

## Dangerous Decolonizing

### *Indians and Blacks and the Legacy of Jim Crow*

For the past ten years I have been doing ethnological and historical research in the southeastern United States that revolves around federal recognition of Indian tribes. One of the thorniest issues to negotiate with people I interview has been the place of blackness in southern Indian communities. The subject quickly raises hackles because of the ways in which the presence of blackness undermines claims to a distinct Indian identity; as a result of this and other factors, antiblack racism remains an unresolved internal and external conflict in the South. As a Choctaw with roots in Louisiana and an activist for racial equality, I feel obliged to discuss the matter publicly to counter antiblack racism and free indigenous communities from what is ultimately a self-defeating support of white supremacy. By doing so, however, I am forcing other southern Indians to talk about the matter against their will and discussing a history that sometimes reflects poorly on us. On the basis of the conflicts and methodological problems I have encountered in this process, I suggest some revisions to indigenous methodologies and discuss the implications of this knowledge for indigenous studies as a field.

This essay addresses the stories we are not supposed to talk about, a thought that gives me pause. Decades of subaltern groups talking back to academics have made it clear that colonial gazing, airing dirty laundry, and treating indigenous people as laboratory animals undermine the safety and integrity of the communities being studied. In light of these critiques, indigenous peoples and scholars have developed a new model based in collaboration with and respect for indigenous sovereignty, and scholars try to be self-critical and self-aware, ensuring that scholarly work benefits the community in some direct way. Collaboration, mutual benefit, and scholarly sup-

port of tribal endeavors are central both to indigenous methodologies and to my ethical concerns as an indigenous researcher.<sup>1</sup>

But the problem of antiblack racism in Indian communities presents a theoretical oversight in indigenous methodologies in a couple of ways. First, indigenous methodologies need to be able to account for indigenous peoples as entities with blurred boundaries and internal heterogeneity rather than as discretely bounded, homogeneous communities. While scholars have often acknowledged the blurred boundaries between indigenous and colonizing populations that result in *mestizaje*, middle grounds, and colonial domination in American Indian studies, we have only recently become more careful about accounting for the ways in which Indian communities have come into contact with other marginalized groups and at times reproduced systems of oppression from the colonizers within our own communities. Moreover, we too rarely account for the multiplicity of social and political positions within a community, preferring the simplicity of well-intentioned declarative statements about supporting tribal sovereignty that carry a secret, homogenizing, nationalist “conceptual prison” for Indians within them.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous methodologies in some ways depend on a presupposition of a tidy power relationship between a tightly bound, oppressed subject group and a separate, oppressive external world, and a presupposition that all of the values of the indigenous community are worthy of upholding and in line with the values of the researcher. So what should we do when that is not true? Or, more accurately, what do we do once we understand that it is, in fact, an impossibility? Can we classify as collaborative work that which seeks to change the values of a community? In this case, I view it as part of a painful process of decolonization and a conversation long overdue in Indian country, but it raises the question of how to make these ethical considerations fit into a collaborative model.

That leads to the second area of concern, which is that in the context of U.S. indigenous studies, we need to have a better infusion of the study of race more broadly than simply in the Indian–white context. In many ways, the native–white relationship is unique. We need to keep this in mind because as a field U.S. ethnic studies does not have a solid understanding of the distinction between indigenous groups and racial minorities and typically fails to see the ways in which the colonizer–indigenous relationship is central to understanding other racial projects. At the same time, Indian studies as a field has focused so intently on what sets indigenous nations apart from racial minorities that we have failed to fully account for our com-

mon experiences as racial minorities. Indians are part of a racial system that goes beyond the binary racial relationship with whites and beyond the colonial relationship; we are part of a dynamic constellation, an entire system of race, and every node in that system affects Native people to some degree. We understand, for example, that white racializations of *Indian* people affect everything from the government-to-government relationship to the way Indian kids are socialized in educational systems. But Indians are part of and participate in a national conversation about race, and we need to understand more fully how racial formations and indigeneity are tied together, too. How do ideas about whiteness, Indianness, and blackness, for example, shape tribal identities? How were shifting attitudes toward Indians in the 1920s tied to the classification of Chicanos as white in the census of 1930 (Foley 2002)? How have Japanese- and Anglo-American myths of racial equality in Hawai'i undermined indigenous Hawaiian sovereignty efforts (Trask 2000)?

