Introduction

Tracing Dividing Lines from the US South: Concepts, Theory, Process, Practice

Steven D. Gayle and Jesse Benjamin

This collection of essays is the result of several years of intersecting projects and work in the Atlanta regional community that brought the two of us together first within the Kennesaw State University Sturgis Library system and within various projects Jesse was running between Kennesaw State University and the Walter Rodney Foundation at the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library. Steven started building cultural programming within the spaces he could find at the KSU Library, and we found ways together to use various resources for documenting and filming and editing around the intersectional events we were collaborating on for the Spring Walter Rodney Public Speakers Series, the annual Walter Rodney Symposium, the Afro-Latino Lecture Series, and other projects. The culturally specific programming and research and networking Steven was engaging in quickly led to a series of regional conferences and related events, collaborations with the Walter Rodney Speakers Series and several other local institutions, and increasingly with people, researchers, and institutions all over the country and the hemisphere. People and communities rapidly engaged and took up the space that had been created and hundreds of people started participating in these events and collectively opening space for simultaneously new but old conversations. This collection is one of the fruits of this work and these collaborations.

Steven

Reaching back even further, I attended the University of North Carolina at Pembroke in the Fall of 2003, in part, to better understand a part of my family’s history that was unclear. The university began as an institution for the education of Native American populations in the Robeson County, North Carolina region. It has carried on this tradition while becoming one of the most ethnically diverse schools in the United States. Later, while working at Kennesaw State University, in 2016, I developed a documentary film entitled, *By Any Other Name: An Exploration of Afro-Amerindian Heritage*. This film was my attempt to discuss these historical overlaps between the African American community and Native American communities. Simultaneously, I used this film to uncover the truth of some of my familial origins, particularly my Hunt and Pettigrew lineages who were purported to have had Indigenous American origins. My purpose for this was to provide an audience with a means of understanding some of the more complex issues at the heart of this topic without denigrating nor praising any group over another.

Jesse and Steven

This was the time we started working together, in several different ways. First through our mutual
the work at the KSU Sturgis Library, which was often and especially over time the site of struggle, and sadly never lived up to its true potential. In the process of researching for *By Any Other Name*, Steven noticed and reconfirmed the lack of centralized information on the topic. There were few academic texts solely centered on the subject matter, let alone those that discussed the topic in-depth, critically or across a range of academic disciplines. Aside from the works by the late Jack Forbes and William Katz, the latter being a person Steven was privileged to be able to consult prior to his passing, very little existed as comprehensive primer on Black and Native ethnic and cultural interconnections. Upon the completion of the documentary, we noticed as interest in the topic of various Native and Black ethnic configurations continued to gain steam in the public zeitgeist. The historical and contemporary connections were being discussed more readily by a multitude of players. There was no centralizing entity housing resources for this subject. This led Steven to form, with the collaboration and partnership of several colleagues, the Afro-Amerindian Research & Cultural Center (AARCC) and its flagship program, *Dividing Lines: An African American and Native American Symposium*.

The purpose of this symposium was to connect community members, scholars of all levels, artists, activists, filmmakers, cultural preservationists and others who were involved with both African American and Native American life and scholarship. This would be a space to make connections that academic silos and ivory tower politics often prevent, and that cultural constructions and other manufactured divisions frequently exacerbate. While working to not conflate or reduce identities, the symposium sought to foster a broad but nuanced understanding of African American and Native intersections, overlaps and complexities within various historical and contemporary cultural and experiential contexts.

Such an undertaking was not without direct and indirect detractors. While Steven, with support from Jesse and others was able to garner some resources for the symposium from a variety of people and institutions, it often felt that the project was not supported as it could have been by its hosting institution, nor by the faculty and staff therein. Just as this work opened State University space as a testing ground for new approaches, it also felt that the reverse was somehow also being done from the perspective of other parties. Like with many aspects of African American and Native American assertions of power or self-determination, the looming threat of exploitation felt present. Despite these adversities, the *Dividing Lines Symposium* took place in-person at the KSU Sturgis Library in February 2019 and 2020. We were also fortunate to have a smaller seminar held in the Atlanta University Center in November of 2019, with the help of the Atlanta chapter of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH). From these symposia came the following contributions for this Part I and also the subsequent Part II paired special issues also titled *Dividing Lines*. They are the result of years of relationship building, resource sharing, and attempts to implement decolonial approaches and perspectives to a number of nearly inherently colonial processes and configurations.

