



1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



1619 Project A New Origin Part 4 Slavery and Native Americans

July 14, 2022
6:30 – 8:00 PM

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August 11, 2022

**1619 Project: New Origin Part 5
Politics & Citizenship**

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Contact: John Piche' at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

Dispossession by Tiya Alicia Miles is an American historian. She is a professor of history at Harvard University and Radcliffe Alumnae Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

What Slavery Looked Like In the West by Kevin Waite is a political historian of the 19th-century United States with a focus on slavery, imperialism, and the American West. His first book, *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire* (UNC Press, 2021), is a study of slaveholding expansion in California and the Far Southwest. He teaches at Durham University in the UK.

America's Other Original Sin by Rebecca Onion lives in Athens, Ohio, and write about culture, history, and ideas for magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. She is currently a senior editor for Slate.com

Indian Slavery: An Atlantic and Hemispheric Problem by Rebecca Goetz is associate professor of history at New York University.

On November 18, 1785, a contingent of Cherokee people arrived at Hopewell Plantation, on the bucolic banks of a South Carolina river, for a meeting that would help set the structure of the American racial hierarchy for centuries to come. It was the first in a set of negotiations between the United States and the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw Nations. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, these negotiations would begin to lay the groundwork for the relationship between the United States and Native governments. If the United States was to consolidate and grow as a country, it had to contend with all of the Indigenous people, who, though devastated by over a century of imperial and colonial battles, were still populous and powerful, and who controlled most of the American continent.

Native people were critical to the American economy as the procurers of skins for the profitable fur trade, and they also posed a threat to American settler communities. In the years before the American Revolution, Cherokees and English colonists in South Carolina had carried out attacks against one another amid trade disputes and cultural misunderstandings, and in retribution for prior killings. These altercations led to the deaths of nearly two hundred Carolinians at Cherokee hands in the year 1760 alone and disrupted the racial power structure by giving some enslaved Black people the opportunity to flee their English captors. A year later, following what is known as the Anglo-Cherokee War, English troops crushed nearby Cherokee towns, pushing the Cherokees into a defensive posture that lasted through the cataclysmic war that broke out between the Patriots and the English in the 1770s.¹

At the time of that war, the largest Indigenous societies south of the Ohio River in the eighteenth century—the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws,

Creeks, and Seminoles—resided in hundreds of towns linked by kinship, language, religion, cultural practices, economic exchange, and governing structures across the present-day states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. When the colonists resisted the British and mounted an armed defense that evolved into full-scale war, Native people, squeezed by both sides, had to choose alliances. As the conflict intensified, many large and influential Native nations leaned toward Great Britain.² Once it was over, the Indigenous people knew that if they were to survive the encroachment of their land, the taking of natural resources, and the local violence that an ambitious new nation in their midst portended, they had to come to terms with the victor in that contest. And so the Cherokee contingent traveled to Hopewell.

The land on which discussions would unfold was a plantation—a place where enslaved people would be forced to labor against their will—owned by General Andrew Pickens, a formidable South Carolina militia leader during the American Revolution. Pickens had been a man of modest means from a South Carolina interior Scots-Irish family who gradually rose to prominence during the war years. By 1773, Pickens had managed to obtain two enslaved Black people, an essential first step in his climb up the Southern social and economic ladder. In July 1784, in recognition of his service in America's Revolutionary War, General George Washington awarded Pickens 573 acres on the Keowee River. This fertile land had previously belonged to the Cherokees, who had generally sided with the British in the conflict and had been badly beaten by Washington's army. For a low price, Pickens quickly acquired adjacent parcels totaling over a thousand acres, which he registered in the names of his children, including a future governor of the state, Andrew Pickens, Jr.³ With his newfound wealth and status secured, Andrew Pickens, Sr., had a sizable house built near a majestic oak tree and began his career as a country gentleman.

Pickens was joined by three men from elite families who also enslaved people and whom Congress had appointed as treaty commissioners. Colonel Benjamin Hawkins, the son of a wealthy tobacco agriculturalist from North Carolina, would conduct the bulk of the negotiations. Joseph Martin, who hailed from a wealthy Virginia clan, and General Lachlan McIntosh, a Georgia rice agriculturalist, would participate as well.⁴

The commissioners had expected a small cadre of Indigenous representatives to appear when they invited the head men of the Cherokee nation to convene at Hopewell. They were shocked when five hundred Cherokees arrived, including women, and soon after several hundred more. These congregants may have expected the distribution of diplomatic gifts from their hosts,

which was an Indigenous custom, picked up by the French and, to a lesser extent, the British. In addition, at the time, Native peoples of the South were deeply democratic and arrived at decisions by consensus. Ultimately, two individuals, Corn Tassel and the Beloved Woman Nanye-hi (or Nancy Ward), both of Chota town, emerged as chief spokespeople.³ Under the branches of the large oak tree, in the shadow of a plantation house, the Cherokee leaders and the commissioners met to formalize a settlement.

Corn Tassel and the Beloved Woman Nanye-hi attempted to defend their claim to the Southern soil. These leaders complained about the thousands of white people who had encroached on their lands and made homes there, urging the treaty commissioners to remove them as a condition of the peace. The American officials asserted that they had no power to act, because the squatters were so numerous. There was nothing they could do.

The Cherokee negotiators suspected that Hawkins and the rest were being disingenuous. In many ways, these settlers were the advance guard of U.S. expansion into Indigenous territory. Corn Tassel responded with more than a hint of sarcasm. "Are Congress, who conquered the King of Great Britain, unable to remove the people?" he asked.⁴

But the commissioners made it clear that the Cherokees must sign agreements with the Americans in order to avoid the devastation of further conflict, and it would have been apparent to the Cherokee leaders that they had little choice. A grand cotton plantation owned by a military leader made the ideal setting to demonstrate American presence, authority, and expectations. Pickens was also known by Native leaders for his brutality; he had personally led violent incursions into the villages of the Cherokees during the war, and as Colin Calloway, a colonial historian, put it, his militia "hacked to death the defenseless occupants as they fled on foot."⁵

On November 28, 1785, ten days after the Cherokees had arrived, American and Cherokee negotiators agreed to the terms of the first Treaty of Hopewell. The Cherokees would accept the "protection of the United States of America, and of no other sovereign." They would return all U.S. prisoners as well as "restore all the Negroes, and all other property taken during the late war from the citizens." Some of these Black former captives were being held in unfree status among the Cherokees, and others had married into Native families. The treaty also stipulated that the Cherokees were to abide by a set of geographical boundary lines drawn between themselves and white Americans.⁶

In return, the United States agreed to prohibit its citizens from "settling on any of the lands westward or southward of the said boundary," excluding

lands inside those boundaries that Corn Tassel had explicitly highlighted as an area where many white people were already illegally living. The United States also promised to regulate trade between Cherokee people and white people and to treat the Cherokees justly. If the Cherokees handed over the Black people and other "property" and respected the new boundaries and U.S. law, "the hatchet," the commissioners attested, "shall be forever buried."⁷

This first Treaty of Hopewell was followed by two others that winter, with the Choctaws and the Chickasaws, with nearly identical stipulations.⁸ Hawkins, the principal negotiator, effectively hemmed in large populations of Native people with the establishment of explicit official borders. The American insistence on crafting treaties at the national level recognized Native political and territorial sovereignty, but the terms of the treaties subordinated Native nations to the American nation.

They also underscored a meaningful difference between Native and Black people.⁹ Just as the colonies had formerly been under the "protection" of the British, Native nations would now be under the "protection" of the Americans. And while that protected status was arguably a less independent one than had previously existed, it was nevertheless a privileged one in relation to African Americans. Whereas members of the Native nations were citizens of their own countries, deserving, at least on paper, human and political rights, African Americans were citizens of nowhere and undeserving even of the rights of personhood.

During these three visits to Hopewell, the Native participants learned important lessons from the plantation scene splayed before them and from the language of the treaties: white people were citizens, Black people were possessions, and Indigenous people were now subject to national interference. In order to maintain the "protection" of the United States from its own citizens, Native leaders were being indirectly encouraged to participate in a form of racial hierarchy that was considered part and parcel of civilized American society—one that has distorted Native and Black relations ever since.

Today, African Americans and Native Americans share the highest incarceration and poverty rates in the country, as well as the lowest high school graduation numbers. Both groups appear at the bottom of a range of health and well-being indicators, and both have suffered high rates of serious illness during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰ And yet the two groups have often struggled to find solidarity, a painful legacy of the way they learned to regard each other in the nation's formative years.

The leaders of the tribal nations, and subgroups within them, that supported Great Britain were choosing the devil they knew. Although English settlers had often taken advantage of Native people with dire effect, the British government exercised greater control over the actions of its subjects than American statesmen seemed inclined to do. This was in large part an economic, not a humanitarian, calculation. During the colonial era, the colonists' constant westward settlement financially strained the Crown, which was called upon to protect these incursions into Native territory with troops and forts. In 1763, King George III issued a royal proclamation asserting authority to oversee trade with Native Americans and forbidding the expansion of white settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. Although there was no enforcement arm for this provision, its existence created a legal barrier that colonists resented, and Native leaders lauded.

In fact, this tension was a contributing factor to the American Revolution. The colonies were growing rapidly in population and running out of fertile Southern plantation ground that would support the sons of landholders, as well as open territory that would satisfy the desire for upward mobility among the swelling yeoman farmer ranks, whose contentment was necessary for political stability. In addition, as the historian Jeffrey Ostler has elucidated, eastern elites such as George Washington held financial interests in these westerly lands that could not be exploited while the Proclamation of 1763 prevented freewheeling land sales.¹¹ As Calloway succinctly put it in *The Indian World of George Washington*: "The Revolution was not only a war for independence and a new political order; it was also a war for the North American continent."¹⁴

It is little wonder, then, that Native people tended to side with the British. During the war American soldiers attacked hundreds of Native towns and British loyalist strongholds. Native soldiers also raided Patriot settlements. In 1777, a group of intransigent Cherokees called the Chickamauga warriors, led by Dragging Canoe, Doublehead, the Glass, Bloody Fellow, and others, began a series of guerrilla attacks on settlements. Sometimes Black people were taken captive, enslaved, or given to other Cherokees.

After the war, as American political leaders prepared to form a new national government, they knew that they had a significant problem. The British did not control most of the lands signed over in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution—Native people did, and some of the aggrieved Cherokee men continued to fight against the Americans in the interior. The road map for living alongside unpredictable Native American nations and, furthermore, for accessing those coveted lands that Native peoples claimed and actively defended, was not clear-cut for the leaders of the infant republic.

The new American politicians and their British forebears believed that Native people should be treated simultaneously as citizens of nations and as members of lower-order societies. The Americans inherited a grab bag of strategies for dealing with Indigenous peoples from the English, who had generally viewed Native nations as separate political bodies with prior occupancy of the soil. But the British also saw Native people as unchristian "heathens" and as "savages" who had not actually developed the land in a civilized manner that would qualify them as rightful owners. The Doctrine of Discovery, a longstanding belief that Christian nations had the right to rule over non-Christian nations and their property, helped justify English imperialism despite prior Native presence. English officials as well as private buyers purchased Indigenous land by contract while also grabbing land through manipulation, coercion, and outright seizure in the aftermath of war. Because the English subscribed to the principles of the rule of law and the primacy of property rights, they used isolated crimes by Native men as rationalizations for large-scale attacks on Native communities.