Stories from my experiences in Indian communities in Louisiana exemplify the complex historical relations between black, white, and Indian peoples, but this pattern of antiblack racism is evident in many Indian communities in the southeastern United States, as other scholars have documented extensively. James Merrell, for example, makes the starkly illustrative statement in an article from 1984 that “as recently as 1981, informants on the reservation called avoidance of and contempt for blacks ‘a Catawba tradition’” (1984, 374). Similarly, Arica Coleman discusses the Rappahannock identity of Mildred Loving, one of the plaintiffs in *Loving v. Virginia*, the famous court case that struck down Virginia’s antimiscegenation laws. While widely perceived as an African American woman, in an interview in 2004 Loving denied having any African ancestry, arguing that “the Rappahannocks never had anything to do with blacks” (Coleman 2006, 75). Helen Rountree discusses the ways in which Virginia’s racial purity laws, beginning immediately after the Civil War, became “a veritable cornerstone” of Indian self-identity in Virginia because of the ways it distinguished the legal rights of Indians with no African ancestry from those with African ancestry.<sup>3</sup> The Mississippi Choctaws, a tribe notable for its high degree of language and cultural conservatism, historically refused to associate with blacks (Thompson and Peterson 1975, 180). The Lumbees, a tribe whose status as such is called into question by some who think they are mulattoes masquerading as Indians, have historically exhibited some of the same behavior, refusing to send their children to black schools when they were not allowed to enroll in white schools under Jim Crow (Blu 2001, 62–65). Each of the so-called Five Civi-

lized Tribes of Oklahoma has in varying degrees excluded people from tribal enrollment because of their African ancestry, leading some of the remaining tribal members with African ancestry to hide their heritage behind particularly loud antiblack rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> The list goes on, but these examples should suffice to establish the broad, deeply set pattern of antiblack racism among southern Indians that reaches beyond the borders of any individual tribe or state. In fact, the pattern reaches beyond the southeastern United States and beyond indigenous communities, to be sure, but I will limit the conversation here to my area of expertise to make the arguments most effectively. I state this at the outset to help frame the discussion that follows and to shield tribes I am discussing specifically from being singled out for any special contempt they have not earned. I hope the fact that we are all in this narrative together provides some consolation to the fact that I am discussing here matters that many would rather bury. This is our common heritage as colonized subjects of a racist nation, and this is my attempt to contribute to our decolonization.

### *Research in Louisiana Indian Communities*

I am a Native American studies scholar rather than an anthropologist or a historian, and the research for this project grew out of my interdisciplinary dissertation in American studies. While certainly informed by anthropological methods, theories, and methodologies, my research was never a strictly anthropological endeavor. My primary sources were oral history interviews and archival research focusing on the federal recognition process, though more traditional fieldwork during ten months in Louisiana also provided valuable context and points of discussion that would not have been available to me through formal interviews or archival research alone.

Rather than immersing myself in one tribal community, I worked with three tribal communities within an hour's drive of each other because I wanted to be able to examine their experiences with the federal recognition process from a comparative perspective. The dissertation focuses on the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe, federally recognized in 1981, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, federally recognized in 1995, and the Clifton-Choctaws, currently petitioning for federal recognition. Within these tribes and several others in the region, I interviewed tribal leaders almost exclusively—more than thirty people who had been involved in the tribal governments or tribal enterprises in some central way over the previous decades—people who I thought would be able to give me the most information about the federal recogni-

tion process. The resulting product might be called an intellectual history of recognition activism in Louisiana. This particular design has its limitations, but it provided insights into patterns of racial thinking that would not likely have been as visible with another research plan.

While the stories of every tribal community in Louisiana could supply ample material for discussion on this topic, I will focus on the Clifton-Choctaws presently because they epitomize the dilemma under study. The Clifton-Choctaws are a state-recognized tribe in the process of petitioning for federal recognition. Some local tribes and tribal members support the Clifton-Choctaws' bid for recognition while others oppose it. A substantial part of the opposition to recognition stems from the fact that some of the members of the community have African ancestry, which makes them automatically black, regardless of any other ancestry under legal and popular U.S. racial codes. As a result, the issue becomes central to Clifton-Choctaw identity construction.

