

Black Power Chronicles: Jay Nightwolf

Josh Myers interviews Jay Nightwolf about his experiences with the Black Power Movement and its connections to the American Indian Movement. Nightwolf, who grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., felt a strong connection to the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He also discusses the historical ties between African Americans and Native Americans, highlighting their shared struggles and the role of Native Americans in the Underground Railroad. Nightwolf emphasizes the need for unity between Black and Native American communities to address current issues, including environmental concerns and political representation, and criticizes the current U.S. administration.

Josh Myers: My name is Josh Myers. This is The Black Power Chronicles interview of Jay Winter Nightwolf. Today is June 29, 2017. Thank you, Mr. Nightwolf, for being here with us today.

Jay Nightwolf: I'm honored.

Josh Myers: What we want to do today is to get a sense of two broad questions, and then we'll have some time to go into more depth. The first question is this: we are working to chronicle Black Power in the United States and in the world. What does Black Power mean to you, and how did you come to an awareness of the movement?

Jay Nightwolf: My awareness goes all the way back to the 1960s when I was just a young boy. I had been following the Civil Rights Movement in the South, Dr. Martin Luther King. I had a lot of love and respect for Dr King. When the [March on Washington](#) came here, I told all my friends in the neighborhood that I lived in—I need to tell you something. My family was actually the only Native American family to grow up in Northeast Washington [D.C.]. There was one other family, and the neighborhood that I grew up in was a Black neighborhood.

We weren't reservation Indians. My mother's people are from South Carolina. They're Cherokees, and they were part of that massive group of Cherokee people that refused to go on

the [Trail of Tears](#). They were part of the people that went up into the mountains and fought Andrew Jackson and his troops.¹

My father's people—my father's father—was Shoshone from Arizona and Cherokee. His wife, my grandmother, was Taino from Old San Juan, Puerto Rico.

When we moved to Washington and began to live there and grow up there, there were no Native American images for us to grow up on, appreciating and respecting. Everything in that community was Black except us. So, you learn how to adjust to your environment. All of my friends were Black, [we] went to Black schools.

But I never forgot my heritage because, as kids, we spent a lot of time in South Carolina with my mother's people. In that experience, we learned our language, culture, and traditions. I held on to that, although it wasn't in the community I grew up in.

So, quite naturally, my heroes became people like Dr. Martin Luther King, [Julian Bond](#). We learned about W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and all of those people. They became an extension of my family. When Dr. King came to Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington, I was telling all my friends, "Come on, let's go down to the march." And they looked at me and said, "No, we can't do that because my father told us that if we go down there, they're going to put their dogs on us and turn fire hoses on us." I said, "No, that happened in the South. That's not going to happen here." They said, "Well, we can't go."

So, I got on the bus and rode to 7th and K on New York Avenue by myself. I got off the bus, and there was this wave of humanity coming down 7th Street. I felt like I was home, so I fell in line with everybody. There was a family from Alabama who said, "How you doing?" I said, "I'm fine." [They asked,] "Who are you here with?" I said, "I'm by myself." [They said,] "Where's your mother and father?" [I told them,] "They're not here." [They asked,] "Do they know you're here?" [I said,] "Yeah, I told them I was going."

So, they kind of adopted me for that day, and I felt right at home. The love I experienced and witnessed that day, walking down 7th Street to the [National] Mall, was phenomenal. I never forgot that.

We were taught as little kids—my grandfathers always said—"Your brother or your sister doesn't necessarily have to look like you to be your brother or your sister." And that's the way we grew up. I grew up in a household where my father didn't see color; he saw justice and injustice. I had a unique experience as a Native American growing up in a Black community, because all my

¹ While many Cherokees were forcibly moved to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), some fled into the mountains and fought against the U.S. government's efforts under President Andrew Jackson to relocate them. This resistance is a significant part of Cherokee history, particularly the survival of the East Coast Cherokee communities that avoided forced removal.

partners and friends were Black. We partied together, ran the streets together, and all of that. That happened all the way into my early adulthood.

Josh Myers: Were you aware of the [American Indian Movement](#) and its convergence with the Black Power Movement?

Jay Nightwolf: In the [19]70s, I was very much aware. As a matter of fact, some of my best friends were those leaders: [Dennis Banks](#), [Russell Means](#), [John Trudell](#), Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt—the list goes on and on. One man who’s still alive right here in the Washington, D.C., area is Chief Billy Tayac, the chief of the Piscataway Indian Nation.

I went down to the Interior Department right after the Natives did an armed takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. That was like a day in the sun for me, to see my people converging upon Washington, D.C., and being a part of taking something back, even if it wasn’t permanent, from the white man.

I became very close friends with Russell Means and, especially, Dennis Banks. Dennis Banks is still with us—he’s 80 years old. I remember the two times the Longest Walk came here from California, walking across the United States to Washington, D.C.² That’s happening [again] now. They started in February, and they’re going to be here on the 14th of July on the National Mall.