Following the Revolution, American statesmen carried on with this mixed approach. They recognized Native nations, politically and geographically, as sovereign entities with the authority to govern themselves, define their citizenry, and occupy their territory. The United States made treaties with tribal nations as with foreign governments, even if these nations were not seen as fully equivalent to European states.¹⁵ And among the most important treaties was the one set in place at Hopewell with the Cherokee Nation. This agreement was negotiated when the United States was just being shaped and it established the first geographical border to the west. But that was not the only reason it was so influential. It also established slavery as part of the American way.

Slavery was not unknown to Native Southerners when they met with the American commissioners at Hopewell. Before the formation of the modern Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek Nations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ancient Indigenous civilizations had organized life around hierarchical governing structures now called Mississippian chiefdoms. A man or woman with inherited rank, the town chief or paramount chief with influence over multiple towns, customarily enjoyed privileged status and decision-making authority. Chiefdoms practiced a form of slavery in which people of a lower caste (seized from other Native societies) were forced to labor for the chiefs they served and were sometimes ritually killed and buried with them.

With the arrival of European explorers and conquistadors in the 1500s, chiefdoms encountered deadly foreign diseases as well as another threat: European slavery. They would certainly have noticed that conquistadors often arrived with captive people of darker-hued skin.

When Hernando de Soto came ashore in present-day Tampa, Florida, in 1539, intent on finding riches for the Spanish Crown, in addition to a contingent of 625 soldiers and 250 horses, he brought enslaved people. He also carried iron restraints for locking up Indigenous people he hoped to seize. De Soto and his men marched from coastal Florida through the inner reaches of Georgia and Carolina, attacking Native villages, raiding their food supplies, ransacking their dwellings in search of gold and silver, and capturing some of the inhabitants. During their ruthless trek, de Soto and his men encountered sophisticated societies with intricate political and cultural systems and ample natural resources. In present-day South Carolina, de Soto's party met a woman chieftain of the domain of Cofitachequi. Struck by her stately appearance—she was borne aloft in a sedan chair carried by several men—de Soto seized two hundred pounds of pearls and deerskins from her temple and then kidnapped her. Just beyond the borders of her domain, this captive, known in the historical record as the Lady of Cofitachequi, escaped with a cache of her precious pearls. Later, Spanish deserters reported that they had seen the Lady of Cofitachequi living as a spouse with a “Spanish slave” who had also escaped. This person was almost certainly of African descent.¹⁶

In this dramatic instance, it seems that an Indigenous leader and an African captive found common cause and forged new lives together in a dangerous and changing political environment, but the space in which mutual support was possible would shrink in the coming decades. By 1680, the Cofitachequi chiefdom had disappeared. Disease, political instability, and slaving had ravaged Mississippian chiefdoms in the century and a half after Europeans arrived and led to a widespread societal collapse that left behind what the anthropologist Robbie Ethridge has termed a “shatter zone.”¹⁷

Europeans in the Southeast established towns that thrived, in large part, on a virulent slave trade. These colonists, who possessed deadly weapons, traded manufactured English goods to Native hunters for deerskins. They also demanded to enslave Indigenous people in exchange for goods and as payment for debts that Native hunters had accrued in past transactions. As they sought to survive in a maelstrom of change set in motion by modern European capitalism, colonialism, and racial slavery, Native Americans began actively raiding and seizing people from other tribes in order to establish strong trade relations with the English, to service debts, and to avoid being hunted them-

selves. As the historian Alan Gáljay has documented, at least thirty to fifty thousand Indigenous Southerners were enslaved by Anglo colonists before the year 1715. Many of these Native people were traded to enslavers in the Caribbean and Europe; a large number were transported to New England; and some were sold to operations in the Upper South, particularly Virginia. Even as an African diaspora was taking shape, as Africans were tracked down in their own regions and brought to others through the Middle Passage, an “American diaspora,” writes the anthropologist Jack Forbes, was developing as Indigenous Americans were also violently relocated.¹⁸

Thrown together by European invasion, colonization, and slavery in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries, Indigenous and African people came into intimate contact and forged relationships that changed their lives and bound their fates. In the colonial period, Charles Towne (now Charleston, South Carolina) was a major site for the sale of both African and Native people, as was New Amsterdam (New York City). These captives stood on the same auction blocks, traversed the Atlantic on the same ships, and finally ended up in the same Northern households or Southern or Caribbean plantations, where they lived, labored, suffered, and surely dreamed together.¹⁹

These shared circumstances of enslavement led to the merger of families, cultures, and fates. Indigenous American people intermarried with Africans and their American-born descendants.²⁰ Corn-based and leafy green-intensive Indigenous diets fused with African American cooking that relied on sweet potatoes, black-eyed peas, and pork to form a fundamental part of Southern regional culinary culture. Black women became expert basket weavers, most notably along the Carolina and Georgia coasts, using Native American plant preferences, even as Black men likely learned to build dugout canoes from Indigenous men. Enslaved Black people used local plants as herbal medicines in accordance with Indigenous knowledge, and both groups developed a rich and perhaps mutually informed folklore centering on trickster rabbit stories. Enslaved Black and Native Americans produced a distinctive pottery style known by archaeologists as colonoware. Many of these earthen vessels, which have been discovered on Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia estates, are marked with hybrid circle and cross symbols believed to be reflective of West African, Native American, and Christian religious beliefs.²¹

Black and Native people also ran away together and had families. Their mixed-race and bicultural children were both African and Indigenous American but were often recorded simply as “Negro” in private and colonial ledgers, rendering them virtually invisible to historical researchers. Black and Native people also enacted small-scale rebellions, such that British agents and

colonial leaders expressed great concern about the probability of organized and effective political alliances between these groups. This fear continued, and when Seminole, Creek, and Black people waged a prolonged defensive war against American soldiers in the Seminole country of Florida in the early 1800s, American military commanders expressed particular consternation because of its interracial character.²³

Yet all along free Indigenous Southerners could not have failed to notice that imported captive foreigners with dark skin were outnumbering Native people among the unfree population. They surely would have been alarmed, too, at how English colonial law deemed these African captives unfree for life, a status passed through the womb. While there were opportunities for some Native people, who were considered potentially redeemable and assimilable, to be converted to Christianity in regions like New England and the Great Lakes, the rules were different for African captives in the South. Even if they embraced Christianity, they would retain their unfree status, due to new English laws crafted to disallow an escape hatch from slavery by way of Christian conversion. Unlike older forms of Indigenous American slavery in the Southeast that involved the capture of people from different tribes whose status was often transitory, English captivity had become both racial and heritable.²⁴

Native Southerners soon recognized the difference that race made and saw that Black people were being defined as a distinct and inferior group with no hope of incorporation into the new American nation as free and respected people. By 1793, some Native Americans in the South were making racial distinctions and displaying prejudices. That year, a Cherokee leader named Little Turkey was recorded as using the term “mulattoes” as a slur against the Spanish in a letter to the American governor of Tennessee, and by 1811 a Cherokee chief named Richard Brown, who disputed a white man’s possession of a horse, protested the dismissal of his demands by asking the U.S. agent, “Are we considered as negroes who cannot support our claims?”²⁴ Slavery was no longer a bridge between Indigenous and African people struggling to survive in similar straits but a wall of division. As a color line hardened and Native people struggled to keep to the free side of it, they were able to leverage political standing as members of nations and economic players that Africans, stolen from their tribes and homelands, could not.

Even so, in the years after the treaties were signed at Hopewell, the situation deteriorated for the tribal nations. Almost immediately, in clear violation of the agreements, American citizens expanded their footprint on Southern soil

by crossing tribal borders and establishing homesteads and businesses that evolved into settlements and towns. The flood of settlers—many of them men with weapons—washed through the forests and mountains, threatening the safety, hunting grounds, and livelihood of Native peoples.²⁵ Furious about the injustice of white encroachment and the failure of the states and the national government to uphold the terms of the treaties, resistant Chickamauga Cherokees relocated to a Tennessee River stronghold and from there launched a series of guerrilla attacks.

Dealing with this grave situation was one of the most pressing matters during George Washington’s first term as president. Together with his secretary of war Henry Knox, Washington devised a federal policy that would avoid “exterminating” Native people and focus instead on civilizing them, as this seemed the most humanitarian and effective way to bring them under U.S. authority and foster their eventual assimilation. The architects of the early American state were Age of Enlightenment thinkers who believed that Indigenous people had the intelligence and ability to assimilate into proper society, unlike Africans, whom they viewed as innately insufficient.

In an address to Congress in 1791, Washington outlined six principles for federal relations with Native people; these included delivering “impartial” justice, regulated methods of land sales and trade, the right of the government to distribute diplomatic presents, penalties for those who violated Natives’ rights, and “rational experiments . . . for imparting to them the blessings of civilization.” The following year, Washington urged Congress to create a plan for “promoting civilization among the friendly tribes.”²⁶

This view was reflected in the Treaty of Holston, signed in 1791, an update of the Hopewell Treaties, which compelled Cherokees to “be led to a greater degree of civilization, and to become herdsmen and cultivators, instead of remaining in a state of hunters.”²⁷ Native people’s ways of life necessitated broad swaths of land for growing corn, squash, and beans; for plants collected from diverse locations; for extensive hunting; and for ceremonial travel to far-off towns with spiritual significance. But the “civilization” program assumed that Indians would recognize the superiority of Western culture and be willing to change without being coerced by force. As civilized tribes, Washington reasoned, the Native people would neither need nor claim so much land. And in exchange for the Cherokees’ consent to “civilizing” practices, the United States promised to prevent Americans from pushing past the new boundaries.

George Washington appointed Benjamin Hawkins superintendent to the Southern tribes in 1796 to translate this plan on the ground. When offering the

post to Hawkins, Washington reportedly entreated him to conduct "the experiment which you have suggested, and try the effects of civilization among them," implying that Hawkins had influenced Washington's own ideas.³⁸

The federal civilization plan was spare on specifics but transformative in practice. American officials intended to drive what the historians Theda Perdue and Michael Green have termed "comprehensive cultural change," converting a communal lifestyle rooted in sustainable farming and hunting into an individualistic lifestyle punctuated by private property and male authority. The policy demanded that Native men give up the bow for the plow, and that Native women cease farming corn and turn their attention to the domestic work of spinning thread, weaving cloth, and other "properly" feminine activities. Native people were advised to adopt Christianity and begin producing "civilized crops" like cotton.³⁹ And Native tribes, which held lands in common, were expected to embrace, as Henry Knox put it, "a love for exclusive property."⁴⁰ To aid in this reinvention of Indigenous society, the United States would provide tools, fund the establishment of Christian missions and schools, and commission blacksmiths. If Native people did not prove that they could rise above savagery and assimilate, Hawkins and others believed, they would be crowded out or killed.⁴¹

And there was yet one more thing. Native communities were encouraged to adopt what had emerged as a defining characteristic of civilized Euro-American society in the South: the enslavement of Black people.

Because the federal civilization policy was conceived, developed, and enforced by enslavers who felt their way of life was advanced and ideal, it included the tacit expectation that the most progressive among Native Americans, those who would lead their people into the future, should also enslave Black people. Although this was not explicitly written into the plan, Natives who enslaved people found favor with the U.S. government, garnering positive reviews in the federal agents' reports and earning government contracts and military honors.

