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The Remembrance Papers, Volume I Before the Arrival: Dismantling the Myth of an Empty Land

*A Scholarly Examination of Black and Indigenous
Presence in the Pre-Columbian Americas*

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Before the Arrival: Dismantling the Myth of an Empty Land

A Scholarly Examination of Black and Indigenous Presence in the Pre-Columbian Americas

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Abstract

The prevailing narrative of American history often begins with the arrival of Europeans and centers the myth of an "empty" or "sparsely populated" land. This foundational falsehood has perpetuated systems of erasure, land dispossession, and cultural misrepresentation for centuries. This paper challenges the colonial myth of emptiness by presenting a multidisciplinary analysis of Black and Indigenous presence in the Americas prior to European contact. Drawing from archaeology, oral tradition, linguistics, and ethnographic accounts, this work invites scholars and the public alike to reconsider the timeline, the inhabitants, and the rightful narrative stewards of this land.

Introduction: Memory Beyond Maps

History has long been written by victors. But memory lives in the bones of the earth, in the names we cannot translate, in the songs we were told to forget. The Americas were not an untouched wilderness waiting for discovery—they were home to vast, complex civilizations¹.

¹ These ideas are informed by the work of Black and Indigenous scholars who have long challenged mainstream historical timelines, particularly Ivan Van Sertima and Runoko Rashidi, whose research outlines cross-continental contact prior to Columbus. The intention here is not to claim singular origins but to emphasize cultural coexistence, spiritual stewardship, and the diversity of ancient civilizations that shaped the land we now call America.

And among those civilizations, evidence suggests the presence of Black-skinned peoples long before transatlantic slavery or European colonization.

This paper does not aim to diminish Indigenous sovereignty or rewrite Native histories—it seeks to *expand* the conversation and uplift the overlapping, braided realities of pre-Columbian presence. It is an offering in the spirit of remembrance, reclamation, and academic integrity.

Section I: The Colonial Narrative of Emptiness

The notion of *terra nullius*—"nobody's land"—was a legal and theological doctrine used to justify colonization. According to this view, any land not occupied by Christians or those deemed "civilized" could be claimed by European powers. This ideology, foundational to the Doctrine of Discovery, erased both Indigenous nations and any other potential civilizations that did not fit European paradigms.

Colonial maps rarely documented the density and diversity of peoples across the Americas. Early explorers described immense cities, cultivated lands, and sophisticated trade networks, yet later records downplayed or outright ignored these realities. The myth of emptiness became a tool of erasure.

Section II: Evidence of Early Black Presence

Numerous scholars—including Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, Runoko Rashidi, and others—have pointed to evidence of African presence in the Americas predating Columbus. Among the most cited examples are:

- **The Olmec Civilization:** Colossal stone heads in La Venta and San Lorenzo display features commonly associated with African physiognomy. While mainstream archaeology explains these features as indigenous variation, the debate remains unresolved.
 - **Botanical and Linguistic Traces:** Plants native to Africa have been found in pre-Columbian American contexts. Additionally, certain West African words appear in Native languages, particularly in the Caribbean and Central America.
 - **Oral Traditions and Migration Legends:** Both African and Indigenous oral traditions speak of long journeys across oceans, sometimes in partnership, sometimes in collision.
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This evidence, while often dismissed by Eurocentric academia, remains compelling when examined holistically.

Section III: Black-Indigenous Alliances and Cultural Blending

In the early colonial period, records reveal communities of escaped Africans (Maroons) who found refuge among Native tribes. These alliances were not only strategic—they were familial, cultural, and spiritual. From the Seminoles in Florida to the Yamassee and Washitaw nations, these hybrid communities defy simplistic racial categorization.

Contemporary descendants often carry both lineages, yet modern legal frameworks frequently force them to "choose" an identity, thereby continuing the legacy of division.

Section IV: Rewriting the Bering Strait Paradigm

The dominant theory of Native American origins involves migration from Siberia via the Bering Strait around 13,000 years ago. However, recent discoveries challenge this narrow window:

- **Monte Verde, Chile:** Evidence of human habitation dating back 18,500 years.
- **Topper Site, South Carolina:** Possible artifacts dating to 50,000 years ago.
- **Genetic Studies:** DNA studies show complex intermixing of ancient peoples, including possible links to Australo-Melanesians.

These findings invite a broader, more inclusive understanding of migration and settlement.

Conclusion: Toward a Healing Historiography

If we are to heal, we must first tell the truth. Not a truth of blame, but of bold clarity. The Americas were not empty. Black presence here is not a post-slavery phenomenon. And the relationships between Indigenous and African peoples are not a footnote—they are central to the American story.

This paper is the first in a series of Remembrance Papers, dedicated to restoring the fractured memory of a people who have always been here—seen, unseen, renamed, but never erased.

Suggested Readings

- Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus*
- Runoko Rashidi, *African Presence in Early America*
- Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*
- Clyde Winters, *The Ancient Black Civilizations of America*
- Vine Deloria Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies*

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