# Diversifying the Oppressor: Native American Participation in the History of Enslavement

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**Abstract**: This essay examines the particularity of historical fiction as a tool for rectifying the gaps distorting our understanding of the history of enslavement. Specifically, I explore Tiya Miles' representation of enslaved women in the context of Cherokee slaveholding in her 2015 *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts*. This novel is part of the redemptive literary tradition of Black women's liberatory narratives that, since its conception in the 1970s, has worked to redress the myriad gaps in the historical archives. Miles' concern with Cherokee participation in the history of enslavement reflects the most recent expression of the shifting historiography influencing the arc of this literary tradition. My analysis thus takes an interdisciplinary approach, demonstrating the imbrication of historical fiction and historical scholarship. Citing the example of *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts*, this essay argues that historical fiction provides a particularly intimate representation of enslaved women's experiences under a Cherokee enslaver. Miles explores Indigenous participation without allocating blame, revealing through the complex junctures of gender and race that the power dynamic of oppressor and oppressed cannot be categorized simply by race.

The history of enslavement is characterized by silences and absences. The extant written records of this past have kept the individuals at its core enigmatic, problematically limiting our understanding of the personhood of enslaved women. This essay takes up this history in order to argue for the particularity of historical fiction as a tool for redressing the archival gaps distorting our understanding of enslavement. I examine Tiya Miles' representation of enslaved women in *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts* (2015), which confronts the contentious historical realities of Native American participation in the enslavement and racial oppression of peoples of African descent. I propose that because of its subject matter, Miles' novel can be categorized as part of the broader

redemptive literary tradition of the Black women's liberatory narrative originating in the 1970s.[1] This genre, as identified by literary scholar Angelyn Mitchell, "disrupts history as we know it in order to illuminate what has not been told, what has been ignored, [and] what has been silenced" (21). Simultaneously, the liberatory narrative is concerned with representing "African American women [...] more authentically as [...] subjects," focusing upon "the protagonist's conception and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self" (5, 4).

The liberatory narrative tradition is ever-changing in light of the texts' moment of production, influenced by the emergence of new historiographical developments and sociopolitical contexts. Consequently, I extend Mitchell's discussion of this form as a twentieth-century concept into the twenty-first century in my investigation of *The Cherokee Rose*. Miles' novel exemplifies recent historiographical concerns, performing the task of asking who should be held accountable for enslavement and its legacies. I propose that fiction is uniquely equipped to tackle this difficult history by allowing readers to imagine the ambivalence of accountability through its effects on the individual, the community, and their descendants. Therefore, citing the example of *The Cherokee Rose*, this essay argues that historical fiction articulates an unprecedentedly intimate account of enslaved women's lives within the milieu of Native American slaveholding. Grappling with the contentious nature of this past, Miles foregrounds Indigenous participation in this history without passing blame. Instead, through the fraught intersections of race and gender, she demonstrates that the power dynamic of enslaver and enslaved, oppressor and oppressed, was never simply delineated by racial binaries.

While the 'master' narrative of the history of enslavement has emphasized the role of white men—whether European colonizers or American plantation enslavers—several developments in historical scholarship have illuminated the multifaceted nature of responsibility and implication. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, this field has undergone continuous expansion, for example, acknowledging the involvement of white women who "stood to personally and directly benefit from the commodification and enslavement of African Americans" (Jones-Rogers 205). More recent historical work implicates non-white populations in this exploitative system, in particular, Africans trading other Africans in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and Native Americans acting as enslavers in the United States. Referring to the "specter of slaveowning Indians" as a taboo, Miles proposes that non-white engagement has been repressed, identified as "an aspect of history that both [B]lack and Native people had willed themselves to forget" (*Ties That Bind* xiv). The recovery of this past has been a multidisciplinary endeavor as authors

1 For additional examples of the liberatory narrative genre, see Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Yaa Gyasi's *Home Going* (2016).

of historical fiction and revisionist historians alike have used speculation and imagination to elucidate it.

Blurring the lines of fiction and nonfiction, historical scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Stephanie Camp fill archival silences by "employ[ing] the imagination, closely reading our documents in their context and speculating about their meanings" (Camp, *Closer to Freedom* 95).[2] Yet, while such historical scholarship is "committed [...] to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten," Hartman admits that she remains forced to "respect the limits of what cannot be known" (*Venus in Two Acts* 4). Accordingly, the work of such historians provides a vital framework for this study, but it is not my focal point. Instead, I concentrate on the parallel, but separate, project of historicized imaginings performed by authors of historical fiction, embodied here by *The Cherokee Rose*. I examine how Miles' work of fiction conjures a counternarrative of Black and Indigenous women's experiences which moves beyond that of historical scholarship, employing the writer's historical imagination to provide a fuller envisioning of enslaved women as human beings with their own agency.

