

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2009

Review of *African Creeks: Estelivste and the Creek Nation*. By Gary Zellar

Robbie Ethridge
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Ethridge, Robbie, "Review of *African Creeks: Estelivste and the Creek Nation*. By Gary Zellar" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1214.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1214>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

African Creeks: Estelwste and the Creek Nation. By Gary Zellar. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xix +343 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

Estelwste, or “black people,” in the Creek Indian language, are the subjects of this well-written, absorbing story of the people of African descent whose lot in life cast them with the Creek Indians of present-day Georgia and Alabama and, after Indian Removal, present-day Oklahoma. Gary Zellar refers to them as African Creeks, distinguishing this particular population from both African Americans, Euro-American Creeks, and Indian Creeks. Such distinctions are necessary to the history of the Creek Indians because, after European contact, Creek lives became irreversibly and forever blended with those of the immigrant populations, yet the Creeks themselves adhered in varying degrees to the distinctions. Zellar’s work is one in a growing body of literature that explores the merger of African and Indian life over the past four centuries. As this body of work shows, the relationships between Africans and Indians in the American South, although not always replicating the race-based slave system of the American South, were built in dialogue with the Southern slave system.

Although spanning almost four hundred years, Zellar’s real focus is on the post-Removal history of African Creeks. Africans came into Creek society in many ways—as runaway slaves, as freed people, and as Creek-owned slaves. In pre-Removal times, as Zellar argues, the relations between Africans and Creeks, even African slaves and Creeks, were fluid

and flexible, not rigid and strict as in Euro-American society. After Removal and the Civil War, and once in Oklahoma territory, according to Zellar, this fluidity translated into equal political, economic, and social rights as African Creeks took their place alongside Creeks in Creek legislative bodies, established African Creek towns, churches, and schools, and generally participated as part of the *body politic* of the Creek Nation.

Zellar's thesis is in contrast to that of Claudio Saunt's, who argues in *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (2005), that the place of African Creeks underwent a deleterious transformation just prior to and after Removal as Creek Indians began adopting American racial ideas of black and white. For Zellar, things did not begin to unravel until much later, in 1887, when the United States raised the specter of allotment with the Dawes Act and turned a blind eye to the intrusions, swindles, and cheating that soon beset the Indian nations as thousands of Americans rushed to take a piece of Indian country. Allotments rested on definitions of citizenship, which, in turn, rested on notions of "blood quantum." Inclusion turned to exclusion, with an increasing racialization of African Creeks by Indian Creeks. Indian Creeks began to view their African Creek neighbors, kin, and friends not as Creeks, but as African Americans. By so doing, they not only denied many African Creeks rights to land (however feebly defined by the U.S. federal government), but also to Creek citizenship. They would cast many out of Creek country. Those who remained, like many Indian Creeks, lost most of their lands. Unlike the Indian Creeks, however, the African Creeks also became subject to the same prejudices, discriminations, and Jim Crow laws as other southern African Americans.

ROBBIE ETHRIDGE
Department of Anthropology
University of Mississippi