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Beyond a Boundary: Black Lives and the Settler-Native Divide

Tiya Miles

WHAT do we do with the black “settler”? Or rather, what do we do with the more than one hundred thousand African Americans who moved north and west onto violated and usurped Indigenous lands in the nineteenth century?¹ We have sidestepped this question in studies of the American Midwest and West even as settler colonial frameworks of analysis have reshaped Native American history. As a result, we still reach for the familiar and now especially charged term *settler* when describing black residents, with all of the conceptual baggage that word carries in our present historiographical moment as indicating agents or subagents of the settler colonial state beset with a “recurring need to disavow the presence of indigenous ‘others’” in the interest of controlling Native lands. Black “pioneer” (a label that “performs a similar disappearing act” by “discursively eras[ing] the indigenous peoples who were there *ab origine*”) likewise still appears in studies of the Black West.² For example, a recent book that admirably reveals and enlivens black farmers’ experiences in the nineteenth-century Midwest asserts that African Americans were “pioneers in the purest sense, willing to risk their freedom and their lives for the chance to gain not just land but their rights.”³ Certainly the pollution

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¹ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (1976; repr., New York, 1992), 146–47; Michael P. Johnson, “Out of Egypt: The Migration of Former Slaves to the Midwest during the 1860s in Comparative Perspective,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (Bloomington, Ind., 1999), 223–45, esp. 229.

² Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing *Settler Colonial Studies*,” in “A Global Phenomenon,” ed. Edward Cavanagh and Veracini, special issue, *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1–12 (“recurring need,” 2, “pioneer,” 6).

³ Anna-Lisa Cox, *The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America’s Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality* (New York, 2018), 6 (quotation). I too have employed this language at times. For the terminology of black settlement and pioneering, see William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (1987; repr.,

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of the category “pioneer,” rather than its purity, begs attention. But, as a cohort of scholars, we rely on this loose and yet electrified terminology—echoing an earlier historiography’s language for white settlers—of heroic black settlers, pioneers, and buffalo soldiers taming a wild frontier and organizing land use for civilized productivity, even though we recognize that black survivors of slavery were a distinctive group.

African Americans who came to dwell in the house of settler colonialism struggled to emerge whole from a proximal past of stolen lives and labor. They fought against stacked odds to set down new roots and grow strong families and communities. We know their enslavement depended on movement—the removal of their ancestors from West and Central Africa, their forced marches across the land in a rabid domestic slave trade, their relocation with owners and owners’ heirs caught up in cotton fever.⁴ We understand—thanks in part to Ronald T. Takaki, who synthesized this overlaid history nearly three decades ago—that black expulsion into the western “frontiers” of slavery was predicated on Indian removal.⁵ We are beginning to grasp in greater fullness the extent to which credit markets for the purchase of former Indigenous land in the cotton West depended on the collateralization of enslaved black bodies in local, regional, and global networks.⁶ Each of these forced removes that African Americans endured, what Leslie A. Schwalm has called a pattern of “uprootings,” required starting anew on grounds that were not rightfully their own, making theirs an ambivalent form of settlement, a situatedness of subjection.⁷ “The spatial alienation that slave transportation effected,” as Patrick Wolfe put it, reinforced the system of holding

New York, 1996); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York, 1998); Tiya Miles, “The Long Arm of the South?,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 274–81; Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841–1869* (Norman, Okla., 2016); Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn., 2018); Herbert G. Ruffin II and Dwayne A. Mack, eds., *Freedom’s Racial Frontier: African Americans in the Twentieth-Century West* (Norman, Okla., 2018).

⁴ Leslie A. Schwalm, *Emancipation’s Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), 12–13; Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens, Ga., 2012).

⁵ Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (New York, 1990), 77 (quotation). See also David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Indian Removal: A Norton Casebook* (New York, 2007), 30.

⁶ See Bonnie Martin, “Neighbor-to-Neighbor Capitalism: Local Credit Networks and the Mortgaging of Slaves,” in *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (Philadelphia, 2016), 107–21.