When I visited the community between 1998 and 2000, the tribal member serving as the federal recognition liaison and unofficial office manager looked to be of Native, African, and European descent, as did her son and several other family members. Her name was Maria Dixon, and she occupied a position of visibility and power, a diplomatic position that in many ways made her the face of the tribe.<sup>5</sup> I assumed her presence in that position meant the Clifton-Choctaws were uninterested in downplaying their African ancestry, despite reports to the contrary from outsiders.

During my first interview with her I asked Dixon about the Clifton-Choctaws' relations with surrounding black and white communities. She said the Clifton-Choctaws have good relations with some blacks, such as the state representative from Alexandria, but that typically distrust flavors the relationship. She quickly added that distrust also typifies Clifton-Choctaw attitudes toward whites. They have good relations with some, bad with others, she said, citing conflicts with the sheriff's office and the school board as examples of the latter. She asserted that perceptions depended on the individuals involved in the relationship, given that many Clifton people distrust outsiders in general, regardless of their race. There is an element of truth in her statement about distrust of all outsiders, but after about ten seconds of silence, another truth burst out from its place just beneath the surface. "But on the whole," Dixon told me, "they trust whites more than they trust blacks."<sup>6</sup>

Setting aside for the moment her use of the word *they* rather than *we*,

it is clear that Dixon was abundantly aware of the antiblack racism among her fellow community members but was trying, no doubt for a number of reasons both personal and political, to convey that reality in an understated way. Other leaders tiptoed around the subject of antiblack racism, too, distancing themselves from it, feeling me out, without necessarily performing an overt display of contempt for blacks. Consider, for example, the words of a Clifton man in his seventies, a man who might pass for white in many places. In his youth, he recalled, “they’d call you Redbone, they’d call you mulatto, they’d call you everything but probably what you are. So, we always, it was a fight with us when they’d call us all these other names, ’cause we always had been taught that we was from Indian people.” The narrative implies that the inaccuracy of the labels mulatto and Redbone was at issue; antipathy hides in the subtext, where it is obvious that the blackness of the labels caused the offense. The element of Indian identity that depended on not only a lack of black ancestry but also antipathy toward blacks, it seemed to me, was a hold-over from the older generations, a fading tradition, verging on becoming covert even in this older man’s statement about his childhood. I recognized that it was a part of community history, but I categorically separated it from the modern community. I later realized it was a mistake to tie these attitudes to specific generations and assume declining acceptance of these traditions merely because of Dixon’s central, visible position in the community.

After I had been away from the community for three years, a series of incidents made me realize I had been underestimating the importance of antiblack racism and the extent of community denials of black ancestry. In December 2003, as part of the collaborative process mandated by indigenous methodologies, I resent a draft of the Clifton-Choctaw chapter from my dissertation to Dixon so tribal members could read and comment on it before it was finalized. Dixon had left her position shortly after I sent the original draft, and apparently no one had seen it the first time around. The new recognition coordinator was a white woman, the wife of a tribal member who was eager to read the chapter. I sent off two copies and waited for the marked-up copy to be returned to me. I waited and waited, but nothing came. I called a couple of times in the intervening two months and left messages but never heard back. Finally, one day I reached her by phone and asked her what she and others thought of the draft. I was anxious because community approval represents a hurdle at least as significant as academic approval and infinitely more challenging and fraught with danger. More than mere courtesy, collaboration makes for more rigorous academic work because it makes

scholars accountable to the expertise and authority of community members as lifelong participant-observers. The new coordinator was hesitant, and I could sense that a significant critique was about to emerge. She told me that “all this information” was new to her and that she was shocked by it. I asked her what information specifically was so shocking. She started talking in a tone that let me know she was choosing her words carefully. “You know, the stuff about the [pause] . . . *muhlahtas*.”

She was referring to my discussions of blackness in the community’s ancestry, to the fact that many of the ancestors of community members were identified as mulattoes in the census of 1910, to the history of intermarriage with the nearby Cane River Creoles of Color, to the fact that I had described the community as mixed Indian, black, and white. She said her husband was angry about this characterization, but that he acknowledged that the perception of his people as mulattoes had been present for a number of years. She guessed that many other community members would be similarly angry, but only about the issue of mixing with blacks—mixing with whites was completely acceptable.

