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NATALIE CURTIS BURLIN

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Natalie Curtis Burlin

a LIFE in NATIVE and AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC

Michelle Wick Patterson

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Arno by Bob Reitz.
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Dedicated to my grandmothers:
Alice Wick and Josephine Smith,
who each, in her own way,
encouraged and inspired me.

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Introduction

Why Remember Natalie Curtis?

IN A PARIS CEMETERY ON ALL SAINTS' DAY IN 1921, A SMALL group of American and French artists and musicians joined the throngs of people marking the holiday to honor a recently deceased American woman they wanted to remember as saintly. The group met to honor Natalie Curtis, an amateur ethnomusicologist and writer on Native American and African American music who had died after being struck by an automobile after descending from a Paris streetcar. Her husband, the modernist painter Paul Burlin, described his sense of this gathering, a "strange indescribable *feeling*, hard to put into words." As thousands "stood in reverence" in the cemetery, he recalled, "a sense of awe came over me, that we were following a saint!" Ideas of "sainthood" permeated the remainder of the memorial service. Alexandre Mercereau, a writer on art with an interest in "primitive" cultures, asked, "For in what does real saintliness consist if not in carrying without despair, throughout the long cavalry of life, the heavy cross of goodness, of perfection, of love." Curtis had become a "permanent source of serenity amidst the terrible struggle of existence, of peace amidst the belligerent

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instincts of man, of belief amidst hundred-headed fanaticisms"; she had been a "spiritual ray amidst the darkness of materialism, a perpetual torch of the ideal, of pure happiness amidst the base pleasures which satisfy the majority." Mercereau admired her for her stance against prejudice and hypocrisy and for her willingness to question the very notion of "civilization." Mercereau believed that in the United States "red men and black men" would venerate Curtis and concluded with the hope that "if there is a happiness more infinite than that of non-existence" that one could reach "by sublime personal virtues and by the ardent prayers of those who knew you on earth," then the door to this happiness had already been opened for Curtis.[1]

Indeed, several groups of Americans met to honor and remember Curtis's life, work, and spirit. In Santa Fe, her adopted Southwestern home, a group of women writers, including Carol Stanley, Alice Corbin Henderson, and Elsie (Elizabeth) Sergeant, met to celebrate her life. Stanley insisted, "Every one of us who loved her must feel keen personal joy over her part in our lives, but her influence was too intense for us to dream of mourning her passing." Instead of grieving the women vowed to continue Curtis's work and hoped to dedicate a new music room or even a building to her somewhere in Santa Fe. In fact, this group of women, in their writing and creative endeavors throughout the 1920s and 1930s, did indeed build upon and extend the work Curtis had begun two decades earlier.[2] Stanley further observed that a Hopi man, upon hearing of Curtis's death, replied: "But she cannot die. She is singing now—somewhere with her Hopi friends." The man then softly sang songs Curtis had taught him. He remarked, "She sang like Indian, have to have spirit of Indian for white woman to sing that way."[3]

In Curtis's hometown of New York City yet another group met to honor her. In 1923 African American musicians held a service for her and for Henry Krehbiel, a music critic and scholar of Negro spirituals. The mostly black gathering (the only white faces belonged

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to the deceased musicians' families), held in the basement of a public library, praised Curtis's and Krehbiel's studies of African American music. The room contained a chair holding Krehbiel's picture, two of his books underneath it, while another chair displayed a photograph of Curtis at the piano, as well as her books. Curtis's brother Bridgham found that the "very simplicity of [the service] made it the more touching." He was moved to witness a young girl place roses beneath his sister's picture and to hear the kind words spoken by Columbus Kamba Simango, an African informant who had shared songs with Curtis, and by Harry T. Burleigh, an African American musician. The group concluded their service with calls for a more permanent memorial to Curtis's life work.[4]