⁷ Schwalm, *Emancipation’s Diaspora*, 1.

a people captive who could not escape to homelands and set African Americans on a quest for belonging laden with pathos and impossibility.⁸

In order to obtain freedom in the antebellum period, many captive blacks fled. To realize, at least nominally, the fruits of freedom during and following the Civil War, enslaved people of African descent often saw no choice but to move again, enacting what Kendra T. Field has perceptively called a long “continuum of flight” across multiracial and transnational spaces that included Indian Territory as well as Liberia, Mexico, and Canada.⁹ Those who remained within the borders of the present-day continental United States traversed rivers, wound through forests, and trudged across state lines to realize their dreams of autonomy from racial tyranny. As Michael P. Johnson has written about migrants in the 1860s: “These refugees from Dixie comprised the largest voluntary interstate migration of African Americans in the first century of the nation’s history, over 80,000 in all.” Following the demise of Reconstruction, tens of thousands streamed into all-black towns such as Nicodemus in what Nell Irvin Painter has called the “Kansas Fever Exodus.”¹⁰ Their moves always and necessarily ended with arrival on land bases that were originally or currently Indigenous, where black migrants might or might not be welcomed by Native stakeholders. Black survival utterly depended on either forming alliances of kinship with Native people or putting down stakes on taken lands controlled by the U.S. nation-state or its white citizens: the squatters, soldiers, and land speculators who formed the advance guard of settler colonial intrusion and entrenchment.

Slavery sequestered blacks within the white state for the purpose of the racial control that expedited labor, while settler colonialism at first expelled Indigenous people beyond the white state through warfare (death and sale into overseas slavery), removal, and reservations, and later imposed social proximity on American Indians through assimilation policies. The interrelationship of these fluctuating, spatially inflected power relationships—or, as Wolfe phrased it, the “antithetical but complementary histories” of African Americans and Native Americans—is by now

⁸ Patrick Wolfe, “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 866–905 (quotation, 886).

⁹ Kendra T. Field, “No Such Thing as Stand Still’: Migration and Geopolitics in African American History,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 3 (December 2015): 693–718, esp. 696 (quotation), 705. For more on black migration to and from Indian Territory, see David A. Y. O. Chang, “Where Will the Nation Be at Home? Race, Nationalisms, and Emigration Movements in the Creek Nation,” in *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, ed. Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland (Durham, N.C., 2006), 80–99.

¹⁰ Johnson, “Out of Egypt,” 229 (“These refugees”); Painter, *Exodusters*, 147 (“Kansas”).

firmly established.¹¹ Architects and practitioners of the **settler colonial slavery complex** sought to expel African Americans (marginalize and exclude them) and, by the late nineteenth century, to ingest American Indians (incorporate and vanish them as collectivities). After two decades of new scholarship influenced by ethnic studies, American studies, critical race studies, and gender studies, we are cognizant of the intricacies and difficulties of black life on Native land precipitated by this complex, but we have yet to develop a refreshed vocabulary for characterizing these nuances conversant with a current settler colonialism frame that, though perhaps overused and underexplained in the contexts to which it is applied, retains currency. The terms *black settler* and *black pioneer* referentially pack African American experience onto the offensive end of the settler colonial playing field in a way that does not allow us—let alone urge us—to carefully consider gradations of difference in positioning and interaction. I am not only referring here to the difference race makes (as a factor that forestalls black rights and protections within settler colonial states); I am also referring to the difference choice makes—choice of affiliation and choice of action, which varied among African American survivors of slavery.

Surely all or even most black migrants to the Midwest were not, as the author of a new book puts it in one instance, “intent upon fighting the Native peoples of the region to clear them from the land.”¹² A prominent example is the extended Bonga family of African, French, and Ojibwe descent, who carefully crafted lives in Leech Lake, Minnesota, and other Great Lakes locales between the late 1700s and late 1800s. As studies by historians Mattie Marie Harper, Rebecca Kugel, and Michael Witgen, as well as extant letters, have shown, George Bonga (the son of an African man, Pierre Bonga, and an Ojibwe woman, apparently unnamed in the documentary record) vigorously participated in a fur trade economy in the early to mid-1800s while also defending the Ojibwe land base.¹³ George Bonga and his Ojibwe spouse had three children. Their daughter, Susie Bonga, born around 1850, organized Christian women’s work groups in

¹¹ Wolfe, *American Historical Review* 106: 887.

¹² Cox, *Bone and Sinew*, 17.

