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## Indigenous Religious Traditions and the Limits of White Supremacy

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**ABSTRACT** Although stereotypes and misunderstandings of Native American worldviews abound, historians can look to the pan-Indian movement known as the Ghost Dance for a clear example of the role religious devotion played in many of these communities post-1870. I introduce the concept of *fugitive religion* here as a new lens for understanding how displaced Indigenous groups in what is today the United States fought for their existence in an era characterized by acute racial violence. I argue that fugitive religion created zones of protection for self and community that allowed Native nations to persist beyond the racial terror that defined the American West in the last half of the nineteenth century. This article is part of a special issue of *Pacific Historical Review*, "Religion in the Nineteenth-Century American West." **KEYWORDS** Ghost Dance, fugitive religion, Native American history, Indigenous religious traditions

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Interpretations of Native American history are incomplete without understanding the dynamic qualities of Indigenous religious thought. Although stereotypes and misunderstandings of Native worldviews abound in both popular culture and academic literature, historians can look to the "pan-Indian" movement known as the Ghost Dance for a clear example of the central role that religious expression played in many of these distinct communities post-1870.<sup>1</sup> I introduce the concept of *fugitive religion* as a new lens

1. Scholarship exclusively focused on the Ghost Dance has expanded as of late. Recent books include Justin Gage, *We Do Not Want the Gates Closed between Us: Native Networks and the Spread of the Ghost Dance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020); Louis Warren, *God's Red Son: The Ghost Dance Religion and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Rani-Henrik Andersson, *A Whirlwind Passed through Our Country: Lakota Voices of the Ghost Dance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018); Gregory E. Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Sam A. Maddra, *Hostiles? The Lakota Ghost Dance and Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006). I have offered some reflections on this historiography in an essay titled "Aligning Disciplinary Ends: Social History, Religious Studies, and Race in America," *Religious Studies Review* 45, no. 4 (2019): 461–67. See also Tiffany Hale,

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for considering how displaced Indigenous people—including the descendants of enslaved Africans—fought for their existence in an era defined by acute racial violence. I argue that fugitive religion created zones of protection that allowed Indigenous groups to persist beyond the racial terror that characterized the last half of the nineteenth century in the U.S. West.

I define fugitive religion as a reservoir of spiritual traditions that Indigenous peoples drew from and replenished as a way of retaining a measure of freedom despite federal plans to eliminate or absorb them.<sup>2</sup> The Ghost Dance is one example of fugitive religion. It should be noted that “Ghost Dance” has become something of a blanket term used by anthropologists and historians to refer to a diverse range of Native religious activity after the Civil War. When used this way, “Ghost Dance” can obscure—in the way that anthropological ideas about Native American cultures as “Other” often do—the ways in which its ideas and practices reflect both broader historical patterns and more specific Indigenous traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as blanket terminology is useful, I posit that *fugitive religion* enables us to see disparate Indigenous traditions operating at broader scales. This framework is beneficial not simply for comparison’s sake, but in understanding the time period and context in greater depth. It helps to illuminate what Cedric Robinson called “shared pasts.” Robinson explains, “The shared past is precious, not for itself, but because it is the basis of consciousness, of knowing, of being. It contains philosophy, theories of history, and social prescriptions native to it. It is a construct possessing its own terms, exacting its own truths.”<sup>4</sup> Although stereotypes of Native spirituality as frozen in time or place persist, these traditions are the result of accretions of shared

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“Centering Indigenous People in the Study of Religion in America,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 67, no. 2–3 (2020): 303–7; and Tiffany Hale, “Review of *A Whirlwind Passed through Our Country: Lakota Voices of the Ghost Dance* by Rani-Henrik Andersson,” *American Studies in Scandinavia* 51, no. 1 (2019): 113–15.

2. Scholarly conversations about fugitivity have helped to inform my approach. Among other works, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); and Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 211.

3. For an example of how the term Ghost Dance has been applied widely, see Jennifer Graber, “They Call It Ghost Dance . . . But It’s Feather Dance”: Indigenous Histories in the Study of Religion and US Empire,” in Tisa Wenger and Sylvester A. Johnson, eds, *Religion and US Empire: Critical New Histories* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 124–48.

4. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism, Revised and Updated Third Edition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxxv.

knowledge, taken and given in exchange over long distances for both material goods and philosophical insights in the form of song, dance, and prayer.

Within the interdisciplinary field of Native American and Indigenous Studies, many scholars have chosen to foreground religion, beginning with Vine Deloria Jr.'s *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*. In this book that appeared in 1973 near the zenith of the Red Power Movement, Deloria asked whether it is possible to conceive of God in terms beyond those of Western civilization. In a fierce rebuke of Western Christian modes of thought, he argued that anyone interested in the future of human existence in North America should examine Christianity's relationship to settler violence. Historians of a more recent generation have emphasized how "syncretic" religion helped Native people adapt to colonization. These traditions, I argue, have done more than simply enable Native communities to adjust to the presence of colonists. Through their negotiations with white Americans and the metaphysics of westward expansion, fugitive religion and the people who assumed responsibility for its many iterations reshaped the map of social and political identities in what is today the United States. Appreciating this accomplishment requires looking at the past through a different kind of analytical lens.