This lesson was also clear on Benjamin Hawkins's model farm in the Creek Nation, where he resided and had relocated many of his enslaved Black people from North Carolina. Here he provided not only an agricultural demonstration for Native people he viewed as pupils but also what the colonial historian James Merrell has called a "racial education." Well-positioned mixed-race Native families of Indigenous and European ancestry began to follow Hawkins's example first, and soon their large farms became models for others in how to maintain a racial order with the Black population at the bottom.⁴²

Over the next two decades, until his death in 1816, Hawkins was the chief civilian enforcer of this plan, a role that saw him traveling frequently to the nations under his charge to survey their progress toward cultural change. His notes on these visits indicate that while Native people were experimenting with Black slavery, many were not yet doing so precisely as he had intended. The agent recorded these failings, including Native women who were marrying Black captives and Native men who were working in fields alongside the people they were enslaving.⁴³ While Hawkins found a number of Creek and Cherokee people exhibiting "no economy or management" during his visits, he did find one person deemed "industrious" as early as 1796. That man, Hawkins recorded, was worthy of such praise for having sixty-one enslaved people, more than two hundred horses, four hundred cattle, and three hundred hogs.⁴⁴

Even so, within the nations that had signed treaties at Hopewell Plantation, slavery gradually took root. Among the Indigenous nations, Cherokees enslaved the largest number of people, but Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws also developed entrenched systems of Black enslavement tethered to racial prejudice.⁴⁵ And although it is the case that enslavers in Native nations were always a small minority of their populations (approximately 2.3 percent by the 1860s, in comparison with approximately 20 percent in the white South), they were also elite members of their rapidly changing societies. These were the men who formed new centralized governing bodies, wrote the laws, and negotiated treaties.⁴⁶

One such individual was James Vann, the son of a Scottish trader and Cherokee woman. Vann had defended collective Cherokee landholdings in negotiations with American officials. But by the early 1800s, he had established a large wheat, corn, and cotton estate in Cherokee territory, becoming the Cherokee Nation's best example of a Native proponent of American-style race slavery. Vann controlled nearly eight hundred acres of rich agricultural land bordered by a prominent waterway. A wily strategist and smart entrepreneur, he did business with the federal government, invited Christian missionaries to his grounds, lobbied for a federal road to pass by his home, and then established a string of hospitality and transport businesses.⁴⁷

He also owned nearly seventy women, men, and children of African descent: they cleared land, farmed crops, constructed buildings, prepared meals, cleaned and maintained his living quarters, wove textiles, watched

over the cattle, delivered goods, and tended to the physical and emotional needs of his family. Vann employed a violent overseer, had once burned down enslaved people's cabins in a fit of rage, and personally carried out or oversaw the chaining and hanging of enslaved men. By the time of his death in 1809, James Vann lived in an impressive home with his Cherokee wife (also of mixed European and Cherokee parentage) and had enslaved more than one hundred Black people.⁴³

James's son "Rich Joe" Vann inherited the estate and many of the enslaved Black residents. The younger Vann replaced the existing family home with an imposing brick manor house festooned with white columns and intricate hand-carved wooden interiors, as well as an architecturally noteworthy "floating" staircase. Joe Vann's Georgia mansion, in which his Cherokee family ate off imported European china and drank from expensive glassware, was meant to symbolize civilizational progress and to showcase his affluence to the planners, like Benjamin Hawkins, of the new American nation-state.⁴⁴

But adopting a republican form of government and operating plantations worked by slave labor would not be enough to protect Native Southerners. White citizens craved more land, and they would have it.

In 1828, Andrew Jackson surged to the presidency on a wave of populist enthusiasm. In his inaugural address, he expressed his understanding that Native nations were subject to U.S. authority and referred to "Indian tribes within our limits," instead of using the language of sovereign nationhood.⁴⁵ Jackson's second State of the Union address, in December 1830, advocated for the expulsion of Native people from their homes, towns, houses of worship, and seats of government. He urged Congress to effect Native "removal" through legislation. This would be a national policy of expulsion with limited financial support, affecting not only the Cherokees and other Southeastern nations but also nations in the Midwest. Arguing that American progress was to be commended, not lamented, Jackson insisted: "Philanthropy could not wish to see this continent restored to the condition in which it was found by our forefathers. What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic?"⁴⁶

In Jackson's view, the removal of Native people in the East to a region west of the Mississippi River was "not only liberal, but generous."⁴⁷ There they would be isolated and protected from the white man's influence, and their cultures better preserved. In the end, Jackson reasoned, this relocation would benefit Native Americans. Using the excuse of the government's inability to control white settlers, as had been claimed in the Hopewell Treaty negotiations nearly forty-five years prior, Jackson asked, "Can it be cruel in this Gov-

ernment when, by events which it cannot control, the Indian is made discontented in his ancient home to purchase his lands, to give him a new and extensive territory, to pay the expense of his removal, and support him a year in his new abode? How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing West on such conditions!"⁴⁸

Jackson's rhetoric emboldened state leaders who already felt that Indigenous lands of the South should be occupied by their citizens instead of by Native Americans. Some advocates for white occupation and Native expulsion used explicit racial arguments, challenging the unique status of Native people as citizens of tribal nations. The editor of one Georgia newspaper, for instance, insisted that Cherokees were "a colored people" and therefore not due the respect of legal protections accorded to sovereign tribes. When it came to differentiating between Native Americans and people of color, he contended, "Abstractly, there is no difference."⁴⁹ Despite vociferous protest by Native leaders and white allies, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which authorized the president to remove tribes from their homes and lands east of the Mississippi and relocate them on land west of the river. On May 28, 1830, Jackson signed the bill into law.⁵⁰

Shortly afterward, in June 1830, Georgia put into effect a law the state had passed two years earlier, asserting jurisdiction over Cherokee territory; the idea of taking over that land had become even more enticing after gold was discovered. The Georgia Guard, an armed force created to patrol the Cherokee Nation, violated Cherokee borders, destroyed the nation's printing press, harassed Native women, and arrested national leaders. In 1832, Georgia established a lottery for the redistribution of all Cherokee land to white Georgians. Cherokees had no say as their homes, outbuildings, and fields were surveyed and assigned to white owners. Mayhem followed.⁵¹

The Vann family was not spared. In 1833, Rich Joe and more than a dozen family members were powerless as they huddled together in a single room of their brick manor house while two white men who both claimed ownership of the estate through the lottery fought over who would get it. One of the men was a Georgia Guard commander, accompanied by soldiers. He ordered them to fire on his rival for the property. Gunshots ignited the wood of the showstopper stairway, which burst into flames.⁵² The Vann family escaped the fire, relinquishing their land and house but not the enslaved people, whom they brought along when they took refuge in their second home in Tennessee. This respite for the Vanns would be short-lived, however, as they and other Cherokees, rich and poor, would be expelled again within five years.

With Andrew Jackson in the presidency, federal and state proponents of Native expulsion worked in tandem to pressure the Cherokees into leaving the South for Indian Territory, western lands acquired through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Convinced that exile was inevitable, a small cohort of elite Cherokee men (mostly enslavers) signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835, relinquishing the people's claim to their remaining land in the Southeast. The treaty was deemed fraudulent by the Cherokees' elected principal chief, John Ross (also an enslaver), who had not authorized these men to represent the nation. Cherokees organized a campaign of legal and political resistance as hundreds of white Northerners flooded Congress with petitions rejecting the idea of removing Native people from their lands. Nevertheless, the Senate ratified the treaty. The first Cherokees to move in accordance with the Treaty of New Echota were the elite men who had signed the agreement. Other wealthy families, including the Vanns, also emigrated early, selecting the most fertile locations on which to rebuild their homes and enterprises. Upon arrival in Indian Territory, the Vanns ordered their enslaved workforce to clear land, plant crops, and construct a replica of the family's stately manor house back in Georgia.⁴⁸

For those Cherokees who had not quickly accepted removal, the federal government made the consequences clear. On May 10, 1838, General Winfield Scott, the officer in charge of the removal campaign, threatened Cherokees in unveiled language:

My troops already occupy many positions . . . and thousands and thousands are approaching from every quarter to render assistance and escape alike hopeless. . . . Will you, then by resistance compel us to resort to arms . . . or will you by flight seek to hide yourself in the mountains and forests and thus oblige us to hunt you down?⁴⁹

Scott and his men and the local Georgia militia followed through on this ultimatum, ordering women, men, children, and the elderly from their homes and fields at gunpoint and bayonet tip and setting in motion the Trail of Tears. Forced to abandon most of their possessions, the Cherokees witnessed white Georgians taking ownership of their cabins and all within them. Daniel Butrick, a missionary to the Cherokees, described what he witnessed: "Women absent from their families on visits, or for other purposes, were seized, and men far from their wives and children were not allowed to return, and also children being forced from home, were dragged off among strangers. Cattle,

horses, hogs, household furniture, clothing and money not with them were taken and left."⁵⁰ In the words of one Georgia militiaman who was also present: "I fought through the civil war and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest work I ever knew."⁵¹

After being ousted from their homes that spring and summer, Cherokee people were placed in temporary shelters. Crowded close together in the stifling heat, many fell ill.⁵² In the fall, those who remained traveled in groups across Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas with insufficient supplies. Among these groups were African Americans and Cherokees of African descent, both enslaved and free. They all walked through the fall and into the harsh winter months, many dying from cold, disease, and accident.⁵³

In addition to bearing the physical and emotional hardships of the journey, enslaved Black people in the nation hunted game, nursed the sick, prepared meals, guarded the camps, and removed obstructions from roads.⁵⁴ Daniel Butrick, who accompanied the Cherokees to whom he evangelized, recorded details about the work and deaths of a handful of Black people in his detachment. One elderly Black woman whose children had recently purchased her freedom "died in the camps," Butrick wrote. Her son and daughter-in-law were then sold to speculators. One Black man "cut some wood for the night," and a woman Butrick referred to as "our kind Nancy" was "employed . . . to wash and [dry] our clothes in the evening by the fire."⁵⁵ Approximately one thousand Cherokees died during the eviction, and the decline in the birthrate meant a total population loss of more than thirty-four hundred people.⁵⁶ The death toll of Black people on the trail has yet to be determined.

The historian Mary Hershberger has observed that slavery played a role in the successful passage of the Indian Removal Act, since the Three-fifths Clause of the U.S. Constitution (which apportioned additional representation in Congress for numbers of enslaved people owned) increased the voting power of Southern white residents who sought Native land.⁵⁷ And after the Indian Removal Act had been enforced, white Southerners benefited yet again. The expulsion of Cherokees and other tribal nations cleared the way for Southerners to move with the people they enslaved onto former Native lands, an expansion of a kind of slavery that far surpassed Cherokee slavery in intensity and extent. As the historians David and Jeanne Heidler have put it in their book *Indian Removal*, the institution of American slavery and the event of Indian Removal were, in both cause and effect, "twin evils."⁵⁸

Brought together and then ripped apart by slavery and racism, the futures of Native and Black people would be again entwined in the exodus of the

tribes from their lands. Some eighty thousand Indigenous people were driven out of the South and the Midwest in the mid-nineteenth century. As the historian Claudio Saunt has poignantly pointed out in *Unworthy Republic*, the movement of Indian removal followed the same routes as the domestic trade of Black people into the Cotton Belt, which had “served to make plausible the forced migration of other nonwhite peoples.” Native expulsion was, he writes, “the war the slaveholders won.”⁵⁹

Nearly two hundred years later, around ninety registrants attended a virtual conference organized by the Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association, a group that most Americans have never heard of. The association is composed of members whose ancestors were enslaved by five nations—Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles—prior to the American Civil War. The members had inherited a legacy of Blackness in the United States, of Indigeneity on the North American continent, and of marginalization within their own tribes.

