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TIYA MILES

## **TAKING LEAVE, MAKING LIVES**

### Creative Quests for Freedom in Early Black and Native America

*We also assume it as a first principle that slavery has been permitted and tolerated in all the colonies established in America by European powers, most clearly as relates to the blacks and Africans, and also in relation to Indians.*

—Judge George Mathews of Louisiana, delivering the state Supreme Court’s decision against the emancipation of an Indian man in *Seville v. Chretien*, 1817<sup>1</sup>

*The colonial laws, down to the end of the colonial period, speak, in almost every statute relating to slavery, of “Negro and Indian slaves.”*

—A. Judd Northrup, *Slavery in New York*, 1900<sup>2</sup>

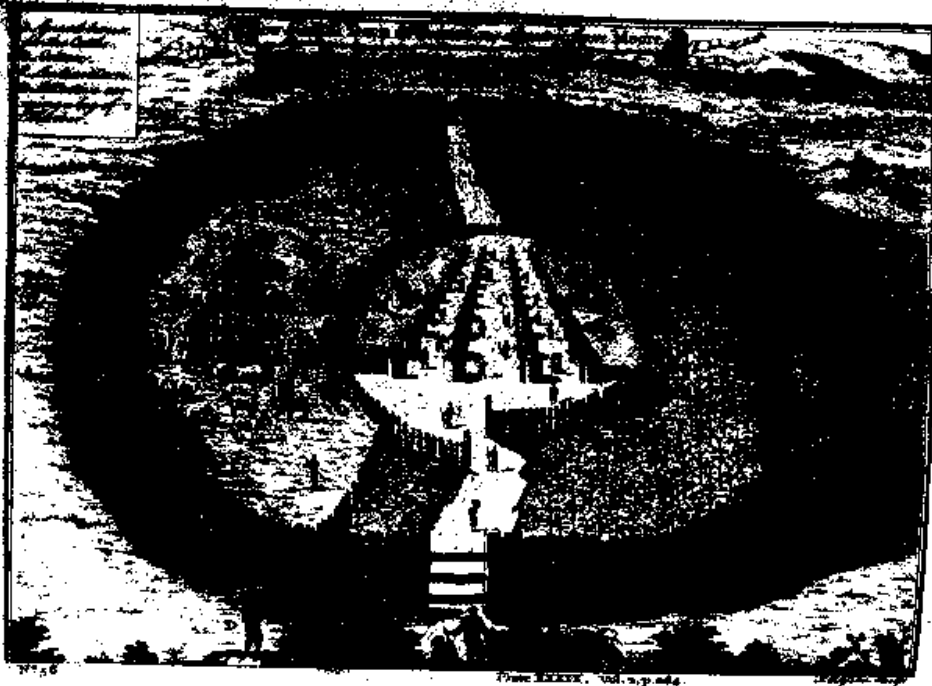
Throughout 2007, the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, celebrated 400 years of history. Pomp, circumstance, and a visit from the Queen of England marked the series of special events. Founded in 1607, Jamestown was the first permanent English colony in what is now the United States. As such, it is also the birthplace of black slavery in America. Many of us are aware that African slaves and indentured servants were brought to Jamestown in 1619 and that a system of chattel slavery expanded into other colonies and hardened over time. We know that black slavery was gradually excised in the northern states in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War and abolished throughout the country as a result of the Civil War. Scholars of American Indian history, colonial history, and ethnohistory, however, are illuminating the fact that this familiar chronology of U.S. slavery is in need of revision, as Spanish enslavement of indigenous

people began in North America before Africans arrived. English, Dutch, and French colonists soon joined in the practice, holding Indians as slaves even as they imported Africans for the same purpose. Jamestown, the fledgling English settlement that barely survived, benefited from stolen labor of not only Africans but also Indians.

In 1981, historian J. Leitch Wright explored this topic in his book about southern Indians, writing: "From the time of European contact in the early sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth century, whites enslaved natives so long as it was profitable and sufficient numbers remained to be captured."<sup>3</sup> In 2002, historian Alan Gallay published a full-length study of Indians and the slave trade in which he discovered and documented the capture, sale, and enslavement of an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 southern Indians by English colonists alone, all before 1715.<sup>4</sup> The numbers, though high, are an incomplete estimate because they do not include Indians enslaved by the Spanish or French, or Indians enslaved throughout the eighteenth century and after.

