



Tiya Miles. *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xix + 306 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24132-9; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25002-4.

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Race, Slavery, and a Cherokee Family

Tiya Miles aims to tell “a Cherokee story, an African-American story, and an American story” (p. xvi). Each element is critical to her book’s success, because, as she argues, “though much of nineteenth-century Cherokee history has been written as a story about Cherokees and whites, it was an invisible third element, the presence of black people, on which the story often turned” (p. 24).

Ties that Bind focuses on the family created by Shoe Boots, a Cherokee, and Doll, his black slave. Their relationship, Miles believes, merits book-length treatment in part because it was the first Afro-Cherokee union to be regulated by the Cherokee national government; as such, it has become a common reference point for scholars. More important, however, is the fact that the lives of Shoe Boots, Doll, and their descendants, from the 1790s to the 1860s, “crystallize and illuminate” (p. 3) a series of issues central to debates within American studies, American history, and ethnohistory. Among the topics brought to the fore by this family story are the diversity of experience among African Americans, the impact of colonialism on Native Americans, the cycles of enslavement and resistance that characterized American slavery, and the link between nationalism and racial formation. The book, in short, aims to investigate a family’s history to illuminate the intersection of race, gender, class, and nation; the family, in Miles’s hands, becomes the “barometer for the society, tracing and reflecting the atmospherics of social life and social change” (p. 3). Throughout, she is concerned with investigating the relationship between black slavery and Cherokee kinship norms, on the one hand, and the link between black emancipation and Cherokee sovereignty, on the other. Miles has no doubt that “racial prejudice” (p. 4) was a central feature of Cherokee life well before Removal, but

she also persuasively demonstrates how racism intertwined, and at times conflicted, with Cherokee notions of kinship and self-determination. This is, then, a wide-ranging and ambitious book. *Ties that Bind* offers a challenging narrative, one that succeeds in speaking to issues fundamental to Native and American history without losing track of its obligations to the individuals and families at its center. It is easy to see why this book won the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize from the Organization of American Historians.

The book itself is divided into two parts, “Bone of My Bone: Slavery, Race, and Nation—East” (chapters 1 through 7) and “Of Blood and Bone: Freedom, Kinship, and Citizenship—West” (chapters 8 through 10), plus an epilogue and coda that bring the Shoe Boots family story into the twentieth century. Miles’s presentation of her material has elements of the thematic (chapter titles include “Slavery,” “Motherhood,” “Property,” and “Christianity”), but because each theme is linked to the evolving lives of her protagonists, she successfully leads her readers through nineteenth-century Cherokee history as well. Thus, her chapter on slavery begins with a generalized account of both early Cherokee-African relations and Cherokee slaveholding before moving on to discuss the specifics (some of them necessarily conjectural) of Shoe Boots’s initial relationship with Doll. Miles then turns to “Motherhood,” a chapter that effectively introduces readers to Cherokee and American laws and customs regulating slavery, women, sexuality, and motherhood, while also providing details of Doll’s experiences within these overlapping social systems. Throughout, Miles calls attention to “the continuing contradictions that characterize the history of this family” (pp. 127-128). For example, Shoe Boots and Doll’s children found

their Cherokee citizenship endangered by the Cherokees' engagement with Euro-Americans' rising anti-black prejudice, but those same children's citizenship was eventually secured because Cherokees accepted certain Euro-American patrilineal traditions. Likewise, in previous generations, "even as Cherokees and Africans developed alliances and dependencies ... they also betrayed and battled one another, vying for liberty and authority in the expanding morass of European colonial rule" (pp. 30-31). In explicating and evaluating contradictions of this sort, and in continually reminding her readers of the need to include Africans and race within our frameworks for Native history, Miles more than lives up to the high standard she sets for herself in the book's introduction: "It is my hope that ... this book crosses traditional boundaries of subject matter and perspective to contribute fresh and useful findings to our national conversation about race" (p. 8).

Scholars focused on such issues will immediately recognize that Miles's book joins Claudio Saunt's most recent monograph in critiquing the assertions made by Theda Perdue in a recent book and article.[1] Miles and Saunt—along with Circe Sturm (whose ethnographic fieldwork has yielded a fine monograph on Cherokee engagement with notions of blood, race, and nation) and Celia Naylor and Barbara Krauthamer (whose books on related topics are in progress)—have published a short but pointed critique of Perdue's thesis in the most recent edition of *Ethnohistory*. [2] The debate hinges on the degree to which the Cherokees and their Native neighbors in the pre-Removal Southeast were influenced by, and deployed, notions of race and racial hierarchy. Miles and the others believe that such constructs became a critical part of Native society; Perdue disagrees. In *Ties that Bind*, Miles goes a long way toward demonstrating that Perdue's position—which centers on relations between Indians and Euro-Americans—is limited at best and untenable at worst once blacks are added to the equation.

After reading Miles, in fact, it is difficult to understand what is to be gained by denying that

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Native peoples participated in contemporary debates about race, debates that became perhaps *the* quintessential American conversation. True, racial thought did not accord well with traditional Native notions of difference, but we know that Native peoples took part in other conversations—about capitalism, say—that forced them out of their pre-Columbian comfort zones. Colonialism, after all, tends to do that. And we know that, as with capitalism, Native peoples at once struggled with the new ideas and behaviors called forth by their colonial situation and found ways to make those ideas and behaviors their own. Even today, Native Christianity (Native capitalism, Native democracy, or Native what-have-you) often looks distinctly different from its Euro-American counterpart. Why should race be different? Miles shows clearly and convincingly that it was not, that the story of Shoe Boots, Doll, and their descendants cannot be understood apart from its roots in systems of racial thought and racist behavior, that were both Cherokee and American. Modern Americans of Native, African, and European backgrounds may all be made uncomfortable by that conclusion—investigating the impact of colonialism tends to do that—but that does not lessen its soundness.

Notes

[1]. Claudio Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Theda Perdue, *"Mixed Blood" Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); and Perdue, "Race and Culture: Writing the Ethnohistory of the Early South" *Ethnohistory* 51 (2004): pp. 701-723.

[2]. Claudio Saunt, Barbara Krauthamer, Tiya Miles, Celia E. Naylor, and Circe Sturm, "Rethinking Race and Culture in the Early South," *Ethnohistory* 53 (2006): pp. 399-406. For Perdue's response, see "A Reply to Saunt et al," *ibid.*: p. 407. See also Circe Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

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