The intention of the organizers of this gathering, held in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic in November 2020, was to offer education about the “history and culture” of the “African-Indian freedmen and their descendants” and to fight “against ongoing racial discrimination against the freedmen descendants.”⁶⁰

The concerns of the Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association relate to the outcome of the Civil War in Indian Territory. After the expulsion of the slaveholding Native nations from the South, the wealthiest among them reestablished estates in present-day Oklahoma and used enslaved Black people to rebuild their homes, towns, and fortunes. When the Civil War erupted in South Carolina, it had an impact far beyond the American Southeast. Native leaders to the West in Indian Territory faced a dire decision. Their governments and towns stood within a unique territory on the margins of the United States and the Confederate states. Like the slave states in the South, they might choose to secede and ally with the Confederacy, which would include political representation in the Confederate Congress, or they could elect to remain “loyal” to the Union. Would these Native nations support the United States, with which they had forged many (violated) treaties in the past and by whom they had been abandoned at the start of the war as violence broke out in Indian Territory, or would they join with the Southern Confederacy, the government with which they shared certain principles of custom and racial ideology but had no history of treaty relations?⁶¹ After de-

acades of participation in Southern plantation culture, Native leaders in Indian Territory identified as slaveholders and referred to their people as slaveholding nations. Though the political picture was complex, in many of these nations significant factions chose to support the Confederate states.⁶²

In the aftermath of the war, the United States initiated a new set of treaty negotiations with the slaveholding Native nations, which collectively held captive approximately eight thousand Black people.⁶³ The series of Reconstruction agreements that resulted, known as the 1866 treaties, compelled these nations to free the enslaved among them, to accept freedpeople as citizens with political rights in these nations, and to allow railroad development in their territories. Not every nation agreed, and even those who did promise equal rights to the formerly enslaved and their descendants did not fully live up to that vow.

In 1907, Oklahoma became a state, subsuming the majority of the former Indian Territory within it, even as tribal nations retained discrete borders and governments. A celebration of statehood held in Guthrie before twenty-five thousand people included a staged ceremony that dramatized how the new Oklahoma citizenry would be configured. In it, a woman of Cherokee descent, “Miss Indian Territory,” mock-wed a white man, “Mr. Oklahoma Territory,” symbolizing the union of the two peoples and places and excluding the African American and Afro-Native presence altogether. Among the first acts taken up by the new state legislature in Senate Bill No. 1 was the passage of Jim Crow laws that categorized Native Americans with white people and segregated Black people based on a one-drop racial rule.⁶⁴ As in the United States, where the rights and protections of citizenship came slowly, haltingly, or not at all, in the Indigenous nations of Oklahoma, Black and mixed-race Afro-Native people would strive for decades to achieve full inclusion.

It is this struggle that the Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association was founded to advance. And it is an indication of this complicated racial and political history that the association’s founder and current president is Marilyn Vann, a descendent of the extended family of “Rich Joe” and James Vann. Marilyn Vann is Cherokee “by blood” as well as the descendant of Black people owned by Cherokees. She and others among the conference organizers and speakers bear the surnames of influential plantation-owning nineteenth-century Native American families. Some of these families had been formed, in part, through sexual intimacies across the color line, both freely chosen and forced. Other Native Americans in these tribal nations did not share blood ties with Africans but did share a history of cultural exchange.⁶⁵

A retired engineer, Vann has been organizing freedmen and freedwomen

descendants for decades. When I first attended a descendants' conference, a couple of decades ago, the event was held in a post office and had the informal mood of a warm family reunion with a few scholars mixed in. In 2020, the conference had major sponsors and influential Native speakers, including the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, a sitting tribal court judge, and attorneys with expertise in federal Indian law. In her opening remarks, Vann asserted, "We fight for enforcement of 1866 treaty rights to freedom descendants" before she introduced "a word of prayer."

Vann's words about the political fight reflected a long history. Descendants of freedpeople in the Five Tribes have been organizing for political inclusion, for cultural recognition, and for economic parity with tribal citizens since the late 1800s. Decades of meeting, fundraising, political campaigning, and vocal speech are now yielding major results, at least in one of the nations in question. Members of the Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association were party to a decisive legal suit that ended in a 2017 federal court ruling requiring the Cherokee Nation to extend civil rights to descendants of formerly enslaved people after decades of resistance on the part of the tribe.⁶⁴

At the 2020 virtual gathering, African-descended attendees spoke passionately about their family histories, about ties to the land, about racial violence, and about the need to remember the past.⁶⁵ Vanessa Adams Harris, the host and emcee, set the tone by openly acknowledging the reality of the racial rift. She made a pointed remark about the ways in which tribal nations had resisted bestowing equal rights upon Black people descended from the formerly enslaved and about the pain of color prejudice. "Part of claiming your history is claiming your citizenship," she said. "And when you are a sovereign nation like we have here, [a] sovereign nation within sovereign nations, then citizenship is really important. . . . These descendants have every right."⁶⁶

But there was also talk of connection. Joe Deere, a non-Black member of the Cherokee Nation Tribal Council, titled his presentation "From Reconciliation to Solidarity: A Discussion of Common Ground," and highlighted the shared history of dispossession and oppression. As the Chicana feminist theorist Cherrie Moraga once poetically observed, Native and Black people were "the first and the forced" Americans.⁶⁷ These populations share a distinctive history, but at the same time they have faced each other across what has often been a deep divide.

In the last decade, though, Indigenous, Black, and Afro-Native activists have joined forces in notable ways. In 2015–16, when thousands of Indigenous people and allies from around the world gathered in South Dakota to protest

the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Sioux homelands, Black Lives Matter activists joined them there and staged a rally in Chicago. In the Black Lives Matter wave of national protests in the pandemic summer of 2020, Native activists and tribal leaders marched, painted murals, and issued statements of solidarity.⁶⁸

When Deere spoke, he emphasized this spirit of allegiance and showed photographs of Native people marching, holding eye-catching signs, and packaging supplies during those protests. His remarks and those of his co-panelists garnered thanks in the conference chat, expressed in both English and Cherokee. "Spoken very well," one audience member typed, adding a thank-you in Cherokee: "Wado." Deere concluded his presentation with a slide that showed a drawing of two brown arms, one dark, one light, grasping hands against a vivid blue background. The tan arm had written across it, in artful lettering reminiscent of a tattoo, **INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY**; the dark arm, a near-mirror image, answered with the inscription **BLACK LIBERATION**.⁶⁹

What Slavery Looked Like in the West

[theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/native-americans-indigenous-slavery-west/620785/](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/native-americans-indigenous-slavery-west/620785/)

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Tens of thousands of Indigenous people labored in bondage across the western United States in the 1800s.

By [Kevin Waite](#)

November 25, 2021

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Early travelers to the American West encountered unfree people nearly everywhere they went: on ranches and farmsteads, in mines and private homes, and even on the open market, bartered like any other tradable good. Unlike on southern plantations, these men, women, and children weren't primarily African American; most were Native American. Tens of thousands of Indigenous people labored in bondage across the western United States in the mid-19th century.

Despite the debilitating and long-lasting effects on numerous Native communities, the bondage of Indigenous people has largely escaped the ongoing dialogue about American slavery and its legacies. Perhaps that's because Native American bondage took various forms—convict leasing, debt peonage, child servitude, captive trading—making it difficult to classify, especially when compared with the multigenerational and brutally systematized chattel slavery of the South. Evidence of Indigenous slavery is harder to find too. Many Native people worked behind closed doors on remote frontiers rather than on large plantations under the full glare of the southern sun.

Yet this history—what the historian Andrés Reséndez has dubbed “the other slavery”—is crucial, especially as Americans interrogate the legacies of exploitation and question what's owed and to whom. American slavery wasn't the “peculiar institution” of the South alone; it was a transcontinental regime. And a diverse range of people was caught in its cruel embrace.

Neither Europeans nor Anglo-Americans invented the institution of Indigenous slavery in what eventually became the U.S. Southwest. Long before white colonists first appeared, the raiding of rival tribes and the trading of their captives had been central to the Native American political economy in the region.



White colonists accelerated and expanded that commerce. Spain's lucrative silver-mining ventures in colonial Mexico consumed both Black and Indigenous slaves. Meanwhile, the Franciscan priests of Spanish California's mission system, established in the late 1700s, forced Native people to work church lands or face severe beatings. When the United States seized more than half a million square miles of western territory from Mexico in 1848, American colonists adopted Indigenous servitude and the profits it generated.

One year later, thousands of aspiring miners began rushing toward California's gold country—and toward Native homelands. Slave hunters raided Indigenous communities and carted their captives to gold-digging sites. There, miners bought, sold, and killed California Indians with impunity. The Gold Rush marked the beginning of what modern historians rightly regard as a genocide of California Indians, in which the Indigenous population plummeted from about 150,000 in the late 1840s to 30,000 roughly two decades later.

California was a free state in name only. By the mid-1850s, white southerners had sent an estimated 500 to 1,500 enslaved Black people to the state—largely to labor as gold miners—despite the constitutional prohibition on slavery there. For those who didn't or couldn't bring Black slaves with them, California Indians proved a readily accessible alternative. A Tennessee transplant named Cave Johnson Couts established a large plantation near San Diego in the 1850s, worked by more than a dozen forced laborers. Visitors commented that "everything about [Couts's estate] had the air of the home of a wealthy southern planter," with the exception that his labor force was primarily Native rather than Black.

Native servitude extended into more urban settings as well. Much like New Orleans, Los Angeles had its own "slave mart," as one local observer put it. But unlike its southern equivalent, he wrote, "the slave at Los Angeles was sold fifty-two times a year as long as he lived, which did not generally exceed one, two, or three years." Nearly every weekend for roughly two decades, Native people in L.A. were rounded up on baseless vagrancy charges, crammed into an open-air corral, and then auctioned off to the highest bidder for a week. If they were paid at all, it was generally in strong liquor, enabling the process to begin again as soon as they were freed. The slave mart—the city's second-most-important source of municipal revenue through the 1850s—was across the street from where city hall now stands.

Most Indigenous forced laborers in California were children. Passed in 1850, the state's disingenuously titled Act for the Government and Protection of Indians legalized a range of unfree-labor practices. Under the law, Anglo and Hispanic heads of household could seize Native children from their families and use them as unpaid servants until they reached adulthood—or died. A petitioner merely had to bring a child's "friend" before the court, have the friend corroborate that the parents were unfit to raise the child, and then claim legal guardianship for themselves. Who qualified as a friend was left to the discretion of the court.

Unsurprisingly, the law encouraged rampant kidnapping. Slave raiders descended on Native communities, murdered the adults, and auctioned their orphans to California colonists. Because California Indians were prohibited from testifying against white people in court, such attacks went unpunished.

Roughly 20,000 California Indians were held in various states of bondage throughout the antebellum era. Thousands more could be found in the neighboring territories of Utah and New Mexico.

