

*Afro/Native Historiography:  
Finding Relevance Outside the Eurocentric Tradition*  
By George Price

Ever since the time when the first Africans came into the lands that are now called the United States of America, in the company of 16th century Spanish "conquistadores", Native Americans and people of African descent have interacted with each other in a multitude of ways and circumstances, all over the continent. They have been, in various places and times, allies, enemies, spouses, ex-spouses, all kinds of relatives, enslaved together, enslaving each other, escaping slavery together, living together in free communities, economic competitors, business partners, partners in political causes, and more. Many examples of Afro/Native relations, such as: the thousands of men from New England's many mixed black and Indian communities who joined the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War; the alliances between Muskogean and African peoples who fought against the early incursions of the United States into what is now the American South; and the interactions between the "buffalo soldiers" and several Native American tribes in the west, were truly significant events in the formation of the America we know today. Yet, until the last three decades, the scholarly world has paid relatively little attention to these essential American stories, or to the stories of interaction between American minority groups of *any* kind over the broad scope of American history.

For the first two hundred years of American historiography, the relevance of and inclusion of any people in officially certified American history-telling was based on those peoples' significance to the goals and exploits of the dominant group. In those rare cases when the focus of study was *not* on the "great exploits" of powerful Euro-American males, we would occasionally be gifted with scholarly studies of groups of color, or some of the poorer and marginalized white people. Usually, in such studies, the mentioned minority ethnic or "racial" group presented some sort of social problem of concern to the majority that, of course, was ultimately resolved in the interest of the majority group.

And those who resolved the "problem"--whether through violence, ingenuity, or deceit--were designated the "heroes" of American history.

In the 1950's and sixties we began to see more works from a less ethnocentric perspective, or presenting more of the historical perspectives of the people of color themselves, such as Kenneth Stampp's landmark book on slavery, The Peculiar Institution.<sup>1</sup> But not until the early 1970's did we start to receive book-length historical studies on the relationships between various marginalized groups of color, without the primary concern being their significance to the dominant majority group.<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest of these types of studies during that decade was Gary B. Nash's, Red, White and Black: the Peoples of Early North America, which was an inclusive history with one long segment on black/Indian relations, and with several shorter examples given throughout the text. That was followed in the late 1970's by three very good studies of the relations between Afro-Americans and the Cherokees: Rudy Halliburton's Red Over Black: Black Slavery Among the Cherokee Indians (1977); Daniel Littlefield's The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship (1978); and Theda Perdue's Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866 (1979). In the 1980's and '90's others added to this growing field of historiography, such as William Katz and Jack Forbes, with their groundbreaking general studies on relations between African Americans and American Indians. In the last five years, many valuable articles and books on the history of Afro/Native relations have come into print. The trend is encouraging, and there are still many important unwritten chapters in an inclusive American history yet to uncover.<sup>3</sup>

In a manner which a historical treatise simply cannot provide, William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.'s play, "Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers" has given us a cogent exploration of some of the dimensions of Afro/Native relations in America, including the identity issues resulting from such relations. The power of theater to connect to our human essence, connect us to the vital experiences of others, teach us new truths, and facilitate our healing--especially in the hands of a master playwright such as Yellow Robe-- is truly unique to that art form. One thing that makes this play particularly potent is the fact that Yellow Robe has drawn this story from a lifetime of personal experience, during which he has deeply contemplated and wrestled with these issues. As in all of Yellow Robes' plays, he writes about what he knows or has related to on a deeply personal level. Hopefully, "Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers" will inspire many others to carry on in theater and the other arts, the inclusive and complete telling of our common American history.

Of the several pertinent issues raised in this play, I would like to address just two of those issues in this essay by providing some brief historical context. Those issues are the Afrophobia present in the minds and subconscious of some American Indians of the western states, and the internalized racism involved in Native American identity formation. Book-length works could and should be written on both topics, but for this essay I will just get right to the point.