Josh Myers: It’s important that we made that connection, because the United States is a settler colony, in the sense that the notion of taking land, colonizing the land, and then using labor from Africa to cultivate that land makes the connections between the American Indian Movement and the Black Power Movement

Jay Nightwolf: Absolutely. That’s true.

Josh Myers: They are connected. We have to think of it in those terms. One of the things that happens in the 1960s is that we begin to hear the language of anti-colonialism again. You begin to hear the language of Black America as this internal colony. And I think part of that makes the connections natural. How do those movements, in your mind—what happened to them?

Jay Nightwolf: Let me first take you back to a brief moment in history. The first slaves in America were not Black people—they were Native American people. We were hunted, captured, and sent off to the Caribbean islands to plantations.

² The Longest Walk was a significant Native American protest march organized to raise awareness about issues affecting indigenous communities. The walk, which took place in 1978 and again in 1980, involved activists and Native Americans walking from California to Washington, D.C. to draw attention to the U.S. government’s treatment of Native peoples, particularly concerning land rights, sovereignty, and the preservation of Native cultures.

The problem the white man had with capturing Indians and enslaving us was that it's very hard to enslave a man or a woman in their own home. We would continue to run away. So, then they said, "Well, we've got to do better than this." And that's when they went to Africa, stole my Black brothers and sisters, brought them here, and placed them into chattel slavery. There's so much rich history between the African and the Indian. Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad...

Josh Myers: The Maroons.³

Jay Nightwolf: Yes. But from the South all the way to New York—every resting point, every place to eat, was manned by Native American communities. When they got to New York, there was a chief—the chief of the Onondaga Indians at that time—his name was Chief [John] Skenandoa.

Chief Skenandoa would wait until 50, 100, 150, or even 200 escapees were assembled, and he would order his guides and warriors of that nation to take our Black brothers and sisters who had escaped slavery into Canada for absolute freedom. That's how Blacks got to Canada.

We've been blood for over 50,000 years. This white man who came from Europe is a recent phenomenon. It was only 500 years ago that he got lost and found his way to this side of the Atlantic Ocean. But the African had been coming here for over 50,000 years.

The first ones to get here were the Phoenicians.⁴ But the white boy wants you to believe that the Phoenicians were white sailors. They were not. They were Black, ocean-going sea merchants who had established international trade on the high seas, and a lot of our tribal people went with them and traveled across those high seas.

The next people who came were the people of Mali, and a lot of them stayed. Now, people will argue with me about the blood relationship between Black and Native people. There's no way in the world anybody can legislate or tell you who you can and cannot fall in love with.

Indians and Black folks have been having babies for over 50,000 years. That's why between 75 to 85 percent of all Black people who consider themselves African-Americans—first of all, your mom and daddy would have to be African, and came here to have you [for you to] be an African-American. You're Black. And Black people are our brothers and sisters, by blood, by struggle, by survival.

Josh Myers: Now, given these convergences and connections, one of our goals in Black Power Chronicles is to speak to the future. What does the future look like?

³ The Maroons were enslaved Africans who escaped from plantations in the Americas and formed independent communities, often in remote or mountainous areas, where they resisted re-enslavement and colonial control.

⁴ The Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic people who lived in city-states along the eastern Mediterranean coast.

Jay Nightwolf: Well, if we were to judge the future by the fool... the idiot that's in the White House now [Donald J. Trump], it looks bleak. However, because of the intestinal fortitude that your people and my people possess, we will survive.

There's a lot that has to be done. We need to make some major changes, because if we don't stop polluting Mother Earth and stealing fossil fuels, we've got 10 years before it's going to be too late to do anything about it. Now is the time for all of us conscious people—red, Black, white, and yellow—to stand up and face off against this devil in the White House. Why do I call him a devil? Because that's all he represents to me—something evil. And to most People of Color.

Once we get the problem of fossil fuels solved, clean renewable energy will not only provide energy for us, but it will also create jobs within the Black and Native communities, to end poverty. You can't end poverty when you have a bunch of people sitting around without jobs and no money. We will rise again. Black people will rise again. The Indian will rise again.

But this time, when we rise, we need to rise together. We can't be in separate silos, because the same experiences of degradation, slavery, disrespect, and inhumanity that were dealt to the Black man were also dealt to the Red man.

We need to come together right now. We don't need to meet on anything—and push all the centrists aside.⁵ Get rid of these white folks in Congress who have been sitting there for too long. Progressive people need to take over the Democratic Party. Simple as that.

The Tea Party took over the Republican Party, and look what they did. They elected a fool. They knew this man wasn't capable, but they put him in there anyway. So, let this be a warning to all of you: we need to stand together, united.

Josh Myers: As we once did.

Jay Nightwolf: As we once did.

Josh Myers: Jay Winter Nightwolf thanks for joining us.

Jay Nightwolf: I'm honored, my brother. Thank you.

⁵ The statement is a call for unity among a group, emphasizing the need for collective action without being bogged down by debates or compromise with centrists—those with more moderate or middle-ground positions.