At the same time that an African diaspora took shape through the dispersal of enslaved blacks, what anthropologist Jack Forbes has called an "American diaspora" was being formed through the sale of enslaved Native Americans.<sup>5</sup> Indian people became slaves of Euro-Americans as a result of being captives of war by members of other tribes and in the aftermath of major battles with European colonists, such as the Pequot War of 1637, King Philip's War of 1675–78, and the Yamasee War of 1715–17. Many of these Indian war captives and refugees—men, women, as well as children—were traded to the Caribbean, Europe, New England, or the upper South. The urban center of Charleston, South Carolina, was the main location for the sale of both African and Indian slaves. Many would have stood on the same auction blocks, traveled across the Atlantic on the same type of ships, and finally ended up in the same northern households or southern or Caribbean plantations. As historian Peter H. Wood observed in his classic study of blacks in South Carolina: "African newcomers found themselves in close proximity not only to Europeans but to Indians as well, for during the proprietary era several thousand Indian slaves still shared the same tasks and the same quarters with Africans from overseas."<sup>6</sup>

While the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in America increased in scale and intensity, the enslavement of Native people diminished and was gradually outlawed in the northern and southern colonies by the middle to late 1700s. But despite new laws forbidding wholesale Indian slavery,



**A Fulani village** in Guinea, West Africa, 1738 (top), and a Native Timucua village in Florida, 1564. In these European views of two communities, the similarities between the two distinct peoples are compelling.

individual Native people could still be captured and held, and Native people who were descended from Indian and black unions were categorized as “Negro” and naturalized into the slavery system.

### **Making Lives: Creative Cultural Production**

In the shared circumstance of enslavement in which many indigenous and African Americans found themselves for at least a century and a half, people came together to forge relationships and share cultural ways. Treated like beasts of burden and forced to labor for the profit of others, slaves faced an environment in which their humanity was degraded and their daily lives dimmed. But even as slavery and its perpetrators conspired to drain dignity from the slaves’ existence, enslaved Indians and blacks maintained their unique cultural traditions and also blended those traditions to create new cultural forms. The impact of culture making in the lives of enslaved people cannot be underestimated. In lending their limited free time to cultural pursuits in evenings and on Sundays, in crafting objects of beauty and utility, and in recalling and enacting the practices of their ancestors, slaves renewed the dignity of their lives, sharpened traditional knowledge and skills, shaped spaces of pleasure and social connection, and infused their surroundings with flashes of beauty. Cultural production, then, was a form of freedom struggle that affirmed enslaved people’s humanity and holistic worth.

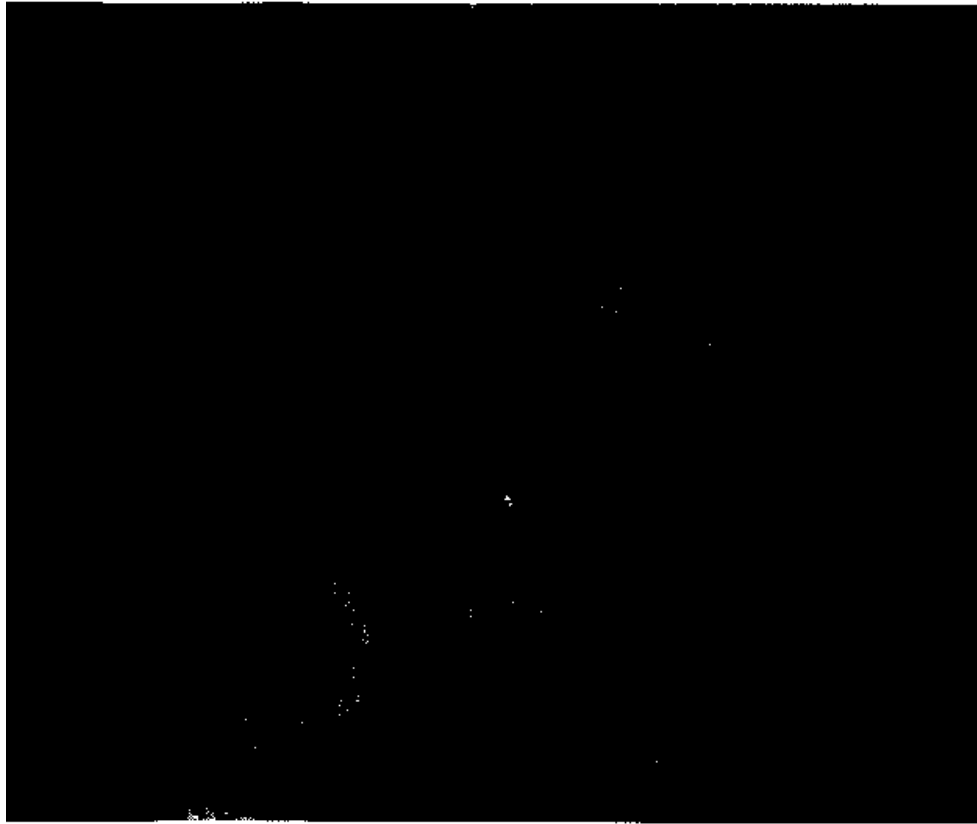
Remnants of the myriad ways that African and Indian slaves shared and melded cultural knowledge have been traced by scholars of slave culture. The corn-based diet of southern Indian tribes left its mark on the recipes of African American “soul food,” in dishes such as cornbread, grits, and hoecake.<sup>7</sup> Black women’s basketweaving designs were probably augmented by Indian patterns and plant preferences.<sup>8</sup> Black southern men who built dugout canoes likely learned this skill from Native male relatives and plantation companions.<sup>9</sup> African American Brer Rabbit trickster stories, with their character, theme, and plot connections to West African stories and southeastern Native rabbit stories, suggest a cross-pollination of folkloric traditions.<sup>10</sup> Plants used as herbal medicines and gourds as containers combined West African and indigenous American knowledge with results that persisted for generations.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1930s, for example, Island Smith, an Afro-Creek Freedman and herbal doctor, would refer to his healing ability as deriving from those dual sources. Smith reported to anthropologist Sigmund Sameth: “Cross-blood means extra knowledge. I can



