

Why we need to stop excluding Black populations from ideas of who is "Indigenous"

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**Editor's note: This piece has been deeply informed by conversations with my friend and colleague Preston Anderson through the years, among other things.*

A few months ago, I posted a [Facebook status](#) regarding a viral meme featuring Disney's cartoon version of Pocahontas and John Smith, arguing that it promoted white supremacist ideas of interracial relationships for the sake of comedy. A robust conversation ensued with insightful points made on many sides, but one comment in particular stood out to me as indicative of another, separate issue that has long been in desperate need of clarification.

“Are there any self-identifying Natives on this thread?” a friend asked the group of mostly Black users who had assembled in the comments, rolling his eyes with a yellow emoji still quite darker than him. By implying that Black people were in no position to critique white violence against “Native” people, the friend—a “white-passing” and “self-identifying” Indigenous person himself—exemplified a historically violent phenomenon both fueled by and fueling anti-Blackness: the longstanding practice of dismissing Black people from our general understanding of Indigeneity.

The harmful implications of this phenomenon go beyond who is acknowledged and/or allowed to participate in conversations around silly Pocahontas memes.

When Black people are disbarred from Indigeneity, we are also refused agency to define our relationship as stolen people to the stolen land we were (and still are) forced to labor upon, often being mislabeled as “settlers” and accused of having an inherently violent relationship with the people indigenous to this land because of this status. Such exclusion also lends itself to “self-identifying” Indigenous people who are “white-passing” to become the face of Indigenous populations globally, thereby also becoming the experts on colonization by virtue of lived experience, despite the fact that Black people all over the world are still experiencing the brutally devastating effects of colonization ourselves.

This is not to say that the experiences of populations indigenous to Africa are identical to the experiences of populations indigenous to the Americas. It is also not to say that Pocahontas would not have had experiences distinct from Africans that are important to acknowledge.

But it is to say that Africans, including those of us born of the diaspora, are an Indigenous population withstanding the same global colonization efforts enacted by white supremacy that has bled its way—quite literally—across the Atlantic, and our lived experiences as colonized and displaced Indigenous people should be recognized accordingly.

Scholars, both within [Black](#) and [Indigenous Studies](#), have already done extensive work in trying to parse through the political responsibilities [each population has to the other](#) as disparate victims of centuries-long white supremacist violence, and I won't wade too far down that maze here.

Instead, this is a call to clarify a point I believe is necessary in order to continue these critical and complex conversations: the understanding that Black people are colonized and displaced Indigenous people too, and our voice in conversations about whiteness and colonialism is not only always important, but vital.

If Black people are Indigenous, and the diaspora is a displaced Indigenous population, then conversations about who is a settler and what “settler” even means shift drastically. Just as populations indigenous to the Americas would not be expected to instantly renounce any relationship American lands they aren't original to, but where they were forcibly relocated via colonial violence such as the Trail of Tears, so too might we develop a necessary grace for Black people who did not choose to live under an anti-Black state here. Rather than demands that Black folks here leave and “go back to Africa” immediately in the name of decolonization—a demand that should sound very familiar—we could collectively work on solutions to the

problem of colonization that leave all of us more liberated from whiteness, rather than only some of us.

If Black people are Indigenous, anti-Blackness *within* Indigenous populations around the globe becomes a responsibility for decolonization.

We might begin to deconstruct the ways “white-passing” and lighter skinned people take up so much space in these conversations in general, more comprehensively addressing even the problems facing darker skinned people indigenous to the states, as well as places like Australia where far too little focus is put today. We might be more equipped to take on the ongoing colonization of the continent of Africa, and how, even if settlers there have dwindled in numbers, **they have not** in political capital, control of resources, and financial power.

“If the very presence of Black people [within Indigeneity] necessitates a more radical moving on behalf of all Indigenous peoples, both the hiding of the Black and darkest peoples within these larger racial and ethnic groupings [stem from] the demand that we be silenced or erasure from ‘Indigeneity,’” Preston Anderson explains. “So the question becomes, ‘go away’ from what? It’s not just land this time.”

I previously wrote about how **Black people have a place in every modern struggle**, because the modern world, including its conversations about colonization, is based on anti-Blackness. I say “based” as in there is anti-Blackness in every population (that has been touched by western and European powers), and also as in the coherence of the modern world has

been formed directly by to the institution of slavery, which literally built the foundations for a global capitalist economy.

I do not say this because I covet attention as a Black person, or cannot function without being centered at all the times (indeed, the center of my politics lies [outside of me](#)). I say this because I truly believe that Blackness is enough. I truly believe that a world where we are liberated fully is the only world where liberation for all people is possible. If we can learn to love those who have been made unlovable, there are no limits to what our love can do.

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