As it turns out, she was right. When I next visited the Clifton-Choctaw community, she was no longer working for the tribe, so I talked with the new tribal recognition coordinator. I brought two copies of my completed dissertation on this trip: one to give to the tribal chair and one to the tribal council. While I had made some minor adjustments in phrasing to indicate that some of the community had African ancestry and some potentially did not, I did not remove discussions of blackness altogether. I talked with the new coordinator, who was a tribal member, and told her about the concerns of her predecessor. She concurred that it certainly would go over poorly with many tribal members, and it did not sit well with her, either. She said that blacks had always been excluded from the community and that if she had any say in the matter the tribe would uphold that tradition. She told me that Dixon had always, in fact, been marginal to the community because of her blackness, a troubling statement that opened a window onto Dixon’s experiences of belonging in her community.

I had a conversation with the tribal chair about the issue later that week, and she spoke in the more diplomatic tones I had heard from other officials, though she, like others, expressed concern that I had suggested that the community had black ancestry and black cultural influences. Perplexed, I told her I thought it was commonly acknowledged that some members of the Clifton-Choctaw community had black ancestry, in particular through its

ties to the Cane River Creoles of Color. Her eyes brightened in recognition and what appeared to be relief, and she said, “Oh, well, yes, the Cane River Creoles, we do share ancestry with them.” In local terms, the Cane River Creoles, who have African, French, and Native ancestry, were distinguished from blacks by their large percentage of European ancestry, their history as free people of color and slaveholders themselves (which carries connotations about both race and class), their francophone traditions, and their celebrity as bearers of a unique tradition that sets Louisiana apart from the rest of the United States. In central Louisiana, they were “a race apart from blacks,” certainly in their own minds and to a significant degree in local custom as well.<sup>7</sup> These were not the blacks that many Clifton-Choctaws were loath to be affiliated with. French and Latin American style racial gradations, which are multifaceted rather than binary, are still in operation in the area to the extent that the terms *black* and *Creole of Color* connote different sets of people and different levels of prejudice. This clarifies to some extent the protestations by Clifton-Choctaws against the suggestion that they had black ancestry.

Though the tribal chair acknowledged her community’s connections with the Cane River Creoles of Color, she insisted that whatever racial ancestry the community had, they had been largely isolated from mainstream black and white influences and intermarriage for many years. That is, while there was intermarriage with Creoles of Color and white outsiders at various points, the community had been largely insular, marrying among themselves for the better part of 150 years. Certainly there was white influence and (less so, she points out) black influence in the community, but on some level she believes a discussion of black influences in particular diminishes the community’s distinctive Indian identity. In terms of the perceptions of the community and of the federal recognition process, which is at its heart about perceptions, she may be right.

### *Regulating Racial Categories*

The origin of antiblack racism among southern Indians rests in Anglo-American racism and colonialism, two phenomena that are so closely related that they might be better accounted for if we understand them as behavior resulting from an ideology centered in white supremacy—an ideology in which white people and their ancestors are understood to be morally, intellectually, politically, and spiritually superior to nonwhites and therefore entitled to various forms of privilege, power, and property.<sup>8</sup> This ideology was



forced on southern Indian communities gradually but surely through the twin hammers of military conquest and assimilationism. A number of scholars have documented southern Indians' adoption of Anglo systems of racial thinking as one component of a multifaceted response to U.S. aggression; in mirroring the peculiar notions of civility held by southern Anglos around race and gender, tribes hoped to protect themselves against conquest based on constructions of Indian savagery (Saunt 2005, 1999; Miles 2004; Perdue, 1979, 1999; Littlefield, 1977). Claudio Saunt suggests that as a result, race became "a central element in the lives of southeastern Indians, not just as a marker of difference between natives and white newcomers but as a divisive and destructive force within Indian communities themselves" (2005, 4). Though there was conflict within the tribes over the issues of slavery and blackness, southeastern tribes increasingly adopted Anglo-American racializations of African-descended people over the course of the nineteenth century.