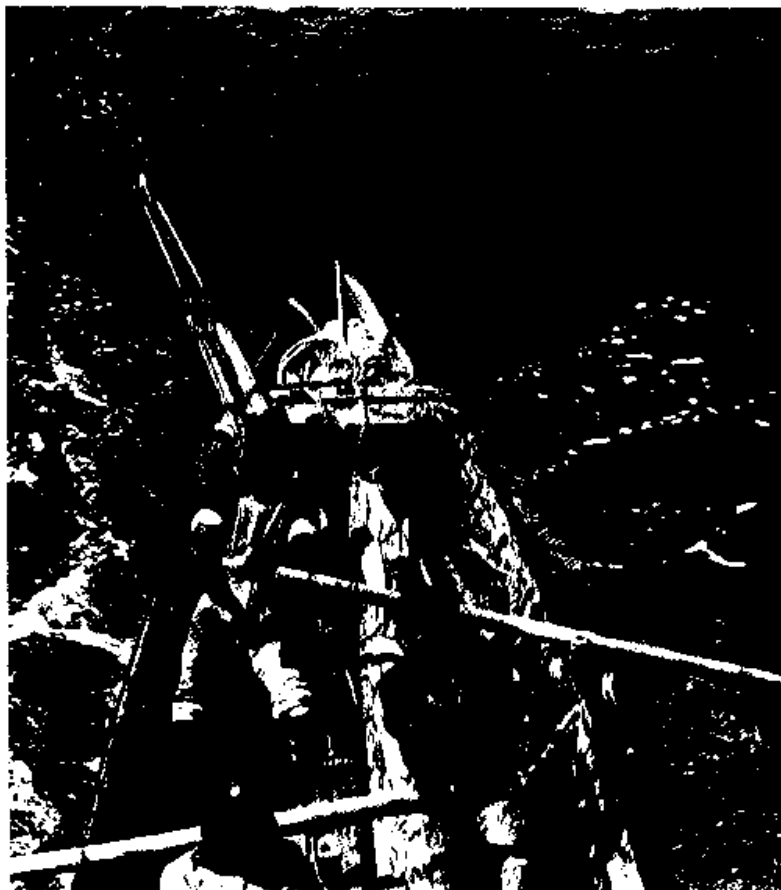
**Island Smith at his desk**, ca. 1935. Smith, an Afro-Creek herbal doctor who practiced in Oklahoma in the early 1900s, drew his spiritual power from both African and Native American traditions.

take my cane [a hollow reed used to apply medicines] and blow it twice and do the same as a Creek full-blood doctor does in four times. Two bloods <sup>15</sup> makes two talents.”<sup>12</sup> 0

