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Alaina E. Roberts

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ALAINA E. ROBERTS

In 2025, an Echo of the 1800s

The Fight for Black Citizenship in the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations

Pondering the connection between the present crises—in higher education, in the United States, and in the broader world—and my research, this essay discusses the connection between the late 1800s fight for citizenship waged by the Black and mixed-race women and men enslaved by Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians (Chickasaw and Choctaw Freedmen) and the advocacy efforts of Chickasaw and Choctaw Freedmen and Chickasaw and Choctaw tribal citizens today. At a time when political leaders of the United States and tribal nations have shown they are not always willing to make the moral or ethical choices that best serve their communities, this essay asks what is possible if we redefine kinship outside of the framework of the settler and tribal states.

I never foresaw that in 2025, in my early thirties, I would end up relating more to my dead relatives than to those still living. From the time I could read, I devoured books about the past, but few about the fields that have become my areas of study, African American and Native American history. No, I was interested in the basic "history buff" starter pack: the *Titanic,* the Holocaust, Henry VIII, Cleopatra. It really wasn't until I went to college that I began to learn African American history, and it wasn't even in history classes that this education occurred, it was in Black studies courses with Christopher McAuley, Ingrid Banks, and Stephanie Batiste at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Reading Jean Toomer's *Cane,* Derrick Bell's "The Space Traders," and William Julius Wilson's *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*—that is where I began to gain consciousness; that is where I began to understand what it really meant to be a Black woman in the United States.[1] There are many reasons this mental evolution occurred so late. Foremost among them, I was raised a Jehovah's Witness; Jehovah's Witnesses are discouraged from engaging in or thinking deeply about any sort of politics—and politics and race are intrinsically intertwined. I didn't even vote until I was in my late twenties (yes, that means I didn't vote for Obama either time he ran). Jehovah's Witnesses are also a majority white religion. So even in the über-multicultural Bay Area, my social circle was very small and very full of people who didn't look like me and didn't necessarily have experiences that mirrored my own.

While I grew up never doubting that racial discrimination was real, it wasn't until I'd lived almost two decades that I learned *why* it was real. In college, I was only just grasping the way institutional racism functioned in the country of my birth to snuff out African Americans' opportunity, limit our ability to accumulate and pass down generational wealth, and sanction violence against us. The more I understood colorism and the prison industrial complex and gentrification and the war on drugs and the politics of hair texture, the more I wondered how members of my own family had been touched by these things throughout their lives. It was fitting, then, that as part of a class assignment, I began researching my ancestors. Soon, I found that they were part of a little-known facet of the African Diaspora: Black women and men enslaved by Native Americans from the mid-1700s to the late 1800s.

Today, in the ivory tower circles I navigate, stating the fact that Native Americans once enslaved people of African descent is no longer a mic drop. Many scholars take for granted that people know this history, because big names like Tiya Miles, Claudio Saunt, and Fay Yarbrough have popularized this topic; it's assumed to be old news. But that's still not the case for many academics and lay people now, and it certainly wasn't almost fifteen years ago when I first read Daniel Littlefield's *The Chickasaw Freedmen: A People Without a Country.*[2] I wasn't discovering something that none of my relatives knew, but I *was* discovering that in families certain people serve as memory keepers and that when my grandfather left Oklahoma for California, this knowledge stayed behind with those memory keepers. For the first time, I contemplated going to graduate school, so that I could become not just a keeper of these memories for my family but also one who spread this knowledge far and wide, so others with similar histories wouldn't have to wait until their twenties to learn of it.

I initially approached my research as a story of mixed-race identity, as that's how it was presented to me by my second cousin, Travis Roberts, our family's primary memory keeper. But after pitching it in this way and getting discouraged by UC Santa Barbara's premier scholars of the mixed-race experience, Paul Spickard and Reg Daniel, I was encouraged by professors Howard Winant and Clyde Woods to think about Native American slaveholding through the lens of what I'd been reading about Black studies and Black history.[3] I'd only just learned that in the simplest terms, racism might be defined as prejudice plus power and that for historical reasons, white Americans held—and continue to hold—the reins of power in this country. How was it that members of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations had seen their own lives inextricably changed for the worse by white European and American colonization and yet, within their own tribal governance structures, proceeded to use power to discriminate against others similarly negatively affected by white colonization? And what could I discover about how Black and Native people felt about this seemingly contradictory entanglement? For scholarship isn't necessarily always about what we most want to know, but rather what we can most prove or point to.

