



Dreams of a Black Commons on Turtle Island

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ABSTRACT *This essay opens with a discussion of the Black commons and the possibility it offers for visioning coherence between Black land relationality and Indigenous sovereignty. Two sites of history – Black slavery and Black migration prior to the twentieth century – present illuminations and challenges to Black and Indigenous relations on Turtle Island, as they expose the “antagonisms history has left us” (Byrd, 2019a, p. 342), and the ways antiblackness is produced as a return to what is deemed impossible, unimaginable, or unforgivable about Black life. While the full histories are well beyond the scope of this paper, I highlight the violent impossibilities and afterlives produced and sustained by both – those that deserve care and attention within a “new relationality,” as Tiffany King has named, between Black and Indigenous peoples. At the end of the essay, I return briefly to Anna Tsing’s spiritual science of foraging wild mushrooms. Her allegory about the human condition offers a bridge, I conclude, between the emancipatory dreams of Black freedom and Indigenous sovereignty.*

KEYWORDS Black commons; emancipation; settler colonialism; migration

Outside the house, between the forests and fields, bounty is not yet exhausted.

Anna Tsing (2012, p. 152)

What would life be that was not interested in leaving a trace of human habitation?

Fred Moten (Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016, 34:00)

Introduction

In her essay “Unruly Edges,” critical anthropologist Anna Tsing (2012) draws her reader, with great enchantment, into a world that is foreign for most – that is, the world of wild, uncultivated mushrooms. Wild mushrooms, with their species interdependency, call a forager back to places of detailed familiarity over and over and over again, she writes. To search for a coveted

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mushroom is to also return to a wanted tree or stump – “*the* oak that lives with chanterelle mycelium” (Tsing, 2012, p. 142). To wander into a forest, to lag slowly across an open field in search of wild mushrooms, is to move the body in harmony with the earth and itself, at “the speed of bodily pleasure and contemplation” (Tsing, 2012, p. 141).

Tsing’s (2012) words about the wandering and unruly lives of wild mushrooms are also an allegory about the stark human-made costs of agricultural cultivation and as she details, the irreparable connection between global colonialism’s logic of mastery and destruction of the land. To “settle agriculture” also, importantly, entailed the ownership of the enslaved (Krauthamer, 2013, p. 3).

Her essay also proposes an opening for further contemplating Black historic presence and land relationality on Turtle Island, as well as a possibility for dreaming and plotting, more fully, a Black commons.¹ To plot a Black commons, as J. T. Roane (2019) has recently written, is to create “possibilities for survival, connection, and insurgency through the strategic renegotiation of the landscapes of captivity and dominion” (p. 242). To plot, as Roane also reminds, is steeped within a long tradition of Black land relationality and Black life on Turtle Island since the moment of its arrival. In his close study of enslaved peoples’ relationships with the land in the “lower Chesapeake ecotone” between Maryland and Virginia, he describes a sacred kinship that is witnessed through the “unintelligible” funerary rites for their kin, as well as their defiant alimental relationships with the land (Roane, 2019, p. 250). Refusing a simplistic characterization that would either collapse Black peoples “into the environment” or cast them “as unconcerned about the preservation of the biosphere,” he uses the term “fugitive commensality” to encapsulate Black people’s care for the land as integral to acts both radical and communal – here, “the unsanctioned and often illicit procuring, preparation, and sharing of food” (Roane, 2019, p. 251). As his work illuminates, the Black commons is a spiritual land relationality that offers a possibility for Black life on its own terms, one that hones a resourcefulness against all odds, and relies, specifically, on anti-capitalist logics and an interdependent relationality for its continuity. Roane’s example is one of many, I argue, that captures Black peoples’ “relation to and from the land but without precluding movement, multiplicity, multidirectionality, transversals, and other elementary or material currents of water and air” (Byrd et al., 2018, p. 11).

To paraphrase Tiffany King’s (2019) urgent question: Why has the Black discourse of conquest – and sacred histories of Black land relationality, such as those Roane (2019) described – remained “unthought” within contemporary discussions about Indigenous genocide, colonialism, slavery,

¹ I invoke the term Turtle Island to honor the sacred creation name given to North America by many Indigenous nations, but also to signal the real possibility, as Leanne Simpson (2017) has written, “to respect each other’s governance, sovereignty, and jurisdiction while committing to taking care of our shared ecosystem” (p. 231) in Black and Indigenous relations.

and settlement in North America?² By “Black discourse of conquest,” I mean to invoke the full spectrum of ways in which Black peoples not only named, but also behaved, suffered, and expressed fugitivity under settler colonialism. I want to name King’s question as distinct from other recent attempts to address Black and Indigenous relationality. Recently, Byrd et al. (2018) asked: “How might we apprehend relationality across systems of capitalism, colonialism, and chattel slavery and its afterlives?” (p. 11). This important question, I believe, must follow King’s, as her question demands an interrogation of the “unthought” – or the well-rooted “bare life” of anti-blackness in our relations. In short, I hold, to grapple with what is unthought, unimaginable about Black life, is to also reckon with certain practices in our relations, both discursive and lived, as a “mode of thought, already in the act,” as well as the histories that precede and produce them (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. vii).

