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Celia E. Naylor. *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens.* The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Illustrations, maps. xii + 360 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3203-5; $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5883-7.

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Dislodging Comfortable Fictions

Debates about the citizenship status of Cherokee freedmen and their descendents have filled newspapers, Web sites, conference rooms, and e-mail inboxes over the past two years and have ranged from the thoughtful to the downright vicious, leaving nearly no aspect of the controversy untouched. But as Celia E. Naylor's recent book makes clear, there is still a great deal more we can learn about the lives, loves, fates, and desires of people of African descent who lived among the Cherokees from the 1830s through the first decade of the twentieth century. In *African Cherokees in Indian Territory*, Naylor aims to "lift the veil" that still covers the world of "enslaved and free African-descended people in the 19th-century Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory" (p. 3).

Naylor's central goal is to explore the perspectives of enslaved people of African descent in the Cherokee Nation. She sets out to analyze how they viewed their Cherokee enslavers, how they viewed themselves, and how they developed and maintained a sense of belonging within their Cherokee communities. This orientation sets the book apart from other works on African-Indian interactions because it focuses on enslaved peoples' own points of view, rather than relying solely on the thoughts, attitudes, and historical records of their enslavers.

Naylor draws on a staggering array of source materials to lay bare the textures of Cherokee slavery and recover what it meant to be an African Cherokee (she opts for this term as opposed to African American, whether or not an individual is "biracial") in nineteenth-century Indian Territory, including oral narratives, journals, letters, U.S. and Cherokee government records, newspapers, missionary records, and travelers' accounts. She taps the rich Works Progress Administration interviews and other collected oral histories of formerly enslaved individuals and uses them as a window onto the daily lives of enslaved African-descended peoples. While these oral histories are indeed illuminating, they also have their limits. For example, in her discussion of how African Indians used cultural signifiers like clothing, language, and foodways to demonstrate a sense of belonging to their communities, she relies heavily on the testimony of African Creeks, rather than African Cherokees. On the one hand, this allows her to draw some general conclusions about African Indians in Indian Territory. As she notes in the introduction, such an approach permits an exploration of "instances of enslaved African Indians' shared cultural experiences and their sense of belonging within these Indian nations" (p. 20). On the other hand, it challenges the reader to decipher whether Naylor is arguing that the experience of African Cherokees was unique or representative among African-descended peoples living in Indian nations. This dynamic–between the specific experiences of African Cherokees and the experiences of African Indians among the five nations–pervades the book. In many ways, it suggests the tremendous challenges a historian of this subject faces (and Naylor has largely overcome) in identifying nation-specific source material. And in some places, it allows Naylor to make the case for her larger argument that slavery among the five nations was no less brutal, constricting, or dehumanizing than it was elsewhere. But in other moments, it is left to the reader to disaggregate the experiences of African Cherokees from African Indians broadly defined.

More successfully, Naylor uses a variety of sources to demonstrate the myriad resistance strategies African Cherokees adopted in their struggle to assert their basic humanity and achieve freedom from bondage while also articulating their place within the Cherokee Nation. For instance, she analyzes runaway slave advertisements in the *Cherokee Advocate* newspaper, as well as interprets the actions of fugitive African Cherokee slaves to show

that far from feeling content with the purportedly more relaxed slave system practiced among Indian slaveholders, the desire to resist bondage was widespread. Her nuanced reading of these frequent but often subtle acts of resistance results in a strong counterpoint to the "comfortable fiction" that slavery among the Indians was "benign."[1] Indeed, while Naylor gives credit to earlier studies of slavery among native peoples (including but not limited to the work of Theda Perdue, William Loren Katz, and Daniel F. Littlefield Jr.), she expends a great deal of energy in this book debunking what she sees as a central misconception about Indian slave ownership. While earlier literature has often presented the enslavement of African-descended peoples by Indians as lenient, familial, and generally preferable to enslavement by white owners, Naylor vehemently asserts that there was nothing innocuous about Cherokee slavery–for the slaves, personally, or for the Cherokees, politically. Furthermore, while still acknowledging the potential for cooperation between fugitive slaves and Indian sympathizers across eras and regions, Naylor insists that romanticized stories of collusion are overemphasized while stories of collision remained largely obscured.[2]

As a style of writing history, debunking romanticized stories is particularly attractive to scholars of subaltern experiences. Among other things, it permits a rigorous and necessary reexamination of academic fields of study and, as has been the case with African-Indian interrelations, often generates new (or regenerates long-neglected) areas of inquiry. But the problem with tossing out comfortable fictions is accepting uncomfortable truths. Naylor's strongest contribution is thus also the most disquieting. As she observes in the afterword, "to believe that Indian cultures made bondage more tenable to African Indians or somehow countered the denigrating process of enslavement is to deny the insidious nature of a system based on the ownership of human beings" (p. 205). Instead of believing that the enslavement of African-descended individuals by Cherokee owners was somehow preferable to other forms of slavery, Naylor maintains it was no less peculiar and no less institutional than elsewhere in the antebellum South and was probably messier and more complicated than scholars have even begun to realize.

This book will find a ready audience within American Indian studies, particularly among historians of African-Indian interactions and scholars examining the politics of race and citizenship within Indian communities. For those familiar with Claudio Saunt's *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (2005) and Tiya Miles's *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (2005), two of the most compelling among similar recent works, this book will take its rightful place as a significant contribution to the topic of nineteenth-century African-Indian relationships. Although scholars of African American history, more narrowly defined, have not been as involved in recent developments within this field of study, the inclusion of Naylor's book in the John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture suggests that it may (and should) have an impact beyond established institutional boundaries.

Notes

[1]. I borrow the term "comfortable fiction" from Vine Deloria Jr., "Comfortable Fictions and the Struggle for Turf," *American Indian Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1992): 397-410.

[2]. In this effort, Naylor is in part extending and enlarging the work of Rudi Halliburton Jr., who challenged prevailing views of lenient Indian slavery in his book, *Red over Black: Black Slavery among the Cherokee Indians* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1977).

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