

“The Finest Men We Have Ever Seen”:
Reading Jefferson’s Osage Encounters
through *Orientalism*

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Abstract: In 1804, a delegation of Osages traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with President Thomas Jefferson. After their meeting, Jefferson remarked in a letter that the Osages were “the finest men we have ever seen” (“To Robert Smith”). Using Jefferson’s comment as a starting point, this essay considers what contributions Edward Said’s approach to critically engaging colonialism in *Orientalism* can make to North American contexts. The essay argues that Said’s focus on the exteriority of colonial texts and archives in *Orientalism* provides an important alternative to most approaches in Native and Indigenous historical studies, which have too often looked for intrinsic meanings behind or beneath textual evidence. Guided by these insights from *Orientalism*, the essay’s analysis focuses on the tri-racial history of Virginia, the home state of Jefferson as well as Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Far from paying tribute to Osage greatness, Jefferson’s comment set the stage for Osage dispossession and the importation into the Mississippi West of slavery and the racial capitalist system that made it possible. The essay concludes by discussing the relevance of Jefferson’s comment to contemporary manifestations of resistance against this Jeffersonian inheritance, including the Movement for Black Lives, the movement to defend the Missouri River against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and those who organized against the Unite the Right white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August, 2017.

Keywords: Osage Nation, Edward Said, Thomas Jefferson, indigeneity, African American-Native American relations, Orientalism

I. Introduction

Edward Said, who was one of my teachers in graduate school, has been one of the primary influences on the way I think about criticism and my work as an Indigenous intellectual. Said's influence was the focus of the chapter I contributed to *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, a 2006 volume I coauthored that was discussed, debated, and otherwise disputed within Native American literary studies for over a decade and which still enjoys currency today. I will not repeat the back and forth of the volume or my chapter except to say, apropos of this essay, that I was disappointed to see that readers regularly missed what I hoped to make as my main point in focusing my essay on Native nationalism on Said's work, which is that he was both a strident critic of nationalism and a Palestinian nationalist. It was, in fact, his abiding criticism of nationalism that provided the basis for his engagement with nationalist politics.

My chapter in *American Indian Literary Nationalism* focuses on Said's definition of criticism as an intellectual activity that a critic does from a "minority" position. This definition generates an ethical imperative demanding that the critic see the object of criticism (i.e., a text) without ignoring the experiences of those who live and often suffer within the social order from which the object of criticism emerges. A key concept in that chapter is dissent—not only the voicing of critique to those in a majority position but also the crucial, often brave, act of standing in critical defiance of established orthodoxies within minority spaces. A commitment to dissenting critique provides the basis for a critic or intellectual to support the aspirations of peoples seeking liberation while, at the same time, naming and critiquing the political and moral corruption of individuals and organizations that set themselves up as leaders of those peoples. The vocation, role, and positionality of critics comes into sharp relief through this Saidian analysis.

Looking back, however, I can see that my comparative encounter with Said on reckoning the relationship between criticism and a commitment to Palestinian nationalism—or, in my case, Native nationalism (specifically Osage nationalism)—does not go very far in showing what practicing that sort of criticism might look like. In other words, my discussion of how critics can and should think about themselves in relation

to the work they do misses the opportunity to show what this means for the process of engaging with the object of criticism.

This essay seeks to do some of that work through a Saidian consideration of one moment in North American Indigenous history. Beyond how Said challenges me to think of myself as a critic, what does a critical interpretation through his work, in this case *Orientalism*, help me to achieve?

II. From Charlottesville to Standing Rock

In 2017, I began working to better understand the connections between the efforts among the Lakota and Dakota people at Standing Rock to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline from crossing under the Missouri River near their reservation and the rise of public demonstrations by white supremacist groups such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of that year. Since the Osages and Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people are historically related to one another—the Osages having migrated at some point long before European arrival in the Americas to the southeastern side of the Missouri River (Mathews 92)—these events eventually prompted me to reconsider an episode from my own history as an Osage person.

The Osages' migration eventually meant that the Osages found themselves caught between Thomas Jefferson's ambitions for the trans-Mississippi West and those of the other Indigenous people living there, including their Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota relatives. The Osages, the dominant Indigenous group in a vast area comprised of parts of present-day Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, were the first barrier to Jefferson's ambitions on the other side of the Mississippi (Mathews 353). In 1804, simultaneous with the beginning of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's expedition up the Missouri River, Jefferson arranged for a delegation of Osages to meet with him in Washington, D.C. to discuss what became, in 1808, the first treaty the Osages ever signed (Burns 208–09).

Jefferson was from Charlottesville, and his initiation of the United States' exploration, expansion, exploitation, and expropriation of the trans-Mississippi West was a crucial moment in the chronology that

would eventually lead to the efforts to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. As Lakota scholar Nick Estes argues, Lakota encounters with the Lewis and Clark expedition “held great significance [for the US], and . . . profoundly shaped their feelings toward a nation [the Lakota] they viewed as criminal ‘pirates of the Missouri’” (74).