What I and other historians have demonstrated is that the societies Chickasaws and Choctaws had emerged from engaged in captivity practices before European contact.[4] After European contact, Chickasaws and Choctaws had raided other tribes for slaves to sell to Europeans and been raided themselves, as part of the Indian slave trade, the first international slave trade.[5] In the 1700s, some Chickasaws and Choctaws assumed jobs as catchers of enslaved people attempting to forge freedom by fleeing for greener pastures in Spanish Florida or various Indian nations.[6] This contact with the newly introduced system of African chattel slavery and the spread of anti-Black culture led some Chickasaws and Choctaws to begin owning their own Black slaves and creating restrictive laws that policed their behavior and provided for cruel punishments.[7] When these Native southerners were forced to migrate from their homelands to what was then called Indian Territory, they brought Black women and men with them, forcing them to endure dislocation in addition to the horrors of slavery. This slave-ownership and racism led many Chickasaws and Choctaws to fight on the side of the Confederacy during the Civil War and afterward to withhold citizenship (to varying degrees) from their former slaves and the descendants of those former slaves—all of whom have been known as "freedmen."[8] Despite all the suffering they had endured within the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, many, though not all, freedmen viewed the lands the tribes had inhabited and the people whose culture they had come to share as their home, and they wanted to remain among them.[9]

Freedmen fought for land and citizenship. They signed petitions, held strategy meetings, and traveled to Washington, DC, to lobby politicians. They walked tens or even hundreds of miles to claim land allotments the federal government had pressured the tribes to set aside for them in post–Civil War treaties.[10] They pooled their meager resources to file lawsuits either to obtain land they were denied or to have their Native ancestry acknowledged, which would have resulted in citizenship rights and larger land allotments.[11] For Chickasaw Freedmen, this was to no avail: they received land but no citizenship. Choctaw Freedmen finally received citizenship in 1886 but saw it revoked almost a hundred years later, in 1983. As the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations were involuntarily absorbed into the new state of Oklahoma at the turn of the century, the tribes retained their reservations, but their autonomy and influence waned. Now with their feet in multiple sovereignties, my family and other freedmen became African Americans, with all the accompanying rights *and* struggles—struggles to access transportation, housing, recreation, and the vote, among many other things.[12] They were now fighting on three fronts, though the American battleground increasingly came into focus.

Through the decades, as African Americans racked up firsts (the first Black woman or man to graduate from a particular university, the first Black CEO of a Fortune 500 company, the first Black millionaire, the first world-renowned Black athlete, the first Black prima ballerina, et cetera) and legal battles, which they sometimes lost and sometimes won, they slowly gained ground, even if sometimes that ground later dissolved underneath their feet in a frustrating dance of one step forward, two steps back. White America supported the Black movement for equality in fits and starts, varying by location and year. As the Obama years really marked the first time I felt my eyes slowly opened to current events—even Jehovah's Witnesses had to notice the election of the first Black president—they were also the first time I felt that dance: How did we go from the ultimate symbol of Black excellence to the Tea Party? To Donald Trump's election? (I'd officially left my childhood religion by the time Trump ran, so my first presidential vote was for Hilary Clinton.) This reversal of fortune for Black folks seemed inexplicable until I looked to historical precursors. I didn't know then that every time this reversal occurred, it would still feel disappointing.

In 2020, when it seemed like all the United States was marching in the streets, chanting the name of Black men—and, to a lesser degree, Black women—murdered by police, like we were now sprinting toward a time when it would be socially unacceptable or at least vaguely politically incorrect to engage in racist practices, I naïvely wondered if we had perhaps turned a permanent corner. Universities like my own were introducing courses on anti-Black racism so all students could learn about past and present discriminatory practices and prioritizing hiring Black faculty like never before (often to the chagrin of white jobseekers). Consumers and big-box stores were supporting Black entrepreneurs to a heightened degree, and trade publishers and Hollywood studios were creating programs for Black writers to overcome their long-underrepresented status, like We Need Diverse Books and CBS's Diversity Institute Mentoring Program.[13] And when I looked toward Indian Country, I saw that folks there, too, were experiencing a reckoning. Prominent Native influencers were discussing anti-Blackness among tribal nations; intertribal organizations were sponsoring educational events and art projects designed to foster connection between Black and Native community members and promote inclusion of mixed-race Black Native people.[14] The Cherokee Nation, a former slaveholding tribe that only three years earlier had finally decided to end a decades-long court battle to stop Cherokee Freedmen from accessing their treaty-given citizenship rights, began charting a new course as a model for including freedmen.[15] Over the next few years, Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. introduced initiatives to educate tribal members on the history of Black participation in the nation, enroll Cherokee Freedmen as citizens, root out anti-Blackness in Cherokee legislation, preserve Black Cherokee historical buildings and cemeteries, change the exclusionary definition of *Indian* on the federal level, and celebrate Juneteenth and Black History Month.[16]

