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FOREWORD **All in the Family? A Meditation on White
Centrality, Black Exclusion, and the
Intervention of Afro-Native Studies**

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On the early November morning in 1907 when President Theodore Roosevelt declared Oklahoma a state, thousands of men, women and children traveled to Guthrie, Oklahoma from the far reaches of Indian and Oklahoma Territories. Crowding the streets and parks of the small city, they viewed public festivities and enjoyed complimentary barbecue. The highlight of the statehood celebration was to be held at the Guthrie library, where Oklahoma national guardsmen flanked the stairway. There Governor Charles Haskell took his oath of office, which was then followed by a scripted dramatic performance. In a symbolic ceremony, a Cherokee woman dressed in beaded buckskin was married to a ruggedly attired white cowboy.¹ The marriage enacted the union of "Miss Indian Territory" and "Mr. Oklahoma Territory," signifying the merger of Indian land and American land into the great state of Oklahoma.²

The drama must have appealed to the mostly white audience members, many of whom were first generation settlers resentful of their previous exclusion from full rights and privileges in Indian Territory.³ But even as these onlookers cheered at the Guthrie display, members of the various Indian nations remained at home, avoiding participation in the celebration of statehood. One Cherokee woman chose to stay in the Cherokee Nation while her white husband attended the events in Guthrie. In an interview the woman recounted her husband's homecoming: "Well, Mary," he said, "we are no longer in the Cherokee Nation. All of us now live in the State of Oklahoma." The woman recalled: "It broke my heart. I went to bed and cried all night long. It seemed more than I could bear that the old Cherokee Nation—my country and my people's country—was no more."⁴

As this Cherokee woman might have noted had she been asked, the ceremonial wedding represented as consensual unification was in fact a performance of domination. Here the culturally symbolic meanings of marriage, invested with inherent and familiar power relations, were enlisted to crystallize a po-

litical moment. Feminist theorist Joan Scott has argued that gender is often deployed in politicized contexts such as this one, as "gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated."⁵ Indeed, the staged marriage between the "beautiful girl of Indian blood" and the "tall, handsome man dressed in cowboy garb" reproduced a gendered ritual with attached social meanings, and spoke volumes about the relationships of race to power and gender to power that were being cemented at that moment.⁶ The performance reenacted and personified various aspects of white-Indian relations in United States history, dating back to the founding of the Jamestown colony and the dramatic tale of "Princess" Pocahontas rescuing Captain John Smith. Just as the Pocahontas story was shaped into romantic, national myth, the symbolic marriage in Oklahoma represented colonization as heterosexual romance, obscuring the struggle of Native people who fought to maintain their homelands both in the East prior to removal and in the western Indian Territory. Native women in particular had long been associated with land in American culture. Viewed as erotic and wild, they were thought to symbolize the openness and abundance of the New World.⁷ Concurrently, cowboys were mythologized as heroic men who could tame nature, making productive use of the unruly land. In this public display, then, in which a Native woman is presented to a white cowboy, she, like the land, is his to tame.⁸

Oklahoma statehood, symbolized in this staged marriage, reinforced and legalized the unequal power relations between Native people and Euro-Americans; the man of the (state)house would certainly be white. Furthermore, what went unspoken in this intimate drama said as much as the scripted lines. One might think, observing the ceremony, that whites and Indians were the only actors on the western stage. But in fact, black people had lived in Indian Territory long before the onslaught of white settlement.⁹ African Americans had come to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears as slaves of southeastern removed tribes, and as free members of Native families. In the 1880s, African American settlers had traveled from the deep South to Indian Territory, seeking to "[c]ome out of the wilderness from among those lawless lynchings and breathe the free air," as one black-owned newspaper put it.¹⁰ In actuality, as cultural critic Michele Wallace has noted, the Indian Territory that would become Oklahoma was more colored than white in the nineteenth century.¹¹

Indeed, the absence of a black actor in the symbolic wedding ceremony indicated an anxiety around black presence and a desire to excise African Americans from the Oklahoma state family album. As author and critic Toni Morrison has astutely observed about the present absence of African Americans in American literature: "We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily "not-there"; that a void may be empty but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves;

arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them."¹² The possibility that the African American community could constitute a third partner in the making of the state was unequivocally rejected in this purposeful void. And while the drama reinforced the (unequal) relationship between whites and Indians, it disallowed even the prospect of relationship between blacks and Indians. African Americans were symbolically severed from relationship with Native people, who were in fact their family members, fellow tribal members, and in too many cases, former masters. This symbolic absence was soon replicated and mandated by the Oklahoma state representatives, who enacted Jim Crow laws to segregate African Americans in their first legislative session.¹³