Jefferson, then, as the US president who laid claim to the lands of the Osages, Lakotas, Nakotas, and Dakotas and sent the Lewis and Clark expedition up the river to find a route to the Pacific Ocean, and whose Monticello estate is near Charlottesville, links these histories and their modern manifestations. But what, in analytical terms, did and does that linkage mean? I attempt to answer that question by considering the 1804 Osage delegation and their meeting with President Jefferson in Washington, D.C. through some critical and methodological insight from *Orientalism*.

III. An Osage Delegation to President Jefferson

The Osages first met Europeans in the 1670s when Father Marquette and Louis Joliet came south from Quebec, eventually floating down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico (Mathews 104). Over the next 130 years, the Osages came to know the French, Spanish, British, and in time the Americans, occupying as they did a remarkably prodigious territory west of the Mississippi in what are now called the Ozark Mountains in Missouri and Arkansas. Those are not large mountains, but they were filled with game and provided lots of nutritious wild foods and plenty of rich soil for the gardens that the Osages planted. In the spring and summer, the Osages left their gardens in the mountains for the rolling hills and prairies to the west, where they would follow the great bison herd to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains before turning around in time to harvest their gardens. Their homelands stretched from modern-day St. Louis eight hundred miles west to the Rockies.

The competition for furs and goods from Spanish and French traders created new challenges for the Osages throughout the eighteenth century. Osage ways of living also changed, primarily due to the new technologies that trading made available to them, including tools, weapons, and textiles. The geopolitical balance was shifting, though, as the

Americans became the new major power with whom the Osages dealt. Settlement had been beyond the capacity of the French and Spanish, but Jefferson envisioned settling Osage lands as the first step in the march to expand the US westward, all the way to the Pacific.

When the US was only in its third decade of independence, the Osages found themselves on the eastern edge of the Louisiana Purchase, the agreement with the French that was the realization of Jefferson’s long-time ambition for the US to hold the recognized right to colonize and settle its portion of North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When Jefferson famously commissioned Lewis and Clark to explore the vast territory west of the Mississippi River and find a route to the Pacific in 1804, he was aware that Alexander Mackenzie had already made a similar journey across what is now Western Canada over a decade before.

Increasing calls to settle those lands made the Osages reluctant to cooperate with Jefferson’s plans, and in late spring of 1804 the US president arranged for a delegation of Osage leaders to meet him in Washington, D.C. As was typical of diplomacy with Native peoples in that era, the Osage leaders in the delegation were leaders of one small group and not authorized to negotiate for the Osages as a whole. Despite the leaders’ level of representation, the process this delegation initiated, as Osage scholar Jean Dennison argues, “drastically change[d] Osage lifeways” (19).

The delegation, according to archival evidence, consisted of twelve Osage chiefs and two boys. Theirs was the earliest face-to-face meeting between Osages and a sitting US president, and was, further, among the earliest of such delegations of Native American leaders to meet with the US president in Washington, D.C. (Burns 208–12) since the US capital relocated from Philadelphia four years before. The delegation’s visit is extensively documented, though primarily from a US point of view. Archival records exist showing not only what Jefferson said at that meeting but also his welcome letter to the delegation and a follow-up note in which he declared intriguingly of the Osages, “[t]hey are the finest men we have ever seen” (Jefferson, “To Robert Smith”). That flattering phrase, which Jefferson said in correspondence to the Secretary of the Navy and not to the Osages themselves, is one I will return to as I think through the meaning of Jefferson’s encounter with the Osage delegation.

My purpose in going back to this scene, importantly, is not to argue that it has been overlooked and therefore needs to be rehabilitated to its rightful place in the historical canon with a corrected version of what really happened. Instead, this moment in 1804 provides an opportunity to think about Native American history through one important aspect of *Orientalism*. What do these archival sources from the 1804 Osage delegation to Washington reveal if we resist the impulse to dissect them in search of truths hidden behind, within, or underneath them and instead think of them through Said's method of performing an "analysis rather of the text's surface, its exteriority to what it describes" (Said, *Orientalism* 20)?

Reading the exteriority of a text cuts against the grain of established interpretive habits in Native history, literature, and culture, in which the tendency is almost always toward assuming that what we are looking for is only available through finding a way past the exterior. The type of reading and interpretation that is predominant in many areas of Native and Indigenous studies seeks to move past the surface for what lays beneath—or beyond the guarded gate and the next bend in the river. Said, in contrast, finds the depth of Orientalist discourse in its exteriority.

