

In the Tethered Shadow:
Native American Slavery, African Slavery, and the Disappearance of the Past

By *Nancy E. van Deusen*

Reflecting on advances in research on Indigenous slavery in the Americas is essential. But it is also imperative to step back and consider why Indigenous slavery only gained a significant foothold in academic studies in the twenty-first century. This article considers several reasons why Indigenous slavery in the Americas was, until recently, considered no more than a short-lived preamble to the horrors of the enslavement of Africans. The topic of disease—and especially discussions about the susceptibility to European diseases that supposedly emptied entire Indigenous landscapes of their inhabitants—has functioned as a heuristic device in historical studies while concurrently tethering the decimation of Indigenous populations to the increased importation of African laborers to replace them. The main economic explanations given in the historical literature for the transition from enslaving Indigenous people (the first slavery) to enslaving Africans overemphasize the African slave trade that supplied laborers for monocultural plantation production in the littoral areas of North and South America and on many Caribbean islands, thus eliding or underplaying the existence and persistence of Indigenous slavery, both in those places in other parts of the Americas. Those habits of thought and argumentation have been abetted and reinforced by the archive's power to tether the two histories of slavery through plenitude, erasure, and obfuscation in how documents are created, stored, and accessed.