This essay attempts a response to King’s (2019) question, with hopes of provoking a softer relationality, a “new relationality” (p. 209) as she writes at the end of *The Black Shoals*, for Black and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. Indeed, the last decade has seen continued discussions between community and academic scholars who have contemplated the relationship between sovereignty and abolition – each unique, visionary end-goals in the respective struggles for Indigenous and Black freedom.³ These discussions have been, at times, painful. This essay is most interested in the generative dimensions of what is hard and painful in these conversations between us. Throughout, I am thinking with Roderick Ferguson’s 2018 ASA address, where he communicated an urgent need for “seeing complexities, and to holding the possibilities for meeting life with life as a matter of being in difference and activating interrelatedness across the antagonisms history has left us,” as Jodi Byrd (2019a, p. 342) has described. There are three key concepts in this characterization that guide the intention and structure of this essay, and I receive them as theoretical guidance: foremost, a willingness to witness a rich complexity threaded through Black life historically and presently; secondly, a generative compatibility within thought and work that holds a tension of difference; and thirdly, an “interrelatedness across the antagonisms history has left us” (Byrd, 2019a, p. 342). This third point, I argue, entails facing down the oft-unnamed history of slavery, its long arc and impact, and its constitutive anti-blackness tangled within numerous Native histories of Black enslavement on Turtle Island (King, 2014). There is a lateral tension that guides this history, historian Barbara Krauthamer (2013)

² See also Byrd et al. (2018) and Hartman and Wilderson (2013). “On one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought” (Hartman & Wilderson, 2013, p. 184).

³ See also Byrd (2011, 2019a, 2019b), Byrd et al. (2018), Ciccariello-Maher (2016), Coulthard and Simpson (2016), Day (2015), King (2014, 2016), Leroy (2016), Miles (2019), Nelson (2016), Sexton (2016), Sharma and Wright (2008), Spady (2017), Tuck and Yang (2012), Walcott (2014), Wilderson (2003, 2010), and Wolfe (2006).

writes – one that together holds the “histories of chattel slavery and Indian removal” (p. 41), as well as settler colonialism.

This essay first offers an overview of recent scholarly conversations between Black and Indigenous peoples on the subject of freedom. It is important to offer a brief characterization of sovereignty and abolition herein for the purpose of avoiding the pitfall of conflating land sovereignty with the private ownership of land. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) helps sharpen this distinction by naming Indigenous struggles as those that must be informed by “land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations” (p. 78) rather than ownership – an ethical system he has named “grounded normativity.”⁴ Byrd et al. (2018) also offer the expansive term “grounded relationality.” In a recent article, they frame the “African American and Native responses to dispossession” as “reparations and sovereignty,” respectively (Byrd et al., 2018, p. 10). I offer that a Black politics of abolition – which strives both for an end to “the mutually-reinforcing relationships between surveillance, policing, the courts, and imprisonment” and imagines and builds ways of living “otherwise” – best captures the radical historical thrust of Black peoples’ “response to dispossession” on Turtle Island (Kaba & Hassan, 2019, p. 13).⁵ Simply, it is more accurate to situate the most persistent, generative arc of Black struggle on Turtle Island within an abolitionist framework.

This essay then opens up two sites of history, the first of which considers historical research on the native ownership of enslaved Black peoples beginning in the late 1700s. “Blackness,” as King (2014) reminds, “is much more than labor within both slavery’s and settler colonialism’s imaginaries” (p. 3). As such, Krauthamer’s (2013) historical work is centered for her attempts to name the unnamable and for mapping out settler colonialism’s historical anti-black modalities. The second offers a way of thinking of Black

⁴ His beautiful, generative characterization of sovereignty as a system of ethics deserves attention. In an interview, he said, “Grounded normativity is a concept that privileges decolonial practice; it is a practical ethics informed by Indigenous contexts and relationships. It attempts to capture the ethical engagements – with situations, communities, land, and relationships – that inform our understandings of right and wrong, how to go about resolving conflict, and how to best relate to the world and each other in a healthy and sustainable manner” (Gardner & Clancy, 2017, para. 17).

⁵ Here, I am also thinking of Sexton’s (2016) description of Black liberation as that which supersedes a desire for recognition, such as reparations, as he writes that a politics of abolition “could never finally be a politics of resurgence, recovery, or recuperation” (p. 593). The notion of living “otherwise” is both foundational to a politics of prison abolition and also interwoven through the work of many Black scholars, such as Snorton (2017; “fugitive fungibility”) and Hartman (2019; “a dream book for existing otherwise”). For more, see Hartman’s (2019) close engagement with this concept. While arguments about the intention of Black politics supersede the space allotted here, I am guided by the generosity in analysis afforded when one “considers the possibility that 1) the ‘Black Diasporic struggles’ under examination are irreducible to anti-racism, 2) that anti-racism is irreducible to demands upon the state, and 3) that demands upon the state are irreducible to statist politics” (Sexton, 2016, p. 590).

presence in Canada specifically prior to the Civil War through a historical logic that I refer to as “metamigration.” This history is evoked for the purpose of highlighting the conditions of displacement and racial segregation that continually ordered the movements of Black peoples within colonial Canada and through the nineteenth century. Black metamigration makes plain the ways that antiblackness commands placelessness for Black peoples on Turtle Island. As such, both areas of history, I insist, call for greater centering within ongoing conversations about Black and Indigenous relationality. The return to a painful history, as the Sankofa aphorism expresses, is essential for clarity and advancement.