Interpretive habits that lead away from that exterior keep us from understanding a moment like this one involving the Osages, Jefferson, and the expedition he had sent up the Missouri as an example of an early US version of something akin to Orientalism at work. If we think of Jefferson in the way that Said thought of Orientalist figures, understanding Jefferson's meeting with the Osages is not at all a search for "the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some original" (Said, *Orientalism* 21). Rather, the existing record of the meeting is "a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as" the colonial encounter it represents (21). This is not, importantly, a critical strategy of seeking the interior truth through careful attention to the exterior, but a recognition that the exterior is a representation that "relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such" (21). To refuse the impulse to discover the real, then, cuts against the grain of a standard way of interpreting Native American texts of colonial encounter, which has

been, I think it is fair to say, to seek points of entry through which scholars can ascertain what the real thing might be behind the documentary evidence.

Though the parallels are far from exact, the West operated for the US in its early years in much the same way that the Orient did for Europe—the West being as much an invention of the US as the Orient was for Europe. In that moment when the Osages travelled to D.C., I argue, Jefferson animated his vision of what the West, and therefore the nation, would be. Throughout *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western discourse on the Orient reflects in a thoroughgoing way European colonialism and its self-understanding and very little about the actual places and people it purports to describe. We are more likely to grasp Orientalist discourse, Said argues, if we understand the extent to which “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (*Orientalism* 3).

Jefferson’s encounter with the Osage delegation in 1804 illustrates in various ways how a North American version of what Said describes in *Orientalism* occurred, and the representations of Indigenous North America that proliferated out of that period have implications that could fill many more pages than I am allotting myself here. Jefferson, after all, was initiating for the US a particular form of colonial discourse about the Trans-Mississippi West at that moment, and, as I hope becomes clear, he seemed to have been abundantly aware of the stakes involved.

IV. “The Finest Men We Have Ever Seen”

Visits by Native delegations to Washington, D.C. eventually became common, especially when train travel made getting to the US capital relatively easy. By the second half of the twentieth century, elected Native American leaders and other Indigenous officials regularly made their way to D.C. for many reasons, including meetings with administration officials or congressional representatives and their staffs or conferences sponsored by the National Congress of American Indians and other organizations based there (Trafzer). Significant Native American protests have ended in D.C., including the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties, which

inadvertently morphed into an armed takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) headquarters building after the housing the caravan's planners arranged for those arriving in the US capital turned out to be inadequate (Smith and Warrior, 149–68). Now, a half-century later, D.C. is host to numerous summer internship programs for Native college students along with a sizable resident population of Native American professionals who work in the federal government for the BIA, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, and other agencies.

1804, of course, was a much different time and place for Native peoples and for the US, and a trip to the US capital was a major undertaking. Archival sources clearly show that Jefferson paid careful attention to preparations for his meeting with the Osages—evidence that he saw the meeting as critical to his larger goals of finding an overland route to the Pacific and opening the Louisiana Territory to US settlement (Jefferson, “To Osage Chief White Hair”).

Jefferson came away from the meeting with the impression that the Osages were, he wrote to Albert Gallatin, his Secretary of the Treasury, “certainly the most gigantic men we have ever seen” (Jefferson, “To Albert Gallatin”). He was referring specifically to their height, which was reputedly well over six feet tall. Soon after, he included the phrase mentioned above when he wrote to his Secretary of the Navy of the Osages: “They are the finest men we have ever seen. The truth is, they are the great nation South of the Missouri, . . . as the Sioux [the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota] are great North of that river. With these two powerful nations we must stand well, because in their quarter we are miserably weak” (Jefferson, “To Robert Smith”).

Within two years, with the help of Lewis, who by then was governor of the Louisiana Territory, Jefferson had manipulated the situation to his advantage. He said to the Osage leaders on the last day of 1806:

tell . . . all your people that I take them by the hand; that I become their father hereafter, that they shall know our nation only as friends & benefactors, that we have no views upon them but to carry on a commerce useful to them and us; to keep them in peace with their neighbors, that their children

may multiply, may grow up & live to a good old age, and their women no longer fear the tomahawk of any enemy.

My Children. These are my words. Carry them to your nation. Keep them in your memories, & our friendship in your hearts. And may the Great Spirit look down upon us, & cover us with the mantle of his love. (Jefferson, “To Osage Nation”)

Jefferson’s rhetorical skills were considerable, but it was not so much his way with words that turned the tide with the Osages; instead, he managed to find a way for everyone (with the important exception of the Osages) to get what they wanted from the situation just west of St. Louis. With virtually no allies, the Osages were challenged on two important fronts. First, whereas before the Louisiana Purchase Osage leaders could play the different colonial powers off of one another in seeking to manage the movement of other Native groups and white settlers across their territory, now they had only the US to work with, and the US in turn allowed the Native enemies of the Osages—which by that point included almost every other group in the region—to go after their adversaries with impunity (Burns 213–16). Second, along with fostering a situation in which the Native peoples on all sides of the Osages ganged up against them, Lewis also severely restricted the flow of trade goods going to the Osages, creating social upheaval as imported goods Osages had taken for granted for multiple generations were no longer available to them (Rollings 217–20). In response to the situation, Osage representatives stated in a meeting in January 1806 (as translated and transcribed):

Fathers: Meditate what you say, you tell us that your children of this side of the Mississippi hear your Word, you are Mistaken, Since every day they Rise their tomahawks Over our heads, but we believe it be Contrary to your orders & inclination, & that, before long, should they be deaf to your voice, you will chastise them. . . .