My approach in this essay uses what Cree scholar Shawn Wilson refers to as an Indigenous research paradigm, which emphasizes a holistic frame for understanding the past.<sup>5</sup> Echoing Robinson, Wilson explains that this paradigm "comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. [It] is shared with all creation." This focus encourages a sense of the global that respects the particularities of local context, including time and place.<sup>6</sup> Working from an Indigenous research paradigm helps to demonstrate how fugitive religion enabled oppressed groups, specifically Black and Red, to outlive the terms of their oppression.<sup>7</sup> This lens is useful, also, because it

5. Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 32.

6. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for their reflections on the methodological framing for this piece, which might also be described as articulating what J. Z. Smith referred to as a phenomenology of rebellion. See J.Z. Smith, "Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?," *History of Religions* 9, no. 4 (May 1970): 302.

7. Scholarship on Afro-Native identity is experiencing a growth spurt in an already long tradition of inquiry. A few recent historical works include Kyle T. Mays, *An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021); Alaina E. Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (New York: The New Press, 2017); Barbara Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian*

allows us to see a larger pattern of Indigenous erasure and epistemic violence that targeted the cultural traditions of Africans alongside those of Native peoples of the Western hemisphere.<sup>8</sup> I draw upon ethnographic sources to identify how Native and Black Americans used religion to carve out zones of protection for themselves and their communities.

Despite slavers' best efforts to erase the identities of the people they stole from Africa, vital elements of their traditions survived both the middle passage and the overland slave trade to generate new expressions of Indigenous thought and being. Historian of religion Jason Young explains that "Black American conjure traditions were not mimetic; rather, they established a ritual space where Africa was both remembered and (re)imagined." Through this process, Young emphasizes that enslaved people "learned much from Native Americans regarding the healing properties of North America's pharmacology."<sup>9</sup> Given these unique origins, Black religious customs present an alternative metaphysics to white worldviews, which still tend to define the terms through which scholars interpret Native experiences in the postwar U.S. West.

With the end of the Civil War, the political priority for Native nations in the West shifted from that of communication and exchange across boundaries to the creation and protection of new kinds of borders.<sup>10</sup> This shift occurred because after the war, U.S. nationalism took an explicitly

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*Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Brian Klopotek, "Dangerous Decolonizing: Indians and Blacks and the Legacy of Jim Crow," in *Decolonizing Native Histories*, Florencia E. Mallon, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 179–95; Celia Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). For a theoretical approach, see Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

8. For a discussion of "epistemic violence," see Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (spring 2011): 236–57; and Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 282–83.

9. Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in the Kongo and the Low-country South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 125.

10. Historical scholarship on the Civil War's implications in the West includes Alice Baumgartner, *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Megan Kate Nelson, *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* (New York: Scribner, 2021); Adam Aronson and Andrew R. Graybill, eds., *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Virginia Scharff, ed., *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Alvin M. Josephy, *The Civil War in the American West* (New York: Random House, 1991).

anti-Indigenous turn. From the perspective of the postwar state, being Indigenous to just about anywhere—whether West Africa, Ireland, or the Carolinas—was viewed as a hindrance on the road to progress and modernity. The postwar era sharpened existing racial distinctions between Indigenous peoples and settlers—a contrast that was less pronounced until Indian Removal in the 1830s Southeast and even later in the West. Following the breaches of trust that ruptured trade relationships with Europeans in the Great Lakes region, the Plains, and the Intermountain West, Native nations grappled with how best to deal with white people, including if and how to continue negotiating with them. This historical moment produced what we refer to as the Ghost Dance, with its explicit focus on the disappearance of white settlers through windstorms, floods, or other natural phenomena.

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By the end of the nineteenth century, colonized and formerly enslaved peoples created notions of time that evaded forms of unfreedom imposed by whites.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes mockingly referred to today as “Colored People’s Time” or “Indian Time,” these temporalities frustrate theories of history that scholars have traditionally used to make sense of Indigenous life. Building from Deloria and others, writer and artist Sâkihitowin Awâsis explains that “Anishinaabe peoples, like many Indigenous nations globally, embrace multiple temporalities while centering Indigenous ways of knowing.” For Awâsis, these alternative temporal frameworks remind us that “There is nothing inherent in the flow of time to suggest that there is such thing as a seven-day work week, twenty-four hour clock time, or the Gregorian calendar.”<sup>12</sup> In appreciating these non-Western temporalities we can read early Ghost Dance prophecies—otherwise obscured in the annals of colonial ethnography and its nineteenth-century terminology—as placing an expiration date on white supremacy’s grip.