¹³ George Bonga, “Letters of George Bonga,” *Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 1 (January 1927): 41–54, esp. 43–44; Mattie Marie Harper, “French Africans in Ojibwe Country: Negotiating Marriage, Identity and Race, 1780–1890” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 51, 64, 82, 83, 92, 93, 95, 96. Harper’s illuminating dissertation is the most careful and extensive study of the Bonga family to date. See also Rebecca Kugel, “Leadership within the Women’s Community: Susie Bonga Wright of the Leech Lake Ojibwe,” in *Native Women’s History in Eastern North America before 1900: A Guide to Research and Writing*, ed. Kugel and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy (Lincoln, Neb., 2007), 166–200; Michael Witgen, “Seeing Red: Race, Citizenship, and Indigeneity in the Old Northwest,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 581–611.

the 1870s that adapted Ojibwe traditions of women's deliberation about political affairs as well as redistribution of material goods. The Bongas established wealth and political influence at a U.S. national level through their relations with white fur traders, Indian agents, and Episcopalian missionaries—representatives of the state—and George Bonga's dealings in treaty negotiations sometimes brought him into conflict with Leech Lake community members who suspected him of opportunism. As Harper observes with directness, the Bongas showed “deep concern for the wellbeing of the Ojibwes” even as they exhibited a “sometimes paternalistic attitude.”¹⁴ This positionality should not relegate the Bongas to an unqualified, undifferentiated “settler” or “pioneer” box.

Mixed-race people of Indigenous and European ancestry, too, have stood with one foot on either side of the settler-native political divide around which we often now arrange our historical narratives. And some Native people also found themselves straddling this line because they were invited to buy into the settler state in exchange for their claims to indigeneity, “bargain[ing],” as Michael Witgen has trenchantly put it, “in exchange for the promise of a political and social future.” The attempted seduction into assimilation that citizenship (and allotment) represented was, as we know, a mechanism of settler colonialism. Indigenous “x-marks,” as Scott Richard Lyons has termed the “contaminated and coerced” Native signatures on treaties, were made in trying contexts and colored with grief.¹⁵ Yet Native people's choices to engage such options were their own. Our close examination of these contexts and choices, our stretch toward new terms (indeed, such as Lyons's *x-mark*), is the required work of reconstructing the intricacy of Native American history and its engagement with settler colonialism.

I want to challenge us to look for and therefore learn to see spaces of difference and complexity that also exist in African American histories of westward migration and homemaking in the first generations after emancipation and to invent or rediscover a language for writing about them. I want to encourage us to resist falling back on familiar phrasing that reinforces blacks' location on the settler side of a conceptual boundary without examining gradations of relations at and around this line. But of course, social relations on the ground where people live out their lives are always messier than theoretical concepts, and teasing out these particularities often depends on our use of microscopic interpretive lenses. In the sharp light of these lenses, the line between “native” and “settler” blurs and bleeds, for African Americans as well as Native Americans.

¹⁴ Harper, “French Africans in Ojibwe Country,” 96 (quotations), 82, 83, 92, 93, 95; Kugel, “Leadership within the Women's Community,” 171, 175, 176, 177.

¹⁵ Witgen, *Journal of the Early Republic* 38: 608 (“bargain[ing]”); Scott Richard Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* (Minneapolis, 2010), 1 (“x-marks”), 2 (“contaminated”).

African Americans had but two choices as the young United States solidified its hold over the central portion of North America: make homes on Indigenous lands or die. There is, as Indigenous studies scholars Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence have argued about Afro-Canadians, a critical difference between this black state of being and the ideology that fueled European and Euro-American settlement. Black people faced a “desperate need to survive after slavery,” Amadahy and Lawrence assert.¹⁶ In contrast, white architects, agents, and beneficiaries of the settler state sought to dominate the land and peoples of North America for economic gain, the reinforcement of political authority, and the enjoyment of a two-centuries-in-the-making racial hierarchy that their actions ensured would persevere. These are, of course, broad brushstrokes for which I might be taken to task. This formulation, for example, does not include all white people in every circumstance. Kelly Lytle Hernández’s illuminating study of the carceral settler state in Los Angeles shows that even white men who failed to comply with narrow social standards could be targeted for seizure and what she calls the “elimination” of jailing.¹⁷ And as I have expressed elsewhere, “black communities do indeed benefit from the dispossession of indigenous lands.” Furthermore, as Field has articulated in clear and uncompromising terms, the African American “search for inalienable land, which would not be threatened by growing racial animus” sometimes led to their “participation in American expansionist policies.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, we can and should account for the desperate quest for survival in the African American relationship with the settler state, particularly in the first generations to emerge from chattel slavery. We might then analyze black lives with a greater degree of imagination of the sort that Lorenzo Veracini urged in the study of settler colonial structures. “A new language and imagination are needed,” he wrote, in the project to “represent the decolonisation of settler colonial forms.” Representing black experience in a U.S. settler colonial context requires new thought-acts, too, which have the potential not only to refine our understanding of African American history, western history, and Native history but also to contribute surprising opportunities for identifying challenges to “settler colonial forms.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, “Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada: Settlers or Allies?,” in *Breaching the Colonial Contract: Anti-Colonialism in the US and Canada*, ed. Arlo Kempf (New York, 2009), 105–36 (quotation, 121).