I intertwine my analysis with non-fictional work, notably Miles' *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story,* which informed the conception of *The Cherokee Rose*. Concerned with the historic Diamond House plantation in Georgia, Miles' scholarship investigates daily life under the dominion of Cherokee Chief James Vann. *The Cherokee Rose* transforms this historical research into an intimate historical imaginary of Native American slaveholding, revealing aspects of this past inaccessible to historical scholarship. The novel tells the story of three women, Ruth Mayes and Cheyenne Cotterell who are of African American descent, and Jinx Micco who is of Indigenous descent. They are individually drawn to the Hold House plantation in modern-day Georgia: a seemingly typical remnant of the 'Old South,' except that it was built for and owned by Native Americans. Miles suggests that this distinction keeps the plantation's past steeped in myth, dispelling the darker realities of Hold House as "a working plantation [where] Blacks were owned as property" (*The Cherokee Rose* 103). However, once the three women recover the lost "[d]iary of a Mission to the Cherokees, by Anna Rosina Gamble, Sister in Christ" (143), it is confirmed that the Georgia plantation was anything but 'paradise' under the oppressive rule of Cherokee Chief Hold. Spanning a period of February 1815 to April 1816, Anna's diary diversifies the definitions of the oppressor through her uncensored representations of the Native American enslaver, opening our eyes to the realities of Cherokee-enacted brutality in the history of enslavement.

2 For examples of this historical research see Marisa Fuente's *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women and the Archive* (2016) and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007).

### Intimate Insights: The Native Enslaver and the Enslaved Woman

As the narrative is told from the perspective of Anna, a white woman, my analysis opens with a discussion of the various roles white women performed within enslavement. I propose that *The Cherokee Rose* complicates these historical understandings by representing white women as allies to enslaved women, not as antagonists. I go on to explore how Miles diversifies the definitions of oppressor in the history of enslavement so to encompass Indigenous slaveholders, focusing upon the violent encounters recorded between Chief Hold and Patience, a young enslaved Black woman. While Miles foregrounds the details of Native American slaveholding, she simultaneously appeals to the impetus driving the liberatory narrative genre, ensuring that enslaved women "are represented more authentically as agents, as subjects" (Mitchell 5). This task is closely related to the redemptive work of historical scholarship, as demonstrated by Camp's theorization that "[e]nslaved people possessed multiple social bodies" (*The Pleasures of Resistance* 539). Camp emphasizes the importance of three particular bodies: the oppressed body; the body "lived in moments and spaces of control and force, of terror and suffering"; and the resistant, outlawed body (543). The building of fictional characters in liberatory narratives, embodied in this essay by *The Cherokee Rose*, is part of the same transdisciplinary project of recovering the breadth of enslaved women's experiences.

My literary analysis extends Camp's historicist theorization by exploring where fiction diverges from such scholarship in its representation of what enslaved women's bodies physically looked like. Crucial to my analysis is therefore the manifestation of enslaved women's physical appearances, or what could be considered the enslaved woman's 'fourth body,' only visible in fictional texts. This fourth body is founded upon imagination, and thus, I suggest that fiction can reconstruct enslaved women's physical appearances in ways that history ultimately cannot. I refer to this fourth body—or what figures look like—as their 'aesthetic identity.' This term can be understood as a synonym for the character's outward appearance. I am interested in the ways in which Miles depicts enslaved women's corporeal bodies beyond their brutalization and dehumanization in archival records, drawing an explicit connection between the external appearance on the one hand and their selfhood on the other.

The concept of aesthetic identity enables us to visualize these enigmatic ancestors. It comprises both the features a person is born with—for example, facial features or skin color—and the bodily marks acquired throughout a lifetime. Such imposed marks are unique to the individual, thereby embodying the ways in which personal experiences have shaped them. Much scholarly and literary emphasis has fallen upon redeeming the "ephemeral archival presences [...] [of] the fragmentary, disfigured bodies of enslaved women," as represented in the historical archives

(Fuentes 1). I propose that the granting of aesthetic identity in liberatory novels uniquely supports this process by giving readers the ability to recognize them as fully embodied subjects. While the focus is on the body, the physical appearance becomes an expression of the person's inimitability. This concept deconstructs the representation of enslaved peoples by transforming Black women's depiction as racialized and sexualized objects into subjects characterized by humanity, femininity, and resilience. I argue that aesthetic identity brings us into direct proximity with these individuals, enabling us to visualize the invisible figures of the past. As *The Cherokee Rose* conjures a visual of the enslaved *and* the enslaver, I explore how Miles' construction of aesthetic identity manifests the individuality of Patience as an enslaved woman, while additionally foregrounding the participation of enslavers of color.