Despite this critique of white power, it is clear that many African American and Native American peoples used biblical teachings introduced by white people to make sense of their own circumstances that included

11. For more on Indigenous temporalities, see Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

12. Sâkihitowin Awâsis, “‘Anishinaabe Time’: Temporalities and Impact Assessment in Pipeline Reviews,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 27, no. 1 (2020): 1–2.

enslavement and exile.<sup>13</sup> These practices sometimes took the form of what are often called “millenarian” movements. As Theophus Smith explains with respect to the African sensibilities of Black Americans, the Bible “comes into view as a magical formulary . . . a book of ritual prescriptions for revisioning and, therein, transforming history and culture.”<sup>14</sup> Smith’s explanation is grounded in an appreciation for the Indigenous African lenses through which Black people interpreted the Bible. In considering millenarian tendencies among Indigenous groups and their diasporic relations, however, too narrow a focus on biblical roots—at the expense of understanding Indigenous traditions—runs the risk of distortion.

Scholars who have written about the Ghost Dance tend to agree on the term *millenarianism* as a key feature of the movement. This label, though flawed, offers an important temporal imaginary for understanding Indigenous goals of protecting themselves. Scholars tend to invoke the term “millenarian” when adherents of the movement in question express hope in a utopian future. These movements’ relationships to state power are usually tense and fraught with violence, as governmental forces have struggled to exercise dominance in light of these groups’ demands for justice.<sup>15</sup> The word itself derives from the Latin root for “one thousand,” a direct reference to the idea in Christianity of a thousand-year reign of Christ following the apocalypse foretold in the Book of Revelations.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than become enmeshed in debates over how to more precisely classify certain tendencies within fugitive religion, we might instead ask what factors inspired such creative responses to the violence of colonization and slavery. The following passage from someone one generation removed from slavery is worth quoting in full. It provides a glimpse into the historical imagination of African Americans a generation after the Civil War’s end:

13. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Orbis, 1972), 98.

14. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 3.

15. A classic work in this field is Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). See also Robert A. Segal, “Eliade’s Theory of Millenarianism,” *Religious Studies* 14, no. 2 (1978): 159–73; and Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora: Fortress Press, 1986), 125–38.

16. “Millenarianism” and “millennialism” are interchangeable terms. See Jean-Francois Mayer, “Millennialism: New Religious Movements and the Quest for a New Age,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II, Second Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 403.

Now, back there in slavery time, us didn't have no power of protection, and God knowed it, and put us under watchcare. Rattlesnakes never bit no colored folks until four years after freedom was declared. That was to give us time to learn and to know. 'Course, I don't know nothing about slavery personal like. I wasn't born till two years after the Big Surrender. Then I wasn't nothing but a infant baby when I was born, so I couldn't know nothing but what they told me. My mama told me, and I know she wouldn't mislead me, how High John de Conquer helped us out. He had done teached the black folks so they knowed a hundred years ahead of time that freedom was coming. Long before the white folks knowed anything about it at all.

These young Negroes reads they books and talk about the war freeing the Negroes, but Aye, Lord! A heap sees, but a few knows. 'Course the war was a lot of help, but how come the war took place? They think they knows but they don't. John de Conquer had done put it into the white folks to give us our freedom, that's what. Old Massa fought against it, but us could have told him that it wasn't no use. Freedom just had to come. The time set aside for it was there. That war was just a sign and a symbol of the thing. That's the truth! If I tell the truth about everything as good as I do about that, I can go straight to Heaven without a prayer.<sup>17</sup>

These are the words of an elderly Black woman known as Aunt Shady Anne Sutton, collected by the anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston during the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the potential utility of the term "millenarian," Sutton's words urge us to consider its limits. Working from the lessons of her mother and relatives a generation prior, Sutton articulates a nuanced understanding of how her people produced and shared knowledge, specifically with regard to the relationship between time and spiritual protection. "My mama told me, and I know she wouldn't mislead me . . ." Sutton begins, establishing a lineage of oral history in her community and contrasting it with the book knowledge of "these young Negroes"—a subtle prod, perhaps, at the class position of people like Hurston herself.<sup>18</sup> "A heap sees, but a few knows" she states, hinting that real truth is evasive and not immediately apparent to or appropriate for the masses. Spoken in the African

17. Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Press, 1981), 72. As one reviewer explained, "For Hurston, the elements and style of worship in the sanctified church are more African than Christian." See Marion A. Thomas, "Reflections on the Sanctified Church as Portrayed by Zora Neale Hurston," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 1 (spring 1991): 41.

18. For recent perspectives on Indigenous oral history see Nepia Mahuika, *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

American vernacular, Sutton's words contain a key to understanding Black metaphysics of the Civil War's meaning and consequences.<sup>19</sup>

"How come the war took place?" She presses, narrowing her focus to correct the common misconception that the war freed the slaves. The Civil War, Sutton clarifies, was a source of "help," but should not be confused with the actual source of Black freedom, which she understands as far more powerful. That point of origin, or root, is known to his relations as High John the Conqueror, and Sutton is careful to give him his due. "Old Massa fought against it," she explains, but their resistance was futile. In her worldview, the expiration date for white supremacy had already been established by potent spirits with the ability to shape time.