You say that you are as numerous as the stars in the skies, & as strong as numerous. So much the better, fathers, tho’, if you are so, we will see you ere long punishing all the wicked Red

skins that you'll find amongst us, & you may tell to your white Children on our lands, to follow your orders, & to do not as they please, for they do not keep your word. Our Brothers who Came here before told us you had ordered good things to be done & sent to our villages, but we have not seen nothing. ("Transcript")

These Osages end their message on an interesting note: "We are Conscious that we must speak the truth, truth must be spoken to the ears of our fathers, & our fathers must open their ears to truth to get in" ("Transcript").

These pleas for truth and truth-telling occurred on the brink of the Osages' first treaty with the US government, which intended to gain cession of their lands and resources. Signed in 1808, that treaty between the Osages and the US included only a small number of leaders from the northern part of Osage territory as its signatories, but it impacted everyone and initiated a process of dispossession that would unfold over the course of the next seventy years via treaty, policy, bureaucracy, and education. In December 1808, Lewis, by then the governor of the Louisiana Territory, wrote to Jefferson: "The Indians appear perfectly satisfied with this treaty; and I hope it is such as will meet your approbation. It extinguishes their title to a country nearly equal in extent to the state of Virginia and much more fertile" (Lewis).

This story of dispossession and the manipulations and machinations that led to it have been recounted numerous times. In all the digging behind, through, and underneath the colonial archive in which Lewis, Jefferson, and other non-Osages left records of their version of these events, Lewis' reference to Virginia has not been of particular interest beyond the obvious connection it makes to Jefferson's home state. Yet when Lewis refers to Virginia, we gain perspective on the specific ways something akin to Orientalism was operating in the Trans-Mississippi West by 1808.

Lewis and Clark were, like the president they served, Virginians. Lewis was tightly woven by marriage into Jefferson's family and social networks in Charlottesville; Jefferson's knowledge of Lewis from those connections prompted Jefferson to call Lewis out of the Army and appoint

him as his personal secretary (“Meriwether Lewis”). Charlottesville has a prominent statue commemorating Lewis and Clark along with many other statues depicting Jefferson, Robert E. Lee, and other Virginians.

I want to suggest that Virginia is not merely a convenient shared point of reference between Jefferson and Lewis, but an invocation of what Said calls, following Raymond Williams, a “structure of attitude and reference” (*Culture and Imperialism* 95). Specifically, Jefferson’s comment that the Osages were the “finest men we have ever seen” does not come out of nowhere, which is how most historical accounts report it. The comment is wrapped up in the long history of Jefferson’s unscientific assumptions about the relative physical and intellectual capabilities of people of European, African, and Native American descent.

V. Tri-Racial Hierarchies in Post-Enlightenment Virginia

Jefferson believed, like many others of his time, that European people were intellectually and culturally superior, African people were in all ways inferior, and Native American people were physically superior insofar as they did not dilute themselves through mixing with African people (Coleman 43–44). These beliefs were lifted straight out of Virginia’s history of intermarriage going back to Pocahontas.

In her 2013 book *That the Blood Stay Pure: African Americans, Native Americans, and the Predicament of Race and Identity in Virginia*, Arica Coleman points to the pivotal role Jefferson played in promulgating an ideology that had taken root in Virginia from its earliest days and continues to shape that state’s peculiar relationship to its own tri-racial history. Two contradictory dynamics, as Coleman demonstrates, have driven that ideology: first, the unwavering commitment on the part of the leading families of Virginia to protect whiteness from contaminating influences and promote a view of themselves and their progenitors as paragons of racial purity; and second, a remarkably rich and deep history of Native, Black, and white intermixture from the myth-laden marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe to the landmark legal case *Loving v. Virginia* (Mildred Loving, as Coleman points out, was with little doubt a person with Native ancestry, along with being African American) (Coleman 151–76).