In 1852, Utah adopted a similar measure to California's law on Indian child servitude, with an equally misleading name. The Act for the Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners allowed Utah's white residents to purchase Indian children for "adoption" into their households for up to 20 years. The children worked to pay off the price of their purchase while receiving food, clothing, and religious instruction. An estimated 60 percent of Indigenous adoptees died by their early 20s. Those who survived and were released generally found themselves strangers in their own land, full members of neither their original tribe nor the white community in which they were raised.

Despite its coercive nature, Utah's measure was comparatively humane by the standards of the Southwest, where slave raiding was both common and lucrative. New Mexican and Native slavers seized women and children as captives (they generally killed the men) and exchanged them on the borderlands market. Boys were sold for as much as \$100, while girls generally fetched twice that price.

Many of these captives and their children became trapped in a vicious cycle of debt peonage, in which a captive or an indebted peasant bound him- or herself to a New Mexican landholder in exchange for wages that barely covered basic living expenses. All goods had to be purchased from a local store, generally controlled by the landholder, thus deepening a peasant's debt obligations. The end result was a lifetime of debt and therefore a lifetime of servitude. And because that debt could be transferred to someone's offspring, servitude became heritable and perpetual, not unlike chattel slavery in the American South. "Peonism is but a more charming name for a species of slavery," wrote one New Mexican resident, "as abject and oppressive as any found upon the American continent."

Debt peons performed the heavy labor upon which New Mexico's landholding class depended. On the estate of Lucien Maxwell, a transplanted midwesterner, 500 men and women worked the fields, while a retinue of domestic servants oversaw the needs of the household. Surrounded by his laborers, Maxwell lived, according to one observer, "in a sort of barbaric splendor, akin to that of the nobles of England at the time of the Norman conquest." There was, however, a more apt and contemporary comparison at hand: the slaveholding planters of the American South.

Historians typically study Black and Native slavery as discrete systems. But America's wealthiest slaveholders didn't draw a fixed line. Rather, they defended these systems—plantation bondage and Indigenous captivity—as mutually reinforcing pillars of a continent built on slavery.

Indeed, southerners in Congress blocked several attempts by antislavery Republicans to abolish debt peonage in New Mexico. In defense of western bondage, southern lawmakers trotted out familiar arguments about local sovereignty and the rights of landholders to regulate their laborers as they saw fit. An attack on peonage, thundered Senator Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia during one such debate, would risk "destroying what is regarded as a relation between master and servant in all other countries in the world."

The institution of peonage survived numerous antislavery assaults—right through the so-called age of emancipation. The Thirteenth Amendment brought freedom to African Americans in the South, but not to Indigenous people in large parts of the West. Two years after the Civil War, Indian captives and peons could still be found in an estimated 10 percent of all New Mexican households; Native people in the state continued to work against their will for decades to come. A Navajo captive named Deluvina, for example, served Lucien Maxwell's family into the 1930s.

This history calls for greater scrutiny. American slavery never hit a hard edge at Texas's western border, as the standard narrative would have us believe. Looking closer, we can see that the plantation landscape of the South bled into another domain of bondage in the West—and that, according to the country's largest slaveholders, the enslavement of Native Americans and African Americans belonged to a complementary project to sustain the power of the so-called master class. As Americans continue to debate the ways in which past wrongs inform present ills, a wider historical lens will provide clearer vision. A national reckoning with the legacies of slavery, after all, requires a national framework.

America's Other Original Sin

slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/01/native_american_slavery_historians_uncover_a_chilling_chapter_in_u_s_history.html

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Europeans didn't just displace Native Americans—they enslaved them, and encouraged tribes to participate in the slave trade, on a scale historians are only beginning to fathom.

By [Rebecca Onion](#)

Here are three scenes from the history of slavery in North America. In 1637, a group of Pequot Indians, men and boys, having risen up against English colonists in Connecticut and been defeated, were sold to plantations in the West Indies in exchange for African slaves, allowing the colonists to remove a resistant element from their midst. (The tribe's women were pressed into service in white homes in New England, where domestic workers were sorely lacking.) In 1741, an 800-foot-long coffle of recently enslaved Sioux Indians, procured by a group of Cree, Assiniboiné, and Monsoni warriors, arrived in Montreal, ready for sale to French colonists hungry for domestic and agricultural labor. And in 1837, Cherokee Joseph Vann, expelled from his land in Georgia during the era of Indian removal, took at least 48 enslaved black people along with him to Indian Territory. By the 1840s, Vann was said to have owned hundreds of enslaved black laborers, as well as racehorses and a side-wheeler steamboat.

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A reductive view of the American past might note two major, centuries-long historical sins: the enslavement of stolen Africans and the displacement of Native Americans. In recent years, a new wave of historians of American slavery has been directing attention to the ways these sins overlapped. The stories they have uncovered throw African slavery—still the narrative that dominates our national memory—into a different light, revealing that the seeds of that system were sown in earlier attempts to exploit Native labor. The record of Native enslavement also shows how the white desire to put workers in bondage intensified the chaos of contact, disrupting intertribal politics and creating uncertainty and instability among people already struggling to adapt to a radically new balance of power.

Before looking at the way Native enslavement happened on the local level (really the only way to approach a history this fragmented and various), it helps to appreciate the sweep of the phenomenon. How common was it for Indians to be enslaved by Euro-Americans? Counting can be difficult, because many instances of Native enslavement in the Colonial

period were illegal or ad hoc and left no paper trail. But historians have tried. A few of their estimates: Thousands of Indians were enslaved in Colonial New England, according to Margaret Ellen Newell. Alan Galloway writes that between 1670 and 1715, more Indians were exported into slavery through Charles Town (now Charleston, South Carolina) than Africans were imported. Brett Rushforth recently attempted a tally of the total numbers of enslaved, and he told me that he thinks 2 million to 4 million indigenous people in the Americas, North and South, may have been enslaved over the centuries that the practice prevailed—a much larger number than had previously been thought. “It’s not on the level of the African slave trade,” which brought 10 million people to the Americas, but the earliest history of the European colonies in the Americas is marked by Native bondage. “If you go up to about 1680 or 1690 there still, by that period, had been more enslaved Indians than enslaved Africans in the Americas.”

Between 1670 and 1715, more Indians were exported into slavery through Charles Town than Africans were imported.

The practice dates back to the earliest history of the European colonies in the future United States. Take the example of the Pequot who were enslaved in 1637 after clashing with the English. As Newell writes in a new book, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery*, by the time the ship *Desire* transported the defeated Pequot men and boys to the Caribbean, colonists in New England, desperate for bodies and hands to supplement their own meager workforce, had spent years trying out various strategies of binding Native labor.

During the Pequot War, which was initially instigated by struggles over trade and land among the Europeans, the Pequot, and rival tribes, colonists explicitly named the procurement of captives as one of their goals. Soldiers sent groups of captured Pequot to Boston and other cities for distribution, while claiming particular captured people as their own. Soldier Israel Stoughton wrote to John Winthrop, having sent “48 or 50 women and Children” to the governor to distribute as he pleased:

Ther is one ... that is the fairest and largest that I saw amongst them to whome I have given a coate to cloath her: It is my desire to have her for a servant ... There is a little Squa that Stewart Calaot desireth ... Lifetennant Davenport allso desireth one, to witt a tall one that hath 3 stroakes upon her stummach ...

A few years after the conclusion of the war, in 1641, the colonists of Massachusetts Bay passed the first formal law regulating slavery in English America, in a section of the longer document known as the Body of Liberties. The section’s language allowed enslavement of “those lawfull Captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us,” and left room for legal bondage of others the authorities might deem enslaved in the future. The Body of Liberties codified the colonists’ possession of Native workers and opened the door for the expansion of African enslavement.

Europeans did not introduce slavery to this continent. Many, though not all, of the Native groups in the land that later became the United States and Canada practiced slavery before Europeans arrived. Native tribes, in their diversity, did not have a uniform approach to enslavement (given Americans' propensity to collapse all Native people together, this bears reiterating). Many of those traditions also changed when tribes began to contend with the European presence. "There are many slaveries, and colonialism brings different slaveries into contact with one another," historian Christina Snyder, who wrote a history of Native slavery in the Southeast, told me. Contact pushed Native practices to change over time, as tribes contested, or adapted to, European demands. But, broadly speaking, Native types of enslavement were often about kinship, reproductive labor, and diplomacy, rather than solely the extraction of agricultural or domestic labor. The difference between these slaveries and European bondage of Africans was great.

Historian Pekka Hämäläinen, in his 2009 book *The Comanche Empire*, writes of Comanche uses of slavery during their period of dominance of the American Southwest between 1750 and 1850. The Comanche exercised hegemony in part by numerical superiority, and enslavement was part of that strategy. Hämäläinen writes that Comanches put captives through a rigorous process of enslavement—a dehumanizing initiation that brought a non-Comanche captive into the tribe through renaming, tattooing, beating, whipping, mutilation, and starvation—but stipulates that once a person was enslaved, there were varying degrees of freedom and privilege she or he could attain. Male captives might be made blood bondsmen with their owners, protecting them from ill treatment and casual sale; women might be married into the tribe, after which time they became, as Hämäläinen puts it, "full-fledged tribal members"; younger, more impressionable children might be adopted outright. After a period of trauma, captives could, quite possibly, attain quasi-free status; their own children would be Comanches.

In his book *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France*, Brett Rushforth writes about a similar tradition of "natal alienation" practiced by enslaving tribes in the Pays d'en Haut (the French name for the Great Lakes region and the land west of Montreal) in order to strip a captive of his or her old identity and life. Rushforth does not sell short the awfulness of these processes; still, he pointed out: "Rather than a closed slave system designed to move slaves 'up and out'—excluding slaves and their descendants from full participation in their masters' society, even when freed—indigenous slavery moved captives 'up and in' toward full, if forced, assimilation." This was more than Africans enslaved by Europeans could hope for, after the legal codification of hereditary chattel slavery in the 17th and early 18th centuries.

Native American Slaves in New France



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As many as 10,000 Indians were enslaved between 1660–1760. Here are the names we know.

The disconnect between Native uses of slavery and European understandings of the practice often made for miscommunication. In some places, ironically enough, Native groups themselves initiated the trade in captives to the Europeans. In the Pays d'en Haut, Rushforth found in his research, Indian groups believed in "a diplomatic function of captive-taking." Early in their time in the area, French officials found themselves offered Native slaves as tokens of trust, peace, and friendship. "When the French embedded themselves in these Native systems of alliance and trade and diplomacy, they found themselves engaged in these captive exchanges—not unwillingly, of course," Rushforth told me. "At the same time, the French were trading African slaves in the Caribbean and South America, so it's not like the Indians forced this upon the French. The French found the diplomatic function of it to be kind of confusing. They didn't know what to make of it at first, and then they sort of manipulated it to their own advantage."

In some places, Native groups themselves initiated the trade in captives to the Europeans.

Rushforth notes that the political equilibrium that prevailed before the arrival of Europeans had kept the Native slave trade minimal. "If you're a Native group in the Midwest and it's hunting season, you have to make a choice," he said. " 'Are we going to go after an enemy, or are we going to stock up on meat and hides and other things?' It's either hunting or captive-raiding. And so that created these disincentives to go after captives, because there were all kinds of reasons you wanted to have peace, all kinds of reasons you wanted to have your economy running."