The final section of this essay offers the Black Commons as a resting place, one that both acknowledges Black peoples’ historical, spiritual relationships with land under settler colonialism on Turtle Island and also offers a way to meet “life with life as a matter of being in difference” (Byrd, 2019a, p. 342). I conclude with a return to lessons drawn from Tsing’s (2012) descriptions of foraging – those that offer a bridge in our current relations, and also align beautifully both with the practical ethics of grounded normativity and a Black commons.

Debating Black Place on Turtle Island

In 2006, anthropologist Patrick Wolfe offered a characterization of settler colonialism as “a structure and not an event” (p. 388), as a complex and continuous social process that has dispossession and elimination as primary goals, in his article “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” One year after its publication, Hartman (2007) introduced the expression “afterlife of slavery” as a way of articulating a living history for Black peoples “imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (p. 6). Both expressions have influenced the disciplines of Indigenous and Native Studies, as well as Black and African-American Studies over the last decade, in communicating the ways in which the histories of Black slavery and settler colonialism have sustained living histories of dispossession for Native and Black peoples on Turtle Island.

Over the last two decades, a number of critical scholars have resisted flattening Black peoples’ relationship within Indigenous sovereignty – a misstep Wilderson (2010) has termed a “ruse of analogy” (p. 37). King (2014) has argued, for example, that the “unusual” historical landscapes of Black fugitivity and migration require a rethinking of “the usefulness of convenient and orthodox epistemic frames” (p. 4) that would situate historic Black presence as aligned with settler colonialism. In a recent critique of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s (2012) oft-cited article “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino (2020) insist that Tuck and Yang cheapen slavery to “the forced labor of stolen peoples on stolen

land” (p. 4), and in turn, “fold slavery into settler colonialism in order to mediate the dis/similarity between the slave and native” (pp. 2-3). Discussing the struggle for natural and legal rights after legal emancipation, Hartman (1997) has characterized the “burdened individuality of freedom” (p. 121) and has asked whether or not it was ever truly “possible to unleash freedom from the history of property that secured it” (p. 119). As a precursor to the more recent work of philosopher Charles W. Mills and his examination of John Rawls’ political philosophy, Hartman’s (1997) work on the foundations of liberalism aptly described the notion of “burdened individuality”: What does Black desire of equality mean, she asked, where the liberal individual, rights bearer, and raced subject exist as “equal, yet inferior, independent yet servile, freed yet bound by duty, reckless yet responsible, blithe yet broken-hearted?” (p. 141). Additionally, Hartman (1997) has detailed the ways that the late nineteenth century harnessed Black life through new structures, legal and social, that set out to determine “where the boundary between public and private society should be drawn” (p. 167). *De jure* and *de facto* segregation, as well as disciplinary practices of white terror and violence, ensured ongoing spatial domination in the lives of Black people throughout North America after Emancipation. As historian Stephanie Smallwood (2019) reminds, “Decoupling the stories of Black life and those of national sovereignty-ties across the hemispheric Americas opens up room to ask questions that are inconceivable within the liberal humanism that organizes disciplinary history” (p. 414). In light of these works, a study of post-Emancipation histories of social control in the lives of Black peoples in Canada and the US between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries sketches a demarcation between enslavement and emancipation that reorganizes as granular and seeping, rather than fixed. As such, why has there been such an ongoing failure to “examine the shifting and transformed relations of power that brought about the resubordination of the emancipated, the control and domination of the free Black population, and the persistent production of Blackness as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious” in the nineteenth century, particularly within Native Studies (Hartman, 1997, p. 116)? Why does the conflation between formal Emancipation and Black people as “beneficiaries” of liberal democracy persist? What does Black desire mean to sovereignty, when it was circumscribed within continuing forms of subjection after the legal end of slavery? And what kinds of care and nuance are needed to think through the ways that, together, “Black communities do indeed benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous lands,” alongside “the desperate quest for survival” that marks Black historical relations with the settler state (Miles, 2019, p. 422)?

A number of scholars have also theorized the ways that Black and Indigenous freedom struggles require both historicity and context. For instance, Sexton (2016) and King (2014) have both described the ways that antiblackness is “constitutive to settler colonialism” (King, 2014, p. 1) and

that a critique of settler colonialism in the Americas must also critique Blackness as an abject position and antipode – specifically, one that served as a pre-condition both for settler colonialism and its ubiquitous logic of white supremacy. The historicity of such claims, as well as the ontological position of blackness expressed in some radical Black critique, has been contested (Kauanui, 2017). Regarding the notion that Black enslaved peoples constituted laborers (albeit forced ones), King (2014) has written that the notion of “fungibility,” a condition particular to Black enslavement, means that the enslaved were “the conceptual and discursive fodder through which the Settler-Master could even begin to imagine or ‘think’ spatial expansion” (p. 3) and are thus always “outside the edge and boundary of laborer-as-human” (p. 2). In short, they argue, asserting the enslaved as laborer and thus, agential subject, obscures both the specificity of fungibility and antiblackness as constitutive to settler colonialism.