Focusing on Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Coleman shows how the racial hierarchy presented therein is very much in line with Enlightenment thought but is also particular in the way it reflects ideas of racial integrity that had become firmly ensconced in the self-understanding of Virginia's leading lights. The hierarchy is as straightforward as it is unscientific: people of European ancestry believed themselves to be the highest form of humanity; people of African descent were inferior both physically and intellectually; Native Americans were also regarded as lesser than Europeans but unlike African Americans had the potential to be equal to them. For Jefferson, Coleman argues, maintaining the superiority of whites in Virginia was always fundamental, while the mixing of Native populations with African Americans made the idea of elevating Native people to their supposed potential through association and even intermarriage with whites increasingly problematic (Coleman 44). Further, as Coleman points out in anticipation of those who find in Jefferson's hierarchy a benign or beneficent status for Native people, reaching that status required losing all vestiges of being Indigenous—including culture, language, and, of course, the very peoplehood that gave the various peoples of Virginia, including the Mattaponi, Powhatan, and Nottoway, their distinct political identity and what later came to be recognized as their inherent right to self-determination, autonomy, and sovereignty (46). Virginia's Native population, to Jefferson, was already beyond becoming a candidate for the sort of fundamental transformation that his ideology would require (59). The place that Jefferson thought such Native subjects could be found for this grand experiment was, according to Coleman, on the path westward as the US expanded (44).

"The finest men we have ever seen" begins to look and sound different when viewed from the standpoint Coleman provides of Virginia and its tri-racial history. What Jefferson seems to have found in crossing the Mississippi is exactly what he expected to find—Indigenous people who could play their part in his racial hierarchy. Far from engaging in idle flattery or being impressed by the unusual height of the Osages he encountered in D.C., Jefferson seems rather to be drawn to what he sees as their uncontaminated blood. But are they really all that fine, or are they perhaps, as Said suggests about the Orient, "a sort of surrogate or even underground self" (Said, *Orientalism* 3)?

In this “country nearly equal in extent to the state of Virginia,” perhaps the Osages represented a new start to the process that had so thoroughly failed to follow the racial hierarchy in the actual state of Virginia. Jefferson, of course, had significantly participated in upending that hierarchy through fathering his own family of mixed-race children with his slave Sally Hemings. He was now the Great Father to his new Osage children in a new Virginia. He seems to have had high expectations of them. Could his Osage children look forward to something more from their new father than his children with Hemings received? Intersecting histories of Native peoples and African Americans, as Gayatri Spivak argues, “sketch a disappearance of the ‘American’ as much as *Orientalism* had sketched the appearance of an ‘Orient’” (51). In Spivak’s terms, colonialism’s discursive impact had already effected the disappearance of Virginia’s Indigenous peoples. Native presence reappears—in a territory the size of Virginia and represented by the Osages—only to disappear again. In both cases, the real presence of Monacans, Nottaways, Osages, and others—that is, their persistence, resilience, survivance, and blackness—is all the more difficult to register due to the persistence and resilience of their ongoing absence within colonial discourse.

VI. Humboldt in America

The historical record provides an additional, intriguing connection to the nexus of the Osages’ meeting with Jefferson through German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (Rebok; Casper). Jefferson received Humboldt as an esteemed and distinguished guest in Washington within weeks of the visit from the Osage delegation. This coincidence provides some compelling contrast to the story of the Osage delegation in D.C., not least because Humboldt seems by Jefferson’s Enlightenment ideals to more likely have been the finest man Jefferson ever met. Having just completed his epic journey through various areas of South America, Humboldt decided to make a journey north to the US before returning to Europe to publish his results. Humboldt’s motivation for making such an extended detour is open to speculation, but it may be as simple as his enduring admiration for Jefferson, whose *Notes on the State of Virginia* the young German scholar had read with keen interest many years before

and which many believe was the model for Humboldt's own (much more extensive) descriptive work on South America.

Humboldt arrived in Philadelphia from Havana in late May 1804, where he spent several days with the American painter, inventor, and naturalist Charles Willson Peale and other members of the American Philosophical Society, over which Jefferson presided (Rebok 21). In early June, Peale and Humboldt traveled to Washington and spent ten days there, during which time he had numerous opportunities to visit with Jefferson, both formally and informally. Jefferson hosted a dinner for Humboldt, Peale, and others in Humboldt's traveling party during their stay, and Humboldt apparently made a big impression among others in Washington—many marveled at his facility with multiple languages, including English, German, French, and Spanish (Rebok 23–26).

Of great interest was Humboldt's knowledge of the territories in the Louisiana Purchase that had most recently belonged to Mexico, which remained largely unknown to those in D.C. (Rebok 20). Indeed, US officials were not sure until speaking to Humboldt how far north their new territories reached in the eyes of the Mexicans and Spanish. Humboldt was able to tell the US officials where US boundaries in the new territory extended and what they could expect to find there in terms of population, terrain, climate, and resources (Rebok 145–46).