For Sutton, these forces likely included the Christian God, but the power was not his alone. Rather, like many people of African descent in North America, she understood the Lord as working in concert with spirits like "High John de Conquer." A secular interpretation would be to call him a "culture hero" or "folk hero." While not inaccurate, descriptions like these do not enable fuller explanation.<sup>20</sup> A religious studies lens allows us to go a step further in considering High John the Conqueror's relational role as a spiritual being in his own right. In this way, he bestows hope and fortitude to those under his care—a responsibility shared with the god of the Bible. Scholars often refer to the practice of blending and combining aspects of Christianity with Indigenous traditions as syncretism. However, Sutton had no apparent use for the term. The seamlessness with which she and her people understood their historical circumstances depended on a working knowledge and mastery of multiple sacred registers.

Sutton's primary concern was the temporal metaphysics of her people's enslavement. "Freedom," she emphasizes, "just *had* to come. The time set aside for it was there. That war was just a sign and a symbol of the thing." This phrasing raises several questions: How did beliefs about time factor into

19. For more on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) see Chi Luu, "Black English Matters," *JSTOR Daily* February 12, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/black-english-matters/>. For an overview of the origins of AAVE see Sharese King, "From African American Vernacular English to African American Language: Rethinking the Study of Race and Language in African Americans' Speech," *Annual Review of Linguistics* 6 (January 2020): 285–300; and Donald Winford, "The Origins of African American Vernacular English: Beginnings," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, eds. Jennifer Bloomquist, Lisa J. Green, and Sonja L. Lanchart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

20. Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).



Indigenous—both African and Native American—participation in the Civil War and its aftermath? What does the idea that the bloodletting which claimed over 600,000 American lives had been written into destiny by a spiritual author known as High John the Conqueror a hundred years prior reveal about Black conceptions of fate? Sutton's embrace of the tension between her way of thinking about the war and the existing historical narrative reveals a debate about the appropriate temporal framework for formerly enslaved peoples. Put differently, the question under consideration was: Are we on human time or are we on God and High John the Conqueror's time?

Hurston's exchange with Sutton allows us to ask a related set of questions about how ideas about time assisted in the creation of a protective realm where seeds of resistance could take root. For example, in 1831 the enslaved mystic and Baptist preacher Nat Turner looked to the sky and began preparations for a violent rebellion against slave owners. Those watching the sky in 1831 witnessed multiple dramatic atmospheric events; A solar eclipse was visible in Appalachia in February, and ash from volcanic eruptions in the Cascade Mountains and elsewhere gave the heavens an unusual sheen that caused the sun, when visible, to appear blue. Turner interpreted this phenomenon as a signal to launch an armed revolt.<sup>21</sup> A generation later, Sutton repeated her mother's story of Black people being put under God's "watchcare." The idea that the cohort that witnessed emancipation was protected against rattlesnake bites is a vivid illustration of how local knowledge fed into and intertwined with a diasporic metaphysics of time. The four-year reprieve from injury incurred by rattlesnakes was predetermined, in her view, to "give us time to learn and to know." Hurston did not inquire as to what sort of information was being gained, but we can take a bird's eye view to appreciate that whatever the form that knowledge took, it pertained to matters of safekeeping in a post-emancipation world.

Across generations and despite the ache of separation from their homelands, people of African descent created a shared understanding about how time and historical destiny operated at ground level. This fact is worth appreciating. The powerful sense of safety and protection that these ideas about time lent themselves to helped give birth to the Black racial consciousness that remains in place today. Historian George Rawick, in his deep engagement with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives

21. See Eric Foner, ed., *Nat Turner* (Englewood: Prentice Hall, 1971), 154.

describes how under formal slavery this process of world-building took place not in broad daylight but, rather, from “sundown to sunup.”<sup>22</sup> It was under the “watchcare” of the unstructured hours that these spiritual traditions took root, in many cases irrespective of geographic location. Faith in the idea that powerful spirits had established an expiration date whereby the intolerable conditions of white supremacy would end had powerful repercussions. Like Sutton, Ghost Dancers understood this insistence to be less a matter of faith than one of truth. In telling Hurston about the Civil War’s *true* meaning, she invoked a metaphysical shortcut whereby one can “go straight to Heaven without a prayer.”

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Long before white people appeared in the flesh, Native nations well into the interior of North America knew that they were coming. Disease was often the first sign of their presence. Strange illnesses spread quickly through far-flung communities, frustrating and challenging traditional healers’ efforts to mend the sick. They knew also, because of *things*: unfamiliar objects of alien manufacture, including weapons and other utensils—kettles, buckets, and knives—whose presence made it clear that new sources of trade had become available. Unsettling as these first indications may have been to witness, these Native peoples centuries ago drew upon the time-tested skill of watchful observation to determine the best way forward.<sup>23</sup> The world is full of signs if you know how to read them, and the people were not illiterate.