Yet another memorial to Curtis helped bring this group's desires to fruition. Officials of Hampton Institute, a black industrial school, held a memorial for Curtis in conjunction with one of its most important annual celebrations, Founder's Day, in January 1926. A large audience gathered at the school's museum, including Curtis's mother, Augusta, and her four surviving siblings. Hampton proposed to honor Curtis's memory by granting a "Natalie Curtis Scholarship" to a deserving Native American or African American student, preferably one with musical inclinations. Hampton also presented a bronze statuette created by an American sculptor entitled *The Buffalo*, which depicted an African American soldier from the recent war. The statuette was dedicated to Curtis, "beloved of many of different races and colors." Upon presenting the sculpture, which would be placed in the school's library, Simango's wife quoted an African proverb: "Gratitude is best shown, not by much talk, but by lighting another fire."[5]

Curtis's good friend Elbridge Adams, a New York lawyer, delivered the memorial address, commemorating Curtis as "a loyal friend of Hampton as well as of the American Negro and American Indian." He noted her unforgettable "strong and vivid personality" and declared his belief that no one who had known her could ever

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really forget her, especially the "countless thousands of her black- and red-skinned friends." Adams portrayed Curtis as "the most tolerant person I have ever known." He claimed that she possessed a marked ability to understand and sympathize with the oppressed and simply could not countenance prejudice, an attitude that allowed Curtis to "look into the heart and soul of a human being" and to understand "the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears" of others almost instinctively. Curtis, Adams declared, always looked for the best in others, only seeing the virtues in her friends. This openness, he observed, shaped her work. She did not record Native American music "in an impersonal, detached way," but instead "made herself one of the people" she studied. She wanted to do more than just collect Indian songs; she hoped to "understand and reveal the inner life of a primitive race."[6]

Curtis's work with Native Americans and her positive outlook on life, Adams concluded, prepared her especially for work with African Americans. "She brought to this work," he claimed, "the same loving care and sympathy that characterized all her labor for the black race." Curtis, he said, never believed in racial inferiority, arguing instead that although blacks lacked the intellectual development of whites, they had their own unique gifts to bestow on American culture. Adams finished by reasserting the power of Curtis's legacy in the world of music: "The most competent musical critics have pronounced that the work of Natalie Curtis in the field of native American folksong is the work of a masterly genius and will endure forever." He grieved that Curtis had died just as she began receiving much-deserved international recognition for her work.[7]

Others joined in the chorus of praise for Curtis's ability to sympathetically record the music of African Americans and Native Americans. Curtis's friend Kurt Schindler, a musician, recalled accompanying Curtis on a collecting trip among the Hopi. Her willingness to sit on a rough dirt floor in happy contentment among

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"her beloved Indians," persuading them to "talk and sing to her and explain the mysteries of their legends," had deeply impressed Schindler. He pronounced Curtis a "genius" for the "strange mixture of child and woman in her" that allowed her to accomplish much more than any "wise man or 'mere musician'" could. Her work with African Americans particularly moved him: "I never had a chance before to state publicly . . . what a deep and educating influence this remarkable woman has had upon the shaping and moulding of my own ideals [and] . . . how she held up the beacon-light of her own idealism to inspire me to serve only the highest art; how she made me believe in the American public." Schindler promised that her memory would "live like a sacred flame in my heart to my life's end and, if it may be willed so, through my work to other generations."[8]

The final speaker at the Hampton memorial service, Father Winfred Douglas, who knew Curtis from her visits to the West, echoed the other speakers' appraisal of her as a gifted, tolerant, and vibrant person. Douglas commented on her sympathy: "This is perhaps the supreme human gift: the power of spirituality sharing the joys, the sorrows, the hopes, the aspirations of others and thereby comforting, encouraging, inspiring the helped soul to its best achievement." Like her memorializers in Paris, Douglas also alluded to the saintlike qualities Curtis possessed. She seemed to him "a person wholly devoted to the good of others for the love of God." Douglas noted that "Tawimana" (the "Song Maid" in Hopi) had thrived among her Native American friends and found in their mythology an apt metaphor for Curtis. "Natalie was like the desert rain," he asserted, "reviving the thirsty, refreshing the withered, bringing new growth from the seed, making the desert bloom and bear fruit."[9]

As these memorials suggest, Natalie Curtis's family, friends, and colleagues remembered her as a sincere and sympathetic friend of Native Americans and African Americans and as an able interpreter

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of their musical traditions. These characterizations are not surprising, given that many of these memorialists shared in her research and in her ideas about American music and culture, but they are not wholly accurate. Although Curtis had an obvious concern for the groups she studied and wanted to improve their conditions, she remained wedded to ideas of primitivism and white superiority that colored her research efforts. Her life, like many lives, represents a great deal of ambiguity, but within this ambiguity much may be discovered.