After their initial meeting in Washington, Jefferson and Humboldt corresponded regularly until a few years before Jefferson died in 1826—most often about books, but sometimes about politics and the great issues facing the US. Humboldt was clearly a great admirer of Jefferson as a learned statesman who had a robust agenda for the sort of work Humboldt did as a scientist. Though Humboldt was a vocal opponent of slavery and slaveholding, he brought up the subject only once in his letters to Jefferson: to apologize for making an anti-slavery statement in one of the books he sent to Jefferson that he promised to revise in future editions (Rebok 149).

Seen from the perspective of his near-simultaneous meeting with Humboldt, Jefferson's comment about the Osages being "the finest men we have ever seen" seems even more like a reflection of Jefferson's eighteenth-century views of racial difference and human development than a

reflection of who and what the Osages were. If Jefferson and Humboldt discussed the Osages during their ten days in D.C., the available archival evidence does not record them doing so. Years later, following the War of 1812, however, Jefferson defended his overall American Indian policy to Humboldt, writing:

You know, my friend, the benevolent plan we were pursuing here for the happiness of the Aboriginal inhabitants in our vicinities, we spared nothing to keep them at peace with one another, to teach them agriculture and the rudiments of the most necessary arts, and to encourage industry by establishing among them separate property, in this way they would have been enabled to subsist and multiply on a moderate scale of landed possession; they would have mixed their blood with ours and been amalgamated and identified with us within no distant period of time. On the commencement of our present war, we pressed on them the observance of peace and neutrality, but the interested and unprincipled policy of England has defeated all our labors for the salvation of these unfortunate people. They have seduced the greater part of the tribes, within our neighborhood, to take up the hatchet against us, and the cruel massacres they have committed on the women and children of our frontiers taken by surprise, will oblige us now to pursue them to extermination, or drive them to new seats beyond our reach, already we have driven their patrons & seducers into Montreal, and the opening season will force them to their last refuge, the walls of Quebec, we have cut off all possibility of intercourse and of mutual aid, and may pursue at our leisure whatever plan we find necessary to secure ourselves against the future effects of their savage and ruthless warfare. The confirmed brutalisation, if not the extermination of this race in our America is therefore to form an additional chapter in the English history of the same colored man in Asia, and of the brethren of their own colour in Ireland and wherever else Anglo-mercantile cupidity can find a two-penny interest in deluging the earth with human blood.—but let us turn from

the loathsome contemplation of degrading effects of commercial avarice. (qtd. in Rebok 155)

As with Jefferson's turn from the Osages being "the finest men we have ever seen" to his engineering of the beginning of their dispossession, these comments to Humboldt reveal how little regard Jefferson had for the peoples who stood in the path of his continental ambitions. And the fault was never, in his own mind, his. The British, in this case, made the Americans do it. So it is with the mirrors that colonialism holds up to itself as it considers the brown faces of other people.

VII. #NoDAPL, #BLM, #M4BL, #MeToo and the Long History of White Supremacy in America

Making a case that Jefferson's point of reference was the tri-racial history of Virginia when he wrote of the Osages in 1804 that they were the "finest men we have ever seen" may seem like a low-stakes exercise, but I do not know that I would have gotten there without Said's example from *Orientalism*. The habits of interpretation, not just in Native studies but in American history, tend toward an encouragement to keep moving west and toward interiority, as if our commission as scholars is an academic version of following Lewis and Clark. Yet the compelling story here emerges through a Saidian focus on exteriority, on seeing that the façade is worth thinking about as something other than a false front.

Taking these Saidian insights seriously can have enormous implications for how we envision Native history unfolding in the Trans-Mississippi West, across the nineteenth century, and into the present. To fast forward to much more recent events, Jefferson's meeting with the Osages can help us think about the connections between the #NoDAPL movement (the Dakota Access Pipeline protests) along the Missouri River at Standing Rock in 2016 and #M4BL (the Movement for Black Lives), the impetus for which came out of, in large part, Ferguson, Missouri, which is just a few miles away from the site of the villages where the Osages who went to D.C. lived. These two movements, importantly, share not only origins along the Missouri but also deep concerns over the way police brutality has been linked, for Native people

and for African Americans in places like Ferguson, to racial capitalism enforced through bureaucratic peonage.

The story of Osage dispossession provides a long history of that process. Osages had made way for the white settlement of Missouri through Jefferson’s machinations, resulting in the first treaty they ever signed in 1808. Missouri’s settlement as a territory began in 1803, which resulted in its admittance into the US as a slave state as part of the Missouri Compromise in 1821, five years before Jefferson’s death. Missouri’s capital is Jefferson City. A half-century after what had been deemed the necessary compromises around slavery to start the American Revolutionary War, Missouri, the first state west of the Mississippi, joined the US as a slave state. Jefferson seems to be let off the hook for his failings, both personal and presidential. I prefer to hold him to account by arguing that he envisioned events unfolding in Missouri in the way that they did. He set about establishing what he envisioned as the US from sea to shining sea fully aware that he was not only endorsing the continued enslavement of millions in new territories but probably extending slavery’s power over those he himself owned, including his own children. To do so, he manipulated relationships with the Osages and other Native American groups in ways that virtually guaranteed they would have a precarious hold on smaller and smaller parts of their previously vast territories.