Soon, however, French officials, desiring more slaves, began to incentivize Native people to take captives by promising desirable goods in return. Nearby tribes began to raid one another in earnest, often venturing far into the interior of the present-day United States to grab Pawnee and other Plains Indians. With French traders now offering goods and comestibles in exchange for captives, the old political balance was disrupted. "If you can go raid your enemies and trade them, for food and cloth and other things, you can actually sort of collapse those two choices into one," Rushforth said. "That means the choice to raid for captives was much less costly for them. And so they actually did it much more often." The French, wanting to be secure from violence in Montreal, made rules that pushed the chaos of raiding farther away—circumscribing the sale of Native slaves from nearby tribes, for example. "So they can create all of this extractive force," Rushforth noted, "and it just makes everything chaotic and destructive out there."

As in the Pays d'en Haut, so in the American South, where the demand for Indian slaves changed the political relationships between tribes. "Once Europeans showed up and they demanded that the supply of Native slaves amp up to meet the demand, Native practices regarding slaves changed," Snyder said. "So people who might once have been adopted or killed now became slaves."

Captives experienced enslavement by 17th-century Europeans in a much different way than enslavement by another Indian tribe. If a Native person was made captive by a rival tribe, a set of relatively predictable traditions governed his or her treatment. But after a Native captor sold a captive to a European, the person was swept into a global system. She, or he, was now a commodity. In the South, Snyder said, "[Natives] basically became slaves in a really similar way to African slaves, who were also arriving at the same time in South Carolina." Reduced to a source of labor, and caught up in a wide-reaching web of exchange, the Native slave could be sold very far away. Rushforth points to instances of Apaches and other Plains peoples being sold, through Quebec, to the Caribbean. "There were Plains Apaches who showed up on sugar plantations in Martinique," he said.

While the histories of Native enslavement and enslaving might seem to be separate spheres of study, they too are intertwined. Tribal groups could find themselves shifting from enslavers to enslaved, as their relationships to Euro-Americans, and with other tribes, changed over time. To illustrate this concept, Snyder points to the story of the Westo Indians, a group originally from around Lake Erie, who spoke an Iroquoian language. They left the North in the middle of the 17th century, Snyder says, "probably because of Iroquois competition over guns and slaving," and moved to the Southeast, where they enslaved local Indians for sale to colonists. "But then the colonists got anxious, or they were afraid that this group was too powerful," Snyder said; in 1680, a group of Carolinians armed the Savannah Indians and empowered them to break the Westos' strength in the area. The remaining Westos were, themselves, sold to the Caribbean as slaves.

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In the late-18th-century Southeast, the Native relationship to slavery took a surprising turn. There, a relatively small group of Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws held Africans in bondage. Historian Tiya Miles has written two histories of Cherokee slaveholding. Miles places the number of enslaved people held by Cherokees at around 600 at the start of the 19th century and around 1,500 at the time of westward removal in 1838-9. (Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, she said, held around 3,500 slaves, across the three nations, as the 19th century began.) "Slavery inched its way slowly into Cherokee life," Miles told me. "When a white man moved into a Native location, usually to work as a trader or as an Indian agent, he would own [African] slaves." If such a person also had a child with a Native woman, as was not uncommon, the half-European, half-Native child would inherit the enslaved people (and their children) under white law, as well as the right to use tribal lands under tribal law. This combination put such people in a position to expand their wealth, eventually operating large farms and plantations. This was the story of James Vann, the father of Joseph, the steamboat owner; the elder Vann's mother was Cherokee, while his father was white.

Apaches and other Plains peoples were sold, through Quebec, to the Caribbean.

In the second and third decades of the 19th century, the Cherokee strategy to keep the American government from taking their land was to prove their own sovereignty as a "civilized" people. They were trying, Miles said, "to form a Cherokee government that looked like the U.S. government, to publish laws, establish a Supreme Court, establish a principal city, to create a police force, to create a newspaper." These efforts were concurrent with the growth of slavery, another adopted tradition that would show that Cherokees were truly assimilating.

The United States government—Congress considered itself in charge of Indian affairs and, starting in the 1780s, established a series of governmental structures meant to manage tribal relations—"had really clear ideas about what it meant to be civilized," Miles said. "That included a different gendered differentiation of labor, so men were supposed to stop hunting; they were supposed to come back and farm. Women were supposed to be in the household. And enslaved people were supposed to be out in those fields, helping to produce even more crops and eventually allowing the native man to have more of a supervisory role." Indian agents—white men appointed by Congress to liaise with the tribes—would report to their supervisors on the degree to which Cherokee slaveholders were fulfilling the expectations of white observers. Some white onlookers thought James Vann far too lenient in the way he socialized with the (by one count) 70 enslaved Africans who worked on his plantation. Still, he prospered, eventually owning 400 to 800 acres of land, a store, a tavern, and a trading post.

The material success of slaveholders such as Vann did not, in the end, save the Cherokees from removal. While some Native slaveowners in the South may have been "temporarily enriched" by slaveholding, historian Claudio Saunt argues, "as the demand for captives rose, it destabilized the entire region. The dehumanization of non-Europeans ultimately allowed white colonists to justify the killing of Southeastern Indians and the appropriation of their lands." The explicitly racist underpinnings of slavery in the South left Native people there, even slaveholders who participated in the system, vulnerable. When white demand for land prevailed, the Native population would inevitably lose.

During removal, some wealthy Cherokees were able to take their enslaved people along. Many walked the Trail of Tears, along with the Natives who held them in bondage. "If you were rich in the Southeast, you got to basically start over again with a captive labor force," Miles said. "Which doesn't mean that removal wasn't awful, it was still awful. But it meant that you had a leg up in rebuilding your wealth."

Slave narratives—there are Works Progress Administration oral histories given by black slaves who were once owned by Cherokees and other tribes—report favorably on the experience of being held by Natives. Miles told me that she thought the historian should take these narratives with a grain of salt, pointing out that there are also many stories of Native slaveholders selling or punishing their black bondsmen. "There were more ways to have a margin of autonomy in Native American contexts. There are examples of Native people freeing their slaves and marrying them," she said. "But at the same time there are many

instances of very violent behavior that tended to take place on the larger plantations. ... So it depended on where you were enslaved and who you were enslaved by." Some Native people who held Africans on small farms, where they might "eat out of the same pot as the master" (as Miles put it), treated them as a kind of family. In her first book, however, Miles wrote about a Cherokee farmer who enslaved an African woman, lived with her for decades, and never freed her, despite her bearing his children. In that particular case, years of intimacy did not lead to emancipation.

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The historians I spoke with said that they found this history challenging to talk about in moral terms—perhaps more so than the history of African slavery. "I think popular history likes to talk about good guys and bad guys," Snyder told me. The complexities of the history of Native enslavement leave such clear distinctions behind. "Some may think that I do not philosophize enough," Alan Gallay writes in the introduction to his book, "that I have the responsibility of always separating good from evil, of creating a parable from which the moral of the story may easily be drawn. I wish that it were so simple."

The fact that Native people so often assisted in the enslavement of people from other tribes makes this story a complicated one. Yes, Europeans did have Native assistance in implementing their ends; they were also the ones who put Native tribes under the existential pressures that forced many Indians to sell fellow Natives into slavery. This tragedy does not make for so clear-cut a narrative as, say, the bravery of the fugitive African Americans who took the Underground Railroad to freedom. Yet it is a tragedy nonetheless.

The many stories of Native slavery force us to think about the strategies Native people used to respond to the relentless European desire for labor. Some, like the Yamasee—who, with their allies, rose up to challenge British colonists in South Carolina in 1715-16—fought enslavement with violent resistance. Some, like the warriors who brought the long coffin of Sioux to Montreal in 1741, or the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw who took their African slaves to Indian Country in the 1830s, tried to adapt by becoming part of the system.

Later, some worked within European law to challenge a tradition of Indian enslavement. In 1739, a Native man known only as "Caesar" sued for his own freedom in New London, Connecticut. He argued that his mother, Betty, who had surrendered during King Philip's War in 1676, should have been set free after 10 years of servitude, rather than enslaved, and that he himself should have been born a free man. More than a few second- and third-generation Native slaves brought such cases in New England in the 1730s and 1740s, and in so doing, writes Margaret Ellen Newell, they fueled New England's growing abolitionism, forcing men in power to reconsider the legal basis for enslavement. Natives were thus part of the history of American slavery at its beginning, and at its end.

Indian Slavery: An Atlantic and Hemispheric Problem

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Abstract

Indian slavery was ubiquitous in the Americas and in the Atlantic World. Though Indian slavery varied in its forms and in its destructiveness depending on both time and place, Indian slavery shaped the colonial world, and its deleterious effects continue into the present. The practice of Indian enslavement and the Indian slave trade bound the continents and their islands together – enslavement was constant, and a constant risk; it could affect native peoples in any place, and all the major European colonial powers participated in the Indian slave trade. This article reviews recent literature on Indian slavery in the Atlantic and hemispheric perspectives and suggests questions and problems for further research.

Indian Slavery in Atlantic and Hemispheric Perspectives

Between the end of the 15th century and the middle of the 19th century, Europeans enslaved an estimated two to four million indigenous Americans, with most acts of enslavement taking place before 1750.¹ Historians now recognize that Indian enslavement was critical to the histories of the Americas and the Atlantic world, Europeans enslaved Indians as part of a process of exerting sovereignty over land and bodies, of providing labor for plantations and mines, and of supporting European trading schemes. These slaveries were regionally particular even as they were hemispheric and Atlantic in their reach. Often the requirements of staple agriculture in tropical regions fueled demand for native labor on plantations and in provisioning economies, connecting coastal regions and islands to continental interiors. In many cases, Indian slaveries also required native agency both to initiate and to end enslavement practices – slavery was thus contingent upon native action. As Joyce Chaplin put it in 2005, “[Indian slavery] should be recognized as constitutive of rather than marginal to American history.”² The emergence of Indian slavery from marginality to centrality has transformed how we understand the histories of native peoples, of slavery, and of the Americas.

The historiographical problem of Indian slavery is in part an archival issue. Because Indian slavery was illegal in many jurisdictions or only legal under particular circumstances, slavers and slave traders hid their actions from the prying eyes of colonial administrators, tax collectors, and census takers in part by not documenting them. This appears to be particularly true in Anglophone archives, where shipping returns appear to record only a fraction of enslaved native people moving around the greater Caribbean. Latin American archives are considerably richer, and Latin Americanists have led the way in writing about Indian slavery. Yet even in documents that seem to discuss Indian enslavement, the categorical descriptors “Indian” or “indio” did not necessarily indicate indigenous people from the Americas. For example, in Mexico, the term “indio” sometimes indicated an enslaved person from the Philippines or other locales in the Pacific Ocean.³ In spaces as divergent as Virginia and Castile, Europeans and Indians alike contested indigenous identities and fought legal battles over who could be considered “Indian” or “indio” and was therefore enslavable or not enslavable.⁴ Overcoming archival gaps and silences remains challenging for historians who study enslaved indigenous people.