The concept of human "races" was foreign to Native Americans before the arrival of Europeans in the western hemisphere. In the various native traditions, strangers or "outsiders" were judged by their individual merits or character, and, when thought of in

categorical terms, were categorized by tribe or nation, or simply as friend or foe.<sup>4</sup> It was common during the times before European contact for strangers from other tribes to be adopted into a tribe- a practice that continued after contact with Europeans, with many adoptions of both Europeans and Africans into many American Indian tribes. Racialized thinking about humanity was brought into Native American consciousness soon after it became normative in colonial America, as contact with Euro-Americans increased, along with the processes of Native American deculturalization or rapid cultural transformation. When American racism became more ideological during the 19th century, first, as a defense of slavery, and later in support of imperialism and Jim Crow segregation, many Native Americans assimilated such concepts about other humans, as they were being forced or pressured to assimilate many of the Euro-American cultural norms.<sup>5</sup>

The process which brought Afrophobic thinking and attitudes onto the Indian reservations of the West, such as the setting for "Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers", took root during the second generation after the creation of those reservations, during the 1880s and '90s. Instrumental to this culturally transformative process was a U.S. federal law, the Dawes General Allotment and Severalty Act of 1887, which ordained that all American Indians on reservations should abandon their traditional communal/reciprocal caretaker relationship to their lands and adopt the western concept of individual land ownership. Each Indian "head of household" (another western concept imposed upon them) was allotted 160 acres. After all eligible tribal members had selected or were assigned their individual allotments, the remaining tribal lands were declared "surplus" and therefore available for "settlement" by American homesteaders.<sup>6</sup>

On reservations which had land that was well-suited to commercial agriculture or ranching, such as the Flathead Reservation in western Montana, non-Indians soon outnumbered the Indians, but most reservations did not have such attractive resources and maintained their Indian majority. Nevertheless, by the end of the 19th century, most western reservations were surrounded by American towns and American ranches and farms at the reservation borders. The Allotment Act opened the floodgates for cultural invasion and racist thinking on the reservations. It is also very significant that this invasion occurred in coincidence with, and was energized by, the Jim Crow era of American history--and negative attitudes about African Americans which were held by some Native Americans did not begin to subside until after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

The depth and scope of white supremacist fervor during the Jim Crow era, not just in the deep South, but throughout the United States is not widely understood by most Americans born after 1960. For example, most Americans today think of the Ku Klux Klan as a primarily Southern institution. That was not the case in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. KKK membership records for the year 1925 (probably close to their peak year) indicate that the KKK had membership branches in all 48 states. Total Klan membership in the U.S. was 8,902,487, out of a total U.S. population of about 115 million. That's almost 8% of the total population! Montana had about 40,000 KKK members in a state population of about 540,000, which is 7.5%, or just a shade less than the national average. Michigan had the largest KKK membership, at 875,000, and Nevada's was the lowest, at 1,003.<sup>8</sup> Although the KKK attacked Jews, Catholics and immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, the primary target of racism, lynching, and other KKK

activity nationwide was African Americans.<sup>9</sup>

Supported by academic white supremacists espousing theories like social Darwinism and eugenics, and local governments nationwide enacting Jim Crow segregation laws, white supremacist ideology was an American norm in that era. Ethnic humor and racial slurs were commonplace everywhere, even in mainstream media and advertising, and even seemed to be required behavior for social acceptance by the dominant group. Many more examples could be provided, but the relevant point here is that the U.S. was much more blatantly and fervently racist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century than most Americans realize, and *it was largely such people who invaded the Indian reservations as homesteaders or moved onto adjacent lands and nearby towns.*<sup>10</sup>

