment Company invited black professionals from across the Creek Nation and neighboring areas to comment on life in Indian Territory. Although the letters may have been edited, and negative letters are likely to have been rejected, the surviving testimonies open a window on the way that individual African Americans viewed and represented the Indian West. The first testimony, by the Reverend Jason Meyer Conner, who held a Ph.D. from Little Rock, Arkansas, and was an officer in the African Methodist Episcopal church, stated: “This is to certify that I have made a personal visit to the Indian Territory, and know it to be the best place on earth for the Negro” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 2). Dr. J. M. Davis, a physician from Muskogee, Indian Territory, reported that “this country is the Paradise for the colored man” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 36). And A. E. Patterson, an attorney-at-law also based in Muskogee, asserted:

In no section of this great land of ours do the colored people have a better opportunity to accumulate wealth and simultaneously develop individual characters and strong minds, than in Indian Territory. Here, where nature has so generously provided for the comforts of all people who are fortunate enough to have found their way to this earthly Paradise, every man is recognized according to his merit. (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 36)

These newspaper articles and letters represented Indian Territory not just as a region where African Americans could thrive politically and economically, but also as an idealized Promised Land. In two examples, the writings of black town settlers suggest that they imagined Indian Territory as a surrogate for an African home. In an attempt to discourage thoughts of emigration, the *Afro-American Advocate* posited that any black person “who can’t live in Indian Territory, need not go to Africa” (as quoted in May 1996, 225). Thomas Haynes, manager of the black town of Boley in the Creek Nation, compared his town to Egypt, claiming that Boley, like that ancient kingdom, was “an imperishable attestation of the power, might and intellectual genius of a race” (Crockett 1979, 46).

In imagining their paradisiacal home, black town settlers envisioned a place where Indians were necessary but peripheral. They were necessary because it was the Indian presence that differentiated Indian Territory from the states, and it was also the complex history between Indians and their former black slaves that had opened the door for African American settlement; they were peripheral because blacks located Native people at the margins of their new communities. Similar to Frederick Jackson Turner’s concept of an American frontier in which an Indian *influence* makes white Americans distinct, but Indian *people* must give way to white progress, the concept of a black Indian Territory transformed Indians into a vehicle for black identity formation and racial uplift. For, as Norman Crockett has observed, the founders and settlers of all-black towns in Indian Territory sought a place where, by showing the values of race pride, self-reliance, moral fortitude, and industry, they could demonstrate their fitness for equal inclusion in the broader U.S. republic. It is perhaps telling that in the black town of Clearview, located in the Creek Nation, the two social organizations were the Patriarchs of America for men and the Sisters of Ethiopia for women — Africa and America jointly invoked against the unspoken backdrop of Indian land (Crockett 1979, 31, 66).

Several letters in the Red Bird brochure suggested that Native people were or should be marginal in the black Indian Territory and repeated the value of having a town “for colored people alone” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 36). A. E. Patterson, the attorney quoted earlier, described the population of the Creek Nation for would-be black settlers, emphasizing its mixed-race character and implying the absence of Native people of unmixed heritage. Patterson wrote: “Our population

is largely cosmopolitan, being made up of Indians of mixed blood, educated colored and white people from the various States, the latter two races predominating” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 36). Mrs. J. Orlando Mitchell, the wife of an Indian Territory businessman, wrote:

The time of the painted Indian on the war path, and the desperado, has gone to make way for the income of civilization, culture and refinement. The Indian Territory of today is as free from the taint of the wild, barbaric life as is the city of Boston. . . . Social conditions here need have no terrors for those who contemplate making the Indian territory their home. (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 5)

Not until the last two pages of the Red Bird brochure is the Creek Nation, the site for Red Bird, acknowledged in any detail. In these final paragraphs, the brochure explains how black towns were founded on Indian land. But then, in a rhetorical erasure of Native presence, the brochure expresses the hope that all of Indian Territory will soon be dissolved into the new state of Oklahoma. The brochure ends with the call: “Soon there will be another star added to ‘Old Glory’ and it is then, when the Indian Territory is ushered into the sisterhood of States, the real boom will come. Get a start in time” (Red Bird Investment Company 1905, 25).