That intimately linked history of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, a history only now understood for its interconnections and interstitial echoes, gave us both Ferguson and Standing Rock. Both of these events reverberated with the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, especially when scholars of Afro-Native history, including Kyle Mays and Tiya Miles, produced historical accounts of the long histories of Afro-Native presence in Detroit and Michigan.

In the spring of 2017, I was invited to deliver the keynote address to the first-ever Native studies conference at the University of Virginia, and I started thinking in earnest about how to draw clear connections between Jefferson, Lewis, and Clark and their hometown; Ferguson; Standing Rock; and that group of Osages who traveled to Washington to meet with Jefferson in 1804. Then, in August of that year, my attention was riveted to Charlottesville and the images of

young white college-age men carrying torches (and these “tiki” torches are themselves items of backyard barbecue kitsch, imported from the same Indigenous fantasy realm that brought us *Moana*, *Lilo & Stitch*, and *Hawaii Five-0*) across the campus where I would be delivering my keynote address in eight months’ time. Those young men were marching in defense of Robert E. Lee, chanting “Jews will not replace us,” for the purpose of recruiting like-minded young men heading off to campuses across the US.

The white supremacist ideologues who gathered in Charlottesville in August 2017 attacked groups of Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and other clergy who gathered to pray for peace. Cornel West credits anti-fascist defenders as having saved him and other clergy from great harm that day (“Cornel West”). Heather Heyer, a local activist who showed up to fight back against the white supremacists who came to her town, was not so fortunate. She was killed by James Alex Fields, Jr., a neo-Nazi from Ohio who ran her over with his car and was later convicted of first-degree murder.

When I spoke on the University of Virginia campus in early April 2018, I discussed the complex history of Jefferson’s meeting with the Osages, but I also talked about recent revelations about my former colleague and Jefferson scholar Jay Fliegelman, who was suspended without pay by Stanford University after sexually assaulting a graduate student, Seo-Young Chu. In an essay about her experiences, Chu quotes Fliegelman from a Stanford News Service story saying what he found compelling about researching Jefferson: “There was a sense that objects were preferred over people because they didn’t leave you, they didn’t talk back, and you could project a certain subjectivity and have an intense relationship with them, particularly with books” (Chu). I posed the question: Is the history of focusing on Jefferson’s genius while ignoring his faults a sort of mirror of its own—the mirror of American wish-fulfillment in which one projects one’s best qualities, smartest ideas, and wisest decisions? In that world, Fliegelman did not really prefer books over people or treat graduate students as objects for his sexual fantasies. What he saw in the mirror was what Jefferson saw—the finest man he had ever seen.

All of this—the Missouri Compromise, Ferguson, Standing Rock, Charlottesville, and more—would be plenty to see through the lens of this one episode in American Indigenous history, but I will offer one more connection. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday weekend has become one on which various groups take to the streets in Washington, D.C. around political causes. It was in this context in January 2019 that Nathan Phillips, an Omaha Nation citizen and Vietnam-era veteran of the US Armed Forces, and Nicholas Sandmann, a student from a Kentucky Catholic School in town for an anti-abortion march, found themselves face to face on the National Mall in a standoff that went viral on social media and was covered by virtually every news outlet in the US. The confrontation between Phillips and Sandmann took place just a brisk walk’s distance away from where the Osages met Jefferson over two centuries before.

Most Native American people see in the video a smirking, disrespectful young white man standing in defiance as an older Native man seeks to defuse an ugly, potentially escalating situation. Many white viewers, especially conservatives, see in the footage a young white man whose personal space is impinged upon by an older Native man who is insistent on getting the young man to back down even though the young man has, in fact, been the target of a barrage of insults from a group of African American men known as Black Israelites since before Phillips and his group arrived. Most viewers, as Estes pointed out at the time, did not realize that the song Phillips sang was the American Indian Movement song, which originated as a song honoring Raymond Yellow Thunder, a Lakota man from the Pine Ridge reservation who was kidnapped, beaten, humiliated, and left to die by white men in a border town close to the reservation. Alyosha Goldstein quotes Estes as saying, “[i]t’s a song of resistance and remembrance, and it was sung during the Wounded Knee Occupation of 1973 and at the frontlines of Standing Rock in 2016.”

