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COLLEGE OF LITERATURE, SCIENCE, AND THE ARTS

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Alumnus
James Earl Jones
Takes Center Stage

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FACULTY



whole world opened to me.”

In that world, she took an extraordinary intellectual journey. It led to graduate school at Emory and the University of Minnesota, then to archives where she uncovered the linked lives of a Native American man and an African-American woman, both long dead; and finally to her study of that couple in *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (California, 2005), recently awarded the Frederick Jackson Turner Award from the Organization of American Historians, the Lora Romero Distinguished First Book Award from the American Studies Association, and the prestigious Hiatt Prize in the Humanities from the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. Even though the book is a success, Miles acknowledges that the path to producing her scholarship was a difficult and complicated one.

REALITY CONFOUNDING THE IDEAL

At Harvard, Miles says, “I was doing African-American studies, and I was really passionate about that.” Her knowledge of Native Americans consisted of only “a little history and a lot of mythology,” including the image, long cherished by many African Americans, of black slaves who “ran away to the Indians.”

To Miles, now a recently promoted associate professor of American Culture and Afroamerican and African Studies, that image symbolized the will to self-liberation and solidarity between two oppressed peoples. But as she and Joseph Gone headed toward marriage, she found reality confounding the ideal.

“We learned that our families—both families of color—were not very well-equipped to relate with

Ties That Bind

➤ TIYA MILES CONFRONTS MISCONCEPTIONS IN HER WORK AND LIFE

by James Tobin

TIYA MILES WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE at Harvard in the early 1990s when she met the man who would become her husband. He was a Montanan named Joseph Gone, a Native American of the Gros Ventre tribe, neighbors of the Assiniboine and the Blackfeet. As their relationship grew, she says, “A

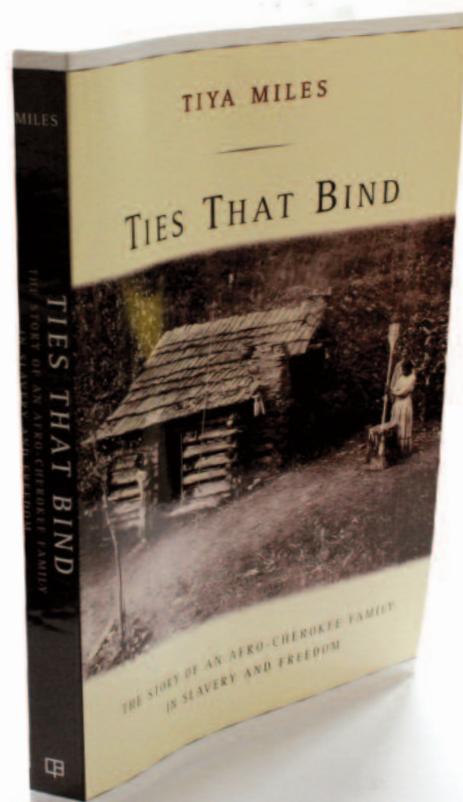
one another,” she says. “I had a fantasy that people of color would have a natural affinity and support each other. We learned in a very personal way that that was not necessarily the case. There were all kinds of misconceptions and even a sense of comparison about who was treated worse. I was disillusioned to learn this. But it made me feel committed to try to do something to combat all the misinformation and the negative emotion that came with it.” Perhaps, she thought, she could find historical precedents for Afro-Indian unity.

In graduate school, reading widely about Afro-Indian relations in early America, Miles spied a footnote about a Cherokee warrior-soldier named Shoe Boots and the African-American mother of his children—the first Cherokee-black relationship to be recognized as a marriage by the Cherokee Nation.

“I thought, ‘Aha, this is going to be that revolutionary story I’m looking for,’” she says.

She collected all the surviving evidence of Shoe Boots’ family. It revealed the complexity of race relations in antebellum America in a way few historians have glimpsed before. But it was not the inspirational story Miles had hoped to find.

The woman named Doll—“a tall, strong-made woman,” according to another slave—was not Shoe Boots’ wife but his slave. He had acquired her in the late 1790s when she was a teenager. She bore five of his children and lived with him for some 30 years. But he never released her from enslavement. At one point, in fact, he gave her and one of their children to another slaveowner. After Shoe Boots’ death in 1829, Doll made a claim for his U.S. veterans’ benefits—he had fought the Creek Indians with Andrew Jackson—and she testified that they had been married “in the Cherokee way.” Denied at first, she finally won her claim. When her last owner died, Doll, by then an



old woman, was declared free, and she lived into the Civil War.

It pained Miles to confront evidence that some Native Americans, rather than rejecting the racism of white Americans, seemed to have adopted it.

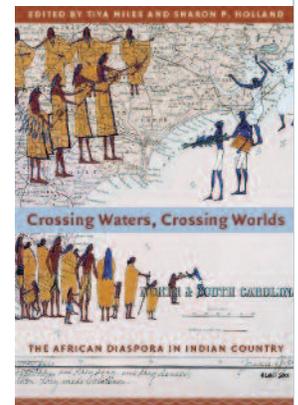
“I’m sure many researchers who do this kind of work—social history—read their documents and feel distraught,” she says. “It’s awful, it’s horrible, you wish the history hadn’t happened. But there it is.”

Still, within the larger picture of a society driven by race, she found moments when “people recognized each other as human beings and were willing to stand up to these incredible systems that were bearing down on them, and it’s important for us to know that people could and did do that.” And if she could not forgive Shoe Boots, she says she came to a deeper understanding of the influence of social context on human relationships.

“I found a story that was mainly about people who were in desperate circumstances and tried to survive, and who, in those circumstances, did awful things to one another,” she says. “Putting this story, this family, into the context of U.S. colonization of native

people and American slavery helped me to understand how people, no matter what race, can turn against each other. They were just trying to survive in a situation that was deeply inhumane. I do hold Shoe Boots accountable. But he was a citizen of a nation that was caught up in a horrible moment.”

Miles continues to explore the world of Cherokees and black slaves. Her latest research deals with a Cherokee named Chief James Vann who owned a plantation and black slaves in northern Georgia. She and Joseph Gone, an LSA assistant professor of psychology and American Culture, are the parents of twin girls.



As an editor of this book, Miles contributed to scholarship about Afro-Indian relations in early America.

*James Tobin (*78) is an associate professor of journalism at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He is the author of Ernie Pyle's War and To Conquer the Air: The Wright Brothers and the Great Race for Flight.*