Despite the dream and rhetoric of black town members, turn-of-the-twentieth-century Indian Territory was not the ideal place that African Americans imagined it to be. Native residents viewed the stream of black settlers as intruders in their nations, and many blacks who had formerly been enslaved by Indians and had lived in Indian Territory for decades resented the new arrivals. As it would happen, the vision of Indian Territory as a haven for African Americans was not to be realized for former slaves of Indians or for new black settlers. As more blacks poured into the Indian nations, tribal governments began enacting de facto segregation policies, lumping together their former slaves with new black settlers. And when Oklahoma became a state in 1907, subsuming Indian Territory within it, the first act of the legislature was to pass Jim Crow laws segregating blacks from whites and Indians. What was arguably the last imagined space of refuge for blacks in the United States no longer existed. As one black Oklahoman, Clarence Love, remembered in an oral history: “My parents had decided to leave Muskogee, just like they had left other places before, because they had not

found the Promised Land that they expected” (Gates 1997, 141). Indeed, in the years that followed statehood, hundreds of African Americans in the former Indian Territory began a desperate attempt to emigrate to Canada, Mexico, and Africa, ever in pursuit of their “dreams of an elsewhere” (Holt 1999, 37).

Seeing Red: Native America in the African American Imaginary

’Cause I’m goin’ to the Nation, goin’ to the territor’
Say I’m bound for the Nation, bound for the territor’
I got to leave here, I got to get the next train home.
— BESSIE SMITH, “Work House Blues” (1998 [1930])

The words of Bessie Smith speak to an experience of coming and going, of nations and territories—a trajectory of experience shared by black and Indian peoples in the forging of a place called the United States. Indeed, this and other African American cultural and colloquial expressions suggest the importance to black experience of Indian presence, Indian relations, and Indian locales. African American resistance strategies, social worlds, and subjectivities have long been inflected by the idea of immigration to Native American spaces and of literal and metaphorical relationships with American Indian peoples, even as indigenous societies and cultures have been influenced by the arrival of these newcomers. In fact, one might argue that the very notion of a visionary politics in African American culture is inextricably tied to an idea (imaginary or realized) of Indian nations and territory as open and even marginal space, a psychic territory where black subjects find safety, solace, autonomy, and family. In essence, part of the idea of freedom in black experience includes the space for a powerful imaginary—a place where Indian presence is felt and often realized.

African Americans’ idealized images of Native lands and Native people are not without foundation. The black historians Carter G. Woodson and Kenneth W. Porter began documenting the fact of black and Native interrelations in the *Journal of Negro History* as early as the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰ They found, as have scholars of both African American and Native American history who have pursued this question since, that Africans and Indians forged bonds with one another while jointly enslaved in the Americas and West Indies in the seventeenth century

and eighteenth century; that some enslaved African people successfully escaped to Indian countries; that major figures in black historical life have been both black and Indian in racial and cultural background; and that African American and Native American individuals and groups have joined forces to challenge European imperialism, colonialism, and slavery.

At the same time though, African American projections of liberation, economic success, community belonging, and ease of life onto Indian lands and peoples have not been free from logical flaws and exploitative gestures. Often these projections incorporate and reiterate broader American colonialist presumptions that Native lands and Native people, particularly Native women, should be made accessible to outsiders for purposes that do not serve the needs of American Indians themselves. The lyrics of “The Faking Blues” (1925) by Papa Charlie Jackson have just such a problematic effect when they express the following intention of the speaker: “Lord I’m going to the nation / Buy me an Indian squaw. / I’m going to raise me a family / Got me an Indian ma” (Jackson 1925). These lyrics not only suggest that racism was part and parcel of the interracial imaginary; such pronouncements also draw attention to the impossibility of safety, family, solace, or autonomy in a country where the twin forces of removal and slavery continue to bring the nation’s imaginary self in direct conflict with its lived history. In other words, we are well aware that words like “family” and “community” conjure a romance of past and present that can never be achieved or realized, as the dream constantly comes undone through the relentless presence of the real.¹¹ Black expressions of alliance with Indians often sideline the parallel history of adversarial relations between African Americans and Native Americans, in which Southern Indians owned blacks as slaves and black buffalo soldiers served in the U.S. military as a unit charged with crushing Native resistance movements and enforcing Native detention on reservations.