The historiography of Indian slavery remains underdeveloped in comparison to that of the African slave trade, in part because of two persistent but erroneous narratives. First, Indian enslavement is often presented as merely a prologue to the wholesale enslavement of the West African people. This assumption was incorrect for most regions – Indian slavery was a phenomenon that developed and persisted concurrently with African slavery, yet integrating these separate histories remains challenging due to gaps in the available literature.⁵ Second, the enduring power of the Black Legend (*La Leyenda Negra*) of Spain's particular cruelty to indigenous people also forestalled research into Indian enslavement in North America. Historians long believed that Indian slavery was largely a Spanish and Portuguese problem; recent investigations into French and English North America show that this is not the case. But perceived differences between Latin America and North America have hampered efforts to see Indian slavery hemispherically. The narratives emerging from spaces as diverse as the Brazilian sertão, the Gulf Coast, the North American Southwest, the Great Lakes region, and New England remain discreet and unattached to the broader narrative of slavery and colonialism. These historiographical challenges make it difficult to see the extent, diversity, and longevity of Indian enslavement and point to the necessity of both hemispheric and Atlantic perspectives in documenting and interpreting Indian enslavement.

Some episodes of Indian enslavement and regional trades in Indians have been well-documented. John Monteiro's pathbreaking book *Negros da Terra: Índios e bandeirantes nas origens de São Paulo* (1994) showed that during the 17th century, the Indian slave trade was critical to both the Portuguese conquest of the Brazilian interior and for the economic development of São Paulo. Enslaved Indians in São Paulo's provisioning economy provided critical support for sugar plantations in other regions of Brazil.⁶ The literature is also expanding for the North American South, a historiography launched by Alan Gallay's field-defining *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1707* (2002). Between 1670 and 1717, the southern trade depopulated some areas entirely while simultaneously transforming Indian politics and normalizing extreme violence. Carolina was a net exporter of enslaved people before 1717; as many as 50,000 Indian slaves were exported to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean after 1670.⁷ Similarly, Margaret Newell's *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (2015) showed that New England, a space not normally associated with slavery of any kind, both craved and depended upon the labor of enslaved indigenous people well into the 18th century.

In other spaces, indigenous power drove slavery practices, as James Brooks argued in his *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (2002). Slavery in the southwest joined native people and Europeans as both captors and captives in a complex web of violence and kinship. Unlike Indian slavery in Brazil or the Gulf Coast, in the southwest, slavery was not officially state sanctioned, and "colonists and indigenous peoples [were] roughly equal in power." Brooks showed that though enslaved people in the Southwest borderlands performed labor for their captors that had economic value, this labor was not directly tied to the Atlantic plantation system. Instead this slavery was based on shared understandings of "the socially productive value and exchangeability of women and children as well as sheep, cattle, and horses."⁸ Brett Rushforth's *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (2012) brought the French in Canada, the Illinois country, Louisiana, and Martinique into the scholarly conversation. When the French first encountered Indian practices of enslavement, they were uncertain how to respond to gifts of enslaved Indians offered as objects of diplomatic exchange. Rushforth argued that over the course of the 17th century, Indians and French in the Great Lakes region and in French Canada "developed a sustained slave trade built upon decades of small-scale exchanges of bodies, goods, and ideas."⁹ Though the French wished to connect this practice of slavery to its sugar

islands, especially Martinique, they were ultimately unsuccessful in creating a sustained trade from the continental interior to the Atlantic islands.

Scholars use the phrase “Indian slavery” to describe a wide variety of practices, thus defining precisely what we mean when we call a practice or experience “Indian slavery” is a difficult and contested exercise. Defining slavery is further complicated by the fact that the Spanish also used Indians in forced labor programs such as the *mita* (derived from Inca practices) in Peru, the *encomienda* and the *repartimiento* in Mexico and the islands, and *naborias* in Hispaniola (derived from Taino practices). Though these forced labor initiatives were legal programs intended to extract labor from native people without enslaving them, as Nancy van Deusen noted, these practices “blurred the legal boundary between freedom and slavery and between servant and slave.”¹⁰ The scholarly debate around the definition of slavery revolves around several critical questions: were enslaved people considered property? Was their status as enslaved people heritable? Did enslaved people suffer what sociologist of slavery Orlando Patterson has called “natal alienation” – the permanent interruption of family and kin networks? What were the power relationships *vis-à-vis* slaveholders and enslaved people? What role did the need for labor play in enslavement?¹¹ As we have seen, the answers to these questions varied widely depending on where one was enslaved, who was doing the enslaving, and whether indigenous people or Europeans held power. While there is no single definition of slavery that will encompass all of these significant regional differences, the word serves as a way of thinking about people who were under the power of others against their wills for a variety of purposes, including but not limited to labor.

Prior to European contact, slavery in the Americas was as ubiquitous as it was diverse. In Mississippian chiefdoms, taking and enslaving war captives was a common practice.¹² Captives provided labor as well as prestige for their captors, and archeological evidence suggests that enslaved war captives were sacrificed as part of the funeral rites of powerful chiefs. Native people did not think of enslavement in terms of freedom or of personal autonomy; rather, captivity and enslavement were the logical effects of being outsiders or people without kin. As Christina Snyder argued, slavery was not the opposite of freedom in native societies but rather the opposite of kinship.¹³ For precontact societies, slavery was not necessarily about commodification of captive bodies but rather about how alienated captives provided captors with status and labor (including the reproductive labor of enslaved women).¹⁴ The slavery/freedom binary so familiar in European cultures was absent from native practices of enslavement. Enslaved people were not “unfree” in the European understanding of freedom but instead were people without kin or kinship ties. As the anthropologist Leland Donald has described enslavement practices among native people of the northwest coast of North America, slavery was “antikinship.”¹⁵ To be without kin and clan ties was to be alone and unprotected – enslaved.

Captives taken during warfare served a number of purposes, including labor, diplomacy, and exchange. Captives therefore might have been mustered merely to show the power and wealth of a chief or even redistributed among a chief's subordinates to encourage their loyalty. The work these captives did was not “labor” in the European sense of producing commodities but rather a function of diplomacy and politics. Among precontact Mississippian chiefdoms in the North American south, for example, anthropologist Robbie Ethridge noted that “[s]ome [captives] may have been ritually killed or sacrificed, some may have been adopted or married into a family, and some may have been used as slaves.”¹⁶ Among the Haudenosaunee, captives taken in the “mourning war” were either adopted to replace deceased kin or ritually tortured to death to placate the spirits of the dead.¹⁷ Those captives were expected to die bravely – many of them perished while singing and insulting their captors (a sight that later terrified French and English observers).

Indian slaveries often built upon preexisting indigenous practices after contact with indigenous people. This was especially true in places in the Americas where Indians remained more

powerful than Europeans. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the French were uncomfortable with native practices of enslavement but were inexorably drawn into the logics of native practices of enslavement.¹⁸ A similar process occurred in the Southwest, where European and indigenous understandings of enslavement came together to form an economically vital raiding and slaveholding culture. By the early 19th century, Comanches had developed a slaving system that enslaved other Indians, Mexicans, and Americans that “[w]hile partly shading into the older, softer systems of kinship and captivity... was in its essence a coercive, economically driven system.”¹⁹ In spaces where native people exercised more power than Europeans, then, pre-colonial indigenous practices melded with European practices to create new forms of violence and enslavement suited to the needs of native people.

Informal, extralegal seizure was one of the diverse ways in which Indians experienced enslavement. Beginning with Christopher Columbus, Europeans enslaved Indians in small numbers merely because the opportunity presented itself. A market could always be found for enslaved Indians, and Europeans also thought that their knowledge of New World geography would be helpful. In 1576 and 1577, Martin Frobisher’s Arctic expeditions captured Inuit and brought them back to England for display and to help raise interest and funds for further expeditions. The English also wanted to teach them to speak English and thus learn from the Inuit the whereabouts of the Northwest Passage. In the decades before the Virginia settlement in 1607, English ships surveying the coast of North America often enslaved native people.²⁰ In 1605, George Weymouth and James Rosier seized five Wabanaki men while probing what is now the coast of Maine. Weymouth brought his captives back to London; some of these men eventually returned to Maine.²¹ Sometimes Europeans lured native people into traps in order to enslave them. One French source (translated into English in the 1660s) indicated that English ships routinely flew French or Dutch flags to attract victims with alcohol and then sell them at various ports of call around the Caribbean, as the opportunity arose.²² These kinds of enslavements were not always noted in records of voyages; they happened as a matter of course. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a number of people who might have been affected by this kind of slaving activity.

Europeans also enslaved Indians through direct warfare with native people. After a series of bloody battles in 1637, Massachusetts governor John Winthrop authorized the sale of captured Pequots to Bermuda and the English Caribbean in 1638. As Margaret Newell has shown, warfare against indigenous people fueled Indian enslavement in New England. Though demand drove European warfare against native people, Newell notes that war did not slake New Englanders’ thirst for native labor.²³ Other English colonies followed suit: in the spring of 1645, many Virginia Indians were taken prisoner in various battles and skirmishes; those over the age of 11 were sold to English colonies in the Caribbean as slaves “to prevent their returning to and strengthening their respective tribes.”²⁴ After the conclusion of a lopsided peace in 1646, the English continued to enslave native people in Virginia.²⁵ English planters in the Caribbean began to view Indians enslaved through warfare in North America with increasing suspicion. After they blamed enslaved New England Indians (probably Narragansetts) who had been defeated in King Philip’s War for instigating a rebellion in Barbados, the Barbados Assembly passed a law against the importation of enslaved Indians.²⁶ The English were not the only Europeans who feared enslaved Indians on their Caribbean plantations. The French on Martinique and Guadeloupe thought enslaved Indians might combine with the Kalinago people and enslaved Africans to rebel.²⁷ Despite these fears, the Caribbean remained a viable destination for enslaved Indian prisoners of war. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Spanish officials sent Apache prisoners of war to planters in Cuba. Though their initial Spanish captors did not think of them as “slaves” in the legal sense, Apaches experienced life in the Caribbean as *de facto* if not *de jure* enslaved people.²⁸

Opportunistic seizure and war did not supply enough captives to sate the European appetite for enslaved labor, leading Europeans to develop raiding/trading/slaving relationships with native groups. These trades were different from opportunistic enslavement practices and the occasional bursts of war captive enslavement in that they were fully integrated into regional and Atlantic economies and were engines of economic expansion and growth for the Europeans who engaged in them. They also integrated native people into European markets, stimulating demand for European goods (especially metal tools, guns, cloth, and alcohol) among native people that could be paid for with a commercial trade in furs, animal skins, and human bodies. This mode of Indian slavery was ultimately most constitutive of European imperial power.

An Indian slave trade began as early as the late 1520s when the Spanish conquistador Nuño de Guzmán raided native villages along the Pacific coast of Mexico, enslaving Indians to take to markets in Mexico City. Many of these people ended up in Cuba or on Hispaniola. In the ensuing warfare of the 1530s, thousands of indigenous people were enslaved.²⁹ Despite vacillating legalities in the Spanish Atlantic, a brisk trade in enslaved Indians continued in the Spanish Americas through the 16th century and into the 17th century, with a few thousand enslaved indigenous people eventually ending up across the ocean in Castile.³⁰ It is possible that the Spanish enslaved as many as 650,000 Indians from Mexico and coastal Central America and sold them into the Caribbean before 1700.³¹ And as we have seen, Monteiro argued that the primary purpose of the *bandeirantes'* incursions into the Brazilian interior was Indian enslavement, not the search for gold and silver. Throughout the 17th century, repeated expeditions into the interior of Brazil produced a steady stream of new enslaved Indians for São Paulo's provisioning economy.