¹⁷ Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2017), 8–10, 42, 45.

¹⁸ Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (New York, 2017), 259 (“black communities”); Field, *Journal of American History* 102: 706 (“search”).

¹⁹ Veracini, *Settler Colonial Studies* 1: 5–6 (“new language,” 5–6, “represent,” 6).

Language, after all, matters. It can facilitate our thinking and enable glimpses of structures and processes previously obscured. The settler colonial paradigm has done this service (even as it, like any rubric, benefits from refinement), providing us with a set of words attached to clarifying explanations that give us conceptual tools for understanding what happened as imperial powers unleashed populations to create states and homesteads while attempting to disappear Native populations and claims. So how best can we get our words around African American residence on Native lands without flattening their realities, protecting them from critiques of power, or reproducing boldface lines between “settler” and “native”? Amadahy and Lawrence prefer the phrase “ambiguous settlers” for Afro-Canadians. Jodi A. Byrd, a theorist of colonialism and indigeneity, offers the term “arrivants,” which she borrows from Caribbean writer Kamau Brathwaite, “to signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe.” Figuring African American arrivants as a third category separate from native and settler recognizes the difference enslavement makes and expands our ability to perceive a spectrum of relations.²⁰

Perhaps we can find inspiration for how to characterize black arrivants by turning to the words of those who experienced enslavement, migration, and resettlement directly. Lucy A. Delaney, formerly enslaved in Missouri, recounts a series of forced and voluntary movements undertaken by her midwestern and southern African American family. In the brief, packed pages of *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom*, published in the 1890s, Delaney details a harrowing story of capture, jailing, and isolation in the city of Saint Louis. Her mother, Polly Crocket, had been born free in Illinois but was kidnapped and shipped south in the early 1800s. A “wealthy gentleman,” Major Taylor Berry, purchased Polly, Lucy’s mother, to labor inside an urban household. “Attracted by

²⁰ Amadahy and Lawrence, “Indigenous Peoples and Black People,” 121 (“ambiguous”); Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, 2011), xix (“arrivants”), 54. Shona N. Jackson, a literary and Indigenous studies scholar, formulates “Creole indigeneity” to frame her critical study of Caribbean post-coloniality. She uses “settler” to define twentieth- and twenty-first-century descendants of black enslaved people and Indian indentured people in Guyana, but never unself-consciously. In identifying a prevalent “Creole indigeneity” in which people of African descent consciously act to claim belonging by investing labor into land and withdrawing the rights of citizenship at the expense of Indigenous people, Jackson’s analysis is instructive for its reach toward invented language and its emphasis on choice of action. People of African descent do not fall into the “settler colonial” camp in her study simply as a byproduct of being; they reside there, instead, “because of the ways in which they maintain power within the postcolonial state.” Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis, 2012), 2–4 (“Creole indigeneity,” 4, “settler,” “settler colonial,” 3).

[her] bright and alert appearance," the buyer turned the legally free Polly over to his wife, Fanny Berry, who "concluded to make a seamstress of her." Polly married an enslaved man (unnamed in the narrative) on the premises and with him had two children, Lucy and Nancy. The family passed from the hands of their master to his widow and were promised their freedom upon her death. Instead, Fanny's second husband, Robert Wash (later to become a Missouri supreme court justice), tore the family asunder. "Slavery! cursed slavery!" Lucy exclaims after recalling the sale of her father further south, "what crimes has it invoked!" Nancy, Lucy's only sibling, ran away to Canada after being carried to Philadelphia as a maid to Major Berry's daughter. This escape, Lucy stresses, was inspired by their mother's admonition to "run away, as soon as chance offered."²¹