Although African Americans have met rejection as often as acceptance in Indian communities, and although African American and Native American historical relations have been characterized by a range of negative as well as positive interactions, a celebratory invocation of Indian peoples and places has persisted in African American cultural life. For if white America has been a wilderness of biblical proportions for African slaves and their descendants, Indian physical and relational landscapes have represented a new Eden for blacks, characterized by

the possibilities of transformation. As the African studies scholar Pablo Idahosa has observed, thoughts of Indian country have functioned like a salve for black people, who have been “hit with every sharp, jagged edge of every stick and sword” in North America (Idahosa 2000). Dispersed from their countries of origin and perpetually homeless on this continent, African Americans have imagined into being a Promised Land that is located both within and outside the national boundaries of the United States. In the realm of the black imaginary, then, the site of the Indian has been present, persistent, and paramount.

Indeed, the idea of and desire for connectivity with Indians and Indian spaces has found expression in a variety of African American cultural forms, including song, story, and visual art. In particular, the oral and written tradition in African America includes a predominant narrative of black and Native interrelations: that during slavery and the unpredictable climate of Reconstruction, blacks found safe haven, enlivened hope, and spiritual renewal by resettling in Indian territories and, whenever possible, becoming members of Indian families. This narrative has been expressed and re-expressed in multiple forms: in everyday speech acts in which African Americans assert Native ancestry; in children’s stories such as Angela Medearis’s *Dancing with the Indians* (1991), in which a black family makes a ritual pilgrimage to the Seminole Indian community that had sheltered their grandfather from slavery; and in the writings of African American authors.

The fiction of the Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist and feminist theorist Alice Walker, for instance, is punctuated by Native American characters and themes. Walker’s second novel, *Meridian*, about a young black woman’s personal and political awakening during the Civil Rights Movement, includes a meditation on the spiritual meaning of Indian lands for a displaced and often despised African American people. Her fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, features mixed-race Afro-Native characters whose ancestry spans the South American and African continents and includes a chapter on the Seminole leaders Wild Cat and John Horse. Walker has suggested in her memoir, *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*, that her representation of Native American characters and themes is an essential expression of her own identity:

In Mississippi I began to crave arrowheads. It came upon me suddenly as the desire, years before, to write poetry. I hungered for the sight of them. I ached for the feel of them in my hand. . . . Our child has never known her mother

without arrowheads, without Native American jewelry, without photographs of Native Americans everywhere one could be placed. Craft and art and eyes steadied me, as I tottered on the journey toward my tri-racial self. Everything that was historically repressed in me has hungered to be expressed, to be recognized, to be known. . . . Indians are always in my novels because they're always on my mind. Without their presence the landscape of America seems lonely, speechless. (Walker 2000, 36–37)

Walker's articulation of the “lonely, speechless” landscape of an America without a Native presence challenges earlier and existing notions of the “vanishing” or, in the case of Indian women, “dead” Indian at the same time that it reveals a special, albeit problematic, attachment to Indian peoples and places.¹² The fiction of the Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison is likewise concerned with the emancipatory possibilities for African Americans of recognizing Native ancestry and nurturing relationships with American Indian people. Parallels between Indian Removal and African enslavement permeate Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved*, in which the spirits of Indians violently removed from the Southern landscape join in the chorus of loss and pain with the baby ghost, Beloved, herself.¹³ As the literature scholar Catherine Griffin has astutely observed, the representation of indigenous Americans has been a trope in African American imaginative expression because Indians might offer a homeland in place of the stolen Africa and extend the promise of ancestors in place of severed family lines (Griffin 2000, 214). Griffin explains that in a context in which “Black history in the U.S. is an endless tale of exile and alienation,” images of Indians have become critical to the African American reinvention of self, family, community, and place (Griffin 2000, 162).

