

## Introduction

It was a slow and steady movement of people, animals, and an array of property. Not a journey across the Atlantic Ocean, the route of this middle passage was outlined in the snow by a trail of blood and bodies. The Trail of Tears, *nv no hi du na tlo yi lv*, signifies the intense suffering experienced by those young and old who traveled in snow and mud, hungry and cold, without ample supplies of food or clothing. The journey by foot, and in some cases by steamboat, proved to be laborious; for a significant number of Cherokees who were forced to relocate during the dreadful winter of 1838–39, this would be their final trip. As a result of the horrendous conditions experienced by members of the Cherokee Nation forcibly removed from their homes in the late 1830s, one-third (4,000) of the 12,000 Cherokees who participated died. Some succumbed to death en route to Indian Territory (current-day northeastern Oklahoma); many died in the temporary encampments, which served essentially as nineteenth-century internment camps. Other southeastern Indians—the Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws—also endured the horrors of this relocation process.

Yet those who traversed this passage were not solely of Indian descent. Accompanying Indians on this journey to a new home were also African-descended individuals, the majority enslaved by members of these Indian nations. Indeed, enslaved people represented a significant part of the inventory of property owned by these southeastern Indians. Even as scholars continue their efforts to assess the conditions and to enumerate the Indians who lost their lives in this mass relocation, it is unknown how many enslaved African-descended people perished along the trail. Their journey and the memories of those who survived or died during this passage remain a veiled and largely untold story. This exodus from the southeastern states to lands further west would have dire consequences for subsequent generations, creat-

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ing various cultural, socioeconomic, and political realities for those, red and black, who survived the crossing.

Although attempts at estimating the actual number of enslaved blacks who participated in this middle passage may be fruitless, the presence and legacy of these enslaved individuals and families who survived this journey expose a very different perspective on the lived experiences of African-descended people in the nineteenth century. Copious accounts of the Trail of Tears have been fashioned by a range of scholars, some crossing the boundaries of historical commentaries and literary tales. Yet these narratives have offered truncated versions of the complete story, due to the ignored and silenced voices of those enslaved blacks who walked alongside and even carried Indians along the trail. If told in its entirety, the story of the Trail of Tears would recount how southeastern slaveholding Indians were among those relocated—Indians who demanded recognition of their rights as slave owners and transported enslaved blacks with them to the West. Many clearly comprehended the possible benefits of having slaves within their reach during the journey and beyond.

Accounts of the journey of enslaved blacks of Indians along the Trail of Tears strike an unfamiliar and unexpected chord. The story of enslaved people of African descent in the United States appears to be a very familiar story of enslavement, forced migration, and eventual emancipation. Most of the images of enslaved African Americans portray them as toiling on southern farms and plantations for European American enslavers. Yet the story is far more complicated, especially if we consider the lives of African-descended people who were enslaved not by European Americans but by Indians, and enslaved not in the southeastern states of Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas, but much further west in a place called Indian Territory.

The story of these people of African descent held in slavery by Indians begins in the familiar manner of enslavement and also ends ultimately with emancipation; nevertheless, accounts of enslaved blacks living within the confines of Indian Territory transform the contours of slavery on a very fundamental level by drawing attention to groups other than European Americans who enslaved people of African de-

scent. They include small numbers of African Americans who enslaved other African Americans in the United States. Although they sometimes justified their actions as providing an avenue for liberating kin, this remains a troubling topic in African American and United States history and complicates our notions of what slavery was and who benefited from it.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, questions about the very nature of slavery emerge when examining bondage in Indian Territory. What transpired between Indian owners and enslaved blacks? Do the issues of enslavement, hegemony, and oppression still remain intrinsic to the whole notion of slavery if we interject Indian enslavers actively buying, selling, and enslaving blacks? The usual “white over black” construction of power and enslavement is one dilemma. The startling “black over black” question strikes many historians and lay readers as problematic. But the notion of “red over black” has, until very recently, seemed almost unimaginable. For that reason, the fabric of these enslaved people’s lives in this seemingly implausible reality has remained behind the veil, awaiting a more meticulous and critical investigation.