As I watched these distinct but interconnected worlds, I hoped against hope that we were seeing the beginning of better things. But sure enough, as it always has on the North American continent, a backlash to Black progress reared its head among both the white majority and some Native Americans. In the United States, podcasters and talking heads bemoaned the ubiquity of "woke culture"; the US Supreme Court heard the lawsuit filed by Students for Fair Admissions that blamed a slight increase in Black student enrollment for the decrease in Asian American enrollment, and subsequently the court struck down the consideration of race in college admissions; and anti-vaxxer embrace of pseudo-science led to a surge in the spread of misinformation about health and politics. As a result of all these factors, and of fatigue on the part of the average (white) American who had tired of hearing about inequality, in November 2024 Donald Trump was reelected president. Under the forty-seventh president, authoritarianism has accelerated at an unprecedented pace, and subtext is now context. Trump and his supporters have weaponized false claims of antisemitism to target pro-Palestine students, faculty members, and travelers for harassment and/or deportation and to withhold federal funds (or at least threaten to) from universities who balk at demands to close all offices and shutdown all research initiatives related to "diversity."[17] A country that once at least claimed to welcome immigrants and champion free speech has now made clear that, in fact, immigrants' status may depend on their speech and values aligning with those of the current regime.[18] This administration derides as "DEI" any acknowledgment of the participation by people of color and white women in American history, and the heroics of figures as seemingly untouchable as the Tuskegee Airmen and Navajo

Code Talkers were deleted from federal websites until outcry shamed the administration into restoring them.[19] I could go on.

As a professor in Pennsylvania, I continue to teach my classes on African American and Native American history, seeing education as a salve I have the opportunity to personally apply, even as I navigate a workplace where students are fearful that a recession will render their education moot, and where my dean and chancellor are wary that the political environment and reduction of federal grants will drastically decrease enrollments of both domestic and international students, putting the university in a financial crisis. I sign letters to support my noncitizen colleagues and urge my university to go to bat for them. I go to protests. I make my calls to my representatives (though I'm well aware Senators Dave McCormick and John Fetterman could not care less about my pleas). I know I'm one of many in my state hoping that my small actions will combine with the small actions of others to make incremental change.

It's an interesting time to be a Black woman, because we're in a period with a shift in the opportunities available to us. For example, Black female entrepreneurs were some of the biggest winners of what I'll call the 2020–23 Black Lives Matter era, but much of the venture capital previously going to us has now been rerouted back to white male–operated companies. And yet for once we are not the face of the worst policies of a presidential administration.[20] I've eavesdropped on or been party to multiple conversations where African American women from varied backgrounds relay that observation with a mixture of unease and relief, noting that the people who voted for our president will soon see their chickens come home to roost, if they haven't already. As scholars like Kelly Lytle Hernandez consistently remind us, there are thousands of Black immigrants in this country, and many of them are certainly facing dire straits, but the people we see dragged away in horrific ICE raids more often, or on the news touted as supposedly dangerous and criminal, are more likely to be non-Black immigrants from Latin American countries, like my own husband. In the US sociopolitical sphere right now, I feel most like an ally and less like the one with my head on the chopping block (though, on our country's trajectory, I'm only a hair's breadth away, as are we all).

