Indigenous “Rememory”: Cultural Hybridity and the Nature of Resistance in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Contemporary writers such as Nettie Jones, Clarence Major, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison depict the long-standing connection between African Americans and Native Americans in American history and society, a connection that has recently attracted greater scholarly attention. Historians William Loren Katz and Jack D. Forbes, who share much of the credit for initiating scholarship concerning Afro-Natives, have rightly called for further study of this important relationship, emphasizing the inaccuracy of a focus on a black-white nexus in discussions of race in America. Forbes asserts,

The ancestry of many modern-day Americans, whether of “black” or “Indian” appearance, is often (or usually) quite complex indeed. It is sad that many such persons have been forced by racism into arbitrary categories which tend to render their ethnic heritage simple rather than complex. It is now one of the principal tasks of scholarship to replace the shallow one-dimensional images of non-whites with more accurate multi-dimensional portraits. (271)

Both Katz and Forbes have pointed toward contact between Africans and natives of the Americas before the American colonial period, shared experiences of slavery at the hands of both Europeans and natives, the development of unique black Indian communities on the American frontier, and cooperation in revolts against European control as evidence of cultural affinity, amalgamation,¹ and shared senses of purpose among blacks and Indians, the basis of a kinship that endures in modern times.

Recent studies of Afro-Native history and culture respond to Forbes’s and Katz’s call and further probe the implications of this
field for an understanding of slavery in America. Jonathan Brennan’s recent study of Indian-black experiences attributes the proliferation of African-Native communities to the colonial plantation system, which first exploited the labor of Native Americans and eventually relied on the enslavement of both Africans and natives (3). According to Brennan, many mixed communities resulted from these shared experiences of slavery (7), and in these communities, “distinctions between African and Native began to blur, especially as the term ‘mulatto’ was widely used to describe both African-European and African-Native American people” (7). Tiya Miles similarly emphasizes the largely unrecognized role of natives in the institution of slavery, an oversight that she attributes to historians who have “painted slavery with a narrow brush” (138).

As Miles asserts, the enslavement of natives, as well as Southern tribes’ enslavement of Africans, indicate a variety of native and black experiences that challenge popular historical assumptions, particularly classifications of “black” and “Indian” that disregard the potential for dual identity (146). Lindsay T. Baker’s and Julie P. Baker’s *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* provides portraits of African Americans who were enslaved by Southern Indians (or integrated into their bands, in the case of Seminoles). After their removal with the tribes to Indian Territory and the end of the civil war, these individuals received tribal citizenship at the insistence of the U.S. government and were further acculturated into the tribes, speaking native languages and employing native cooking and medicinal practices (5). As Miles asserts, these individuals’ espousal of Indian cultural practices can be understood in part as an act of resistance, one that privileges Indianness as its source rather than both Indianness and blackness (155).

In addition to the black-Indian amalgamation that resulted from slavery, Brennan also highlights African-Native American populations known as Maroon communities, composed of Indians and runaway slaves, which often resisted European infiltration and rule in the South (8) and encapsulated the kind of interracial cooperation that some American writers have fictionalized. These Maroon communities are in a sense emblematic of a broader phenomenon of culture, one defined by active resistance as well as cultural hybridity, and may be understood as “in-between spaces” (2) that, according to Homi Bhabha, “initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). Bhabha’s characterization of maroon communities as a metaphor for “the force of the people of an Afro-American nation” (207) thereby