Finally, in perhaps the best-known example of black and Indian cultural fusion, a pottery style known as Colono Ware, produced from the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth-century, has been found in Indian towns as well as on Virginia and South Carolina plantations where black, Afro-Native, and Indian slaves worked. Archaeologists who study this pottery have identified both West African and American Indian influences, concluding that “a creolized culture, highly influenced by Native American beliefs, values, and practices, arose.”<sup>13</sup> Archaeologist Leland Ferguson has discovered, further, that a subset of the Colono Ware bowls produced in the 1700s has been engraved with



**Photo of a Montauk family, 1924.** The Shinnecock and Montauk communities of Long Island, with their knowledge of ancestral land and the sea, prospered in the whaling industry of the mid 1600s and late 1700s. By the twentieth century, many Montauk joined other Native communities, and the Shinnecock have had to struggle to keep their land rights while they continue to celebrate their whaling heritage.



**Oarsmen in bow of whaleboat, 1924.** As sailors and laborers on whaleboats, and as captains and crew leaders on ships with mixed African and Indian crews, the Shinnecock and the Montauk prospered and retained land rights from the mid-1600s to the late 1700s. Ironically, their adaptability—and intermarriage with African Americans—obscured their Native identity in the eyes of the white population.

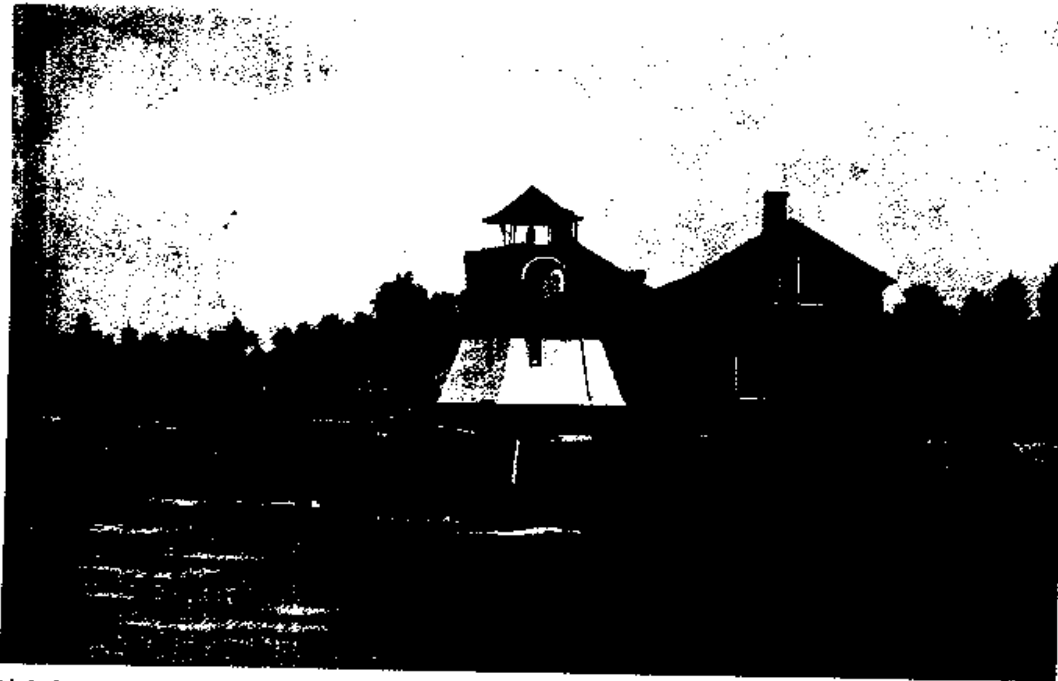
symbols derived from Kongo (West and Central African) religious traditions. The symbol series, distinguished by a cross enclosed within a circle, bears a striking resemblance to Native American medicine-wheel symbology, suggesting that “circle-and-cross symbols could be syncretic, incorporating Christian and Native American as well as African and newly created African American meanings.”<sup>14</sup>

Sharing the experiences of race-based degradation and slavery in early American history led to the exchange and re-creation of cultural forms between Indians and Africans. Even as discrete indigenous traditions continued to be practiced within nationally specific contexts, Native people who had been parted from their home communities contributed to the formation of a creolized Afro-Native culture. What is more, historian Peter H. Wood and feminist theorist bell hooks have speculated that West African concepts of place and the environment, spirituality, respect for ancestors, and the oral tradition paralleled Native American concepts of the same, thereby facilitating the process of cultural synthesis.<sup>15</sup> In creating objects and enacting practices that derived from their multiple cultural traditions, African and Indian slaves improved the quality of their circumscribed lives and asserted their human rights to cultural self-determination and creative expression.