The foregoing discussion of black imaginings of Indians raises the question: How do Native Americans view African Americans, imagine blacks and black culture, and interpret the points of overlap between African American and Native American histories? Comparatively few Native intellectuals have taken up this subject matter in the past. Those who have — namely, the Powhatan-Renape scholar Jack Forbes, the Modoc-descended writer Michael Dorris, and the Laguna-Pueblo novelist Leslie Marmon Silko — have articulated theories that recognize the joint impact of European colonialism, slavery, and racial hierarchy on indigenous American and African American subjectivities, communities, and resistance strategies. Through his character Rayona in *A*

Yellow Raft in Blue Water, Dorris indicates the complexities of Afro-Native “dual heritage” in a Montana Indian community that reproduces aspects of U.S. racial prejudice (Dorris 1988 [1987], 63). Silko introduces the prospect of cultural and spiritual fusion from the perspective of the African American character Clinton in *Almanac of the Dead*, writing: “From the beginning, Africans had escaped and hid in the mountains where they met up with survivors of indigenous tribes hiding in remote strongholds. . . . Right then the magic had happened: great American and great African tribal cultures had come together to create a powerful consciousness within all people” (Silko 1991, 416). It is this vision of shared experience and joint creation that the Lakota artist Francis Yellow embraces in his piece that graces the cover of this book, a pictograph-like drawing of Africans entering indigenous American lands, titled, “First They Made Prayers, and They Sang and They Danced and Then They Made Relatives.” The work of Forbes, Dorris, Silko, and Yellow represent only a segment of Native interpretations of black and Indian relationships. There is much more to be said from the perspective of Native thinkers, and we hope to extend and invite that dialogue through the works collected here.

Summary of Collected Essays

In the spirit of interdisciplinary openness and in the hope of fostering unexpected and productive dialogues, this book is divided into two loosely organized, nonchronological halves that cross disciplinary lines. Chapters 1–8 are primarily concerned with the themes of race, place, belonging, citizenship, and historical memory. Chapters 9–15 are particularly interested in explorations of presence, identity, and intimacy through narrative, performance, and visual art.

We begin with the evocative “A Harbor of Sense,” in which the veteran poet and literature professor Eugene B. Redmond conducts an introspective interview with the Creek poet and musician Joy Harjo (Mvskoke/Creek). Widely recognized for her many books of poetry, including *She Had Some Horses* (1983), *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* (1994), and *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems* (2002), Harjo speaks in the interview about becoming a musician, about the new musical form of “tribal jazz,” and about sources of inspiration, from a grade-school classroom to her saxophone-playing

grandmother and the history of black and Native shared traditions of music and dance.

In the first essay of the volume, “An/Other Case of New England Underwriting: Negotiating Race and Property in *Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge*,” the literary and cultural studies scholars Jennifer D. Brody and Sharon P. Holland provide one of the first extended readings of Eldridge’s story. The memoir, first published in 1838 by the prominent Rhode Islander Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall, offers a window onto the complex metaphoric negotiations of African and Indian subjectivity in early-nineteenth-century New England. Brody and Holland return to the archive to investigate Eldridge’s maternal grandmother, Mary Fuller (reputed to be Narragansett), and to trouble the terms of such an investigation. What they find is a narrative that, although written by a white woman, engages the articulation of race, gender, and sexuality. As such, the piece proves illuminating for scholars of the era and area.

In “Race and Federal Recognition in Native New England,” the attorney Tiffany M. McKinney questions the impact of historical Afro-Native intermarriage on the makeup, identity, and federal categorization of certain New England Indian tribes. McKinney asserts that racial complexity within Indian kinship circles and citizenries has contributed to contentious debate within tribal communities. She takes as her point of focus the Eastern Pequot and Pautucket Pequot bands and the Mashantucket Pequot tribe of Connecticut and Rhode Island, which have encountered internal dissention and external criticism due to the presence of “phenotypically black” tribal members. In a survey of government regulations and legal cases that serves as an instructive overview of the intersecting racial and legal dimensions of federal tribal recognition, McKinney suggests that the United States’ history of federal intervention and recognition have contributed to tensions around race and belonging in contemporary Native communities. The result, McKinney posits, has been the construction of new tribal definitions of membership and citizenship that disenfranchise community members based on their racial categorization and physical appearance.