This book lifts the veil by allowing readers to enter into the world of enslaved and free African-descended people in the nineteenth-century Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory.<sup>2</sup> This lost world is illuminated largely through interviews of former enslaved blacks and their children in Oklahoma, conducted in the 1930s (during the Depression) by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These narratives allow us to see this history through the eyes of African-descended people who were enslaved by Indians in the Southeast and who were “removed” west with them, as well as those who were born and enslaved in Indian Territory within these exiled nations; their tales of bondage and freedom serve as the cornerstone for the story that follows.

In order to evaluate the changing nature of the experiences of enslaved and free blacks in the Cherokee Nation over time, I examine the period between the resettlement of Cherokee people in Indian Territory in the 1830s and the admission of the state of Oklahoma into the Union in 1907. The birth of the state of Oklahoma sounded the death knell for Indian Territory. Within that framework, this book traces the development of particular sociocultural and political dimensions

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of the lives of enslaved and freed African-descended people in the nineteenth-century Cherokee Nation—on a trajectory determined by the intricacies of bondage, resistance, and belonging.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, shifting notions of bondage and the multifaceted process of belonging shaped the layered paradoxes of black and Indian identities. In this book, I explore how these intersecting paradoxes emerge in the lives of enslaved African-descended people in a place called Indian Territory. Some of these enslaved people had great-grandparents, grandparents, and even parents who spoke of home far away in a continent called Africa—who remembered words in African languages like Ewe, Twi, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Mende, Bambara, Soninke, Wolof, Umbundu, and Kikongo. Although their parents or grandparents might have recalled an African home far away, the central ideas of home for these enslaved African-descended individuals, having been born in the Americas, were primarily grounded in Indian-dominated spaces and nations. This book delves into the lives of African-descended people who became enslaved by Indians—Cherokee Indians. It is a difficult and often painful story that speaks of the horror of bondage, shatters ideas about “kind” Indian masters, ruptures conceptions of a monolithic enslaved black community, and challenges preconceived, popular beliefs of “black Indians” with mythical Indian kin. It is not a romanticized tale of black refuge in Indian country. The accounts of enslaved blacks being whipped, running away, and even murdering Indian owners disrupt any delusion of such a legend. What follows is an attempt to expose the nuances of identity, the contradictions of belonging, and the complexities of bondage for people of African descent in Indian country.

As enslaved people living in Indian Territory—not the United States—they cannot be defined as African Americans; they were neither enslaved within the United States nor owned by citizens of the United States. Once these people of African descent became enslaved in Indian Territory, they became denizens of Indian nations—outside the national boundaries of the United States. Beyond geography and na-

tional borders, some enslaved people of African descent—whom I describe as African Indian—developed sociocultural connections to Indian people, communities, and nations. When using this term “African Indian,” I do not automatically imply biraciality or multiraciality; however, some African Indians in Indian Territory certainly were of African and Indian descent. When referring to such individuals in particular, I specifically state “biracial African Indians” or “biracial African Cherokees.” Unlike enslaved African Americans owned by European Americans in the United States, enslaved African Cherokees in Indian Territory encountered a different world of bondage. This world shaped the contours of their day-to-day experiences, as well as their overall conceptions of themselves as individuals, members of their families, and integral parts of Cherokee communities.

The heart of this book focuses on the lives of enslaved and freed African Cherokees who were born and raised in the Cherokee Nation and who developed intimate relationships with Cherokees—on the basis of not only bondage but also sociocultural ties and a sense of belonging. Sociocultural identifiers of their Indianness represented crucial factors in their self- and group identification as members of the Five Tribes. Those with multigenerational associations with the Five Tribes, cemented in the old country east of the Mississippi before the Trail of Tears, shared life experiences grounded in Indian cultures and traditions. After arrival in Indian Territory, enslaved African Cherokees embarked on a new beginning in a new land, but within familiar Cherokee communities and structures.