For much of the twentieth century, segregation policies were the arena in which the boundaries of race and privilege were officially policed, and because of this history in educational policy specifically Indians in the South learned to define themselves in ways that distanced them from blacks as much as possible. While there were simultaneous impulses toward isolationism from whites, when southern Indians, of African ancestry or not, wanted access to education they fought to have their children enrolled in white schools and refused to send them to black schools. Rather than challenging the existence of the color line, most tried to position themselves on the right side of it. By saying they would not go to school with blacks, an act of self-defense taken with the intention of ameliorating racial discrimination against Indian people and maintaining a distinct Indian identity, Indians were complicit in the segregation and oppression of blacks.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, antiblack racism seeped deeper still into the construction of Indian identity. The Clifton-Choctaws, like other southern Indians, continue to grapple with this legacy today.

More recently, federal Indian policy that determines whether previously nonfederal tribes should qualify for federal recognition has been a much clearer venue for the regulation of the boundaries of Indian identity, and by extension in this case of black, white, and Creole of Color identities as well. Blackness and its absence come into the federal recognition discussion in several ways. The first is the significance of previous recognition from governments, surrounding communities, and social scientists.<sup>10</sup> Because of

Anglo-American conceptions of race and the one-drop rule, anyone with visible or known African ancestry (“one drop” of African “blood”) was considered black or colored for most purposes. An Indian community with even a small degree of black ancestry is much less likely historically to have been acknowledged as an Indian community by governments, social scientists, and surrounding populations than a community with greater degrees of white ancestry.<sup>11</sup>

The census is a good example of this bias in historical records. The census of 1910 for Rapides Parish, for example, lists many of the families in the Clifton community as mulattoes.<sup>12</sup> The special Indian Schedule for Rapides Parish in 1910 lists none of the seven family surnames represented in the Clifton community in recent years. The census enumerators in 1910 were instructed to use the Indian Schedules “principally for the enumeration of Indians living on reservations or in tribal relations, and also by the enumerators in certain counties containing a considerable number of Indians” (United States Census Bureau 2002, 55). They were given further instructions on deciding how to group mixed communities: “Detached Indians living either in white or negro families outside of reservations should be enumerated on the general population schedule as members of the families in which they are found; but detached whites or negroes living in Indian families should be enumerated on this special Indian schedule as members of the Indian families in which they are found. In other words, every family composed mainly of Indians should be reported entirely on this special schedule, and every family composed mainly of persons not Indians should be reported entirely on the general population schedule” (United States Census Bureau 2002, 56).

This presents a problem for the Clifton community. People of mixed black, white, and Indian ancestry were classified as mulattoes by the census, undifferentiated from people of solely white and black ancestry. The surrounding population did acknowledge Indian ancestry in the Clifton community when they called them Redbones, a derogatory term that connotes Indian, black, and white ancestry, but the official census record did not have a category to reflect that distinction, which would allow people to conclude that the record stated they were solely black and white instead of Indian.<sup>13</sup>

The census enumerator’s decision also reflected the broader American understanding that the presence or absence of Indian ancestry did not usually alter a designation as mulatto, a term that could mean any mix of black and nonblack ancestry in the United States. The presence of African

ancestry among any of the Clifton families may very well have closed the enumerator's eyes to the possibility that this might be an Indian community as much as anything else, particularly if any links to the Cane River Creoles were known to the enumerator.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Jack Forbes's research on Virginia census records at the very least suggests that one needs to be cautious in assigning African ancestry to people listed in historical records as mulatto. Certainly people of visible African ancestry were classified as such, but so were people of undetermined racial ancestry. A designation as mulatto is not in itself confirmation of African ancestry and certainly is not confirmation of a lack of Indian ancestry (Forbes 1993). The only firm conclusion one can draw is that the enumerators believed the people they listed as mulatto should not be considered white.

Similarly, in terms of previous federal acknowledgment of Indian communities, the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the 1930s was extremely disinclined to serve communities with black ancestry because of the one-drop rule. Bureau officials expressed concern that they might be called on to serve Louisiana Indians who were "mixed with negroes" like other "so-called Indians in Louisiana particularly in Terrebonne Parish [in reference to the Houma tribe], such people being of various racial mixtures."<sup>15</sup> Bureau records indicate that black ancestry among *some* Louisiana Indian groups made officials less inclined to serve *any* of the Louisiana tribes, but they did briefly serve those who could demonstrate that they had not mixed with blacks, such as the Jena Choctaws and the Coushattas. Thus, tribes with black ancestry petitioning for federal recognition are at a disadvantage in this aspect as well.