Now a member of a shrunken family under the authority of her master's daughter, Lucy Delaney shared a special bond with her mother. Still, their "severe" new mistress threatened to sell Polly "down the river at once" for "put[ting] on" what she called "white airs." The next day this mistress had Polly auctioned for 550 dollars. Lucy was twelve years old when she heard her mother had run away to avoid being handed over and had "the bloodhounds (curse them and curse their masters) . . . set loose on her trail." Slave catchers snatched Polly in Chicago and delivered her back to Saint Louis, where she mustered the courage to file a suit for her freedom. While Polly succeeded in court, Lucy herself was slated for sale. Lucy ran, following the example of all the women in her family, and, aided by a white neighbor, hid in her mother's house. Polly, accompanied by the sheriff, found and removed Lucy. Polly then brought suit against the husband of her former master's daughter, D. D. Mitchell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Saint Louis, for Lucy's freedom. The court threw the child in jail, where she languished for "seventeen long and dreary months," before being declared legally free in 1844.²²

Lucy Delaney's life story continued long after this freedom dream was first realized. She and her mother worked as a seamstress and a laundress, respectively, saving enough for Polly to travel north to Toronto in search of Nancy, the "long-lost girl." Delaney stayed in Saint Louis, married, and moved to Illinois with her husband, who died soon thereafter from a fatal injury incurred while working on a steamboat that exploded. She moved back to Saint Louis, married again, had four children, and lost them all to premature death. After the passing away of her mother, she set

²¹ Lucy A. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom* (St. Louis, [189-?]), 10 ("wealthy"), 11 ("seamstress"), 14-16 ("Slavery!" 14, "run away," 16), available through Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina Library, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/delaney/delaney.html>.

²² Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 21-22 ("severe," 21, "bloodhounds," 22), 34-35 ("seventeen," 34), 30.

out to find her father. During what she calls “the great exodus of negroes from the South” that led numerous people to the city of Saint Louis in 1879, Delaney watched for her father and questioned weary travelers “on whom the marks of slavery were still visible.” She learned that her father was on the same plantation to which he had been sold years before, near Vicksburg, Mississippi. While black refugees poured into and out of the city, searching for family and the places that would become their next homes, Delaney sent her father traveling funds. Forty-five years—nearly a lifetime of “hard work, rough times and heart longings”—had separated them. After the reunion that Delaney’s inquiries had made possible, the little family splintered again, with her father returning to the southwestern home he now knew and her sister, Nancy, heading north to her first space of escape, Canada.²³ Delaney, the youngest member of a family that had endured a series of wrenching relocations, both forced and contingently voluntary, must have seen migration and resettlement as a regular, if traumatic, aspect of black life. She, her mother, her sister, her father, and the weary travelers in exodus were all settlers—but what kind? They experienced a situatedness of subjection before, during, and following the Civil War even as they strove to make good lives beyond the bare bones of survival.

Black people in the nineteenth-century United States, as Delaney captured and Nell Irvin Painter emphasized, were engaged in an exodus of biblical proportions. In the 1860s through the 1890s, we see them in desperate flight from slavery, racial violence, and economic exploitation. Yes, they settled on Native lands appropriated by a colonial state; yes, they made choices to invest in that state in ways that we must examine and expose. And we should also note, in our expositions, that they did so in a state of near-permanent exile that always shaped their relationship to settler colonial social and political structures. The Afro-settler is an exo-settler, pushed by exigencies of exodus and exile and (almost) always exogenous to the settler state. As Painter underscored in her classic study of black migration to Kansas and of the people she termed Exodusters, “the prospect of leaving the region entirely for truly free soil fired the imaginations of Blacks who realized that their oppression was inextricably bound up with Southern or perhaps American life.”²⁴

²³ Delaney, *From the Darkness*, 52 (“long-lost”), 60 (“great exodus”), 61 (“hard work”); Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia, Mo., 2007), 2; Jack, “Crossing the Red Sea: Saint Louis and the Exodus of 1879” (lecture, University of Missouri, Columbia, Nov. 9, 2016). For more on black community life in St. Louis in the moment when Delaney wrote her narrative (likely 1891), see Eric Gardner, “‘Face to Face’: Localizing Lucy Delaney’s *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*,” *Legacy* 24, no. 1 (2007): 50–71.

²⁴ Painter, *Exodusters*, 137.

Perhaps we, as scholars of these migrants' lives and times, can catch some of their fire as we work toward sharper and brighter formulations. The Exoduster, ambiguous settler, arrivant, or exiled settler disturbs the fixed boundary line between Native and settler, pushing us to trace and represent the past with exactitude and imagination.