

The Complex Indigenous Identity of the Black Diaspora

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1—Why does the author invite us to rethink our understanding and use of the word “indigenous”?

Typically, when anyone hears the word, “Indigenous” it may be rare for Black people of African descent to come to mind.

Within spaces and platforms that shed light on issues harming Indigenous communities, Black people are seen as “allies.” We are also sometimes conflated with oppressors (**Colonizers, Settlers—immigrant & migrant**) by default to Indigenous communities, given we are not viewed as Indigenous ourselves.

That could not be further from the truth, however, as *all* Black people of African descent are some form of Indigenous. From those living in Africa to Black people in the African Diaspora due to slavery, we are *all* Indigenous. This is not to conflate those of us in America with Native Americans or to imply that as Black Americans, we existed here before those Indigenous to Turtle Island (North America).

However, it is important to acknowledge the diverse definition of the word “Indigenous” and recognize how it plays into the complex identity of those in the **Black diaspora**. **“Displaced”** and **“Indigenous”** are the keywords that come to play when discussing Black communities and cultures formed as a result of slavery.

Whether we speak of Black Americans, Afro-Latin people, or Black Caribbeans, our ancestors were Indigenous peoples to the African continent. Indigenous African communities, tribes, people, etc., still exist today and should be recognized.

Understandably, due to slavery, there may be a sense of disconnection from many Black people in the diaspora. As a Black American, that feeling of not having a true place of belonging due to Anti-Blackness in America, but not truly feeling connected to Africa is haunting.

Even as I have come to accept my identity as a displaced indigenous person, sometimes the feeling of displacement weighs heavily upon me. I know I am not the only one who feels this way.

2–What colonial system is the displacement of African Indigenous people tied to and how did this system complicate African-American’s relationship to the American Continents?

Our very existence, here on American soil, is vastly different from everyone else's and while we *know* where we came from and where our ancestors originated from, it can sometimes feel as if we do not have a place of belonging.

Yet, when I find myself falling into this thought process, I have to constantly remind myself how far [my community and I] have come.

There was a time before slavery when every single one of our ancestors belonged to a tribe or community, and from there, cultures, traditions and heritage were taught and formed.

Unfortunately, the **Transatlantic Slave Trade** ruined that and severed those connections and traditions – though not completely.

While our indigenous ancestors were taken from their homes and forcibly brought to new lands, it did not mean that their identity was completely wiped, they did not forget where they came from.

They were displaced, but they were still Indigenous: Years later that has not changed. We are displaced, but our ancestors and our essence are still Indigenous to distant lands, and so are we. For decades we have carried them with us the best we can.

3–How was African culture in the Americas “formed” and how does this tie to “indigeneity”?

Over the hundreds of years of disconnection, those in the Black diaspora have made successful efforts in both creating new cultures and forming new communities and traditions in the lands our ancestors were brought to.

Speaking from the perspective of a Southern Black American, this is something I have seen in my community. Black Americans do not have a strong cultural connection to Africa or African Traditionalism and practices due to slavery, and reconnection is hard if not impossible for many.

Yet, that has not stopped Black Americans from cultivating rich cultures and traditions here in America by using what we *do* have and remember from our ancestors. Such cultures and traditions have influenced the world around us.

Black fashion, dance and music (ie. Hip-Hop, Rap, R&B and Rock) have had an integral impact on global and popular culture. The international entertainment industry takes heavily from the genres Black American creatives have produced.

None of that would have existed without Black Americans, despite those things not truly being *seen* as Indigenous to Black American culture.

Here in Texas, certain foods such as collard greens, fried chicken, sweet potatoes, etc., are integral staples in Black American cuisine and culture. This is called Soul Food and has been an important staple in southern Black cuisine since slavery.

Black American culture was formed from the ground up, as our ancestors had nothing coming to this land but their stories, memories, and languages.

Hoodoo, for instance, is a spiritual practice used to venerate our ancestors that indigenous to Black communities of the American South and was created by combining cultural traditions taken from Africa and religions and practices on American soil.

4–Why is “Black identity” intricate (complicated) when in relation to “indigeneity”?

With little connection to our Indigenous land and cultures, we had to make do with what we had and find new meaning and purpose on American soil. From that, we formed one of the most influential and powerful cultures in the world today.

One that is sadly heavily appropriated and commodified by people who are not Black American. Cultural appropriation is still an issue we as Black Americans face today.

Within the Black diaspora, African Americans are not the only ones who have created new cultures while also utilizing Indigenous African traditions: Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean communities incorporate the diverse cultures of the lands their ancestors were brought to during slavery, while still ringing true to African traditions as well.