Perhaps the most difficult rejection to deal with is that which comes from other Indians. While several Tunica-Biloxi tribal leaders have expressed support for Clifton-Choctaw tribal status, some of the neighboring and now federally recognized Jena Choctaws have been fairly critical of the Clifton-Choctaws' claims to tribal status. Individuals within the Jena Band respond to the Clifton-Choctaws in different ways, though, so any impression that they uniformly reject Clifton-Choctaws because of African ancestry in the community would flatten and compress the range of opinions other Indian people have about Clifton.

One Jena Choctaw leader argues that there certainly are Indian individuals in the Clifton-Choctaw community, but that the presence of Indian ancestry in some of the members does not make them a tribe. After attending a festival sponsored by the Louisiana Inter-Tribal Council in Clifton in the late 1990s, she noted that "one of the new leaders or council members or some-

thing, he looked just like a perfect old Choctaw Indian man would look like, you know, just Indian. I mean, he's Indian." She feels the same way about other state-recognized tribes, acknowledging that some members clearly have Indian ancestry but withholding support for their federal recognition. If the community as a whole could demonstrate more social, cultural, and, frankly, racial markers of Indian identity, they would seem more like a cohesive Indian community to her, one that could be classified as a tribe.

A Jena Choctaw elder adds that it is unfair to withhold recognition from the "real" Indians at places like Clifton and Houma, but by the same token it would be unfair to recognize non-Indians with them. Her definition of what constitutes a real Indian is not terribly complex—she believes anyone who can trace their genealogy back to any documented Indian can be a real Indian. Any relation is real, she says, and that ancestry cannot be cut off or erased. While she was a full blood, her tribe's minimum blood quantum is one-eighth, and she believed that would change soon since most of the young people were marrying whites at the time. The Clifton-Choctaws may meet her standards for tribal recognition if they can document that they all have at least one Indian ancestor.

Another Jena Choctaw leader believes the Clifton-Choctaws have no Indian ancestry at all and should have their state recognition revoked. His opinion relies on—and contributed to—a genealogical argument that erupted in 1988 between the Clifton-Choctaws and Mary Carter, a specialist in Indian genealogy who worked for both Jena and Clifton.<sup>16</sup> Carter concluded, after researching Clifton genealogy for six months, that the Clifton-Choctaws were not Indians but "really" blacks with some Indian ancestry. Apparently after arguing with the spouse of the Clifton tribal chair in 1988, Carter went to the newspapers with her "revelation," leading to articles that publicly declared them non-Indian poseurs. One Jena Choctaw leader described the articles as being horrible. The articles were supposed to say that the Clifton-Choctaws were primarily mixed black and white with only a little Indian ancestry, but that finding, the Jena Choctaw leader contends, ended up being distorted to say that they were not Indian at all.<sup>17</sup>

During another formal interview with Maria Dixon, I asked her about accusations made in those articles that the Cliftons were really black and not Indian at all. She bristled: "Mary Carter came up with that, who also worked for the tribe. As a matter of fact, she's the one that started training me to do genealogy. And she and [a former recognition coordinator] got in it about something, I don't really know. And next thing we knew, she did have two

articles in the paper about it. . . . I would put it this way. We have documented our Indian ancestry. Now, whether—and I'm not going to say there's no black blood in the tribe, because quite a few people in the community are triracial. But the majority are—I mean, it all goes back to Native Americans. We have been able to document that. And I really don't think there's a tribe in Louisiana that can say that they did not have maybe a drop of black blood or Caucasian or anything else within them.”

Members of the Clifton-Choctaw community who appear to have black ancestry, people such as Dixon, bear a unique burden in being discriminated against within the tribe, within their families. Doubts about tribal authenticity that are linked to accusations of blackness are placed on their shoulders or, more accurately, on their faces. This situation presents an ethical and scholarly dilemma: how do I encourage Clifton-Choctaws to embrace or at least acknowledge black ancestry in their community when there is a strong sentiment in the community to deny it altogether? I contend that it would help their recognition case if they dealt with their black ancestry directly; skirting around it gives the impression they are trying to hide the truth, never a productive stance in the acknowledgment process. It would also help ease their sense of shame over the issue and take some of the burden off phenotypically black tribal members. What is my responsibility as a Louisiana Choctaw researcher to this other Louisiana Choctaw community, of which I am not a member but with whom I share Choctaw heritage? How do I implement the supportive, collaborative model of indigenous methodologies without undermining my personal responsibilities as a racial activist? If the Clifton-Choctaws know that talking about African ancestry in the community has caused them problems in the past, I am putting myself in a position of betraying their trust and saying that I know better than they do about how and when to talk about these things.