Since the introduction of these expressions by Wolfe (2006) and Hartman (1997), some scholars have continued to collapse Black North American history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – specifically the histories of Black enslavement and migration – within the discursive category of settlerhood.⁶ Recently, historian Ikuko Asaka (2017) undertook an expansive transnational study about Black displacement and colonization efforts in Canada and the US between 1780 and 1865. Alongside her thesis that biological determinism justified Black “dislocation to tropical regions” and ensured economic and social marginalization “in the metropolises and on continental frontiers,” her study also explored “the intersections between Black freedom and settler colonialism” (Asaka, 2017, p. 17). Concurring with a fraught 2005 article in her opening chapter, Asaka wrote that “in thinking about freedom and settler colonialism, one should keep in mind that aspirations for landholding by the emancipated were ‘premised on earlier and continuing modes of colonization of Indigenous peoples’” (2017, p. 18). In her conclusion, Asaka returns to this point: “The codification of Black rights to become settlers was a paradigm shifting development” (2017, pp. 197-198), which made Black peoples “the legal beneficiaries of the official apparatus of native land divestiture” (2017, pp. 197-198).

I want to name the way that this abridged logic has made continuing discussions of Black and Indigenous relations, both within a scholarly and community context, uneasy, as well as an antiblack logic that flattens the historical position of Black life on Turtle Island to inhabitants on lands “appropriated and contested” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 134). Of course, scholars have since offered more elaborative terms – “arrivant” (Byrd, 2011,

⁶As one starting point for this position, see Lawrence and Dua (2005), who state flatly that “people of color are settlers” (p. 134). This position was reiterated in 2006, during the “Diasporic Hegemonies: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Feminist Transnationalism” conference, held at the University of Toronto from October 17 to 19. For additional context and critique, see Dahmoon (2015), Sharma and Wright (2008), Tuck and Yang (2012), and Walcott (2014). For a discussion of “settlers of color,” see Trask (2000).

p. xix) and “exogenous others” (Veracini, 2010, p. 18) come to mind – that signify complexity in the context of the movement of racialized populations onto and through Turtle Island, historically and presently. Historian Tiya Miles (2019) recently concluded that “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” (p. 425).⁷ I am drawn to and honor the possibilities for richness and care that such terms offer. Yet, the introduction of these terms has neither produced an abundance of conversations, nor works by Native Studies scholars “about how the relations of conquest structure Black and Indigenous relations” (King, 2019, p. 59), nor has the potential within these terms trickled down, widely, to the level of organizing.⁸ Additionally, I have found that the vying “exceptional status” that scholars have warned against, continues to show up in a less rigid, but nonetheless exigent fashion in some scholarship.⁹ How, for example, might Byrd et al.’s (2018) insistence that black slavery “must always already be a collision with Indigenous presence” (p. 5) signal a kind of primacy that is distinct from the claim that “anti-blackness is constitutive to settler colonialism” (King, 2014, p. 1) and distinct from Krauthamer’s (2013) statement that “the histories of chattel slavery and Indian removal overlap in complex and uncomfortable ways” (p. 41). In short, what kinds of possibilities for analysis and synthesis exist in the latter, but may be precluded in the former with its claims to temporal primacy?

Grappling with the “Antagonisms” of History: Slavery and Black Migration

History is not about the past. It’s only incidentally about the past. History is about arguments we have about the past. Because it is about arguments, we have about the past, it is really about us, our times, and our problems.

(Ira Berlin, 2015, p. 1)

By invoking these histories here now, I am thinking of the Sankofa bird with its feet planted firmly forward and neck turned backwards – this a rich,

⁷ Here, Miles (2019) writes skillfully about the post-Civil War Black migrations in the US through the end of the twentieth century and their ongoing exposure to white violence, and issues a call for the creation of a “refreshed vocabulary” (p. 20) that both considers the historical intricacies of Black and Indigenous relations and creates “currency” for our present relations.

⁸ However, scholars such as Nakia Parker, Barbara Krauthamer, Tiya Miles, and Shona Jackson, amongst others, have rigorously engaged these questions in their work over the last decade. The point here is not to “vie for exceptional status as the foundational violence of modernity,” as Justin Leroy (2016) has written, but rather highlight those committed to examining the lingering antagonisms of history in our relations.