### **Taking Leave: Creative Escape and Rebellion**

Pottery, cookery, dugout canoes—these are all material aspects of Native and black co-creativity during the long, dark night of shared racial slavery. But creativity—the work of imagining and bringing something into being—did not take place just in the realm of material culture. It also played a part in outright resistance to oppression. Written documentation, archaeology, and oral history tell us that enslaved people refused to be reduced to the status of property. Through everyday acts of defiance and plots long in the planning, slaves thwarted the power of owners to fully control and diminish their lives. Historians have mapped slave resistance along a number of axes: from an internal, psycho-social resolve to preserve their human dignity; to subtle external acts, such as negotiating with the master for greater autonomy, reducing work productivity, and briefly and frequently departing from the plantation; to outright attempts to poison the master, commit arson, or take full flight. All of these means of refusal were powered by a spirit of creativity. At a time when racial hierarchy was conceived as natural in Euro-American society and





**Lighthouse at Hell Gate** on the East River in New York.

slavery was sanctioned by culture, church, and state, each deed of noncompliance began with an act of radical imagination. To engage in resistance or seek freedom was a creative endeavor for slaves, who had first to dream a free world and then attempt to reach it. Just as black and Native people blended their cultures in the forms of bowl and basket, they sometimes joined forces to find routes out of slavery.

The first recorded slave revolt in New York City is a dramatic case in point. Recent historical studies and museum exhibitions have illuminated the fallacy that slavery was solely a southern institution. In addition to being commercial partners with southern planters, northerners possessed both Indian and black slaves until the gradual emancipation that followed the American Revolutionary War. In the companion volume to the New York Historical Society's *Slavery in New York* exhibit of 2006, historian Jill Lepore points out that in the 1700s, "New York City was second only to Charleston, South Carolina, in its proportion of slaves in an urban population."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as early as 1629, when New York (New Amsterdam) was occupied by the Dutch, colonists voiced a need for slave labor. They complained that their lack of productivity stemmed from the land's being "very difficult of cultivation, especially for our people who being unaccustomed to so hot a climate can with great difficulty betake themselves to agriculture; and being unprovided with slaves and not used to the employment

of them cannot, like the Spaniards and Portuguese, supply through others their own inefficiency.”<sup>17</sup> The West India Company, which had sponsored the colony, acknowledged that the Spaniards and Portuguese relied on “the labor of blacks and Indians,” and suggested that the Dutch colonists follow suit.<sup>18</sup>

In 1664, the British crown won possession of New York, and King Charles II granted a charter to his brother, the Duke of York, to import African slaves from Guinea.<sup>19</sup> As the enslaved population increased, the New York Assembly passed slave codes that documented the presence of Native as well as black slaves and harshly regimented slave life. An act in 1706 proclaimed that “the baptizing of any Negro, Indian, or Mulatto Slave shall not be any cause or reason for setting them or any of them at liberty,” and added: “All and every Negro, Indian, Mulatto, or Mestee shall follow the state and condition of the mother and be esteemed and reputed, taken and adjudged to be a Slave or Slaves to all intents and purposes whatsoever.”<sup>20</sup> Slaves soon were forbidden to serve as witnesses in cases against free men, limited in the number of miles they could travel away from the city center, outlawed from buying or selling without their master’s permission, and disallowed from assembling in groups of more than three slaves.<sup>21</sup>

In the aftermath of this curtailment of already-limited liberties, slaves in New York rebelled. The spectacular revolt of 1712 in which scores of slaves armed themselves and set fire to the outhouse of one of their owners has been well documented.<sup>22</sup> A fateful rebellion that took place four years earlier, however, remains largely unknown. The story of the slave revolt of 1708 begins on the East River, where Hell Gate, a natural passageway into Long Island Sound, rocked passing ships with terrible tides. Near this spot, an Englishman named William Hallett, Sr., received one of the earliest land grants in what would become Queens, New York, and named his haven Hallett’s Cove. Hallett divided his land between his sons, one of whom, William Hallett, Jr., operated a farm there with the aid of at least two slaves—one African American, the other American Indian.