Born in 1875 to a well-to-do family in New York City, Curtis trained as a classical musician in the United States and Europe. Prepared for a career as a composer and pianist, Curtis visited the American Southwest around 1900 and was captivated by Indian music. She devoted herself to its study, publishing articles in a number of popular magazines. Her first lengthy work on this music, *Songs of Ancient America*, came out in 1905. Two years later she produced *The Indians' Book*, a collection of more than two hundred transcribed songs from eighteen tribes accompanied by artwork, photographs, and folklore. Curtis's work led her to Hampton Institute, a school for African Americans that at the time offered training to Indian students. While researching there Curtis, unlike many other scholars of Indian music, expanded her interest to the songs of African Americans and Africans. She published *Negro Folk Songs* (1918–19) and *Songs and Tales from the Dark Continent* (1920) to preserve this music and to offer it as inspiration for Americans. Curtis insisted that composers might use the sounds and spirit of these traditions to develop a distinctively American musical idiom and create a national cultural expression. Curtis understood music as a language of interracial discourse and as a means to generate reform for Native Americans and African Americans. In 1917 she married Paul Burlin, an artist who also incorporated Indian and black subject matter into his work, and eventually joined him as an expatriate in Paris in 1921. There, after she delivered an address to the International

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Congress of Art History in October 1921, Curtis's career and life were tragically cut short at age forty-six by a car accident.

Few Americans today remember Natalie Curtis at all. Her name is occasionally mentioned in histories of Native American and African American music or in works on women anthropologists and folklorists of the early twentieth century. Often she is criticized for her racial essentialism, which clouded her accomplishments as a folk music collector. Like other amateur female ethnomusicologists and anthropologists she has been dismissed as sentimental or "unscientific" for her approach and her presentation of folk music. Her tragic death at an early age means that she missed opportunities to refine her viewpoints or publicly reflect on her career and its meanings. Nor did she get to witness the full blossoming of the seeds she had planted: she did not live to see the rise of respect for black folk traditions during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s or the period of greater respect for Indian cultures during the New Deal of the 1930s.[10]

Because of the role Curtis played in preserving the musical histories of these groups, and because of her search for a personal and American identity during these pivotal years, Curtis's life story deserves to be told. As the many memorials to her suggest, her career touched on a number of important themes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of sweeping economic, social, and cultural change. Because of these themes one must resist the temptation to dismiss Curtis as a minor figure in the history of ethnomusicology and American thought. Her life story has much to tell us about the role of women in music, anthropology, and Indian reform. It also reveals a great deal about the multifaceted roles played by images of Native and African Americans in American culture and in the search for an American identity. This is the first full-scale biography of Curtis, and as interesting as Curtis's story is in itself, its broader significance lies in the issues with which it engages.

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As a "New Woman" Curtis faced a world of possibilities and anxieties. She embraced the new opportunities for women to study and perform music, and she expanded the boundaries confining female musicians and researchers in her efforts at composition and ethnomusicology.[11] In the Southwest she, like other white women, experienced the tensions between increased opportunities in the fields of anthropology and ethnomusicology and lingering gendered restrictions on women's opportunities. She capitalized on her position as a privileged white woman to gain access to informants and to attract audiences to her writing and reform efforts. Many women followed Curtis to the Southwest, especially in the period following World War I; she paved the way for younger generations of politically active and culturally engaged women to work in the Southwest.[12]

