Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country

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Book Reviews

Using a variety of methodologies, including literary and cultural criticism as well as archival research, the authors of these fifteen essays aim to illuminate a complex and underexplored topic, the nexus between African American and Native peoples that has been engendered through intermarriage and other social and cultural mixtures and influences. This book contains a stimulating blend of insider and outsider perspectives.

Two essays deal with the book’s earliest topics: one deeply examines the construction of race in colonial Mexico, while the other explores the life of a New England woman, Eleanor Eldridge (1785–1865), of African American and Indian (possibly Narragansett) descent. These pieces represent the wide geographic and cultural variance featured in abundance in this volume.

Deborah E. Kanter, the author of the essay on Mexico, cautions against too easy acceptance of a story line that fashions mestizo identity as the norm; “both Indians and Spaniards clung to racial differences for as long as possible, in part because race granted certain legal and social prerogatives for both groups” (p. 177). Jennifer D. Brody and Sharon P. Holland, examining Eldridge’s life, which is known primarily through memoirs published in 1838 by a white collaborator (Frances Whipple), wrestle with a text, and indeed a historiographical tradition, “that often obscures the melange of whites, blacks, and Native peoples who inhabited” New England (p. 51). In Whipple’s text, Eldridge’s blackness was generally presented as more important than her Indianness. How to resist the submergence of either blackness or Indianness and to give an eloquent and fair voice to each is a frequent theme in Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds.

David A. Y. O. Chang, Barbara Krauthamer, and Melinda Micco wrestle with the changing meaning of black-Indian identity in the late nineteenth-century Indian Territory (and elsewhere) as it affected the Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations. These fasci-
nating essays also explore the little-known Reconstruction-era treaties that left many black Indians with unclear or highly contested citizenship and national identities. Each author works carefully with historical nuance, revealing that the story of each of these Native American nations turned out somewhat differently. These essays make a very solid contribution to our historical understanding.

Robert Warrior’s masterful essay on the early twentieth century transposes a question by W. E. B. Du Bois into a Native American context: “How did it feel in 1903 to be an Indian problem?” Warrior then contrasts the relentless assimilationism of Richard Henry Pratt, the chief architect of the infamous off-reservation boarding schools, with the careful advocacy for preservation of native cultures by Luther Standing Bear, an alumnus, ironically, of one of Pratt’s schools. In matters of education and much else, Native Americans and African Americans, writes Warrior, have been on “a different, sometimes convergent, journey” (p. 194).

This volume also includes an interesting group of essays on more contemporary topics, including eligibility for conducting reservation gambling: controversies over black Natives competing in and winning Native American beauty pageants; and the cross-fertilization of Afro-Caribbean and Hawaiian musical forms. Some of these essays are stronger than others, but most readers will likely find something of interest in this collection.

This volume makes an important contribution to the still underresearched area of African Americans’ interactions with Native cultures and peoples. It should also suggest important avenues for further research and is highly recommended for students of both African American and Native American history and culture.

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The term “Gulf South” is problematic for a variety of reasons. Rarely employed by historians until the late twentieth century, the label has since then steadily appeared in studies dedicated to reinterpretng historical themes in early North America via a region long neglected in examinations of colonialism. But how does one define this locale? Does it consist only of the coastal strips bordering the Gulf of Mexico? Or, does it encompass the varied hinterlands contiguous to those coasts? Is the region constrained by traditional definitions of “the South” or does it include all continental lands that touch the Gulf of Mexico?

Neither Richmond F. Brown, the volume’s editor, nor any of the twelve contributors provide an explicit definition of the term. In the preface, Brown indicates that the Gulf South is a region “stretching from Florida to Texas” but offers little clarification (p. ix). Daniel H. Usner Jr., a contributor and early proponent of the Gulf South label, equates the area with “the Gulf Coastal Plain—the focus of this volume,” though that description excludes places investigated in the work (p. 18). Ida Altman, the author of the afterword, does little to clarify the usefulness of the term as an organizing strategy by noting that the “distinctive societies” addressed in the book “existed in relative isolation from one another” and the “remarkable variation in colonial Gulf South societies defies easy generalization” (p. 231). She concludes that what those diverse communities shared “was eventual submersion in the expansionist United States or partial or even complete elimination” (ibid.). But such a claim could be made for multiple societies in North America, many of which have much clearer geographic (such as New England, Central Plains) or cultural (such as Iroquois League, Mormons) ties.

Those issues manifest themselves at times in the essays. Amy Turner Bushnell’s piece on Jonathan Dickinson’s odyssey in Florida addresses material previously covered elsewhere and contradicts the volume’s Gulf South premise by focusing on activities along the peninsula’s Atlantic coast. Seemingly more relevant, Greg O’Brien’s work uncovers the Choctaw perspective on English colonization in present-day Alabama and Mississippi while Karl Davis presents an innovative depiction of life in the Creek trade center of Taensa remi-