Steven’s contribution, “The Path to Montezuma” seeks to contextualize the phenomena he argues is at the heart of the complexity of African American and Native American historical and ethnic intersectionality. The reconfiguration of multiple ethnic identities by oppressive forces in order to operationalize them within specific political and economic contexts was central to the establishment of the modern iteration of the Americas. Understanding the creation of “Indianness” and “Blackness” and their roles within this system is crucial in order to grasp the various re-framings
of identity and history presented in these special issues. In order to understand “Indianness,” one must understand “Blackness,” and vice versa. Additionally, in order to understand the Americas and the effects of Euro-American capitalism, one must understand both “Indianness” and “Blackness” and how they have reshaped, aided, and subverted one another.

The symposium and AARCC always had a focus on the inherent international aspects of African American and Native American intersections. This was part of the reasoning behind AARCC’s utilization of the term Amerindian. It was a term that was inclusive of peoples residing in the Caribbean, North and South America, and suggested a broader scope within AARCC’s mission, vision, and initiatives. Throughout the existence of the Dividing Lines Symposium, we found it imperative to have international artists represented due to the fact that the arts, when centered on this subject, highlight Black and Indigenous American experiences across linguistic, geographic, and political spectrums.

A major segment of the Dividing Lines Symposium was a series of international film screenings that coincided with the event’s overall theme. Inspired by the effectiveness and the personal impact screenings of *By Any Other Name* had upon the film’s Director and its audiences alike, showing films by other filmmakers emerged as an integral part of the symposium. It was designed to offer a semi-autonomous space for the image of African American, Native American, and those with shared heritages to voice their views and identities in a medium that has historically ignored, exploited, or mischaracterized them.

During our 2020 symposium, we also showcased artwork courtesy of the Jose Antonio Dias Pelaez Experimental Art School in Havana, Cuba. Artists featured were Jesús Molina, Yuly Fernandez, and Yasser Rittoles. Yuly Fernandez’s work, “Transculturation I & II” were also utilized as the image for our 2020 Symposium, as it embodied the central theme of the Dividing Lines Symposium and AARCC itself. Jesús Molina’s work was included due to his incorporation of indigenous symbolism and imagery from a Cuban perspective. Yasser Rittoles’ work makes connections between the various personal, social, and political contextualizations of Blackness. These three artists also shared with us video messages explaining their artistic visions and inspirations. The videos have been translated with the assistance of Cayse Wilson and AARCC Associate Director, Emily Cook. We are happy to be able to share these messages and some of artists’ work in this issue, and also in Part II, as a partial window on the exhibit that occupied physical space on a suburban Atlanta university campus for a week in 2019.

Brittany Hunt, an early supporter of both the symposium and AARCC, provided us with her work “Sinister Schooling,” which is a provocative look at the perceptions of institutional learning and how simultaneously oppressed people groups can have varied perceptions and experiences within the same institutional learning space. Under this historical pretext, the question then focuses on the modern implications of such a system. This particular work provides an opportunity for reflexiveness, and to question how spaces seemingly controlled by the oppressed can contradictorily operate in a liberating and oppressive dyad.

We are especially proud to feature a deeply historic critical meditation on our themes by one of our elder scholars, Ward Churchill, who had been working with us on various Rodney and community related projects since Jesse first met him in Dr. Washington’s GA State law school class on whiteness. Years later, travel challenges prevented Professor Churchill’s keynote speech from being presented at the Dividing Lines Symposium, so finally printing the first half of his truly
significant intervention here, as Part I, fulfills a long promise and allows us to redress that missed opportunity. We will print the equally substantive Part II of Churchill's essay in Part II of this issue of Dividing Lines, immediately following this one. Together, and even in these separate halves, the significance of this scholarly reflection on decolonial potentials cannot be over-emphasized, and will be studied for decades to come. The text, in the end, does more than any keynote could have.

This collection then joins the continuum of collective activities that this project has brought together and can serve as a partial reflection of it. Originally the two volumes of Dividing Lines Part I and Part II were to be separated by almost a year, but technical challenges and delays resulted in them being published in succession as Volume 3, Numbers 1 and 2. We appreciate the space this allows for our esteemed contributors to share their research and their experiences with the wider community in an extended way. As we do this work, we continually note the need for so much more, we note how significant the absences are, and the fact that we are only just beginning to redress them. Thanks to the many people in our communities who participated in small and large ways to all of this work, and all of this cultural sharing, dialogue, understanding and celebration.