

Estelvsste and Cherokee Freedmen

By Delphine Criscenzo

African Creeks: Estelvsste and the Creek Nation. By Gary Zellar. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. 343 pp.

Race and the Cherokee Nation: Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century. By Fay A. Yarbrough. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 184 pp.

African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens. By Celia E. Naylor. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 376 pp.

The scholarly field that explores the historical relationships between people of African and native descent has become crowded during the past five years. Three major works dedicated to documenting Black slavery among the Five Civilized Tribes in particular were published in 2007 and 2008. Two of them examine the Cherokee Nation and the third the Muskogee Creek Nation. All three monographs look at the experiences and lives of the African people enslaved by the Creek and Cherokee Indian Nations and try to ferret out the reasons beneath the enslavement of Black people by Native-American nations. However, not all link their findings or the importance of their research to the contemporary struggle faced by the descendents of the Cherokee and Creek Freedmen, who are currently being denied access to their Cherokee and Creek citizenship.

Gary Zellar's *African Creeks* explores an important but understudied aspect of American race relations: people of African descent with Native Americans. His book exposes the different key roles that African Creeks have played, individually or as a people, in all major events of the history of the Creek Nation from the first years of contact to the early years of the twentieth century. He emphasizes the various economic and political positions of influence that African Creeks managed to attain during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including the essential role they played as interpreters negotiating for the Creek Nation with the federal government. Through detailed depictions of crucial events that disturbed the Creek Nation, such as the Civil War, their removal to Oklahoma, the Green Peach War, and the introduction of many micro-histories, Zellar is able to tell, or even re-tell, the history of a group of people so well assimilated into the Creek Nation that they spoke the language, practiced the culture, and had a vested interest for the welfare of their nation.

After the Civil War, Zellar explains, the African Creeks were full citizens of the Creek Nation and had obtained a proportional share of the tribal funds. However, with the opening of Indian Territory to White settlement and the massive waves of White and African-American migrants, Euro-American cultural hegemony began to change the Creek Nation's life. In the 1880s Creek "citizenship was denied to anyone born to a Creek mother who 'had more than half African blood'" (114). Ten years later Creek land was put up for allotment by the federal government, a process that Zellar describes as extremely devastating for the African Creeks. He denounces the exploitation of the African Creeks by "grafters" and "new settlers" on the basis of race. He argues that during that time, Indians were given a chance to be assimilated but that a person of color owning some land was an insult to the Whites. I believe Zellar may have underestimated the losses and trauma on the part of the Creeks that a policy, such as allotment,

created. Attempting to correct the wrongs done to a group of people does not always imply denying the suffering of others.

With this work, he gives a voice to a group of people still being denied existence. Both websites of the Creek Nation of Oklahoma and Georgia do not mention the story of the Estelvestes in the section entitled “History of the Creeks.” With this monograph, Zellar sides with the African Creeks by telling their story and documenting their enormous contributions to the Creek Nation. However, his position is deprived of political intent, since he does not explain why he studies this field nor why it is understudied. However, he “point[s] the way for further and much needed research in the field”(xix).

Fay A. Yarbrough introduces *Race and the Cherokee Nation* as “a book on interracial sex from an American Indian perspective” (1). This monograph makes an important contribution to the field of interracial encounters, as Yarbrough moves away from White male/Black female relationships to include unions between White males and Cherokee women, as well as Cherokee males and Black women. Her book is of significant interest to historians of race relations, slavery, the Indian Territory and Oklahoma, as well as to educated laypersons who have developed a curiosity in Black Indians.

With her monograph, Yarbrough challenges the widely held beliefs that “the Indians always helped the slaves, helped them run away, that they saw each other as equals, both as oppressed [,and that] all their relationships were consensual”.¹ Indeed, her book complicates the debate, which began during the first half of the twentieth century with historians such as Laurence Foster and Kenneth Porter and developed to a greater extent in recent years with contributions by Tiya Miles, Theda Perdue, and Melinda Micco, to name a few. For the past ten years these later scholars have looked at interracial sex through the lens of identity formation. Yarbrough’s intent with this monograph is to promote a better understanding of the different factors at play in the construction of a Cherokee identity.