⁹ As a pointed example of this dynamic, see Kauanui (2017) for the danger in using a singular, historical snapshot to conclude that blackness cannot constitute an ontological position, and to undermine Wilderson’s (2010) claim that “Blackness is incapacity in its pure and unadulterated form” (p. 38).

longstanding metaphor syncretized within the liberation philosophies of many Black peoples whose ancestors were enslaved on Turtle Island.¹⁰ The Sankofa bird icon – resting but ever-ready for flight – is both aphorism and a proverb of ethics communicated through an Adinkra symbol and in Twi, the language spoken by the Akan of Ghana, that means to “go back and get it.” In short, the aphorism expresses the need for peoples whose ancestors were colonized or enslaved to return to a history that has profound implications for the living history of our present moment. The return, as the turned neck symbolizes, is for the purposes of inquiry, clarity, and finally, guidance for moving forward. Cultural theorist Christel N. Temple (2010) also describes Sankofa as a practice of cultural resilience and resistance to white supremacy. Sankofa, she writes, is an act of “resistance with respect to rejecting European language and world views and insisting on the relevance of using African conceptual possibilities to define and characterize” Black life in the present (Temple, 2010, p. 128). This conceptualization of Sankofa feels akin, in important ways, to Leanne Simpson’s (2017) description of *Biiskabiyang*, a practice rooted in her community’s Nishnaabeg belief system. “*Biiskabiyang*,” she explains, is “the process of returning to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out” (Simpson, 2017, p. 17). Recently, the Sankofa symbol was highlighted throughout the final report from the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry (2019), which examined a historical site of patterned abuse, torture, and extreme neglect for many, many of the children who lived in the Home between 1920 and 1990. In the report, the Sankofa proverb was invoked as part of its intention to return to the site of trauma, to document the stories of survivors and former Home administrators, and to understand what failures occurred over decades that led to the magnitude of violence that befell Black children within an institution, at times, led by well-known community members. In the proverb, the return to the site of harm is essential. As the report states, “While Sankofa reminds us to go back, it is clearly for the purpose of finding what we need in order to move forward” (Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry, 2019, p. 26).¹¹

But why slavery, when other sites of history hold the “antagonisms history has left us” (Byrd, 2019a, p. 342) and also, as Miles (2019) recently wrote, require “a refreshed vocabulary for characterizing these nuances conversant with a current settler colonialism frame?” (p. 420). In part, my response is a personal one – one born out of years of community work in which anti-blackness has uneasily, disorientingly appeared or resonated within Black and Indigenous relations. These experiences, as well as my own scholarly areas of study, ultimately led me to history and the body of historical writings about the native ownership of the Black enslaved. Within this canon, I observed the

¹⁰ See, for example, Gerima (1993), Grayson (2000), and Temple (2010).

¹¹ While I have a number of criticisms about the undertaking and the final 600-page report, I am highlighting here the importance of returning to the site of harm as a crucial gesture for altering relations within our living histories.

presence of Black women scholars and noted, in particular, the tremendous complexity and care they balanced with their methodologies and in their writings. The history of Black slavery on Turtle Island is a history of Black subjugation and ongoing spatial displacement born, first, of natal alienation and ongoing displacement. Slavery with its long, entrenched historical arc, is the site where blackness as debasement – as “the zone of nonbeing” (Hartman, 1997, p. 178) – was conscripted. The history of slavery on Turtle Island is also a history that includes the ownership of Black enslaved by Native owners, and the work of historians who study this area of history communicate the ways that Native slaveholders “crafted and refined their own ideologies of racial identification and differentiation” beginning in the early eighteenth century that viewed Black peoples as inherently inferior and uniquely conditioned for enslavement (Krauthamer, 2013, p. 17).¹² Similar to slave ownership broadly, Native slaveholders also “sought to maintain a social and economic order premised on the commodification and degradation of Black people’s bodies and labor” (Krauthamer, 2013, p. 5). This logic of Black subjugation was not exclusive to Native owners. In her study of the Choctaw’s and Chickasaw’s engagement in Black slavery, Krauthamer (2013) writes that

by the end of the eighteenth century, Choctaw and Chickasaw slaveholders, as well as those who did not own slaves, came to embrace those elements of Euro-American racial ideologies that identified people of African descent as an inherently and permanently inferior group. (p. 4)

Additionally, the years preceding the Civil War did little to alter the perception of Black peoples, enslaved and free, who lived within or outside of nations:

By the 1840s, proslavery ideology hardened in the Indian nations, creating a climate of animosity towards all black people especially those who were free. Indian law and custom unequivocally linked blackness with servitude and defined citizenship in terms of race, effectively making free black people social and civic anomalies. (Krauthamer, 2013, p. 71)

Crucially, the internalized white supremacy that regarded Black peoples as loathsome and enslaveable is historically discernable from a white supremacy that viewed native peoples as disposable and inferior to whiteness. Krauthamer (2013) explains, “While southern Indians may have dispensed with the aspects of the dominant American racial ideology that exalted white superiority and posited Indian inferiority, they firmly embraced a racial

¹² See, as examples, Bentley (1991), Berry and Parker (2018), Halliburton (1977), Miles and Krauthamer (2005), Saunt (1998, 2004, 2006), and Saunt et al. (2006), as well as a podcast episode where Nakia Parker speaks of this (Winfrey, 2018). For slave ownership by Joseph Brant in Canada, see Archives of Ontario (n.d.).

hierarchy that degraded blackness and associated it exclusively with enslavement” (p. 32).