After the founding of the Carolina colony in 1670, English traders and their Indian allies developed an internal trade in enslaved Indians that reached deep into the continental interior. The great Mississippian chiefdoms had already suffered serious dislocations after the warfare and epidemic disease sparked by Hernando de Soto's *entrada* in the 1540s. The arrival of the English and the French into this already fluid environment in the late 17th century resulted in still more dislocation – what anthropologists have termed the “Mississippian shatter zone.”³² The shatter zone encompassed the Carolina, Georgia, and Gulf coasts and extended inland as far as the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio river valleys. In the southern shatter zone, native people coalesced into new groups both to take advantage of slaving opportunities afforded by European traders and to defend themselves against slave raids by Europeans and their allies. Shifting alliances among native peoples and Europeans, geographic mobility, and extreme violence characterized the Mississippian shatter zone. European demand for animal skins, especially deerskins, and the need for plantation labor on the Carolina coast and the Caribbean drove the development of the southern trade in Indian slaves that was supplied by alliances of European and Indian raiders. For Carolina and to a lesser extent Virginia, the Indian slave trade was a critical engine of economic development in the English empire. The impact of the trade on native peoples in the region was devastating (as the term “shatter zone” implies); some groups ceased to exist altogether while others who survived increasingly violent raids banded together in multiethnic, coalescent villages. Interimperial rivalries drove the trade as well; in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, combined Anglo-Indian forces repeatedly raided Spain's Florida Indian missions for slaves, eventually destroying them.³³ The Yamasee War of 1715–1717 ended the most obvious aspects of the trade, but the Carolinas continued to trade in Indian slaves into the middle of the 18th century.³⁴

Indigenous people were critical to how Indian slave trades developed. In a bid to gain access to European guns and other commodities, the Westo, an Iroquoian people, filled a niche as slavers, using their new English guns to raid neighboring groups for slaves they then sold to the English. This arrangement lasted about a decade, but by 1680, the English preferred the

Savannah as slave raiders/traders. The English enslaved the Westo and sold them en masse to English sugar plantations in the Caribbean.³⁵ (Those few who survived must have merged with other groups in the area in an effort to protect themselves.) Similarly, the French enslaved the Natchez people, who had served as slavers, in 1729. Interimperial conflict as well as intertribal conflict influenced Natchez resistance in the late 1720s, a moment in which they declined to continue to participate in French enslavement activities. After a series of raids against French settlements, the Choctaw besieged the Natchez. The Choctaw won the battle, enslaving several hundred Natchez, whom the French then sold into slavery in Saint-Domingue. A few remaining Natchez sought refuge among the Tunica and the English-allied Chickasaw.³⁶ The English also developed a prosperous trade for enslaved Indians on the Mosquito Coast of present-day Nicaragua. The Mosquitos raided their neighbors for captives, which they then exchanged for guns and gunpowder. Between 1710 and 1722, the Mosquitos and their maroon allies shipped at least 2,000 enslaved Indians to Jamaica.³⁷

Though the Indian slave trade in English North America was a critical element of empire-building and of economic growth, it was semi-clandestine. The Proprietors of the Carolina colony tried to stamp out the trade (unsuccessfully), and this also meant that enslaved Indians were often smuggled out of the colony to the Caribbean to avoid proprietary attention and tax collection.³⁸ This of course was not how the Indian slave trade in Monteiro's São Paulo worked – there, the trade was legal and encouraged. This trade was probably as internally disruptive in the interior of Brazil as it was in the American South – it is possible to speak of a Brazilian “shatter zone.” Established trades in Indian slaves developed all over the Americas regardless of legality, spurred by the needs of the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. Even if enslaved Indians were not exported directly to the Caribbean, their labor usually supported plantation agriculture in some way. In no other mode of Indian enslavement were the connections between Indian enslavement and European conquest, colonialism, and economic growth so intimate or violent.

Europeans justified enslaving Indians in a variety of ways. The Spanish debated among themselves the applicability of Aristotelian natural law to Indians. Were some people born to be natural slaves? Most Spanish theologians eventually rejected this justification as it applied to Indians but agreed that Indians could be enslaved if they were cannibals (*indios caribes*), if they had violated some other civil law, or if they were captured in a just war.³⁹ The French also rejected Aristotelian natural law in favor of just war theory and the law of nations. Intellectually separating the act of enslavement and slavery itself, the French, following Jean Bodin and Hugo Grotius, generally believed that captives taken in a just war could be enslaved rather than being killed. As Rushforth notes, “[n]o one in seventeenth-century France argued for Indians’ enslavement based on Aristotelian principles of natural slavery.” Though French colonists sought to differentiate themselves from the Spanish by protecting Indians in French-held territories, in practice, the French captured, bought, sold, and owned enslaved Indians in New France, Louisiana, and the Caribbean.⁴⁰ The English generally invoked just war principles or penal slavery (enslavement as a punishment for a crime) when they bothered to justify the legality of enslaving Indians. Often they preferred to keep their reasoning opaque: Margaret Newell has argued that English settlers in Massachusetts Bay, for example, deliberately wrote legislation that avoided actually legally defining and justifying Indian slavery.⁴¹

What were the lives of enslaved Indians like? While there is a well-developed social history of enslaved Africans that engages questions of how African cultures, languages, and religions persisted and changed in the Atlantic diaspora, doing similar work for enslaved Indians presents serious challenges. The source bases for enslaved Indians are neither as numerous nor as rich. Monteiro reconstructed some aspects of the lives of individual slaves by reading their suits for freedom, and Rushforth performed a similar exercise using criminal court records involving enslaved native defendants in Montreal. The theft case of the enslaved Fox woman

Marie-Joachim in Montreal, for example, reveals both the dense social networks and the legal vulnerabilities of enslaved people in New France.⁴² In the Caribbean, sources suggest that at least some enslaved Indian men engaged in particular forms of labor: they fished and hunted for their European masters rather than working in the sugar fields.⁴³ Though hunting and fishing would have been familiar work for Indian men, some native people faced unfamiliar labor regimes in captivity. In New England, enslaved women were “faced with unfamiliar tasks and technology such as spinning on a wheel, dairying, watching livestock, and tending gardens and fields with unfamiliar crops and techniques.”⁴⁴ These circumstances posed additional challenges to newly enslaved indigenous people. Though some particularly detailed sources allow scholars to envision the daily lives of some enslaved Indians might have been like –the labor, personal relationships, kinship networks, privation, among other issues – it remains difficult to move beyond broad generalizations. The opacity of enslaved Indians’ daily lives also compounds the difficulty of integrating them into narratives about enslaved people and resistance. Enslaved Indians participated in slave rebellions, and it is possible to think of many wars between Europeans and Indians as sites of violent resistance to Indian slave trades. More research is needed to understand the resistance activities of enslaved Indians. One solution to this problem might be to connect more firmly histories of enslaved Indians to histories of enslaved Africans. Though it is clear that enslaved Indians and Africans labored alongside one another all over the Atlantic World, their historiographies remain stubbornly separate. Bringing these historiographies aggressively into conversation with one another will help answer questions about daily existence and resistance.⁴⁵

Much work remains to be done on gender and Indian slavery. Brooks and Rushforth both emphasized that enslaved Indians in the southwest and in New France tended to be women and children, and anecdotal evidence from Carolina suggests that many of the enslaved Indians who remained in the colony were women and children while enslaved men were sold into the Caribbean. Indian enslavement might have disproportionately affected women and children in other areas, adding a gendered dynamic to the experience of enslaved Indians. The Choctaw historian Michelene Pesantubbee has written that enslavement among Europeans was particularly dislocating for native women and children: “...the captives, mainly women and children, became nonentities. ...men died according to the rules of warfare; women, however, simply disappeared.”⁴⁶ Not all enslaved Indian women “disappeared” though; in some contexts, enslaved Indian women held particular economic value to European enslavers and native enslavers alike. As Newell noted, in New England “women headed lineage groups and kin networks,” which made their persons valuable to native and English captors alike.⁴⁷ Women also played critical roles in trade and diplomacy. Enslaved Apache women among the Caddo, for example, helped cement diplomatic and economic ties with the French in the 17th century.⁴⁸ In New Spain, enslaved Indian women became the mothers of *mestizo* children, a dynamic of sexual and reproductive labor that scholars are just beginning to unravel.⁴⁹

Putting together a demographic profile of enslaved Indians remains a daunting task. Though estimates of numbers of enslaved Indians range from two to four million between 1492 and 1850 across the Americas, in the tens of thousands for the American South, and in the hundreds of thousands for Central America, coming up with definitive numbers has proven difficult and contentious. Alan Gallay’s careful census of the Indian slave trade in the South acknowledged the difficulties of calculating numbers: the scant sources are often imprecise, and scholars of Indian slavery lack the shipping manifests and other sources that drive the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (which has allowed accurate calculations of the millions taken in the African slave trade).⁵⁰ Europeans also produced records that misidentified or re-identified enslaved native people as enslaved Africans – acts of writing that not only did profound violence to native identities but further obscured the existence of enslaved Indians in the archive.⁵¹ A further wrinkle in calculating the demographic impact of Indian slavery comes from the role epidemic

disease played in both indigenous depopulation and the violence of slave raiding and trading. The confluence of European-introduced epidemic disease and the height of the South's Indian slave trade definitely caused a demographic, political, and social crisis for native people, but how to express that crisis in numerical terms remains unclear.⁵² This fascination with numbers should not, however, detract from the importance of understanding Indian slavery even in the absence of firm numbers – enslavement as an experience was more than a statistical abstraction.

Scholars of the early Americas often conclude that Indian enslavement ended with the Age of Revolutions. For the English Americas, scholars think the trade closed even earlier, with the end of the Yamasee War in 1717 for Carolina, for example. Yet new work suggests that Indian enslavement persisted after 1717 in Carolina, and enslaved native people were suing for their freedom in Virginia as late as the 1820s.⁵³ Evidence also suggests that Indian enslavement persisted in various forms, especially via state-sanctioned bonded labor practices in the American West through the 19th century.⁵⁴ Many historians now include forced residential schooling for native children from the late 19th to the late 20th century in both the United States and Canada as an extension of earlier enslavement practices. The disproportionate presence of native people in the prison system has also led to comparisons of the modern carceral state with earlier episodes of Indian enslavement.⁵⁵ As the Muscogee (Creek) lawyer, scholar, and anti-human trafficking activist Sarah Deer has noted, contemporary human traffickers disproportionately target native women, a “dynamic [that] has historical roots in the formal institutions of the United States, including the military and federally funded education programs.”⁵⁶ Understanding Indian slavery – in its diversity, adaptability, and its longevity – will be critical to unmaking its present-day legacies.

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Notes

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¹ Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 9.

² Chaplin, “Enslavement of Indians in Early America: Captivity without the Narrative,” 45. The modern Anglophone historiography begins with Lauber, *Indian Slavery in Colonial Times*. For an older bibliography, see Magnaghi, *Indian Slavery, Labor, Evangelization, and Captivity in the Americas*. Despite older work, scholarship on Indian slavery has largely remained marginal to larger narratives until recently.

³ Serjao, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico*, 4–5.

⁴ van Deusen, *Global Indios*, 169–191; Goetz, “Indian Slavery, Dispossession, and Settler Colonialism,” n.p.

⁵ Marín and Brooks, ed., *Linking the Histories of Slavery*.

⁶ Monteiro, *Negros da Terra*. Those who cannot read Portuguese may consult Monteiro's dissertation, “São Paulo in the Seventeenth Century.” An English language edition of *Negros da Terra*, to be translated by James Woodard and Barbara