In Oklahoma, though—the core of Indian Country—my potential footprint and stakes are clearer and more pressing to me. Of the five former slaveholding tribes, only the Cherokee Nation took the ideals of the Black Lives Matter movement to heart for more than a fleeting moment. The Seminole, Muscogee Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw Nations have not followed its lead. The Seminole Nation continues its second-class treatment of freedmen, who can vote but not access other rights of citizenship, including tribal scholarships and housing assistance.[21] The Muscogee Creek Nation leadership ignored the ruling of its own district court judge, who said in September 2023 that the post–Civil War treaty that gave freedmen "full tribal citizenship and rights" is "supreme law" and is now fighting its own Supreme Court's August 2025 ruling that agrees with the lower court—proof that even when the desire for positive change comes from within their own nation, racist tribal leaders will reject it.[22] In June 2020, the House Financial Services Committee, under the direction of Chairwoman Maxine Waters, threatened to withhold millions of dollars from the Choctaw Nation (as well as the Seminole, Muscogee, and Chickasaw Nations) if it did not provide citizenship to freedmen. Choctaw Chief Gary Batton responded with a letter blaming its adoption of slavery on the United States and washing its hands of any responsibility to freedmen.[23] A year later, he backpedaled, writing in a blog post that open dialogue was needed because "the story of Choctaw Freedmen deserves our attention and thoughtful consideration within the framework of tribal governance."[24] This proved to be mere lip service, though, as Batton did not meet with representatives of the freedmen community nor offer any update on how this "open dialogue" might occur.[25] Last, the Chickasaw Nation never acknowledged the discussions around police violence against Black and Native Americans or around freedmen citizenship, maintaining the low profile that has come to be its modus operandi when it comes to thorny topics and most current events.

In the midst of all this, I was talking to Chickasaws and Choctaws I'd met or who reached out to me after reading my book, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land*, or one of the op-eds I wrote as part of the book's promotion, or watching one of my Zoom presentations; I got the sense that there were tribal members who were receptive to my message. I had phone calls and lunches or dinners with these people, and in 2024, I reached out to some of them to put together a group that could work toward some sort of outreach to tribal leadership. For this coalition, I specifically invited well-known academics, several of whom had embarked on high-profile relationships with their Native nations and/or been honored by their nations, in hopes that they would be able to win the ear of Choctaw Chief Batton and Chickasaw Governor Bill Anoatubby in a way that I, as a noncitizen freedman, never would. In my first book, I built on the work of those who came before me in my subfield by not supplanting the idea of citizenship being important to freedmen in the nineteenth century but rather adding another layer. For Chickasaw Freedmen, especially, who would not achieve formal political inclusion, an examination of their connection to tribal land was essential in thinking through why they chose to stay in the Chickasaw Nation—or return frequently—instead of leaving permanently for the United States, where they could enjoy some of the benefits of citizenship. It's a funny parallel that as the United States was growing increasingly hostile to granting and reinforcing citizenship to and for nonwhite people, I find myself drawn to fighting for citizenship in the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations.

Some Chickasaw and Choctaw academics ignored my entreaty, while some, including Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw; University of Chicago), Robert O. Smith (Chickasaw; University of North Texas), Jenny L. Davis (Chickasaw; University of Illinois), and A. Shane Dillingham (Choctaw; Arizona State University) agreed to meet five times over the course of a year. We discussed tribal citizens' responsibilities to address and atone for their nations' slaveholding past, the best way to sway hearts and minds on an issue considered highly controversial, and the right way to get a message to tribal leadership.

We decided on a two-pronged approach: We would submit a panel to the Oklahoma City meeting of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) to test the waters at one of the largest gatherings of Native American scholars, and we would draft a letter to Governor Anoatubby (and then possibly Chief Batton) requesting a meeting to discuss how these nations could, as sovereign bodies, choose to open their citizenship to freedmen. It took almost a month to craft the letter; it took only two weeks for us to receive a response, and this came not directly from Governor Anoatubby but from a lawyer who told us that the governor respectfully declined to meet with us because "the matter of citizenship has been litigated and decided."[26] This was the response to a group that included women who had been honored by the tribe as Chickasaw Dynamic Women of the Year, a high distinction described as a "tribute to a Chickasaw woman who has inspired, given hope or opened new possibilities or opportunities for others through her example."[27]

In the United States and in the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, citizens were finding that appealing to politicians to solve problems of inequity and oppression seemed a lost cause. I used to think of my role as solely a recorder of history and then, as I moved into writing about the twenty-first century, as a witness to current events. But in the absence of change from the top, I realized it's up to us individually to make change—not exactly an original realization, but one I think we must all make in our own time. Appealing to Chickasaw history and traditional culture in our letter to the governor hadn't worked. What we've decided to do instead is work together to create a new, more inclusive idea of what it means to be Chickasaw (and Choctaw), and even if that idea never catches on at the top, we believe we can still create pockets of refuge, pockets of interracial coalition where the descendants of the enslaved and enslaver are in dialogue and in relation. This is what we advocated with the other, more successful part of our strategy. Our NAISA roundtable was accepted, and in June 2025, we were likely the first panel at any academic conference to feature multiple Chickasaw and Choctaw tribal citizens calling for freedmen citizenship. My fellow panelists situated their advocacy in the context of their own journeys to understanding their families' connections to slavery and the need for tribal governments and the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies to articulate a more inclusive, ethical notion of kinship and sovereignty.