These absences and discontinuities in the Oklahoma Statehood marriage ceremony reflect those in American historiography. The history of African American and American Indian relations has been a footnote in general narratives of American history, as well as in much of the literature on Native nations as well as on African Americans produced by scholars of American Indian history, African American history, and Ethnohistory. Most classic studies of blacks and Indians in the U.S. have discussed these groups in relation to white Americans and governmental policy rather than in relation to each other. These histories have replicated a binary that maintains white people as the predominant force shaping the experiences of people of color. And in doing so, they have negated the importance of relationships between communities of color which have shaped historical experiences as well as outcomes.

In the subfield of western history, for instance, historians have traditionally approached their topic with a focus on white men as pioneers, farmers, ranchers and cowboys. When people of color enter these classic histories, they do so as foils whose lives have importance only in connection with the white actors. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, the father of western history, defined the western "frontier" as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."¹⁴ It was here, Jackson argued, at the site of confrontation between European men and a wilderness peopled by Indians, that the American character was forged. Neither African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans nor white women played a part in the transformational moment Turner described. Native people were present only as the backdrop through and against which Americanization occurred. It is no small coincidence that Turner presented his essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association that convened in Chicago at the same time as the Columbian Exposition. A fitting counterpart to Turner's theory, the Columbian Exposition showcased The White City, a testament to the advancement of Western civilization and technology in America¹⁵

In addition to a long-standing tendency of some historians to focus only

on white experience, fixed ideas about race and region have also led to a compressed picture of American historical relationships. Scholars have expected to find the usual suspects in the usual places: African Americans in the rural South and urban North, and Native Americans on the open plains. This narrowed vision made it impossible to see blacks in the Creek and Cherokee nations or Indians in Harlem and Alabama. Thus, black life in Indian Territory and other western locations went largely unexamined, Native life in urban communities went largely unrecorded, and the shared experiences of blacks and American Indians remained mainly invisible except among a small group of black historians in the 1920s and 1930s and ethnohistorians in the 1970s and 1980s. Those of us who believe that historical scholarship can affect thoughts, actions, and identities in contemporary life would argue that these gaps in American historiography have concrete political and social ramifications for African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indians. For descendants of slaves held by Indians who are fighting to regain tribal citizenship rights, and for southern tribes petitioning for recognition from federal officials who have historically viewed intermarriage and cultural exchange with African Americans as a challenge to Native authenticity, the historical record matters.¹⁶

It is welcome news, therefore, that scholarly interest in the conjoined histories, arts, and cultures of Native Americans and African Americans has surged in recent years. A number of dissertations, conference papers, journal articles, essay collections, and monographs on Native and black intersections have emerged or are emerging in various fields, inspired perhaps in part by the rise in scholarly and public attention to the notion that the United States is and always has been a mixed-race as well as multiracial country. In addition, new courses on the subject of Afro-Native relations and Black Indians are being taught in Liberal Arts departments on a number of college campuses. One of those campuses, The University of Chicago, has produced a cohort of undergraduate and graduate students whose research papers in Afro-Native studies were of a remarkable quality. The essays collected in this volume include work developed in that class, as well as additional invited and reprinted essays.

These essays by students, scholars, and community leaders indicate the diversity of African American and Native American experience, illuminate the multiple sites of African diasporic displacement and dispersal, highlight the circuitous routes of cultural transformation, and reveal the complexities of public performance as a space of exploitation, resistance, and negotiation. They explore the presence of African Americans in unexpected and under-researched locales, such as the Midwest, Southwest, and Hawaii. In addition, they boldly confront a set of dilemmas that are not uncommon in the study of African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indians. First, many of these essays sort through the challenges inherent in reconstructing the history of Native

and black people when most of the extant sources were kept by white people in positions of power over one or both groups. Next, these essays reveal that determining the status of black persons living in Native communities is often challenging. The authors' inability to state with certainty the absolute standing of certain African Americans reveals the ambiguities of the times and places in which these individuals lived, indicating that although they were racialized "black," their place in Native communities was not predetermined and could be negotiated in interaction. Finally, several of these essays tell the stories of African Americans whose presence among Indians hastened the eventual colonization, cultural transformation, and even assimilation of Native peoples by the United States. This fact challenges us to continually confront the distressing dynamics of power that often exist in the comparative and intersectional histories of Native Americans and African Americans.