As Comanche scholar and curator Paul Chaat Smith summarizes,

The Five Civilized Tribes were deeply committed to slavery, established their own racialized black codes, immediately reestablished slavery when they arrived in Indian territory, rebuilt their nations with slave labor, crushed slave rebellions, and enthusiastically sided with the Confederacy in the Civil War.... They were willful and determined oppressors of blacks they owned, enthusiastic participants in a global economy driven by cotton, and believers in the idea that they were equal to whites and superior to blacks. (Smith, 2018, paras. 6–12)

The history of Native ownership of the Black enslaved is, of course, limited to specific nations. Yet, to assert that antiblackness was concretized within the conditions and longevity of the practice of slavery, also tells a complicated story about the nations who owned Black enslaved peoples; about those who remained, laterally, in kinship with their communities over the centuries; and about the logic of antiblackness produced and sustained – uniquely and nonetheless – under the conditions of settler colonialism. In short, we need to ask questions about the texture of antiblackness in native communities historically and insist that our ongoing discussions are not condensed within the faulty liberal notion of legal Emancipation. My point here is not to finger-point to a particular nation or group of nations, nor conflate the practice of slavery to all nations on Turtle Island. Rather, I believe that the common practice of Black slavery within nations and a widely embraced “racial hierarchy that degraded blackness” calls us to attend to the stark erasure of “the history of Black people’s enslavement, emancipation, and struggles for meaningful freedom and citizenship in the Indian nations,” as well as the afterlife of antiblackness, broadly, within nations on Turtle Island (Krauthamer, 2013, p. 154).¹³ This inquiry is not one that can be answered by Black scholars or organizers alone.

What does it mean to address the substance of this history, as well as its self-internalizing logic of white supremacy? What agency do we attribute to historical actors who have been long cast within the static shadows of historical production, rather than within an agential light of its making and design? Thinking with Alexander Weheliye’s (2014) inquiries about the bounds and breaks of historical agency, I ask how we may better attend to and conceptualize the “warring intimacies” (p. 11) or corrupted agencies that existed between lateral relations, between those “not-quite humans and non-humans” (p. 11) who co-existed under settler colonialism? What actions are ours to bear when the conditions that prepared the ground for harm and violence were beyond an individual or collective capacity for radical change? And, what happens when the conditions change, but the convictions linger?

¹³ See, importantly, Johnson’s (2019) recent article on the ways in which antiblackness was made curricula in residential schools.

How do we parse out the “thought in the act” that shackles us in ways that are remnant of the old times? Of course, full responses to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I insist that we must begin, that cracking open this history with the intention of Sankofa represents a beginning, and that the work is both necessary and generative. To begin addressing these lingering “antagonisms history has left us,” I insist, is consistent with an intention for an interrelatedness that meets life with a new kind of life, and in the spirit of Sankofa, offers the most capacious possibility for a “new relationality that can imagine new kinds of Black and Indigenous futures” (King, 2019, p. 209).

This history of Black migration in Canada prior to the twentieth century also raises historical questions, “lingering antagonisms,” in our relations because it expands and deepens a conceptualization of Black spatiality on Turtle Island. In Canada, the story of Black dispossession also entails a history of “metamigration.” I define metamigration as a commingling of migration, internal and external displacements, and emigration into the Atlantic world characteristic of Black presence throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁴ To study the history of slavery alongside the narratives of emancipation that shaped Black life prior to 1865, is to witness a history of Black metamigration.¹⁵ Within this history, discussions of the border’s meaning also abound (Zellars, 2019).

In the context of this essay, the troublesomeness of Black presence in Canada, historically, deserves brief attention. Of course, many more essays and monographs have been written on the subject of Black presence in Canada beginning in the eighteenth century, but for the purposes of this essay, I center two historical loci oft excised from discussions pertaining to Blackness and sovereignty on Turtle Island: the stark experience upon arrival, and secondly, the forces that compelled Black people into the Atlantic world and home southward after arrival to colonial Canada.

The constraints imposed upon Black life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are visible whether Black migration northward occurred as fugitivity, or in another fashion during the American Revolution or the War of 1812; they are visible throughout all the territories.¹⁶ In his discussion

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis, see Zellars (2019, p. 81). Similarly, in the U.S. context, Field (2015) describes the “continuum of flight” (p. 696) that characterized the lives of Black peoples after the Civil War. See also Asaka (2017).

¹⁵ For a detailed historical exploration of Black metamigration within Canada, as well as its bibliography, see Zellars (2019). While there are many more excellent sources, in this essay I am especially thinking alongside the following foundational writings that detail the complex histories of black migration and settlement during the time period herein: Arenson (2013), Berlin (2010), Brown-Kubisch (2010), Cooper (2000), Donovan (2014), Freyer and Campbell (2011), McLaren (2004), Pybus (2006), Riddell (1919), Silverman (1985), Smardz Frost (2007), Smardz Frost and Tucker (2016), Spray (1972), Whitfield (2002, 2006, 2016, 2017), Wigmore (2011), Wilkerson (2010), and Winks (2000).