Perhaps those first premonitions of coming disaster stood out in the same way that an eclipse does, or indications of a uniquely bad storm: the mind begins searching for answers to explain discomfort, loss, and a whole range of unusual sights and sounds. Those first impressions may also have been of otherworldly beauty, like that of a meteor shower or lava flow. The people were not strangers to destruction. On the west coast of North America, for example, Mount St. Helens seems to have erupted with great force around the year 1800. Some anthropologists think the first Ghost Dances were initiated near the Columbia Plateau around the same time. Historian Gregory Smoak explains that the “oldest recorded case of a Plateau prophet can be traced to the years after the ‘dry snow,’ a volcanic ash fall that took place

22. George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing, 1972), 3–12.

23. See Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley’s discussion of the Yupiaq base word *ella* as it relates to faculties of observation in *A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit* (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 1995), 33.

sometime after 1790 and before the arrival of whites.” Smoak describes the recollections of a Spokane leader known as Cornelius who explained that following the ashfall, spiritual leaders emerged who “told the people to stop their fear and crying,” and then issued a troubling vision of the future: “Soon there will come from the rising sun a different kind of man from any you have yet seen, who will bring with them a book and will teach you everything, and after that the world will fall to pieces.”<sup>24</sup>

If we trust these ethnographic accounts, Ghost Dancing seems to have begun not with predictions of white destruction, but rather with prophecies of European arrival. This means we can understand the earliest manifestations of the Ghost Dance as part of a dynamic and multilateral debate about what the presence of white people and—as the prophet Cornelius explicitly made clear—the imposition of Christian religion would mean. Cornelius’s recollection indicates that the medicine people viewed a volcanic eruption as a less severe disaster than the one that loomed. These prophecies present evidence of Native leaders’ efforts to understand the composition and decomposition of the social order around them and to explicitly question and confront the meaning of Euro-American invasion.<sup>25</sup> Spiritual leaders who received news of the settlers’ approach viewed this invasion, in some cases, like a natural disaster. As with any other misfortune, they understood the present one to have a beginning and an end.

Without direct knowledge of the language and Salish philosophies of the subjects of this ethnographic inquiry, it is important to understand that much may be lost in translation or deliberately hidden from view. The relationship that the Spokane prophet seems to have identified between his peoples’ coming hardships and the entry of whites into their territories, however, was a common theme running throughout Native prophecies across the continent at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In 1811, for example, three Cherokees experienced a vision in the mountains of northwest Georgia

24. Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity*, 59; Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expeditions during the years 1838–1842*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), 439.

25. For use of the term “invasion,” see Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

26. Studies of Indigenous prophetic movements in this era include Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Random House, 1969); Joel Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees’ Struggle for a New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); and Alfred Cave, *Prophets of the Great Spirit: Native American Revitalization Movements in Eastern North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

that prompted a new phase of racial self-consciousness. In the vision, as Choctaw scholar Michelene Pesantubbee relates, a contingent of Indian messengers riding small black horses told the Cherokees that “God is dissatisfied that you are receiving the white people in your land without any distinction.” The visitors instructed the Cherokees to “put the white people out of the land and return to your former manner of life.”<sup>27</sup> This example of the creation of new racial boundaries between Indigenous and white people means that even today, aspects of this history remain inaccessible to outsiders. Some may find this frustrating, but acknowledging that ambiguity helps us to appreciate it as a defining feature of fugitive religion.

After the Civil War, it became increasingly dangerous to be identified as Indigenous, and particularly as a spiritual leader or medicine person.<sup>28</sup> This meant that often, communications were kept private. For many Native people, maintaining confidentiality was a first step in enacting a new kind of boundary between themselves and anyone deemed non-Indian. Against the tide of manifest destiny, Indigenous groups deployed the language of prophecy to carve out pockets of epistemic safe haven. Although prophetic traditions in what are today California, Oregon, Nevada, and the Plains likely predate colonization, it is clear that these innovations eventually came to borrow from Christian eschatology. Ohlones in California combined the Ghost Dance and the World Renewal Ceremony with theirs and neighboring peoples’ local dances.<sup>29</sup> This novel blending of influences gave the local movements that became known to outsiders as the Ghost Dance their uniqueness.

In sprouting up between the cracks of the modern world system as it was hardening in place, Ghost Dances offered innovative yet familiar means through which Indigenous people could name the process of racial consolidation as they experienced it while also reclaiming a measure of control. By the time the Pacific Coast began to swarm with miners seeking gold in the 1850s, Indigenous prophetic movements had been thriving for decades in the

27. See Michelene Pesantubbee, “When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811–12,” *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (summer 1993): 301, 315 note 1. John Gambold and A.R. Gambold, “Springplace Diary,” Cherokee Mission, February 10, 1811, Records of the Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, N.C. Translated into English by Elizabeth Marx for William McLoughlin.

28. Historian Kathryn Gin Lum connects this moment to the launch of U.S. imperialism overseas. Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 176–77.

29. Damon B. Akins and William J. Bauer, Jr., *We Are the Land: A History of Native California* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 302.

