

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

When I began work on this book several years ago, I wanted to tell a story. I imagined it would be about the intersecting lives of blacks and Indians in nineteenth-century America, about interracial and intercultural alliance, about shared meanings and joint resistance to slavery and colonialism. In the intervening years, however, I found, as veteran storytellers have known for longer than I have been alive, that the “story” is rarely what it seems on the surface and often encompasses many more stories. As I read secondary-source materials on Native American and African American histories in preparation for writing this book, the story that most arrested me was one about a slave woman: a black slave woman, owned by a Cherokee man who would later father her five children. Her name was Doll, his was Shoe Boots, and the tale of their life together was both complicated and painful.

The Shoeboots family¹ story opened up an entire history that I, growing up in an African American family, majoring in Afro-American Studies in college, and studying Native American history in graduate school, had never heard. And yet this story seemed vital to gaining a full understanding of the American past, since it moved through and encompassed key moments, issues, and struggles both in African American and American Indian histories. The more details I uncovered about Doll and Shoe Boots’s life and family, the more committed I became to writing into the

historical silence that often surrounds interactions between black and Native people.

While conducting research and speaking about this project in public and in academic venues, however, I found that the story of Doll's life in the Cherokee Nation was, in the view of many, an unspeakable thing. The specter of slaveowning Indians stirred up emotional, intellectual, and political trouble for contemporary African Americans and Native Americans alike who remember and imagine this past in differing ways. Some black people, I found, were reluctant to hear about American Indians who engaged in trading and owning slaves because they imagined Indians as the historical protectors of black runaways; still other African Americans were disinterested in hearing about American Indians, thinking that such a focus would siphon attention from black justice struggles. Some Native people felt regretful and even ashamed of this history; others denied it outright. And ironically, like their black counterparts, some Native people saw any engagement with African American history as detracting attention and stealing energy from American Indian justice struggles. It seemed that black slavery within Native American nations was an aspect of history that both black and Native people had willed themselves to forget. Their reactions seemed to echo an assessment made by cultural critic Sharon Holland, that there exists an ever-present attempt in America to "disremember a shared past."² For black and Indian peoples in the United States, this imperative to "disremember" is even more pressing, because memory contains not only the suffering we have endured in the wake of colonial expansion, genocide, and slavery but also the suffering we have endured at the hands of one another in this context of brutal oppression.

The desire to disremember, the desperate need to blot out the horrors of the past, is a central theme in Toni Morrison's epic novel of slavery in the United States, *Beloved*. This novel is now considered a classic by many scholars of American literature. In my view, the work still stands alone in its intuitive sense and articulation of the power of the unspoken. The resonant quality of *Beloved*, its enduring ability to mediate between our present selves and shrouded pasts, has echoed in my thoughts throughout the process of writing this book and thus has left an imprint on the story that I tell. In the world of *Beloved*, the memory of the ravages of slavery, of its distortions of human relations, refuses to be suppressed despite desperate attempts by the main characters to suppress it. The memory of slavery continually returns to haunt the protagonist and her family, first as a ghost and later as a flesh-and-blood woman with the power to poison relationships in the

present. At the end of the novel, the narrator repeats these words like a mantra: "It was not a story to pass on . . . it was not a story to pass on . . . this was not a story to pass on."³ And yet, in her remarkable portrayal of the impossibility of remembering, the impossibility of speaking the stories of the slave past, Toni Morrison does pass it on. Even as she denies the possibility of telling her tale, she unveils it layer by layer. She gives us the story in one hand and with the other takes it away. This, I believe, is a necessary feint. For the very stories that pain us so are the maps to our inner worlds, and to the better worlds that we envision for our children. In the words of Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko, "through the stories we hear who we are."⁴

Recently when I was speaking in a public forum about black and American Indian relations in colonial and early America, a respected Indian elder from a Great Plains tribe impressed on me her strong desire that I cease speaking about this topic. Her fear, as she expressed it, was that documenting the intermarriage of black and Indian people would give the U.S. government just one more reason to declare Native people inauthentic and soluble and then to seize their remaining lands and any vestiges of political autonomy. At the end of a private conversation following the session, the woman said, "Don't write your book; it will destroy us." I was pained by her words, just as she had been pained by mine. I couldn't help but question the efficacy, and even the ethics, of denying the existence of the relationships forged by our forebears. I wondered, too, about the impact of such denial on descendants of black and Indian couples who are too often marginalized in Native and sometimes black communities, as well as on the communal well-being of the many Native nations with mixed-race citizens. I also saw in her formulation of the risk involved in acknowledging black and Indian kinship, a reiteration, indeed a reformation, of the triangulated relationship between Indian, African, and European American people. This relationship has existed ever since African and Native people came into contact in massive numbers during European colonial expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it continues to prohibit blacks and Indians from speaking directly with one another, forcing them instead to speak through and against the material and discursive structures of American colonialism. During this conversation, I was reminded of an observation made by black feminist theorist bell hooks more than a decade ago: "For Native Americans, especially those who are black, and for African Americans, it is a gesture of resistance to the dominant culture's ways of thinking about history, identity, and community for us to decolonize our

minds, reclaim the word that is our history as it was told to us by our ancestors, not as it has been interpreted by the colonizer.”⁵ In this elder’s plea that I not write, I saw even more reason for doing so. For the void that remains when we refuse to speak of the past is in fact a presence, a presence both haunting and destructive.

It is my hope that black and Native people can bear the weight of this, my telling, and also the weight of the complex history that we share in America. As the court cases pending in the Cherokee Nation and the Seminole Nation about the place and citizenship rights of descendants of black slaves within those tribes demonstrate, this history continues to shape our lives, both separately and together. The following account is a Cherokee story, an African American story, an American story. In the words of historian Nell Irvin Painter, it is a “fully loaded cost accounting” of who we have been and who we can become, as peoples whose lives have been intertwined on this land for centuries.⁶ It is a heartfelt and imperfect offering.