In Brazil, Samba originated from the traditional dances of enslaved Africans brought to the country in the 1500s and it eventually spread, taking aspects of Brazilian culture to make it what it is today.

Samba is not the only Latin American dance form or genre that started because of the mixture of African culture and the culture of the land. Cumbia is also rooted in the culture of African slaves and later branched out into various communities around Colombia.

Bachata, Salsa, Reggaeton and many other dance and music styles in Latin America and the Caribbean islands were all formed in similar ways: the combination of African Indigenous cultures carried over by the slaves, eventually melding with the land they were brought to.

Dancing, musical styles, and entertainment are not the only ways we see Black Indigenous culture making its impact on the world around us.

Black African religions and practices such as Hoodoo (mentioned before, though there are different types depending on the place), Vodun/Voodoo, Santeria, and various forms of Yoruba religions are seen from every corner of the diaspora and are still practiced and observed today.

Black identity as it relates to indigeneity is intricate. Yet, it still exists even if it may be difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Black communities who are descendants of the Trans-Atlantic slaves are displaced from our original home in Africa, but as seen, we have not forgotten our indigenous identity or the land we come from.

Whether that means rebuilding from what little we have to create a new community, or taking what we have from our place or origin and combining it with the culture of the land, our identity as displaced Indigenous people is an integral part of our community.

While I still struggle to accept this – continuing to explore my own ethnic identity – I have to remind myself that hundreds of years of slavery did not sever my heritage and did not sever my blood. When I look at – not just Black communities here in America, but all over the world – there is a sense of pride when realizing just how far we have come.

5–Why is it dangerous to attribute the term indigenous to only one group (ie: Native American communities)?

However, while coming to terms with our Indigenous identities can be liberating to Black people, it does put us in an extremely difficult place when others do not see us that way. When Black people are seen as bystanders to Indigenous issues or simply branded as Indigenous allies, this complicates things as far as activism, representation and platforms to speak on.

I remember when *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) was released in theaters, people praised the movie for featuring Indigenous Mayans, namely the film's antagonist Namor. My thought process was: *Did Black Panther not already feature Indigenous people? The Wakandans, the Jabari Tribe, etc? There were various Indigenous African people in that movie, both fictional and real, looking at the actors.*

That is when it dawned upon me that even in situations where Black indigeneity is shown and highlighted, Black people are not actually seen as Indigenous.

This is concerning because no one group has a monopoly on the term “Indigenous.” Indigenous can mean Native Americans, Saami peoples, Polynesians, etc., and more than often this is acknowledged that yes, these are all Indigenous groups. Just different. Yet the same understanding and nuance are not quite given to Black people, not even Indigenous African groups and tribes on the continent.

The erasure of Black indigeneity inevitably leaves us out of important discussions. When discussions of environmental racism, cultural preservation of languages and religions, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and even land back come up, Black faces aren't seen in these spaces despite all of these issues impacting us.

Black women are still some of the most trafficked, kidnapped and killed in America. Politicians in the South continue to target Black education: Florida already banned African American studies and Texas and other Southern states are working to ban civil rights and slavery from being taught in classes.

When it comes to environmental racism, we see hurricanes destroying primarily Black communities worldwide, snowstorms impacting Black low-income communities (for instance, the Texas Snow Storm) and heat waves due to global warming, we can see how badly Black communities are harmed in these situations.

In Africa, various tribes, such as the Maasai tribe in Kenya and Tanzania, are fighting to get their land back. In America, the Gullah-Geechee people are also fighting to keep their land. Every day in Black communities worldwide, gentrification is an ever-looming threat.

All in all, Indigenous communities worldwide face similar, yet distinct issues as Black communities because we *are* Indigenous. Yet it is difficult to have these platforms to explore these issues and our communities in general.

A reason for this *can* be due to the politicization of Black people and our struggles. While Black Lives Matter and marching against police brutality is always going to be important, I fear that non-Black people tend to see Black struggles only in one way, and believe that BLM/Police brutality is the only issue our community faces, and cannot see us past that.

In some ways, this works to dehumanize us and put us and our identities in one box.

The idea that Black people are indigenous is not something that can be easily grasped by non-Black people because it challenges them to look at Black people in a more complex way, and therefore their activism and allyship of Black people must be challenged as well.

Regardless, the first step for others to recognize the Indigenous identities of Black people is for Black people to recognize and accept them ourselves. For those living in countries that are corrupt with white supremacy and anti-Blackness, it is easy to feel a sense of being lost, as if we do not belong.

Yet, it is important to remember who came here before us, and who cultivated our identity and culture before us, so we could continue to do it today.

Acknowledging that even if we are *displaced*, we come from an Indigenous land, and we have either carried or re-made those cultures, will help us not only ground ourselves but build a stronger community and place of belonging.