For reservation Indians, who were then surrounded by and forced to live among and beside such Euro-American neighbors, there was considerable pressure to at least *publicly* conform to their neighbor's disdain for African Americans, as a way of getting along with these new neighbors. It came right along with being forced to speak English, to live in the cash economy, working for Euros for wages, being covert or going "underground" with their own culture and religion, cattle ranching, drinking with cowboys, inter-marrying with Euro-Americans, and all the rest of it. This sort of social pressure and influence was not only applied to Indians, but to *all* marginalized groups in America during that era- including eastern and southern Europeans, Jews, Hispanics, Asian Americans, as well as some African Americans themselves. They were all learning that by disassociating themselves from African Americans, and other people of color-- *even from their own people*, sometimes--and joining in the public chorus of disdain and

contempt for any people who were not under the label of “white”, they could somehow find a higher degree of acceptance among the dominant, Anglo-American “cultural norm”. Or, at least it could help them to survive in this strange new world.<sup>11</sup>

It should be of no surprise, then, that Native Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who were part African—whether descended from the buffalo soldiers or from any of the multitude of other Afro/Native unions in American history—may have had difficulty feeling accepted in reservation communities, as well as with accepting themselves. Afrophobia and internalized racism led many a 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian with some African ancestry to deny that ancestry to others and to themselves. In some cases in which the African ancestry was phenotypically obvious, the person would explain away their curly hair or darker than average skin with the words, “My grandmother was raped by a buffalo soldier.” In some cases that may have been true, but if the Afro/Native person had actually received their African genes through a consensual relationship or a marriage and they admitted that, many Indians considered that to be more of a taint upon their family than if the African genes had entered the family by brute force.

It would be wrong to doubt a person’s word about their own family history, unless there was some substantial evidence to the contrary. For example, when such claims are made by people who are from tribes which had no historical contact with the buffalo soldiers whatsoever (as was the case with most of the tribes of the northern Plains), it would seem that the claim probably was spawned by the Afrophobic atmosphere that filtered onto the reservations during the Allotment and Jim Crow eras. Most of the buffalo soldiers were stationed in Texas and New Mexico, and most of their warfare was against Apaches,

Comanches, and other southwestern tribes. There was also a brief 9<sup>th</sup> and tenth Cavalry presence in what is now Kansas and Oklahoma. In the North, there was some warfare and other military contact between buffalo soldiers and the Lakota, Nakota, Crow, and Cheyenne peoples, and some peacetime contact between the buffalo soldiers stationed at Fort Missoula and the Salish and Nez Perce people. I have yet to see any documentation on such contact with other Northern tribes, but that doesn't mean that such evidence will not some day be found.<sup>12</sup>

For culturally traditional Native American people, the connections and relationships with one's relatives and tribe are as essential and life-sustaining as the connections to homeland and culture. To be shunned, ostracized, or exiled from one's people has always been one of the most unbearably painful things that a traditional person could ever go through, and before contact with Europeans that kind of treatment used to only be given to people as punishment for the more serious types of crimes. To be punished in such a way for something that is no crime whatsoever, but, instead, a natural condition of birth and something that for all the ages of time before the Jim Crow era was as normal and accepted by traditional Native people as the welcoming of and occasional adoption of strangers, surely brought immeasurable anguish to those who received such treatment. For those of us who have not lived in such a world, only the power of theater can even begin to show us something of what such an experience was really like.