¹⁶ For discussions of Canadian slavery in each territory historically, see Nelson (2016), Whitfield (2016), and Winks (2000). The latter applies the term “Canadian slavery” to describe “the region

of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, historian Harvey A. Whitfield (2006) writes that “the British offered physical freedom to American slaves willing to abandon their patriot owners” (p. 31). Yet, Black freedom was a carrot, and promises of emancipation outside of the United States were, decidedly, “tactics [employed by the British] to defeat the United States” (Whitfield, 2006, p. 31) in its imperial wars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as part of a “settler colonial impulse” that “drove and shaped racial geographies of freedom” (Asaka, 2017, p. 16). Whitfield’s (2006) work is crucial for understanding the profound hopes “for stable families, independent farming, and freedom of movement” (p. 37) that Black migrants held, as against what was experienced upon arrival after the American Revolution and War of 1812. Black migration to the Maritimes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not the project of fugitivity, settlement, and freedom as is popularly understood. Rather, its terminus underscores “those forms of captivity which sometimes promised kinship, only to be transformed” (Walcott, 2014, p. 96) into chattel slavery and other technologies of captivity. As Asaka (2017) has recently argued, the periods coinciding with the largest Black migrations to Canada failed to constitute even a “freedom of residence” (p. 2) for the formerly enslaved.

In addition, Black migration to Canada also signifies the “diaspora within diaspora” (Pybus, 2006, p. xvii) that the continual movement, flight, and geographic dispersal of Black peoples borne of slavery, racial violence, and ongoing discrimination made. As one well-known example illustrates, white resistance to Black presence in colonial Nova Scotia pushed at least 1200 to emigrate to Sierra Leone in 1792 and again, in 1800 in search of an emancipation more than the racial hatred and forced poverty they encountered in Nova Scotia (Pybus, 2006; Smardz Frost, 2007; Whitfield, 2006). White violence against Black migrants was so severe that in 1821, 95 Blacks from the United States who arrived in Nova Scotia after the War of 1812 decided to depart for Trinidad, despite the practice of slavery on the island at the time (Whitfield, 2002). In addition to the decisions that Black peoples made to continually depart the Maritimes in the early nineteenth century, the stream of fugitivity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Nelson (2016) and Whitfield (2016) detail in their extensive examinations of runaway ads in New France and the Maritimes, respectively, also attests to the sustained violence in the lives of Black peoples within Canada. Writing about the forced migrations and flight that classified Black fugitivity and movement in the nineteenth century, Miles (2019) captures the reality of Black life in the US succinctly. “African Americans had but two choices as the young United States solidified its hold over the central portion of North America,” she contends, “make homes on Indigenous lands or die” (Miles, 2019, p. 422).

that encompasses present day Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Quebec” (Whitfield, 2016, p. 132).

What are the freedom costs for Black peoples migrating or forcibly brought to Canada who lived with the condition of forced displacement and when untenable, were segregated? If the study of Black peoples in Canada may be best articulated through the notion of “displaceness,” as Walcott (2014) has suggested, how can formulations of metamigration be better understood as they relate to Black presence in Canada and issues of Indigenous sovereignty?

Conclusion: More Than and Otherwise

I became very conscious about how comfortable you could be roaming around outdoors in a certain kind of environment.... [My life] became more spacious. I had a lot of freedom at that time. I spent a lot of time outdoors alone. Those are my best memories.

(Joy James in Yancy, 1998, p. 246)

Witnessing the complexity of metamigration – the ceaseless movement, displacement, and transit of Black life through and beyond Turtle Island wrought by slavery – and Black peoples’ coterminous relationship with the earth, together offers a refusal of “convenient and orthodox epistemic frames” in an ongoing study of Black people and settler colonialism (King, 2014, p. 4). Alongside the visionary possibilities for Black life/living recently offered by thinkers such as Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, adrienne maree brown, and others, Tsing’s (2012) spiritual science of the wild mushroom and her allegory for the human condition also illuminates, I now conclude, emancipatory dreams of Black life beyond the break – life as a “beautiful experiment,” a more tender relationality, a land-based “more than human” existence, a Black commons. The inability to couple both things together – Black peoples’ forced movement and Black land care – I contend, is an antiblack logic produced by slavery and nested within our relations. It is one that refuses complexity and expresses a return to what is deemed impossible, unimaginable, or unforgivable about Black life. The “bare life” of antiblackness, I hold, is a logic that fundamentally expresses an impossibility, an unimaginable complexity, and an utter disinterest in Black subjectivity – an underpinned presumption of the worst.¹⁷

Throughout her essay “Unruly Edges,” Tsing (2012) describes living as an ethical engagement with the earth. As a student of wild mushrooms and avid forager, she writes that the rewards are twofold: “first, the undeserved bounty of the gift; and second, the offer of a place that will guide my future walks” (Tsing, 2012, p. 142). Her words allude to the bridge existent between a Black commons and an ethics of grounded normativity that, in shared

¹⁷ With my term “the bare life of antiblackness,” I am thinking with Weheliye’s (2014) radical question: “Why are formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed?” (pp. 11-12).

fashion, capture “the ethical engagements—with situations, communities, land, and relationships—that inform our understandings of right and wrong, how to go about resolving conflict, and how to best relate to the world and each other in a healthy and sustainable manner” (Coulthard, in Gardner & Clancy, 2017, para. 17).