West. These movements reveal a deep familiarity with changing circumstances that included disease, displacement, and increased competition for resources and power. As Indigenous groups both locally and in varying shades of diaspora experienced new levels of intimacy with colonizing forces, they consistently refreshed existing means of comprehension. Propheying enabled these groups to interpret and debate the signs of a new reality taking shape as they observed them.

Among these signs, group coherence or unity was a top concern, as economic competition rooted in the fur trade created a series of lasting divisions. Disease was also critical, as were the consequences of ecological imbalance on the lives of relatives like buffalo or other species. In this context of fear and uncertainty, prophecies of white demise served as powerful reminders that “the end is near.” In a more immediate sense, they provided an emotional outlet for anger and disillusionment, as well as a diagnostic tool for naming the many moral and ethical shortcomings of this new world system. Beyond this, propheying allowed Indigenous peoples to focus on impermanence, to remember that nothing lasts forever—not disease, not empire, and not the ways of thinking that first enabled white supremacy to take root.

Regardless of where they appear in the timeline of Native American history, prophetic statements served the function of enabling Indian people to see beyond their current conditions—no matter how terrifying and uncomfortable—to glimpse the totality of the historical moment that was theirs. Stepping back to reflect in a philosophical way made it possible to maintain a sense of curiosity about the world despite the acute pain that resulted from, as Western Shoshone historian Ned Blackhawk describes it, the “pandemic relations of violence engulfing their communities.”<sup>30</sup> Locating temporal reprieve served the vital function of allowing for the maintenance of Indigenous interior space and intellectual distance from the new phase of racial consolidation that accompanied westward expansion.

Like Aunt Shady’s story of High John the Conqueror, early Ghost Dance prophetic traditions were—even in their first articulations—concerned with naming the limits of white power and inviting anyone who would listen to take part in the ethical debate that their prognostications inspired. These prophecies reminded dancers that the stress of colonial invasion was not as all-powerful as it professed to be. Rather, like places on a map that could

30. Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 10.

provide physical shelter or asylum, Ghost Dance prophecies created intellectual and emotional zones of refuge wherein families and re-constituted kinship networks could come together to debate truth, reach new kinds of consensus, and keep time together to the rhythms of the places they called home. Scholars may search in vain for a central doctrine at the heart of the Ghost Dance, but there is a simple message that taking a broad view allows us to see: Through finding one another and continuing to honor the cycles of death and renewal, Indigenous peoples of what is today the United States summoned the power to outlast the disasters they faced.

This history makes it clear that scholars miss the point in trying to pin down a central meaning of the Ghost Dance. Divesting from a preoccupation with doctrine allows us to instead ask new kinds of questions, like to what extent everyday Native people actually believed or put stock in these prophecies. Ghost Dancing sometimes fed the kind of political militancy that whites feared, but many iterations also featured the process of actively questioning whether or not spiritual leaders of a given community were accurate or trustworthy in their predictions. These prophecies were meant to be discussed and debated, questioned and even lampooned by adherents and skeptics alike. Through this process, Ghost Dancing led to the creation of new fault lines, new kinds of allegiances, and in some cases, broken social loyalties.<sup>31</sup>

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Enslaved communities across the South greeted news of emancipation with jubilee. Celebrations commenced because, by stroke of a pen, Black Americans were suddenly free to move of their own accord, no longer bound by law to the plantations and homes of white masters. Freedom for the African diaspora within the United States meant precisely this power to come and go, to travel to see relatives, to explore, or to settle without the threat of being stolen and sold. As the Civil War shifted to the western theater, however, the impetus to control the movement of African bodies found new expression in the creation of a highly bureaucratic reservation system that paralleled the rise of Jim Crow in the South. If we consider how many times freedom was momentarily realized then once again nullified by the legal mechanisms of

31. Historian Louis Warren makes a comparable observation about how the Ghost Dance intervened on existing notions of authority and truth. See Warren, *God's Red Son*, 115–39.

white supremacy, the fugitive religious tendencies of Indigenous peoples make sense as a rational response to social conditions.

Guy Dull Knife Jr. from Pine Ridge Reservation conveyed the state of confusion and loss that characterized the decades following the Civil War for Native people:

For many of the families, ours included, it was a very difficult time, a very confusing time . . . Between the fighting and the removal from one reservation to another, families were split up, broken up and torn apart. The army back then was in the final stages of ridding the frontier of the ‘Indian Problem’ and once one group had been forced to surrender and taken to a reservation, it was difficult to leave the reservation from that point on. Sometimes, families ended up being separated for years. Even before then, right after Custer, tribes and bands and families were breaking up into smaller and smaller groups to try and evade the soldiers. There was very little food anymore and everyone was on the run. It was a time of panic and chaos and no one really knew what to do.<sup>32</sup>

The consequences of this splintering and estrangement were painful, but as Dull Knife’s retelling makes clear, splintering could also be an effective strategy for survival in an era of genocidal violence. Understanding the internal turmoil of Native histories is challenging, but doing so helps us avoid the mistake of inscribing an overly coherent narrative onto the idea of fugitive religion. For fugitive religion to be of conceptual use, we must understand it as being as diffuse as its multiple sites of creation.

