Review of *Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal*, by Gregory D. Smithers

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Gregory Smithers provides a historical overview of the many Indigenous Peoples of the South—from Cherokees and Creeks (Muscogee) who inhabited present-day Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaws who still live on the Gulf Coast—from the beginning of time to the mid-nineteenth century. As stated, the “goal of this book is to introduce readers to the societies, cultures, and people who made and remade the Native South,” and the broader American South, for that matter (p. 6). Smithers similarly and impressively synthesizes the most recent historical, archaeological, and ethnological histories for these diverse peoples. In doing so, Smithers narrates the many and varied ways in which groups like the Chickasaw, Natchez, Yuchi, Tuscarora, Seminole, and Caddo experienced the past, particularly their centuries-long interactions with Euro-Americans, and fundamentally shaped the South throughout the centuries. As Smithers articulates, all of these “stories matter” because “the importance of storytelling—of not only speaking, but listening—is critical to understanding the histories of Native Southerners” (p. 3). And what Smithers ultimately hopes to accomplish is to inform the uninitiated of the critical role that Native Southerners played throughout American history, and thereby “inspire empathy and raise new questions that deepen our collective understanding of the histories featured throughout this book” (p. 11).

Smithers’s most significant contribution is tackling the toxic stereotypes that exist in the United States today regarding Indigenous Americans and their histories. He immediately demonstrates the great diversity that existed (and still exists) among Native Southerners and their multiplicity of identities and stories. Smithers also addresses popular misconceptions about North American “pre-history”—the era before European arrival—in which Mississippian groups (i.e., paramount chiefdoms) carved out complex societies and urban spaces in the South that rivaled what existed in Europe at the time, and that contrary to the assumption Europeans held an “edge over Native
[Peoples]" upon contact, Native Southerners quickly acquired firearms and developed new tactics and technologies to confront the European threat (p. 51). In other words, Mississippian peoples "played a profoundly important role in the history of the South" (p. 53). Smithers similarly challenges the idea of "origins" in American history—or when North America became inhabited—by privileging Creation (Origin) Stories and Indigenous worldviews that reflect centuries-long beliefs by Native Americans that they have always been here, despite what scientists and archaeologists might say about the Bering Land Bridge, Solutrean theory, coastal migration, and DNA analysis (pp. 27–30).

Smithers further demonstrates how Native Southerners not only interacted with Euro-Americans—both violently and nonviolently—over the course of centuries (far longer than the United States has been in existence), but also profoundly shaped U.S. history as much as Europeans did. Altogether, Smithers exposes such pervasive and deeply rooted stereotypes while humanizing the many Native Southerners and their ancestors who live with a "historical awareness of how European and American societies impacted, and continue to impact, their lives," particularly when it comes to their histories and identities (p. 165).

This is why Smithers's synthetic overview is not only an essential addition to scholarship on the Native South and Native American history more generally, but also for a general reading public that overwhelmingly consumes popular histories—most recently John Sedgwick's Blood Moon: An American Epic of War and Splendor in the Cherokee Nation—that perpetuate and reinforce the stereotypes that haunt Indigenous Americans and histories today. There is only one nagging criticism for Smithers: why stop at Removal, which has the potential to reify certain stereotypes (declension) that abound in Native American history? However, this should not detract from the importance of this book, which challenges and thoroughly complicates the stories that Americans tell about themselves and the past.

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