Cornel Pewewardy, in grappling with his own role as an indigenous person within the academy, similarly concludes that “sometimes we (as Indigenous scholars) have to redefine our roles as scholars in academe to become involved as facilitators *and* informants in the process of tribal community empowerment. To take on the role of facilitator is to deny my own activism. I must recognize that my own liberation and emancipation in relationship with my tribal community are at stake, and that continued marginalization and subjugation are the perils” (Pewewardy 2004, 14). It is in that spirit of activism for the liberation of my people, of Indian people, from white supremacy that I move forward with this discussion.

In *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*, Tiya Miles notes that various individuals, black and Indian, discouraged her from discussing the history of Cherokee slaveholding and of Cherokees as colonized and colonizing subjects. The desire to “disremember” these painful shared histories among communities of color is entangled with contemporary desires and anxieties about imagined histories of “natural affinity” or “natural animosity” among communities of color, the ways we construct race and righteousness, the ways we draw connections or construct boundaries. But there is a story to tell, even if it is “not a story to pass on,” not a story anyone wants to remember or address publicly.<sup>18</sup> However, as Miles wrote, drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, “The void that remains when we refuse to speak of the past is in fact a presence, a presence both haunting and destructive.”<sup>19</sup> When we examine these histories, we gain knowledge that opens ways to work through the theoretical and emotional conflicts inherent in the subject. If I thought this conversation had no implications across Indian Country, I would not address it in this public forum, but we need healing and redemption around this issue. And we need decolonization.

We are dynamic people, and we have the power to change and adapt our strategies as new information comes to light. When we understand that the ideology of white supremacy performs multiple tasks, diverting multiple resources away from oppressed groups and toward whites through multiple kinds of behavior, we can see more clearly that antiblack racism, when performed by Indians, confirms a racial formation that places whites at the top of a racial hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> Such an ideology hardly seems to be in the best interests of Indians, especially when we connect it to the “cultural bomb” described by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as the most devastating weapon of the colonial project. Its effect, he writes, “is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than pathologizing Indians, we need to recognize the source of Indian antiblack racism within a broader colonial project and acknowledge its hidden impact not only on Indian resources, but also on Indian senses of self.

In terms of the scholarly dilemma, the double meaning in the title of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s foundational book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, clarifies and justifies the role of scholarly activism in a case such as this (1999). First, it speaks of creating methodologies that do not perpetuate colonial practices of exploitation and assimilation, that is, methodologies that have

been decolonized. Second, it is about pursuing decolonization as a goal that can be achieved through methodologies designed for the task, that is, it is about decolonizing indigenous peoples through specific methodologies. The second definition motivates my decision to have this conversation in this essay: a desire to decolonize minds and illustrate the ways in which antiblack racism supports a white supremacist racial formation.<sup>22</sup> White supremacy clearly does not support indigenous people. Its pathology is well known, but, in the absence of a more inclusive understanding of how race works, we do not always see whom it infects and how. Racial theory and racial histories help us rethink indigenous studies, indigenous methodologies, and the collaborative process to better serve indigenous communities. Decolonizing can be dangerous, but that moment of danger is also a moment of opportunity.

### Notes

1. Linda Tuhiwai Smith is often credited with developing this field as an area of focused study through her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999). Her work draws on and builds upon many traditional critiques of the relationship of the academy to subaltern groups, including the work of scholars in postcolonial studies and Native American studies as well as the writings of feminist women of color, feminist anthropologists, and postmodernists. Generally, see Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, (1988, 78–100); Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture” (1991, 137–62); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004); Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara C. Gelpi, eds., *Feminist Theory* (1982).

2. Deloria critiques the “conceptual prison” created for Indians by anthropologists through notions of authenticity in his foundational work of 1969 (1988). Paige Raibmon offers a useful history of the development of the concept of authenticity and its impact on indigenous peoples in *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (2005). Abu-Lughod argues the merits of “ethnography of the particular” as a way of avoiding the flattening tendency of cultural theory (1991).