Despite immense social pressure, Indigenous people fought for freedom of movement at both personal and collective levels. This quest for freedom is especially true of the kind of movement set to rhythm that enabled newfound senses of selfhood to emerge. Historian William McNeill argues for understanding the “emotional resonance of daily and prolonged” collective motion, such as that which results from keeping together in time through military drills or, in some instances, dance. McNeill describes the process of “boundary loss” whereby individuals meld into a larger stream of awareness with others who participate in the same motion.<sup>33</sup> This shift of consciousness has the potential to allow participants to enter trance or dream-like states. It

32. Joe Starita, *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge: A Lakota Odyssey* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 75.

33. William McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3, 7–8.

famously promotes bonding among soldiers who march together at boot camp, for example. This is also why boarding school administrators disciplined Native children through the use of marching and drilling. McNeill's study helps to explain why everyone from military generals to Ghost Dancers have found the use of choreography essential to forging new kinds of group identity.

For many Native people after the Civil War, Ghost Dancing likely meant experiencing a feeling of protection amid widespread grief and confusion. That these dances often took place in beautiful settings—beneath a protective blanket of fog or with the brilliant clarity of the Milky Way against dark skies—made the experience all the more powerful. This connection with the elements of the landscape enabled Indigenous peoples to protect not only their physical bodies, but the ideas and emotions that mattered to them. McNeill's insights into rhythm and human bonding highlight subtler dimensions to the question of how different temporalities are reflected in Indigenous religious philosophies. Singing, chanting, and dancing are ancient modes of expression, all of which rely on a sense of timing, but new demands arising from the postwar era fueled the use of these ageless technologies to create protective zones, capable of shielding the vulnerable from being lost.<sup>34</sup>

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The English term “badlands” conjures images of remote and wild places. Many travelers today only encounter them from them above, should they happen to peer out of an airplane window. In the late 1860s and into the 1870s, however, badlands were key sites of social and religious transformation for Native people coping with the violent chaos of westward expansion. The association was so strong, in fact, that even current sensibilities about what makes an Indigenous person racially “Indian” remain tied to images of wilderness. Although such connotations have persisted through the circulation of stereotypes and movies, the fact is that many Native communities trace an important sense of themselves to these isolated rural locations. Although many Indigenous people today reside in cities and suburbs around the world,

34. Saidiya Hartman offers a parallel explanation of the role of fugitivity in binding and protecting communities in piecing together the story of West Africans sold into slavery. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 211–35.



the association between “nativeness” and badlands, lava beds, everglades, or mountains remains strong.<sup>35</sup>

Much of this association is romantic, but some aspects are based in historical fact. As zones of physical protection and fortification for Native people, badlands were designated places that exceeded and evaded settler knowledge of the topography. As a military term, “badlands” refer to places where an enemy has entrenched themselves to the point of being difficult or impossible to dislodge. The presence of a stronghold of some kind on either side of a conflict is critical to that encounter being defined as a war. Against the backdrop of romantic ideas about Indigenous peoples and nature, settler armies also demonized badlands as evil, ghost-ridden places or maligned them as barren wastelands. Viewed from within, a stronghold is a safe place. It is where one goes to replenish stock, supplies, and to rest when possible, even in the midst of battle. These strongholds were physical manifestations of fugitive religion as Native resistance.

Considering badlands from the perspective of fugitive religion reminds us that the ground, clouds, rocks, and rivers are not separate entities from social life, but constituent elements of historical transformation. Indigenous religion literally and deliberately *involves* the rocks, the plants, any and all spirits of a given place. This way of understanding circumvents the binary construction of material versus invisible realms. Blackfeet scholar Rosalyn LaPier explains that for her people, “the invisible dimension *was* the real world.”<sup>36</sup> This way of thinking was not new for Native people in the aftermath of the Civil War, but those who lived through it did their part to tailor the philosophical traditions they inherited to the changing circumstances of total war. The fact that whites began to dread these landscapes is fleeting evidence of their success. In this way, fugitive religion spread by wind, in signals from glowing embers, in hushed voices and songs, by way of air passed through the lungs of those in flight.

As Native groups fled disease and genocide, they often sought the physical protection of the landscape itself, trusting that the beauty of the land offered curative, life-affirming power. Lava Beds National Monument near what is

35. See Timothy Bowers Vasko, “Nature and the Native,” *Critical Research on Religion* 10, no. 1 (April 2022): 7–23; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 12–13; James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), x.