## A Site of Redemption: Women's Transracial Relationships

Even as *The Cherokee Rose* draws attention to the Cherokee enslaver, neither Miles' nor my investigation are concerned with placing blame. Instead, Miles conveys the ambivalence of Indigenous slaveholding by signaling the inappropriateness of indiscriminately holding all peoples of Cherokee descent equally accountable. Anna's diary thus not only represents Native American participation in the enslavement and racial oppression of African Americans but also provides access to the interior world of the plantation's community of women. Transracial female relationships undermine racial divisions, evidenced in the friendship between the enslaved Patience and Peggy, Chief Hold's Cherokee wife. The interracial bonds forged between Patience and Peggy in the inherently hierarchical landscape of the Southern plantation carefully illustrate the complexity of this history. Female solidarity transcending racial lines affirms that the dynamic of enslaver and enslaved cannot be simplistically allocated along racial binaries. I frame this discussion with Tiffany Lethabo King's analogy of the shoal, "[a] place where the water is of little depth; a shallow, a sand-bank or bar," to theorize the complex overlapping of Indigenous and Black histories (1). The shoal is simultaneously water and land, representing "a process, formation, and space that exists beyond binary thinking," teaching us that the intersections of Native and African American populations cannot be categorized by one definition (28). The metaphor of the shoal enables a crucial exploration of how Miles represents the ambiguity marking the historical encounters of Native and Black peoples.

The latter section of this essay returns to the importance of the liberatory narrative form, investigating the ways *The Cherokee Rose* "describ[es] how to achieve freedom" from the painful legacies of this history (Mitchell 4). Miles imagines a redemptive future for contemporary women of Indigenous and African

descent by reconfiguring the interracial kinship, modeled on the nineteenth-century plantation by Peggy and Patience, in the modern-day. Ruth Meyes, an African American journalist, and Jinx Micco, a Creek-Cherokee scholar, forge a romantic relationship as they bear witness to their Native and African American maternal ancestors. I propose that this transracial lesbian relationship represents a new "model of liberation," supplanting the ambivalent historical relations of Native and Black peoples with an unambiguous image of unity and kinship in the contemporary moment (Mitchell 39). I, therefore, conclude that historical fiction is not only able to delicately, and intimately, explore enslaved women's experiences in the context of Native American slaveholding, but that Miles also provides a path to freedom from the legacies of this past, manifesting hope in the present.

## White Women's Allyship and the Narration of Enslaved Women's Experiences

Recognizing the participation of white women in racial slavery is a significant movement toward broadening how this implication within the history of enslavement is understood. Historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers emphasizes the prevalence of this demographic, proposing that "[s]lave-owning women not only witnessed the most brutal features of slavery, they took part in them, profited from them, and defended them" (ix). Jones-Rogers demonstrates that white women were not only as financially invested in the domestic slave trade as men, but they were also just as brutal. She concludes that "Southern white women's roles in upholding and sustaining slavery form part of the much larger history of white supremacy and oppression. [...] [T]hey were not passive bystanders. They were co-conspirators" (205). Nonetheless, Jones-Rogers' research does not encapsulate universal white womanhood within this history. White women occupy an ambivalent position, as explored in *The Cherokee Rose* through the character of Anna Rosina Gamble—a white female Moravian (Protestant) church missionary. The novel tells the story of Native American slaveholding from Anna's perspective. Her diary conveys a complex dance of alliance versus accountability, demonstrating that implication in the enslavement of peoples of African descent cannot be categorically allocated along the binaries of white and Black. Crucially, her narration unveils the atrocities committed by a Cherokee slaveholder, simultaneously complicating our understandings of the roles white women played in this past.

Told from Anna's perspective, rather than a first-person account from the enslaved, Miles' stylistic choice represents a close alignment with existing historical sources. Her research for the publication of *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* exemplifies this, dependent on the archival letters and diaries written by Moravian church missionaries, in particular those by Anna Rosina Kliest Gambold: "[W]ithout her democratic eye, we would know little about

the everyday life on the Vann plantation and virtually nothing about the names, experiences, and personal relationships of [B]lack slaves" (Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill* 210-11). Miles acknowledges that "Anna Rosina's diary entries stand out for their attention to human social relations, [...] notic[ing] the domestic and emotional struggles of Cherokee women and recogniz[ing] [B]lack people as individuals" (210). As a historian predominantly, Miles respects this archival reality, appropriating and adapting the extant records embodied by Gambold's diary in her fiction.