Yarbrough depicts the fluidity of Cherokee identity and its changes through time and geographical relocation. She tries to demonstrate that the Cherokees developed a racial ideology in order to protect their political sovereignty. It has been argued by scholars of the field and by Circe Sturm, in particular in *Blood Politics, Race, Culture and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*, that the Cherokee adoption of the peculiar institution within the confines of their nation and the eventual exclusion of their Freedmen citizens are the results of their internalization of a White Euro-American racial hierarchy. Yarbrough cites Sturm extensively and does not refute her argument; however, she sees a psychological reason underlying such actions by the Cherokee Nation. In a 2004 interview, Yarbrough says, “the Five Civilized Tribes owned slaves for two reasons: one reason they did this was purely economical . . . a second reason was to send a strong, strategic message to whites. ‘We are free like you; we can own slaves just as any free people can.’”²

Race and the Cherokee Nation does contribute extensively to the current controversy in reference to the Cherokee Freedmen insofar as it gives the reader an idea of racial formation within the Cherokee Nation throughout the nineteenth century, as well as provides many concrete examples that enable the reader to understand Cherokee identity formation. Yarbrough says, “the origins of Cherokee ideas about race and the development of racial prejudice are less important to this study than the recognition that the ideas were present in Cherokee society” (75).

¹ Interview from Jeff Worley for *Odyssey* available at:
<http://www.research.uky.edu/odyssey/exclusive/summer04/yarbrough.html>

² *Ibid.*

I am not sure that the Cherokee Freedmen will feel contented by the simple recognition that ideas of race were present in the Cherokee Nation. This is something that they know and that they live every day. Yarbrough contributes greatly to highlighting the Cherokees' efforts to maintain their political sovereignty and demonstrating how crucial this status is to their identity. However, the Cherokee Freedmen might be interested in knowing why it is that their rejection from the Nation is the only way for the latter to reaffirm its sovereignty. Might their skin color have something to do with it?

Celia Naylor's first monograph, *African Cherokees in Indian Territories: From Chattel to Citizens*, is a great contribution to the seminal academic interest in the experience of Black slaves within Indian nations. With this book, she attempts, in her words, to "expose the nuances of identity, the contradictions of belonging and the complexity of bondage for African people in Indian country" (4).

The core of Naylor's study is centered in the nineteenth century, during which African Cherokee identity was created and developed. She devotes a great amount of her monograph to documenting the cultural particularities of African Cherokees. Their clothing, food, and extensive knowledge in herbs and medicines are distinctive attributes that testify to their uniqueness, which was derived from their status as African Cherokee. Their notion of belonging was connected to the Cherokee and Indian Territory, Naylor argues, and was reinforced by their Cherokee blood. These cultural elements, which she calls "sociocultural ties," are the proofs, according to Naylor, that the experiences of Africans among the Cherokee were specific and reinforced their notion of belonging to this Indian nation.

Naylor's mission at large is to provide an alternative narrative of the lives of enslaved and free Blacks in America in an attempt to question "racial categorizations, cultural subjectivities, a national politics of exclusion and sovereignty, then and now" (24). Her ambition is to unveil a past that will contribute to a better understanding of present struggles. Indeed, if the core of her study is centered around the nineteenth century and the creation and development of an African Cherokee identity, then in her conclusion Naylor connects the narrative she just provided with the very recent struggle faced by descendants of the Cherokee Freedmen to be recognized as Cherokee citizens. In March 2007 the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma voted to exclude many descendants of their former slaves who were unable to prove their Cherokee ancestry, thus contradicting an 1866 decision made by their ancestors, who signed a treaty with the U.S. government that gave citizenship to their newly freed slaves. She is able to provide an "alternative narrative about the enslaved and free lives of people of African descent in the 19th century" Indian Territory (25); and she is the first scholar to connect clearly the African Cherokee slaves' sense of belonging to the Cherokee Nation and their "struggle for recognition and equal rights that emerged" at the time to the ongoing claims of their descendants today.

The importance of these researches is enormous for the descendants of Freedmen who to this day are denied rights to their Indian citizenship under the pretext that they do not have any Cherokee or Creek blood. It seems that these three monographs are trying to redefine the circumstances for the contemporary struggles of the descendants of the Freedmen. Indeed, they describe the connections between the Creek or Cherokee and the enslaved and freed Blacks living among them. All three books document the substantial contributions of slaves and freedmen to the tribes and their kinship relationships. Also, these three scholars depict the Freedmen's early struggle to be accepted and the different ruses to disenfranchise them. Finally, all three authors write about the process of racialization followed by these two Indian nations, which could leave some readers, aware of the contemporary struggle, with the idea that the

reasons for excluding the descendents of the Freedmen today might be based on their race. However, none but Naylor fully acknowledges the connection between the author's historical work and the contemporary struggle of the Freedmen descendents and their grassroots movement.