36. Rosalyn R. LaPier, *Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers, and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

today the border of California and Oregon is one such location on the map. The source of the lava is the Medicine Lake shield volcano, which geologists estimate to be approximately one million years old. This particular volcano's last eruption appears to have been about one thousand years ago. Today, the craggy, rambling landscape smells of thick and fragrant sagebrush. Dark pumice and gleaming obsidian contrast with soothing grey-greens of native plants. In spring, dragonflies and other insect pollinators buzz through the skies, moving from plant to plant and bloom to bloom. The Lava Beds are a feast of layered textures and iridescent colors. Depending on the day, the snowcapped peak of Mount Shasta might be visible on the southwest horizon. Even if the peak is shrouded, Tule Lake glistens reassuringly to the north, a critical source of water for antelope, birds, and people.

It may be dissonant to think of this beautiful place as the setting for war; but, from 1869 until 1871, the Lava Beds were the site of a deadly standoff between the Modoc people and the U.S. Army. The Modoc Nation from Klamath Basin document their presence in the region to at least fourteen thousand years ago. Their ancestral homeland consisted of over five thousand square miles, from the Cascade Mountains in the West, to the peaks of the Sierra Nevada in the East; from rich pine forests fed by a patchwork with lakes and rivers in the North to the Lava Beds in the South. In 1864, the government established a reservation by way of federal treaty. Known as the Treaty of Council Grove, it was ratified in 1870 and squeezed the Modoc onto a small reservation alongside their traditional enemies, the Klamath.<sup>37</sup>

The treaties spelled crisis for the Modoc people and their neighbors. This context is where the leadership of a figure like Captain Jack comes into focus. Finding the conditions on the reservation intolerable, a group of approximately sixty Modoc warriors and one hundred and fifty of their family members, including elders, women, and children, relocated into the Lava Beds under Captain Jack's guidance. Here they set up an entire community, folded into the crevices of the rocks. Extensive networks of underground caves provided natural shelter from the elements and refuge from the Army, whose orders were to return them to the reservation. Captain Jack's band was accompanied by a spiritual leader named Curly-Headed Doctor who led ceremonies to sustain the warriors and the people. Historian Jim Compton explains that in addition to requesting spiritual protection in the form of

37. "History," Modoc Nation, <https://modocnation.com/history/>.

a “dark cloud” as well as for the gifts of strong hearts and clear thinking, Curly-Headed Doctor “prayed and made a long rope of tule reeds, which he painted red and stretched around the Modoc positions to deflect bullets and make the Stronghold invulnerable.”<sup>38</sup>

Hidden in plain sight, the intangible quality of fugitive religion was also its greatest strength. A massive fog bank enveloped the badlands on the day that the Army attacked, rendering their system of signaling with flags useless. Even on a clear day, the rocky, roadless terrain was confusing to the soldiers. Assessing the impenetrable fog, one soldier reportedly quoted Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” Armed with rifles, Modoc snipers “fired from unseen cracks, fissures, and gaps in the Lava Beds.” Thinking back on their disastrous attack on the Modocs, an Army captain recalled that Modoc fighters were impossible to see, “stripped to the buff and of the same color as the rocks, [gliding] stealthily from cover to cover through the intricate passages.” This soldier reported never having seen a Modoc fighter during the battle, only the muzzle flashes when they fired.<sup>39</sup> That the Modoc, though wounded by the consequences of colonialism, found ways to leverage the power of their surroundings in the interest of their own survival is history we cannot and should not discount.

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Creating zones of safety against the regime of white supremacy in the 1860s and beyond drew upon faith in unseen worlds tied concretely to changing sensibilities about time and place. The core issues at stake were similar to those involved in surviving a bad storm: The goal, when the wind is at its worst, is simply to prevail. Indigenous peoples survived the postwar era in part through the practices of fugitive religion, which involved renegotiating their relationships to space and time. They created zones of protection through prophetic oral traditions that placed an expiration date on the settler violence that they either knew was coming or experienced directly. In these

38. Jim Compton, *Spirit in the Rock: The Fierce Battle for Modoc Homelands* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2017), 105; This scene is also described in Alfred Benjamin Meacham, *Wi-Ne-Ma (The Woman Chief) and Her People* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1876), 143; and by the daughter of Modoc warrior Schonchin John in Verne F. Ray, *Primitive Pragmatists: The Modoc Indians of Northern California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), 67. For a more recent overview of the Modoc War, see Boyd Cothran, *Remembering the Modoc War: Redemptive Violence and the Making of American Innocence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

39. Compton, *Spirit in the Rock*, 108–10.

ways, fugitive religion tapped into longstanding traditions of observation and exchange with local landscapes in ways that frequently confounded the conceptual ambitions of westward expansion.

Considering Black religious ideas alongside Native American ones helps to highlight dimensions of shared pasts that have so far been obscured by white interpretations of the Civil War and its aftermath. This is because Black and Native people hold in common the experience of having their Indigenous identities directly undermined by colonizing and enslaving forces. It is also because their ancestral traditions reflect complex ways of relating to time and space that cannot be reduced to Christian metaphysics. Thinking about fugitive religion in this way might open up new paths for understanding Indigenous resistance, despite colonial powers' best efforts to erase history and break these communities at their very foundations.

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