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- <sup>1</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South, New York, Vintage Books, 1956.
- <sup>2</sup> Certainly *anthropologists*, such as Brewton Berry, had explored the topic, and several *articles* on black/Indian relations were published in The Journal of Negro History by historians such as Carter G. Woodson and Kenneth W. Porter, but there were no *book-length* treatments.
- <sup>3</sup> Brewton Berry, Almost White: A Study of Certain Racial Hybrids in the Eastern United States, New York, Macmillan Co., 1963. Carter G. Woodson, "The Relations of Negroes and Indians in Massachusetts", Journal of Negro History, Vol. 5, 1920, pp.45-62. Kenneth W. Porter, "Relations Between Negroes and Indians Within the Present Limits of the United States", Journal of Negro History, Vol. 17, 1932, pp. 287-367. Gary B. Nash, Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1974, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1992. Rudy Halliburton, Jr., Red Over Black: Black Slavery Among the Cherokee Indians, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1977. Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1978. Theda Perdue, Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1979. Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1993, pp. 187-189. William Loren Katz, Black Indians: a Hidden Heritage, N. Y., Atheneum, 1986. Jack D. Forbes, Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993. Ronald Takaki's A Different Mirror (1993) had an interesting segment on a labor union formed jointly by Japanese and Mexican Americans who were working together in the California beet fields in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. More recent works on Afro/Native relations include: James F. Brooks, ed., Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America, Lincoln, the University of Nebraska Press, 2002; Tiya Miles, Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, and; Claudio Saunt, Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family, Cambridge, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Several claims and stories have been offered regarding ancient Indian concepts of the "four races of man", which all have amazing coincidence with the European concepts offered in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century ("red, yellow, black, and white"), such as the widely-accepted categorization system developed by Swiss philosopher/biologist Carolus Linnaeus in 1735. The closer scholars examine the historical record, however, evidence is accumulating to show that those "ancient traditions" do not pre-date European contact, and were probably first introduced by Christian missionaries.
- <sup>5</sup> There are many published sources on traditional Native American treatment of strangers and on adoptions into tribes before the Allotment Act era, and the advent of "blood quantum", and economic issues regarding tribal membership. See Ella Cara Deloria, Waterlily, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1988; Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest, N.Y., W.W. Norton, 1976, esp., pg 149; Robert Juet, "The Third Voyage of Master Henry Hudson, 1610", in Franklin J. Jamison, Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664, N.Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909, pp. 13-28 (examples of generous native hospitality at first contact). An extremely informative account of traditional native hospitality at first contact with strangers can be found in the journal of Christopher Columbus, entry for October 13, 1492: "They invite you to share anything they possess, and show as much love as if their hearts went with it. How easy it would be to convert these people, and to make them work for us."
- <sup>6</sup> D.S. Otis, The Dawes Act and the Allotment of Indian Lands, Norman, The University of Oklahoma Press, 1934 and 1873. Burton M. Smith, "The Politics of Allotment on the Flathead Indian Reservation", Pacific Northwest Quarterly, vol. 70, no.3, July, 1979, reprinted, 1995 by Salish Kootenai College Press, Pablo, Montana.
- <sup>7</sup> In fairness it should be said that, probably, due to their very limited and often non-existent contact with African Americans, most American Indians on western reservations had more of an indifference to or obliviousness about African Americans than any hostility. Some maintained the traditional open-mindedness towards all people, while others absorbed the attitudes of their new white neighbors.
- <sup>8</sup> Statistics on KKK membership from, Molefi K. Asante and Mark T. Mattson, The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans, N.Y., Macmillan Publishers, 1993.
- <sup>9</sup> A detailed study of the rise of radical white supremacy and the extent of lynchings during this era can be found in Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 1984. See also, Rayford W. Logan, The Betrayal of the

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Negro: from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson, 1877-1914, London, Collier, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson, cited above, esp. Chapters 4-6 (includes the info on Woodrow Wilson). For many examples of racist images in popular media look at an issue of Harper's Weekly or Harper's Monthly, between 1890 and 1920. See also C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 1974 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the pressure on marginalized groups in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to conform to white supremacist thinking, see Takaki's book, A Different Mirror, cited above, and Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White, N. Y., Routledge, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> More information on the buffalo soldiers can be found in, Charles L. Kenner, Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1999; Gail Buckley, American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military, from the Revolution to Desert Storm, N.Y., Crown Publishers, 2003; William H. Leckie, The Buffalo Soldiers: a Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1967; John M. Carroll, ed., The Black Military Experience in the American West, New York, Liveright Publishing, 1971; Arlen L. Fowler, The Black Infantry in the West, 1869-1891, Westport, CT, Greenwood Publishing, 1971.