Curtis also served as a transitional figure within the field of Indian policy and reform. Her work bridged the late-nineteenth-century era of forced assimilation and allotment and the cultural pluralism and appreciation for Native American lifeways of John Collier's Indian New Deal in the 1930s. Although still paternalistic, the Indian New Deal did reverse the harshest elements of the previous era and plant seeds for political and cultural self-determination for Native people.[13] Curtis's refusal to abandon the nineteenth-century evolutionary rhetoric of the "vanishing Indian" and her tendency to speak on behalf of Native Americans coexisted with her calls for white Americans to listen to Indian voices, accept Native cultures on their own terms, and reject the policy of complete assimilation. The transitional nature of her work—seen, for example, in her reliance on federal boarding schools for her research while simultaneously calling for an end to these schools' harsh assimilationist policies—helps us understand a significant change within official Indian policy, the move from assimilation to cultural pluralism.[14]

Curtis's research among Native Americans also raises questions about the response of Native people to efforts to preserve and study their cultural institutions. Curtis stressed, particularly in *The Indians'*

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Book, that the songs and stories she recorded were "the direct utterance of the Indians themselves."[15] Her portrayal of Native Americans as collaborators and joint participants in the preservation process raises difficult questions about the process of collaboration and cultural brokerage between informants and researchers.[16] Curtis may have believed that she allowed Native American informants to speak unimpeded by her interference, but she clearly shaped material to meet her own needs and those of her audiences. Her research reveals the functioning of an American Orientalism, a fascination with a primitive Other located on American soil.[17] Native Americans have long served as symbols of American identity.[18] Curtis's insistence on presenting an "authentic" Indian voice played into turn-of-the-century desires to locate a national identity in response to the turmoil resulting from a modernizing America.

Although Curtis is better known for her works on Indian music and folklore, her efforts in African American music are equally significant. Few students of Indian music also studied black song. Curtis's work is particularly significant because Curtis also turned to African Americans in her quest for a cultural American identity. This phase of Curtis's career reflects similar tensions between essentializing a "primitive" Other and making sincere efforts to use music as a means for racial uplift. The influence of Hampton Institute and the role of Curtis's patrons in this research bring these tensions to the surface. *Negro Folk Songs* and *Songs and Tales from the Dark Continent*, both products of her fieldwork in conjunction with Hampton, reveal Curtis's inability to divorce herself from racialist notions of human development even as her research opened the possibilities for interracial understanding and discourse. Curtis is often noted for her accomplishments in recording the harmonization in Negro spirituals, while being dismissed for her racialist thinking. Her efforts to use music to help African Americans — through a music settlement in Harlem, for example, or her efforts to promote black composers — complicate this image of her life and work.[19]

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Many disaffected Americans at the turn of the twentieth century sought in primitive or folk cultures remedies for the maladies of modern life. Curtis joined composers seeking to produce an American musical expression with Native American and African American songs, who argued that the true spirit of America lay not in the factory and large city, but in the American West, in the romantic South, and among the true "folk" of the United States. Curtis incorporated Native American and African American themes into the Arts and Crafts movement in an effort to find alternative ways of living and working in the modern, industrial world. Curtis joined other thinkers, often termed antimodernists, who appropriated medieval, Oriental, or martial cultures as a way of achieving "authentic" experiences in their own lives. Although these Americans are often criticized for the self-centered nature of their appropriations, Curtis's work reveals that not all antimodernists—particularly not those attracted to Native Americans in the West—ignored the needs of the groups from which they appropriated cultural elements for their own uses.[20]

Natalie Curtis's career centered on the theme of her search for an identity as an American. Throughout her life she constantly engaged in a process of defining an identity for herself and her fellow Americans. Beginning with her youthful passion for the piano and Wagner, she adopted the language of music as a means to express and understand herself. In her encounters with Native Americans and African Americans she drew on this language to make sense of her increasingly diverse, urban, industrial, and modern America. Natalie Curtis's life story shows one way in which an American woman came to terms with the compelling issues of her day and encouraged others to adopt her vision for an America different from the one in which she lived.