By grounding this novel in the surviving documents of a free white woman, *The Cherokee Rose* represents an overlap of historical fiction and historical scholarship. Thereby, it echoes Hartman's proposal that "there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents" (*Scenes of Subjection* 10). Such archival material is reappropriated by scholars and "read [...] against the grain in order to write a different account of the past" (10). However, as a fictional counternarrative of this past, *The Cherokee Rose* goes beyond simply inferring meaning from the fleeting archival presences of enslaved women. Miles confesses that the impetus behind *The Cherokee Rose* was that "[a]s a scholar, [she] was not happy with how the real story ended for enslaved women and Cherokee women on the Vann plantation. But as a novelist, [she] had the opportunity to write [her] own ending" (1-2). Therefore, even as Gambold's diary provides a meticulous account of life on the Diamond Hill plantation, as a work of fiction, *The Cherokee Rose* transforms such historical records into an incomparably intimate historical imaginary of Black and Indigenous women and their experiences.

As a white Christian missionary intent on "spread[ing] God's word" throughout "the darkness of the heathen Indian lands," the earliest entries in Anna Gamble's diary implicate her in the hierarchical judgment of people of color (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 144, 73). She is thus originally an outsider in this space. However, as the narrative progresses, and the pressures created by the intersecting forces of gender, race, and status exacerbate, Anna is increasingly embedded in the plantation's community of non-white women. She is more than a passive observer, fulfilling the roles of friend, sister, and mother to the women of Cherokee and Black descent. Significantly, Anna adopts Mary Ann Battis, a girl of Creek and African descent, as her own daughter. Subsequently, she gives birth to a biracial child, Isaac, after an interracial relationship with Samuel Cotterell. Anna's interpersonal bonds provide a point of entry into the lives of Black and Cherokee women. She both offers support and finds strength within a diverse sisterhood, obscuring the divisions of race through the articulation of women's relationships. While Anna is inevitably subject to the limitations imposed upon women by the plantation's patriarchal hierarchy, her whiteness protects her from the double oppression conjured by gender *and* race. She consequently bears witness to the daily

experiences of Cherokee and enslaved Black women, giving voice and recognition to such ordeals through her racial privilege. In her dealings with the complexities of who participated in the enslavement and racial oppression of Black peoples, Miles balances the inner workings of the oppressed while diversifying the figure of the oppressor. Although Anna is white, her gender aligns her with the plight of the oppressed. Influenced by sentiments of love and sympathy, her narrativizing of life on the plantation carefully complicates how we understand participation in the enslavement of people of African descent and exemplifies that this history cannot be defined by a simplistic power dynamic of race.

## The Complexities of Native American Participation in the History of Enslavement

Many Native American communities embraced racial hierarchies which devalued Blackness. Barbara Krauthamer's research reveals that various Indigenous communities adapted "those elements of Euro-American racial ideologies that identified people of African descent as an inherently and permanently inferior group" (4-5). Citing the examples of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations, Krauthamer observes that from the late eighteenth century through the end of the US Civil War, "[l]ike their white [S]outhern counterparts, Indians bought, sold, owned, and exploited [B]lack people's labor and reproduction for economic and social gain" (2). Indigenous slaveholding remains a contentious issue, only recently explored in depth by historians.[3] Miles discusses its taboo nature in her historical scholarship:

> 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 vise 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. (*Ties That Bind* xiv)

Taken collectively, Miles' scholarly and fictional works offer an important corrective to the repression of this past.

The act of imagination embodied by Anna's diary paints a detailed account of life on the Hold plantation in the nineteenth century. Significantly, before any atrocities are witnessed, Miles constructs what I term an 'aesthetic identity' for her

3 At the end of the twentieth century, historical scholarship like William McLoughlin's *Red Indians, Black Slavery and White Racism: America's Slaveholding Indians* (1974) explored Native American and Black relations during the colonial period. However, more recent scholarly interventions by Tiya Miles and Barbara Krauthamer focused on the role of Native American enslavers.

characters. Anna's narration allows us to visualize both the oppressed and the oppressor, firstly describing Chief Hold at length:

> Mr. Hold's skin is as fair as that of any white man [...]. He wore his wavy, pitch black hair shorn at the ears, a tailored shirt of Irish linen, and a silk cravat. His dark eyes are brooding, his jaw squarely cut, his lips the color of a bruised summer plum. (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 155-56)

Hold's aesthetic identity—fair skin and Eurocentric dress—encourages readers to reconfigure any potential stereotypes held regarding the appearance of Native Americans. By the nineteenth century, the Cherokee Nation were one of several tribes deeply engaged in the antebellum market economy. This, in part, came as an effort on behalf of government officials "to 'civilize' or assimilate Native peoples by forcibly channeling them farther into the market economy and transforming their material conditions" (Krauthamer 24). The overwhelming influence of colonialism is indicated both on a superficial level, as demonstrated by Chief Hold's appearance, but also ideologically, as he carries with him "an avalanche of useful and frivolous things [...] and a coffle of African slaves" (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 155). This portrayal of Hold brings us into intimate proximity with his character, explicitly shattering any preconceptions regarding the question of who embodies the figure of the oppressor within the history of enslavement. Despite his 'whitewashed' appearance, Hold is of Cherokee descent. A non-white tyrant is the novel's focal point, undermining the white-Black binary that has typically defined the dynamic of enslaver and enslaved. In tackling the reality of Native American participation, an ominous description of his brooding eyes, dark lips, and chiseled jaw prevents the readership from losing sight—literally and figuratively—of the man responsible for the acts that ensue as the narrative unfolds and, importantly, his indigeneity.