To give you a sense of how momentous it was to have these particular people advocating for this particular cause: President Trump's firing of staff who don't agree with his stances has received a lot of attention, but for decades employees of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations have been aware that if they speak about "the freedmen issue," their job is on the line and their standing in their community is in question. My fellow panelists knew that merely by putting their names next to mine on the NAISA conference program, they were jeopardizing any future opportunities working for or with their tribal governments. It was amazing for me, on an individual level, to know that they were not only validating me as a Chickasaw/Choctaw Freedman and as a scholar of my people's history but also choosing allyship over self-interest. It was also important for other scholars of Native American and Indigenous Studies to see. After all, the common refrain of Native folks in conversations about "pretendians" is that the mark of true Native identity is that one is claimed by their community.

The reception was wholly positive (at least outwardly), with audience members drawing connections between holding the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations accountable for anti-Black racism and pushing Indigenous nations around the country to rethink disenrollment motivated by greed and rethinking partnerships with the US Border Patrol that ignore the humanity and indigeneity of many of our Latin American sisters and brothers. The "freedmen issue" has long been one of the few matters on which NAISA scholars have been willing—if, until recently, only reluctantly—to broach tribal fallibility, but in our roundtable Q&A, the topic seemed poised to pave the way for other discussions that had previously been taboo. A number of attendees seemed to agree that to push the study of Native nations forward in all the richness and complexity they warrant, we must also be willing to subject them to legitimate critique. As a discipline, we have to balance this with the introduction of mechanisms like tribal Institutional Review Board (ethical and regulatory oversight of research) and recommendations to acquire endorsement from specific elders or tribal councils who may possess biases or complicity in the very concerns we're trying to confront.

After the conference, I held events with two of my co-panelists—one at a location in the Chickasaw Nation with Robert and the other at a location in the Choctaw Nation with Shane—each with the goal of starting up the grassroots education program that clearly needs to be our next step. The Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations have so suppressed their involvement in slavery that most of their citizens have no idea this is real, important history. And if citizens do know bits and pieces of the history, they often harbor misunderstandings or fear that they will be personally held accountable. In essence, we face the same challenges African American educators and activists have long faced in the United States with white Americans. As I voiced to the attendees at both of these educational events: The United States is a sovereign nation that was enriched and built through the use of Black labor, and its leaders and citizenry eventually recognized it had a moral and ethical obligation to extend citizenship to those Black laborers and their descendants. Don't the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, then, have the same obligation? Native nations are not monoracial. They have diverse populations, resulting from histories of adoption through various means, including captivity, intermarriage and interracial sex, shared history, and political agreement. Their history as victims of oppression does not render them immune to critique or absolve them of harm they perpetrated on another group of people. Our attendees' reactions ranged from incredulity (from a tribal citizen who didn't like the idea that their nation was at fault for historical ills), relief (from freedmen who had never been able to attend a formal event where their history was discussed), and shock (from tribal citizens who now realized just how much of their history had been hidden from them).

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."[28] We—historians, people of color, anyone watching the world's events for more than a few years—know things are more complicated than that. The good guy (or gal) doesn't always win; morality doesn't always triumph. To survive without falling into despair, though, I think we must all continue to fight in whatever way feels right to us. It feels like, as the kids say, "the darkest timeline," as if any chance to make progress is gone for who knows how long. But I've chosen to see it in the opposite way: there is clearly never a perfect time to build coalition and gain ground on important issues, so *any* time is the *right* time. Every time I talk to a Chickasaw or Choctaw who believes in freedmen equality and the acknowledgment of accurate tribal history, I feel like I'm slowly building a community. That community may never count among its number a Chickasaw governor or Choctaw chief, and I may never gain citizenship in either nation, but at least I can say I made a small difference in awareness, that through my advocacy, the book I've already published and the book I'm currently working on, a few thousand more people know, and will at some point learn, about the history, struggles, and well-deserved rights of my foremothers and forefathers. As all around us we see the echoes of the struggles of the Civil War era, struggles we hoped would be resolved long ago, that seems a battle worth fighting.

NOTES

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7. Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters,* 28–29, 83–84.

8. Yarbrough, *Choctaw Confederates.*

9. Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters,* 119–38; Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation After the Civil War* (Yale University Press, 2019); Alaina E. Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

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