The work gathered here raises key questions and offers new interpretations that have the potential to enrich our understanding of the Native American, African American, and American past and present. Thus this volume has a unique and important place in the broader intellectual project to unearth relationships that have been buried, and to restore to recognition and dignity peoples who have been ignored.

Notes

1. Howard Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan, *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1977), 91.
2. Muriel Wright, *Our Oklahoma* (Guthrie, OK: Cooperative Publishing Co., 1939), 279.
3. Morgan and Morgan, 91.
4. Quoted in Edward Everett Dale and Morris Wardell, *History of Oklahoma* (New York, NY: Prentice Hall, 1948), 317-318.
5. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (December 1986), 1067-1069. Theda Perdue's use of Joan Scott's essay on gender and historical analysis to frame her argument in *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) inspired my reference to the text here.
6. Quoted in Dale and Wardell, 316.
7. For more on associations made between American Indian women and the land, see Carol Douglas Sparks, "The Land Incarnate: Navajo Women and the Dialogue of Colonialism, 1821-1879 in *Negotiators of Change: Native American Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995). Also see Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor and Experience in American Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
8. The erasure of the Native man in this ceremony is in keeping with the feminization of American Indian men in periods of U.S. history, which, as Kathleen Brown has argued, began when English men encountered Native men who did not farm and were thought to be enslaved by their bodily needs and appetites. See Kathleen Brown, "The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier" in *Negotiators of Change: Native American Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995).

9. Historian Katja May also makes the point that this ceremony excluded blacks. See her book, *African Americans and Native Americans in the Creek and Cherokee Nations, 1830s to 1920s* (New York, NY: Garland, 1996), 223.

10. Quoted in May, 225. This call to black settlers to seek refuge in Indian Territory ran counter to the more typical image at the time of Native people disappearing into black communities and being swallowed up by black racial categories such as "Negro." This image was prevalent in *The Journal of Negro History* of the early 1900s, as authors attempted to document black-Indian interactions, and it is common today in debates about federal and state recognition for Indian tribes who have intermarried with blacks. For more on African American movement west to escape racial persecution in the South, see Nell Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1976). For more on black life in the West, see Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1998); William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (Seattle, WA: Open Hand Publishing, 1987).

11. Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London, New York, NY: Verso, 1990).

12. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 1-34, 11.

13. Morgan and Morgan, 85.

14. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1894), 81.

15. Brian Dippie discusses the ideological overlap between Turner's paper and the Columbian Exposition in his essay "American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives," in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde Milner and Charles Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 112-136.

Even when later generations of scholars attempted to fill the gaps left by historians such as Turner, they often approached their topics narrowly, singling out one group of color to study in isolation. For example, Angie Debo, a prolific historian of Oklahoma and the Five Tribes whose labor and persistence in the 40s and 50s forged a way for women in the field, skimmed over crucial chapters of Native history that involved African Americans. Some of Angie Debo's works include: *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941); *And Still the Waters Run* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940); *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934). In another example, Philip Durham and Everett Jones, authors of *The Negro Cowboys* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), a book that attempted to pay homage to a forgotten group, presented black cowboys as western heroes who did not engage in significant relationships with Native Americans or grapple with questions of their own complicity in the American conquest of Native land.

The "New Western History," a relatively recent theoretical approach that inserts questions of power, race, gender, and the environment into the study of the American West, is revising the previously limited accounts of western history. For examples of this approach, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde Milner and Charles Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History*; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1987); Elizabeth Jamison and Susan Armitage, eds., *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990).

16. Historian Melinda Micco and anthropologist Circe Sturm are producing activist scholarship that lends historical perspective to current struggles over black and black-Indian political

participation in the Seminole and Cherokee nations. Melinda Micco's book on black-Seminole history is a work in progress. See Circe Sturm, "Blood Politics, Racial Classification, and Cherokee National Identity," *American Indian Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 1998): 230-258; this essay also appears in *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America*, ed. James Brooks (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 223-260; also see Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002). For more on the issue of federal recognition and race, see Karen Blu, *The Lumbee Problem: the Making of an American Indian People* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Gerald Sider, *Lumbee Indian Histories: Race, Ethnicity, and Indian Identity in the Southern United States* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Brian Klopotek, "The Long Outwaiting: Federal Recognition Policy in Three Louisiana Indian Communities" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2004).