Despite focusing on the enslaver, Anna's diary does not neglect the enslaved. Amid the coffle of enslaved people, "whose lives were now entwined by the thick rope that bound them," is Patience (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 157). Anna's portrayal of Patience ensures that her identity is not reduced to the amorphous and anonymous status of 'slave,' nor is it eclipsed by Hold:

> A young woman [...] flicked her gaze about, keenly taking in the surroundings. The smooth skin of her face glowed a buckeye brown. Her eyes flashed the color and shape of almonds. Her hair wound around itself in a series of spiral knots. Her limbs were long and lithe. (157)

Enslaved people not only lacked recognition in the historical records, but our sense of what they look like—their aesthetic identity—is also obscured by an archive that views Black faces and bodies in objectifying and racist terms. Hartman demonstrates this, proposing that "the stories that exist [in the historical archives] are not about them, but rather about the violence [...] [that] transformed them into commodities

and corpses" (*Venus in Two Acts* 2). Historical fiction enables Miles to actively challenge this, imagining a visual of enslaved women's physical appearances which looks beyond their objectification and brutalization. This opening depiction of Patience's appearance represents her as a picture of purity. Her innate features are aligned with the natural world, indicated by her smooth buckeye brown skin, almond eyes, and lithe limbs, emphasizing a condition of unsullied innocence. Illustrated as Anna first perceives her, Patience embodies somewhat of a blank slate, not yet corporeally brutalized by experiences under enslavement. This literary shaping of her body and face foregrounds the humanity, femininity, and inimitability inherent to her existence. We are, in turn, brought face-to-face with this previously intangible maternal ancestor in a manner inaccessible to historical scholarship.

Yet, even as Miles works to redeem enslaved women from their archival depictions as "a display of the violated body," in order to effectively bear witness to this past, the liberatory narrative must reproduce the violence of historical records (Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts* 2). The representation of Patience's aesthetic identity as akin to nature is thus manifold, suggesting that she is defenseless like an untouched landscape. In an analysis of sixteenth-century discourse on discovery in the so-called New World, historian Louis Montrose reveals "instances of the gendering of the New World as feminine, and the sexualizing of its exploration, conquest, and settlement" (2). As a Black woman in the slave economy, Patience is rendered a physical site of conquest, echoing the "similitude of the land and a woman's body" apparent in colonial accounts of discovery (12). In juxtaposition, Hold is depicted as Patience's malevolent antithesis, as suggested by his "brooding" and "bruised" visage versus her "glow" and elegance (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 156-57). Anna's descriptions of enslaved and enslaver thus establish the same antagonistic dynamic apparent in the colonial literature written regarding the New World: Patience is a feminized object "arous[ing] excitement at the prospect of despoiling it," while Hold is the masculine figure set to desecrate her (Montrose 12). Therefore, even as Miles brings us into intimate proximity with Patience, establishing her innate femininity via the construction of an aesthetic identity, this is a vexed project. This is made clear by the allusions to the inherent vulnerability marking the experiences of Black women.

Anna subsequently narrates the horrors of Hold House, bearing witness to the brutal gang rape of Patience by Hold and five other men. Drawing on Portia Owusu's understanding that slave narratives are "a tour de force to the point of being voyeuristic" (22), the intimacy of being able to 'see' enslaved women in such a setting raises questions of voyeurism. The desirability of fully recovering these figures in historical fiction can therefore be questioned. Such texts are at risk of recreating a dangerously intimate account of enslaved women's experiences as they

appear in archival records. Yet, even as Miles reproduces the violence historically enacted upon enslaved women, its representation within *The Cherokee Rose* embodies a crucial shift from the sixteenth-century texts discussed by Montrose. Observed and narrated by an allied white woman, rather than from the exploitative "masculine subject position" of the colonial records, the former feminized object is now perceived as a human subject (Montrose 13). Consequently, like Anna, the reader becomes a helpless onlooker to the heinous violence of slavery. She describes the scene, once again emphasizing Hold's appearance:

> Mr. Hold, in his cleanly knotted blue silk cravat, was the most civilized in appearance among them, and the most brutal. [...] When Mr. Hold defiled her, he forced her eyes open, pressing her lashes apart with his thumbs as he crushed her with the weight of his body. Sated, he threw her to her knees, sending her skirts to the treetops, cajoling the other men to take her, then, but only from behind. [...] Only he, her master and possessor, had free reign to search her gaze. (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 171)

This total disregard for Black women's humanity showcases that Hold adopts not only the fashions of whiteness but also the racial and gender ideologies determining that "[t]o be an enslaved woman was to be subject, always, to the sexual will of another" (Miles, *Ties That Bind* 47). This graphic account utilizes myriad violent verbs—defiled, forced, pressing, crushed, threw—to emphasize Hold's terrorizing omnipotence over his property. Hold's tyranny is overwhelming, resulting in Anna neglecting to provide any portrayal of Patience. While the former manifestation of Patience's aesthetic identity ensures that she is not wholly overshadowed by the brutality of her enslaver, the reader is not privy to whether she fights back, acquiesces, or exhibits any physical signs of emotion. The absence of Patience in the representation of her rape focuses on the figure committing the act of sexual violence rather than the victim. The rapist is too often eclipsed by the immensity of their actions and the trauma incurred. Miles therefore addresses the possible questions of voyeurism and objectification manifested by the aesthetic identity and the recreation of the violence endured by enslaved women. By providing a detailed description of Hold's appearance and actions, she ensures that the spotlight falls upon the perpetrator, explicitly assigning accountability where it previously had the potential to be lost.

The rape of Patience is the only display of physical brutality directly witnessed by Anna. Further acts of violence that burden the plantation's women of color are recorded from secondhand accounts. This lack of eyewitness testimony represents an important shift of attention: No longer narrating scenes of violent spectacle, Miles centers on how Hold's sadism shapes the plantation's racially diverse community of women. The focus upon women's agency in Anna's diary again exemplifies "[t]he effort to 'brush history against the grain'" as performed by Hartman, a task which

"requires excavations at the margins of monumental history in order that the ruins of the dismembered past be retrieved" (*Scenes of Subjection* 11). As part of the plantation's female community, Anna is rooted in the margins of this past, unearthing several disremembered aspects of this history including the intimate details of oppressed women's lives—not just the violence enacted upon them. Therefore, as *The Cherokee Rose* portrays the brutality of Native American slaveholding, Miles also conveys the ambivalence of Black-Cherokee relations through representations of transracial solidarity. Many women come together in this diverse solidarity, including Anna. However, focusing specifically on the relationship of Patience, a Black slave, and Peggy Hold, Chief Hold's Native American wife, allows a deeper exploration of the personal effects of their encounters with oppression. Both Peggy and Patience are victims of Chief Hold's abuse. It is as a result of such trauma that the women become one another's "most intimate companion[s]" (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 200).

King's work enacts a conversation between African American and Native studies which helps juxtaposing the transracial relationships of Peggy and Patience versus that of Hold and his slaves. King uses the previously mentioned analogy of the shoal, a space which is simultaneously water and land, to embody where Black and Native histories, cultures, and experiences "have come into formation together, or where they are one" (27). The shoal encompasses the diverse intersections of Native and African American populations on the Hold plantation, unable to be categorized by a singular definition. These relationships are conceptualized beyond racial binaries, representing, instead, Indigenous participation in enslavement through the junctures of race and gender. While Cherokee brutality is coupled with patriarchal power, the sororal bonds of Patience and Peggy represent the capacity of female relationships to blur the definitions imposed by racialized patriarchal hierarchies.

Women's relationships are a recurring motif in Black women's literature, as discussed by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins: "Black women writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women's relationships with one another" (104). Encompassing Black and Native American women, this affirming relationship is reconfigured within *The Cherokee Rose* in the friendship between Peggy and Patience. While Peggy is not enslaved, as a woman of Cherokee descent, she is subject to the intersecting forces of race and gender. Peggy and Patience consequently forge an intimate kinship out of their shared experiences of oppression, evidenced after one exceptionally brutal night. While no insight is given into the horrors of the ordeal, several days later, Anna observes:

> Peggy and Patience walked into the outside air for the first time since the ordeal. Arms interlinked like ivy, they made their way to the bubbling waters of a spring on the property, called sacred by the Indians. There, with Peggy, holding each of Patience's hands to guide

> her into the deep sand creek, together they bathed. (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 201)

On a superficial level, Patience and Peggy embody the same interracial dynamic as the characters in the graphic rape enacted by Hold. However, as a moment of unity between two women, this scene is instead imbued with intimacy and purity. The depiction of the rape is one-sided, focusing upon the power of Hold as a supposedly racial and gendered superior. In contrast, the tender moment between Patience and Peggy emphasizes their togetherness. Their linked arms, held hands, and the communal act of bathing manifests a sense of harmony and equality between the two women. In this patriarchal environment, the bonds of female connection override the significance of racial dichotomies, allowing them to find support in one another in the face of trauma.

