

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizen. By Celia E. Naylor.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zj3b0r9>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Collins, Robert Keith

**Publication Date**

2009-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## REVIEWS

**African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizen.** By Celia E. Naylor. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 376 pages. \$55.00 cloth; \$22.50 paper.

Grounded in primary sources and lived experiences, Celia Naylor's *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizen* offers unique historical insights into the diverse realities of African Cherokee existence. In a similar vein, this book challenges the reader to ponder the individual agency that caused racism and slavery to become cultural practices, even among an oppressed people. Although there have been several historical analyses of the practice of slavery within the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, few have made the realities of individuals of African descent among the Cherokee as their focal point for analysis. Naylor does just this and compels the reader to question the aspects of the African experience that are based upon assumptions that slavery among Native Americans was less brutal than among their American counterparts.

Naylor introduces her discussion with two major questions: How did Cherokee owners and enslaved blacks interact with one another? Are issues of forced servitude, domination, and brutality still relevant because the enslavers—buyers and sellers—were Cherokee? These questions are central because they lay at the intersections between what historians have said about the African experience in servitude within American Indian nations and the realities that freedmen of these nations shared during Works Progress Administration interviews. Naylor's work encourages the examination of potential inconsistencies between these two perspectives. To address these questions, Naylor presents six chapters that cover the social, cultural, political, and economic lives of enslaved and freed individuals of African descent within nineteenth-century Cherokee society in what was to become the state of Oklahoma. This is followed by an explicit discussion of the lingering implications that slavery holds for understanding the role that enslaved and freed Africans played in Cherokee society before, during, and after Removal. A role their descendants seek to have acknowledged. Contrary to popular belief, Naylor argues, these were not African Americans but African Cherokees born and raised within the Cherokee Nation who developed intimate relationships—not only based in servitude—with Cherokees who contributed to their sense of belonging within the nation's families.

Naylor's second chapter on the African Cherokee individuals' everyday resistance to slavery within the Cherokee Nation offers a strong foundation

for understanding the serious discontent that African Cherokees demonstrated in the face of forced servitude. She reminds her reader that African Cherokees were well aware of their enslavement. Some—with relatively just enslavers—passively yielded to their condition, sometimes becoming casualties of wars between the Treaty Party and the Ross Party (progressive and traditionalist) factions. Others challenged the boundaries of their ascribed “place” in the face of Cherokee Black Codes, which sentenced them to flogging for the slightest action deemed offensive and prohibited them from learning to read and write, owning a home, and owning a hog, horse, or cattle (because chattel was not supposed to own chattel). This approach affords the reader a chance to understand the individual concerns of enslaved African Cherokees on a personal level that is often absent from most discussions of the subject. *African Cherokees* fills such explanatory and relational gaps in the literature by illuminating how important narrated lived experiences are to understanding the similarities in enslavement practices of both Cherokee slave owners and their Confederate counterparts.

Naylor’s focus on those living during the construction of race politics and subsequent Jim Crow segregation within the Cherokee Nation at the time of Oklahoma statehood, is one of the great strengths of the book. The author deftly weaves historical events with life histories to tell the story of African Cherokees and their cultural differences from African American populations, who migrated from neighboring southern states, that sought to make a home in Oklahoma. A generalized black diaspora is a common theme in historical interpretations of Africans in Indian Territory and later Oklahoma, and more often than not these interpretations lend the illusion that the African population was culturally homogenous. Naylor offers the reader vital insight into the real variations in language, culture, custom, and practice that African Cherokees embodied in contrast to those of African Americans. She rejects notions of African Cherokees as passive recipients of racism masked under the auspice of Cherokee sovereignty and hegemony and rejects imported notions of “blackness” from African Americans taking up residence on lands ceded by the Cherokee Nation. Instead, she replaces these with a narrative that highlights the active agency and fortitude African Cherokees have maintained over time in pursuit of recognition for their contributions to Cherokee society and their rights as citizens. The significance of these notions is not only made evident in chapter 6 but also in the afterword, which encourages the reader to consider the implications the discrimination-filled African Cherokee past holds for understanding the present recognition challenges faced by subsequent generations.

Naylor discusses the ways in which African Cherokees navigated and negotiated the subjective minefield of belonging after Reconstruction. By focusing the reader’s attention on the inconsistencies between expected “place” and African Cherokee agency, the author illustrates the instrumental roles that these individuals played in Cherokee economic development and assimilation into American society and associated race-making culture.

*African Cherokees in Indian Territory* offers an important contribution to the current historical discussions of slavery and African lived experiences

within American Indian nations. It provides future scholars in American Indian studies, African American studies, and history a foundation upon which to investigate the dynamics of this phenomenon further. The wealth of context-specific information offered in Naylor's book (for example, maps and photos) will make this intriguing read an excellent textbook that will generate vigorous discussion in the classroom. If there is one critique that I could offer, it is that more discussion is needed on the dynamics of African Cherokee identity, particularly the relationships and sentiments between those defined as Cherokee by blood and those deemed slaves. Despite this one critique, however, Naylor's well-researched and supported discussions should prove enlightening for the academic and the layperson, American Indian and African American, citizen of a sovereign American Indian nation and everyday American interested in the ways in which humans can suppress their common humanity for the sake of creating sources of free labor.

*Robert Keith Collins*

San Francisco State University

**American Indian Education: Counternarratives in Racism, Struggle and the Law.** By Matthew L. M. Fletcher. New York: Routledge, 2008. 223 pages. \$140.00 cloth; \$37.95 paper.

Matthew Fletcher has woven scholarly content with fictional ethnography in a masterstroke. His *American Indian Education: Counternarratives in Racism, Struggle and the Law* takes the—sometimes—clinical tone out of federal Indian policy by couching it in the story of contemporary fictional Native American students. This interesting literary device makes the law-and-policy content accessible to a wide audience.

Fletcher, an enrolled member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, draws on his extensive knowledge of several topics: federal Indian education policy, tribal law, the daily angst of Indian students, and the historico-cultural milieu of Great Lakes tribal communities. He creates a fictional reservation named for local Lake Matchimanitou, an emblematic Indian school, the Lake Matchimanitou Band of Ottawa Indians, and the non-Indian inhabitants of this northernmost part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The protagonists, such as Niko Roberts, Parker Roberts, Gil Ogema, and Anthony "Beercan" Mark, are from the Lake Matchimanitou rez.

The structure is unique; in most chapters, a single character is center stage. The narrative moves through the struggle of that featured player with a legal issue in an educational setting. As the connected stories unfold, weaving together the history of Indian country's love-hate relationship with formal "white" schooling, loss of tribal identity, and the objectification of indigenous symbols by the dominant culture, ethical issues are raised for the reader to contemplate. This is poetics, not polemics. Fletcher said he collected material by interviewing many Great Lakes informants, then crafted the results into the guise of a few fictional characters. If so, it was a brilliant device.