The next essays carry the historical debate about community boundaries, belonging, and citizenship out of New England and into the Indian Territory of present-day eastern Oklahoma, to which certain tribes of the Southeast were removed in the 1830s and 1840s. By focusing on the aftermath of black slavery in Indian nations, these three

authors import into Native locales key questions about the meaning of freedom and the practice of politics in post-bellum black life. The historian David Chang's essay, "Where Will the Nation Be at Home? Race, Nationalisms, and Emigration Movements in the Creek Nation," redirects the post-emancipation discussion to the meaning of nationhood for Creek Indians, Creek freedmen and women, and other Native peoples in late-nineteenth-century Indian Territory. Chang argues convincingly that the notion of the nation held a particular power for both black and Native communities. He then demonstrates the complexities and contradictions for these groups in claiming a national paradigm during a historical moment in which Native governments were under threat of dissolution by the U.S. government, Native tribes were excluding ex-slaves and mixed-race Afro-Native people from the national body, and both black communities and Native tribes were launching independent plans to emigrate to Africa, Mexico, and Canada in parallel attempts to find new homelands for their communities. In this exploration of national discourses and emigration projects, Chang shows how it was possible—and, indeed, consistent—for former slaves of Creek Indians to assert definitions of their community that embraced an Afrocentric nationalism, respected and identified with Creek nationalism, and implicitly opposed the racialized nationalist projects of the United States.

The historian Barbara Krauthamer continues this discussion in her essay, "In Their 'Native Country': Freedpeople's Understandings of Culture and Citizenship in the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations." Krauthamer offers an overview of the experience of black slaves in the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes and an assessment of their forty-year struggle for the rights of citizenship following the Civil War. Rather than focusing on the slaves' formation of syncretic Afro-Indian identities, as some scholars of this era have done, Krauthamer explores the political life of these communities. She argues that in their attempt to define the meaning of freedom for themselves, former slaves focused on civic inclusion and the attainment of land in Indian Territory based on their history of cultural identification with Indian tribes. By tracing the shifting strategies that freedpeople engaged in, sometimes pressing for citizenship within their respective Native nations and at other times vying for citizenship within the United States, Krauthamer reveals a political conviction as well as a sense of peoplehood that was both linked to and separate from Native American tribal bodies.

The final essay in this trio, “‘Blood and Money’: The Case of the Seminole Freedmen and Seminole Indians in Oklahoma,” by the ethnic studies scholar Melinda Micco (Seminole/Creek), traces the history of black Seminole and Seminole Indian relations since the Seminole Wars and examines contemporary ramifications of this history — namely, the present-day court cases concerning civil rights and the disbursement of federal monies within the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma. Micco’s work reveals the ways in which structures of military alliance and social organization that developed in the earliest moments of black and Seminole interaction continue to shape tribal politics and intertribal relations. She argues that while external factors — namely, American territorial expansion, European categorization and control of indigenous Americans and transplanted Africans, and the codification of racial identity through the concept of blood quantum — have been critical to the fragmentation of the Seminole people, internal structures and tensions underlie the conflicts between black Seminoles and Seminole Indians. Micco’s interpretation of the past and present state of Seminole politics is enlivened and complicated by interviews with black Seminoles collected over a ten-year period. These interviews, together with her historical research, lead Micco to conclude that black Seminoles and Seminole Indians have a connection that is enduring and a history that cannot be collapsed into the broader category of black Indian experience.

The historian Celia Naylor takes our study farther west in “Playing Indian: The Selection of Radmilla Cody as Miss Navajo, 1997–98.” Here Naylor explores Afro-Native identity claims and contestations through a case study of the 1998 Miss Navajo Nation contest. The winner of this cultural pageant was the singer Radmilla Cody, the daughter of a Navajo woman and African American man, whose right to reign was questioned by other Navajos. In dialogue with the scholars Rayna Green and Philip Deloria, who have written about the phenomenon of “playing Indian,” Celia Naylor begins her study by asking whether African American claims of Indian heritage are treated with greater skepticism by Native people than are European American claims. In addition, through a compilation of letters to the editor in the *Navajo Times* and personal interviews with Cody, Naylor traces the reception of the mixed-race Miss Navajo among Navajos both on and off the reservation. She finds that internal community dialogue about the relationships between race and nation, between race and culture,