The access Anna provides to this moment of intimacy indicates the cruciality of a universal womanhood encompassing "Cherokee, Negro, and white alike" (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 216). Miles does not suggest that the bonds of solidarity would have fragmented in the absence of Anna's friendship. However, without her interaction with "[t]he [plantation's] women [and] the network of caring," we would not have access to the personal experiences of non-white women (211). Anna's narration thus foregrounds the issue of Cherokee participation in enslavement without losing sight of enslaved women's personal realms, fulfilling the liberatory narrative's endeavor to represent "African American women […] more authentically" (Mitchell 5). Even as she documents the ways in which enslaved women were brutalized, Anna's emphasis remains on Patience's humanity. The construction of her aesthetic identity draws an explicit association between her physical being and her personhood. Furthermore, Anna's depiction of Peggy and Patience's kinship demonstrates the subjective effects of oppression on the individual. To paraphrase Mitchell, we witness Patience becoming an individual with agency who is defined not just by her racial and gendered oppression but also by her inimitability and sororal relationships (4).

*The Cherokee Rose*, therefore, brings us into close proximity to the personal experiences of the plantation's women. This act of historical imagining teaches us that the relationships between white, Native, and African Americans cannot be dichotomously defined as enslaved and enslaver, oppressed and oppressor. As an analogy for the coming together of Native American and African American histories, cultures, and experiences, King's notion of the shoal is thus vital. Unable to be categorized by a singular, static meaning, the shoal expresses the hierarchical relations between Hold and the enslaved as well as the safety found in the plantation's interracial female community. Anna's narrativizing of life on the Hold plantation conveys the previously unseen subaltern experience, illuminating female

connection as a path to survival and empowerment in the face of patriarchal tyranny.

## Liberating Native American and African American Futures

The friendship between Peggy and Patience establishes an important precedent, overcoming racial binaries to find strength in an unexpected togetherness. Consequently, women's transracial relationships are reconfigured in the novel's contemporary moment as a site of reparation in Native American and African American futures. The biracial friendship modeled by Patience and Peggy undergoes a dramatic shift in the twenty-first century, metamorphosing into a romantic relationship between Jinx, who is of Creek-Cherokee descent, and Ruth, who is African American. As a journalist and a historian, Ruth and Jinx travel to Georgia in search of information regarding Hold House's enigmatic history. On arrival, the women are drawn together not only by their shared interest in the plantation's past but also by the "thickness of common experience," united by a communal sense of maternal loss (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 222). The loss of Ruth's mother and Jinx's grandaunt creates a void in the women's lives, uncertain about "who [their] people are or where [they] belong" (120). Consequently, the coming together of Ruth and Jinx enables a site of personal redemption: "Ruth had a tribe now. And Jinx's quest was at an end" (241). They thus find cohesion and purpose in one another.

Yet, the interracial relationship between Ruth and Jinx embodies something that extends beyond the boundaries of their personal world. The ensuing process of "making a life that could bridge their separate pasts and entwine their futures" encapsulates the intimacy of Native and Black populations' histories, and now, more generally, their futures (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 241). Therefore, as the motif of entwining reappears, echoing Peggy and Patience as they entered the water, this interlacing affirms the significant connection between two populations repeatedly omitted from the histories of the United States. King discusses the significance of Jinx and Ruth's romance as an example of using "creative storytelling to build worlds where Black and Indigenous people have a future. More specifically, Black and Indigenous people make a future, or worlds, for one another by drawing on the power of the erotic" (143). For King, the erotic is a crucial construct for decolonization, proposing that "[w]ithin Black and Native thought, the space of the erotic often figures as a liberatory space [...] mean[ing] a space of possible futurity for Black and Indigenous people" (144). Their relationship is an important intervention in the contemporary moment, as suggested via the image of them sharing a bed, "their bodies curved together like question marks at the end of a wandering sentence" (Miles, *The Cherokee Rose* 233). As a history consistently marked by

silence and ambivalence, this "wandering sentence" embodies the enigmatic experiences of their predecessors. Even as Miles alludes to the necessity of continuing to query and interrogate this past through their resemblance to question marks, the coming together of Ruth and Jinx as they bear witness to the experiences of Patience, Peggy, and Anna manifests a newfound closure, somewhat completing this narrative. In this moment of intimacy, a sense of clarity and conclusion is indicated. Miles therefore hints at the possibility of understanding this past, and in turn achieving freedom, through the contemporary unity of Native American and African American women.