Her study of the lives of wild mushrooms, I conclude, is also a meditation on a Black politics of abolition, which is to say, a meditation on Black land relationality historically and a prompt for an ongoing set of practices that guide Black land relationality. Transformative justice (TJ), the bedrock of abolition, is a set of living practices that guide human relations, radiating outwardly from practices beginning at the smallest scale, in order to respond to harm and violence non-punitively. TJ is a non-scripted and ever emergent set of practices that organize in ways designed to confuse the conditions and state structures that impede Black autonomy – the progeny of Black plunder, as well as the systems of policing, child welfare, criminal justice.¹⁸ TJ, I offer, is one of the “endless number of beautiful models in living otherwise that encounter defeat and then, must reemerge again” (Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016, 37:00). Transformative justice practices are also tandem practices of persistence and discomfort: as long-time organizer adrienne maree brown (2019) once described, they are akin to a process of untangling tightly drawn knots of nerves.

To attend to the lives of wild mushrooms is to also engage in practice, to study places of familiarity and return to them again and again (Tsing, 2012). Foraging practices express both an intimacy and reciprocity with the earth. “Grounded normativity,” Coulthard and Simpson (2016) have written, “houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place” – by “*the oak that lives with chanterelle mycelium*” (p. 142). In addition to the personal rewards that Tsing (2012) describes in her own practice as a forager, the lives of wild mushrooms and their refusal for grand scale encourage us to eat smaller, live smaller, and attend to familiar places time and again in their search. Such actions are movements that express commitment and sweetness. As “every practice is a mode of thought, already in the act,” to forage and engage in the work of TJ is to be changed by the practice and to be guided by modes of thoughts sharply attuned to the otherwise (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. vii). The otherwise is synonymous with a wayward life. To live waywardly, Hartman (2019) writes, “is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies” (p. 228).

Crucially, the lives and foraging of wild mushrooms signal the irreconcilable failures of capitalism across all lines of sociality. Human desires for scale, largess, and ownership are incompatible with the cellular plans of the wild mushroom, as well as the well-being of the earth. Tsing

¹⁸ For more on transformative justice in Canada, see the work of The Third Eye Collective (n.d.).

(2012), for example, reminds her reader that monocultivation is both a laborious and extractive technology, as well as the practice that birthed the plantation. “Only through extreme order and control,” she writes, “could anything flourish in this way; but with hierarchy and managed antagonism in place, enormous profits (and complementary poverties) could be produced” (Tsing, 2012, p. 148). In contrast, to forage and study the small-scale order of the wild mushroom is to move ever-counter to the technologies that fostered Black dehumanization, Native ownership of Black peoples, and the genocide of Native peoples in the New World (Krauthamer, 2013). It also exposes an opportunity to fashion something anew, to embody a different way of being on and with the land. TJ – as a practice that hones itself within the interpersonal, the parental, and the local – refuses a model of size or scale for its effectiveness and viability. As I have come to understand, an ethics of grounded normativity also conceptualizes sovereignty in anticapitalist terms. “Grounded normativity,” as Coulthard and Simpson (2016) have explained, teaches one how to live a life in relation “to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner” (p. 254). For Tsing, as well, the failures of domestication are shared between the field and the home, both historically racialized spaces.¹⁹

Finally, as humans, we harm one another. And still, we are reliant on one another for our well-being. To study the lives of wild mushrooms, is to understand that its interspecies associations with other living things are “not always benign” (Tsing, 2012, p. 143). Specifically, “fungal appetites are always ambivalent in their benevolence,” and simultaneously, are always parallel “companions to other species” (Tsing, 2012, p. 143). In short, the wild mushrooms that guide Tsing are as relational and hardy as they are harmful. It is this very complex quality of species interdependence that “is a well-known fact – except when it comes to humans” (Tsing, 2012, p. 143) and our relation to one another.

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¹⁹ In the nineteenth century, as many have written, white women became models and “agents of racial hygiene” (Tsing, 2012, p. 149) in North America, those not only responsible for “maintaining the boundaries – of homes, families, species, and the white race” (Tsing, 2012, p. 149) but also paternalistic agents and landlords who infringed upon the lives and homes of Black women. In her descriptions of the encompassing racialized state surveillance in the lives of Black women beginning in the later part of the nineteenth century, Hartman (2019) describes: “Women were arrested on the threshold of their homes and inside their apartments, while exiting taxicabs, flirting at dance halls, waiting for their husbands, walking home from the cabaret with friends, enjoying an intimate act with a lover, being in the wrong place at the wrong time” (p. 254). For context of this history in Canada, see Valverde (2008).

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