3. Any Indian person in Virginia who had more than one-quarter African blood (later one-sixteenth) would be classified as colored and have access to fewer rights and resources than those classified as Indians, people who had more than one-quarter Indian blood (later one-sixteenth) (Rountree 1990, 200, 211).

4. On Cherokees, see Sturm (1998) and Miles (2004). On Creeks, see Saunt (2005). Generally, see Miles and Holland (2006); Brooks (2002).

5. “Maria Dixon” is a pseudonym.

6. A close reading of this statement would note her use of the word *they* to refer to the Clifton community, when it would seem more appropriate for her to use *we*. This seems like evidence of discomfort in including herself in that opinion by saying “we trust whites more than we trust blacks.” But it also seems to be a long-standing reflex to distance the community “on the whole” from blacks and blackness even though she is unwilling to ally herself with such thinking.

7. (Mills 1977, xiv). Lalita Tademy, a Cane River Creole herself, wrote a bestselling novel and Oprah’s Book Club selection about her people, giving perhaps the most visible moment in recent Cane River history (Tademy 2002).

8. While typically the term *white supremacy* conjures images of Klan robes and neo-Nazi skinheads, the term as it is used in contemporary ethnic studies also refers to the everyday ideology of white racial superiority and domination carried even by people who do not consider themselves racist and even by people of color. For a general discussion of white racial ideology and material advantages in the United States, see Rothenberg (2002) and Lipsitz (1998).

9. Neil Foley draws heavily on Toni Morrison’s ideas about southern European immigrants becoming white in the United States by demonstrating their hatred of blacks as he grapples with similar racial formation issues in Mexican-American integration activism in Texas in the 1930s (2002, 49–59).

10. Susan Greenbaum adeptly and precisely addresses this matter, though others have addressed it elsewhere (Greenbaum 1991; Paschal 1991; Starna 1996; Campisi 1991; Clifford 1988). A number of significant contributions can be found in Miles and Holland (2006) and in Brooks (2002).

11. Circe Sturm discusses this issue (Sturm 1998).

12. The Census of 1910, Rapides Parish, Louisiana, lists many Clifton, Tyler, and Smith families as mulatto. This is not a complete, diagnostic genealogical connection, but obviously these are the ancestors of at least some of the modern Clifton families.

13. See also Williams (1979).

14. United States Census Bureau 2002, 56: “Proportions of Indian and other blood.—If the Indian is a full-blood, write ‘full’ in column 36, and leave columns 37 and 38 blank. If the Indian is of mixed blood, write in column 36, 37, and 38 the fractions which show the proportions of Indian and other blood, as (column 36, Indian)  $\frac{3}{4}$ , (column 37, white)  $\frac{1}{4}$ , and (column 38, negro) 0. For Indians of mixed blood all three columns should be filled, and the sum, in each case, should equal 1, as  $\frac{1}{2}$ , 0,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ;  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{4}$ , 0;  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{8}$ ,  $\frac{1}{8}$ ; etc. Wherever possible, the statement that an Indian is of full blood should be verified by inquiry of the older men of the tribe, as an Indian is sometimes of mixed blood without knowing it.”

15. A. C. Hector to W. Carson Ryan, Jr., 12 September 1934, file 68776-1931-800, part I, National Archives Record Group 75.

16. “Mary Carter” is a pseudonym.



17. "La. Tribe Fights to Prove Its Heritage," *Times-Picayune*, 14 August 1988, C8.
18. Miles (2004, xv), citing Morrison (1987, 274–75).
19. Miles (2004, xvi). Miles and many others witnessed the calamity and pain of this ghostly presence at a conference on black–Indian relations she organized at Dartmouth in 1998 called "'Eating Out of the Same Pot': Relating Black and Native (Hi)stories." Several pieces have been written about the dramatic conflicts that surfaced throughout: Phillips (2002); Saunt (2005, 6–9); Tiya Miles, "Preface: Eating Out of the Same Pot?," in Miles and Holland (2006); Warrior, "Afterword," in Miles and Holland (2006).
20. George Lipsitz suggests the value of this formulation in his work (1998).
21. Thiong'o (1986, 3), cited in Silva (2004, 2).
22. Following Omi and Winant's definition of racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed," and a racial project as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (1994, 55–56).