Indian Territory, however, became the pathway of indoctrination to Indian people and mores for newly purchased enslaved people who had been owned previously by European Americans in the southeastern states. Indian Territory served as a site of a cultural and nationalistic transition for those who had never experienced living in Indian communities. No longer would the mores and rules of European American enslavers dictate the lives of these enslaved people of African descent. Instead, new Cherokee enslavers and their laws would now control their bodies and their progeny’s future.

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Whether newly enslaved by Cherokees or continuing an intergenerational legacy of bondage to Indian people, enslaved African Cherokees in the Cherokee Nation constructed several layers of connections and disconnections between themselves and Cherokees in nineteenth-century Indian Territory. Some enslaved African Indians perceived their cultural connections with the Five Tribes as immutable ties that bound them to Indian people, communities, and nations. Such cultural links to the Five Tribes illustrated their sense of belonging to and within Indian nations; “blood” and familial relationships with Indians reinforced and accentuated cultural ties to Indian communities. Due to the specific circumstances of their bondage—complicated by conceptions and realities of belonging and “blood” relations—those enslaved within the Five Tribes crafted a distinctive African Indian cultural milieu in antebellum Indian Territory.

The lives of the Cherokees and other southeastern Indian people who were relocated to Indian Territory also reflect the distinctive nature of these Indian communities. Though not the primary focus of this book, the shifting and paradoxical position of Cherokees (and other southeastern Indian nations generally) in relation to people of African descent suggests that European American belief systems permeated southeastern Indians’ conceptions of themselves—as Indians, as “civilized Indians,” as slave owners, and as people who often defined themselves as superior to those of African descent. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the national policies of the United States and the presence of European and European American men who had married Indian women also altered the sociocultural fabric of these communities. Unions between Indian women and European men created biracial European Indians like Principal Chief John Ross, a Cherokee who had three generations of Scottish men in his lineage, including his father Daniel Ross. Moreover, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of European and European American slave-owning men not only married Indian women but also became citizens of Indian nations—referred to as “intermarried whites” in the Five Tribes. Though they were only a minority of the population in Indian Territory, their views about people of African

descent, often reflecting racist southern sensibilities, impacted the slave-master interactions in Indian Territory.

Even as members of Indian nations—including Indians, enslaved African Indians, and intermarried whites—attempted to reestablish their lives after removal in a new land west of the Mississippi, the tribulations of the United States continued to shape their destinies. As the Civil War approached, the federal government of the United States and the Confederacy pulled the Five Tribes into the war. Due to the actions of the United States and the Confederate States of America, as well as sociocultural and historical connections to southerners, the Five Tribes created alliances with the Confederacy. These alliances would usher in a new era of change for the Five Tribes in the post-Reconstruction period, ending with the temporary dissolution of their sovereign nations and the creation of the segregated state of Oklahoma.

◆ The ownership of human beings transcends both time and space. Although European and European American involvement in the transatlantic slave trade often dominates the standard narrative concerning the enslavement of Africans throughout the Americas, the participation of African societies was integral to the development of this slave trade from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. However, to categorize the ownership of individuals as a fixed state and process is to misunderstand entirely the fluidity of slavery on the African continent and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Slavery within West African nations cannot be equated with bondage and servitude in European and European American colonies. In a similar vein, bondage within an array of Indian nations throughout North America did not simply duplicate impressions of ownership and property within European and European American worldviews.<sup>4</sup> Unlike plantation slavery in the Americas, bondage in African and indigenous Indian communities rarely involved hereditary enslavement; instead, captivity and debt primarily served as the rationale for conditions of servitude. Moreover, enslaved individuals often eventually became part of African and indigenous Indian communities by either marrying into these communities or being adopted into clans. Nonetheless, the concept of human beings as property, as