King's application of the erotic is a helpful framework for understanding Jinx and Ruth's relationship and the liberatory space it occupies. Nevertheless, she overlooks the importance of their gender. The power of female identification, first exemplified between Peggy and Patience, extends beyond the antebellum era. For Jinx and Ruth, the overlapping of the erotic with female relationships actualizes the possibility for Native American and Black futures. To overcome the intersecting forces of racial and gender oppression endured by their maternal ancestors, their union crosses racial binaries and digresses from the heteronormative framework. The ambiguity marking Indigenous and African American historical encounters, conjured by juxtaposing Chief Hold's treatment of his slaves against the transracial women's community, is supplanted by an unequivocal image of harmony and love. As a biracial, lesbian couple, Jinx and Ruth represent the empowering possibilities of a female unity which traverses racial lines.

In conclusion, and to paraphrase Miles, historical fiction offers the opportunity to write an alternative, more desirable ending for the women of the non-fictional Vann plantation and their descendants (1-2). The speculative freedom inherent to historical fiction enables Miles to transform a bleak historical reality by inserting optimism where history denies it. Ruth and Jinx's contemporary same-sex relationship thus fulfills the plight of the liberatory narrative tradition, "engag[ing] the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new models of liberation" for the descendants of Indigenous and enslaved peoples (Mitchell 4). Therefore, while the novel tackles the repressed narrative of Native American participation in the history of enslavement, Miles ensures that modern day relationships between these peoples are not ensnared by the same ambivalent definitions. She couples her representation of difficult historical realities with an effort to navigate a future of connection between Indigenous and Black populations. If the solidarity between Peggy and Patience suggests that the bonds forged between women have historically provided escapism in the face of trauma, patriarchal tyranny, and racial division, Jinx and Ruth exemplify that in the contemporary moment, this same connection "provides the opportunity for healing the wounds, the shame, and the pain of that past" (Mitchell 150).

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that historical fiction conjures an incomparably intimate account of enslaved women's experiences in the milieu of Native American slaveholding. While this is a fraught history, Miles delicately foregrounds the issue of Cherokee participation in the enslavement of Black people without blame or accusation. *The Cherokee Rose* demonstrates that the intersections of white, Indigenous, and African American histories were never simply defined by a categorical power dynamic of race. Returning to the significance of the liberatory narrative genre, my investigation has demonstrated *The Cherokee Rose*'s adherence to the genre's driving principles, "illuminat[ing] what has not been told [...] [and] what has been silenced" (Mitchell 21), as Miles reclaims the intimate experiences of enslaved women in the context of Native American slaveholding. This work of historical fiction does not undermine the immense significance of the white patriarchal oppressor, but instead looks beyond this well-historicized figure to make a Cherokee enslaver the focal point. The imaginative freedom of historical fiction represents Chief Hold as a tangible figure, giving us an unprecedented ability to visualize the men, and their actions, formerly shrouded by historical repression.

Yet, even as Miles illuminates the difficult realities of Native American participation in the history of enslavement, her novel never loses sight of the personhood of enslaved women. Narrated from the perspective of Anna, we are able to visualize Patience as a human subject rather than an abused commodity. The powerful connection manifested between women, in particular Anna, Peggy, and Patience, invites intimate access to the interiority of the plantation's women of color. Through the construction of an aesthetic identity and the transracial bonds of women forged in the face of patriarchal tyranny, *The Cherokee Rose* demonstrates the particularity of historical fiction as a tool to explore this past. Miles imagines the ways in which these distinctive racial populations were defined by so much more than the drive of power-hungry men. Participation in this history is thus represented as inherently patriarchal. While Peggy and Anna are of Cherokee and white descent, the gendered oppression they are facing aligns them with the experiences of the plantation's enslaved population. The intersections of gender and race in this hierarchical environment unite and empower women across racial lines, explicitly ensuring that 'blame' is not allocated indiscriminately along racial binaries.

*The Cherokee Rose* perpetuates the precedent set by these foremothers into the contemporary moment, achieving a future for the descendants of these fractured populations. The ambivalence marking the historical encounters of Indigenous and Black populations begins to heal in light of the biracial, romantic relationship of Jinx and Ruth. Their coming together not only establishes a sense of personal coherence considering their own difficult pasts but additionally shapes Indigenous

and African American futures in an image of unambiguous harmony. Using historical fiction, Miles thus "describ[es] how to achieve freedom" from such historical antagonisms, and their legacies, by recreating the empowering alliances of this past (Mitchell 4). Following the example of their maternal ancestors, Ruth and Jinx achieve a sense of personal and historical understanding, manifesting hope and togetherness in the contemporary moment. Overcoming these historical complexities, therefore, holds the capacity to begin healing the wounds of the past, manifesting togetherness in the communal and continued struggles against the legacies of enslavement, racism, and gender inequality. It is through this unity that liberation is imagined for the descendants of these historically troubled populations.

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