The slaves—a Native American man and an African American woman—chose to alter their circumstances, rejecting the yoke of their master by shockingly violent means. The plot they developed took planning and daring and must have arisen from a deep sense of desperation. In January 1708, the pair carried out their plan to kill their master’s entire family. Two black slaves from outside the household were later charged as co-conspirators in the attack. A witness described the event as follows:

William Hallett Junior who labored at a place called Hellgate his wife and five children in a quarter of an hour were all murdered by one Indian slave whom he had up for 4 years. There was a Negro woman Slave in the house who was to him in counseling this bloody matter. . . . About seven at night Hallett and his wife returned home and went to bed. . . . The slaves were watching their opportunity for they had to do it that night.<sup>23</sup>

The Indian slave, called Sam in this testimony, was said to have killed his master, pregnant mistress, and all of their children with an axe. *The Boston News-Letter*, a regional newspaper, followed the case, reporting that “[o]n Saturday night last Mr. William Hallett junior of Newtown on Long-Island, his Wife who was big with Child, and five Children were all murdered by an Indian Man and a Negro Woman[,] their own slaves.”<sup>24</sup> Without offering evidence, the newspaper claimed that “several other Families were designed for the like slaughter, had they succeeded in this without discovery.”<sup>25</sup>

Retribution for the killings would be swift and final. Lord Governor Edward Hyde Cornbury reported on the incident in a letter to the Lords of Commissioners of Trade and Plantations in February 1708:

A most barbarous murder has been committed on the family of one Hallett by an Indian Man Slave, and a Negro Woman, who have murder'd their Master, Mistress, and five Children; The Slaves were taken, and I immediately issued a special commission for the Tryal of them, which was done, and the man sentenced to be hanged, and the woman burnt, and they have been executed; They Discovered two other Negros, their accomplices who have been tried, condemned & Executed.<sup>26</sup>

The couple at the center of the rebellion faced awful deaths. The Boston newspaper reported that they were “on Monday the 2d instant Executed at Jamaica [Queens] . . . and put to all the torment possible.”<sup>27</sup> The woman, whose name is not recorded, was burned alive at the stake and taunted with a horn of water she could not reach, and Sam was hung to death on the gallows while being pierced by an iron spike.<sup>28</sup> The two accused African American men were also hanged. The punishments endured by these slaves were intended to be “a terror to others.”<sup>29</sup> And soon after the executions were carried out, the New York Assembly

passed an act threatening “the Pains of Death” to “all and every Negro, Indian, or other Slave or Slaves within this Colony who at any time after the execrable and barbarous Murther [*sic*] committed upon the Person and Family of William Hallett jun. late of New-Town . . . have has or shall Murder or otherwise Kill . . . or Conspire or Attempt the Death of his[,] her[,] or their Master or Mistriss.”<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the evidence of increasingly harsh slave codes, the documentary record does not tell us who this Native man and black woman were as full individuals with life histories, what specific circumstances motivated their behavior, or why they chose to follow such a treacherous course of action in an attempt to be free. *The Boston News-Letter* asserts that the pair chose to rebel “because they were restrained from going abroad on the Sabbath days.”<sup>31</sup> Whatever their motivations, their actions were undeniably violent and destructive. But their attempt to free themselves from the misery of their world was also without a doubt radical and resounding.<sup>32</sup>

A renaissance of scholarship on African American and Native American historical relations has examined the role of southern Indians as slaveholders,<sup>33</sup> and indeed, tracing the development and dynamics of Native adoption of black slavery is a necessary part of our broader historical understanding of race relations, colonialism, and power. Among the populations of the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokees, and to a lesser extent, Creeks and Seminoles, nearly 10,000 black slaves were held in bondage between the late 1700s and the end of the Civil War.<sup>34</sup> After emancipation, those former slaves and their descendants faced racial prejudice within their Indian nations, as well as rampant Jim Crow discrimination across the state of Oklahoma.

At the same time that we must confront the reality of black slavery in Indian nations, it is equally important to recognize the much longer period that indigenous Americans and African Americans, as well as Afro-Indians, were enslaved together by European colonists and early Americans. Tens of thousands of Native people were held in bondage between the mid-sixteenth and the early-nineteenth-centuries. Nearly half a million enslaved Africans were transported to North America in the latter part of that same period, and their numbers would increase to approximately four million by 1865. Through the brutal shared experience of bondage, Native Americans and African Americans came into intimate contact, forging deep relationships that inspired collective cultural forms and emboldened creative quests for freedom.