As with so many such events, the controversy surrounding Sandmann and Phillips captured the attention of journalists and people on social media for a short time before all but disappearing. Goldstein, however, provided thoughtful analysis a few months later focused on two popular

memes featuring Sandmann wearing his Make American Great Again baseball cap, captioned with the words “Stand Your Ground” and “Land Gets Stolen” (Goldstein). Florida’s stand-your-ground law exonerated George Zimmerman in the 2012 murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, allowing Zimmerman to argue successfully that his belief that Martin represented danger to him justified his fatal shooting of the unarmed Martin. “Land gets stolen” came from less specific areas of American social beliefs, though its hold on American imaginations, Goldstein argues, is similarly strong.

What played out in D.C. in January 2019 was, Goldstein argues, deeply rooted in “the actual historical and ongoing violence of colonialism and racism that the Indigenous Peoples’ March aimed to address.” In analysis that brings out many of the connections I have been making here, Goldstein argues that “[t]he iconic ‘stand-off’ between Phillips and Sandmann, and the white nationalist bravado of the meme[s] are symptomatic of the profound misgivings” among contemporary settlers. Antagonisms directed against black people and Indigenous peoples, Goldstein writes, “converge . . . with such clarity in part because of the very real threats to white settler prerogative posed by anti-colonial and anti-racist coalition building. This crisis of entitlement is compounded by the nihilist greed of the capitalist planetary death drive and its predatory acceleration of upwardly redistributed wealth.” Put more simply, it seems the racial hierarchy Jefferson transported from Virginia to Missouri, and thus to the developing nation of the US, remains with us.

VIII. Conclusion

I always appreciated how Said responded to criticism of his work, especially criticism that he found to be unfair and inaccurate. The criticism that he seemed sensitive to regarding *Orientalism*, however, was that he had not done enough to recognize how colonized subjects stand up against and resist the processes of colonial oppression. That sort of criticism seems to have prompted his development of the idea of contrapuntal reading and the inclusion in *Culture and Imperialism* of a long section on figures who set out to challenge colonialism through their imaginative work.

As in musical counterpoint, contrapuntal reading creates a different way of experiencing a composition, demonstrating how more than one theme can exist within the same structure (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 51). Just as importantly, counterpoint creates the possibility of a new experience of both music and the object of criticism. A Saidian reading of the 1804 meeting between the Osage delegation and Jefferson, as I have shown primarily through a focus on Saidian analysis of the exteriority of that encounter, provides the opportunity to do just that. To conclude, I will offer two brief contrapuntal examples that point toward further ways of deriving complex meanings from that 1804 encounter.

The first involves botany, which was a preoccupation of Jefferson, Humboldt, Peale, and other European and American men of those times. The Osages of the early nineteenth century, however, also knew a lot about botany, and that knowledge was put to use in their everyday lives. It strikes me as both telling and sad that neither Jefferson nor his cohort seemed capable of imagining the men in the Osage delegation as fellow botanists, except perhaps as unlettered informants. With a good translator, any of the Osages would have been able to hold forth quite well about gathering and using any number of plants in their homelands. At least some of them, I imagine, would have been just as interested as Humboldt to take a botanical tour of Washington, D.C. or to talk about local plants and their usages. Sadly, that part of the Enlightenment imagination was fairly limited and remains so today.

As a second point, Coleman details in *That the Blood Stay Pure* little-known aspects from Virginia about Nat Turner, who led a slave rebellion that shook the foundations of US slaveholding in 1831 (222–24). Turner, as Coleman points out, had close connections among the Nottaway people, whose homelands were near the plantation on which Turner was enslaved. Some even speculate that Turner was Nottaway and Black (223). Though not often acknowledged in histories of Nat Turner’s Rebellion, Turner visited the Nottaway regularly, and the Nottaway hid him during at least part of the three months after the rebellion before he was captured, hanged, and skinned. The Nottaway have sought state recognition from Virginia but have been denied, almost certainly because of their history of intermarriage with African

Americans and the long-standing anti-black racism among both whites and many Natives in Virginia (224–34). The Nottaway, however, were a group with strong connections to African Americans and a long history of intermarriage. Turner's three-year-old daughter, Charlotte, escaped to the Nottaway following the rebellion and stayed with them for the rest of her life (223). Eventually, she had Nottaway children. Their surviving descendants, Coleman writes, serve "as testament to the Black-Indian alliance that was instrumental to the survival of her forebears" (224).

Remembering these complex and brave contrapuntal histories and experiences changes the interpretive landscape considerably. How different might the world have been if the Euro-Americans of Jefferson's time had seen the Osages and other Indigenous people as botanists and diplomats rather than as living representations of their colonial fascinations that served their ambitions of possession? Even more tellingly, Jefferson, it seems, did not need to wait until 1804 nor go west of the Mississippi to meet the finest people he had ever seen. They were there in Virginia all along—Nat Turner, the Nottaways, and many others whose stories we wait to hear, tell, interpret, and, someday perhaps, understand.

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