THIS RESEARCH DRAWS FROM A VARIETY OF PUBLISHED AND unpublished primary sources. Curtis wrote three major works, composed over fifteen songs, and penned over eighty articles in popular

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magazines, journals, and newspapers. Because of her many years of involvement at Hampton University, its archives contain correspondence between Curtis, school officials, and others interested in her work, as well as pamphlets from music programs, songs, student records, and other useful material. Curtis also corresponded with a number of important figures in anthropology and politics, including Theodore Roosevelt, the philanthropist George Foster Peabody, and the anthropologists Aleš Hrdlička and Franz Boas. The Library of Congress contains copies of manuscripts, recordings, and musical compositions by Curtis, as well as material from fellow musicians, especially David Mannes and Percy Grainger. Recordings of Native American and African Americans songs by Curtis are located at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University. Correspondence and other material kept at the Southwest Museum's Braun Library; the diaries of Curtis's brother George, held in Special Collections at the University of California, Los Angeles; and Curtis's field notebooks, housed at the Denver Art Museum, provided previously unknown perspectives on Curtis's work. Finally, the Natalie Curtis Burlin Archives, in the possession of Alfred and Virginia Bredenberg, proved extremely useful. This collection includes correspondence, clippings, photographs, artwork, and a plethora of useful material on Curtis found nowhere else. These primary sources, taken together, helped reconstruct Curtis's life and career, providing useful insights into her social and cultural world.

This book is divided into seven chapters. The first two examine the impact Curtis's early life and training had on the formulation of her later ideas and career. Chapter 1 explores the privileged cultural legacy Curtis gained from her family. The Curtises epitomized major social and economic transitions of the nineteenth century, changes that led to the arrival of modernity during Curtis's lifetime. The first chapter thus paints a picture of the upper-middle-class society into which Curtis was born and the influence this upbringing, especially

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Transcendentalism and abolitionism, had on her life. The second chapter examines Curtis's teenage years and musical education. Music provided Curtis with a language that allowed her to discuss her artistic, spiritual, and feminist anxieties within a largely female world. Her training in classical music, her participation in the vibrant musical scene of 1890s New York City, her passion for the operas of Richard Wagner, and her early efforts to compose American music all prepared, but did not dictate, her path toward the study of Native American and African American music.

The next three chapters focus on Curtis's Native American research, writing, and reform efforts. Chapter 3 examines Curtis's initial attraction as a woman and a musician to the Southwest and to the music of its Native peoples. As Curtis collected music on Indian reservations, at boarding schools, and at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, she functioned as both a colonizer appropriating Native music and a potential reformer hoping to ameliorate the poor conditions of her informants. In her early writings on the Southwest and Native American music she presented the region as an American Orient open to Americans searching for authentic identities. Chapter 4 interrogates Curtis's claim that she merely served as the "pencil in the hand of the Indian" in *The Indians' Book* and other writings. This claim is largely false; Curtis's work represents her desire for authenticity and fascination with the "primitive" more than an accurate record of Indian music and folklore or the actual words of her informants. However, Curtis's claim that she was presenting a genuine Indian voice opened a space in which Native Americans might speak. Furthermore, her intention to dispel harmful stereotypes, increase white understanding, and help Indian youth cope with their difficult transition to the modern world does not lose its significance because of her interventions in these texts. Chapter 5 further develops these themes by arguing that Curtis used white interest in Native American music to pursue reform, especially within federal Indian schools. Working apart from other

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Indian reformers, she represents a shift in Indian policy in the early twentieth century.

Chapter 6 explores Curtis's work collecting and popularizing African and African American music while researching at Hampton Institute and other sites in the South, as well as her work with the Music School Settlement for Colored People in Harlem. It examines her problematic portrayal of blacks as primitives capable of redeeming a soulless American culture. This portrayal, however, coexisted with Curtis's advocacy for African American music and civil rights and with her ability to collect a variety of African American folk songs and capture the harmonies found in their music. This chapter also examines the contradictory influences of Curtis's patrons on her thinking about culture and race, ranging from the racialist attitudes of her patrons associated with Hampton, to the primitivism of her patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, to the nascent cultural pluralism of Franz Boas.

The final chapter places Curtis within a broader cultural context and examines the ways her ideas fit in a variety of different, yet related, movements. Her participation in the Arts and Crafts movement, her role as a member of the artists' colony in Santa Fe, and her contributions to "Indianist" and "Negro" movements in classical music demonstrate the multifaceted scope of antimodernist discourse, particularly through the inclusion of race in these discussions. The language of music shaped a personal and particularly American identity for Curtis, one she believed other Americans could and should adopt.

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