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Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom

Tiya Miles
University of Michigan, tiya@umich.edu

Jessica Zimmer
University of Florida

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December 2008 Newsletter

Book Review

Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, 326 pp., 3 figs., index, \$39.95 hardback, ISBN 978-0-520-24132-9, \$23.95 paperback, ISBN 978-0-520-25002-4.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Jessica Zimmer, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida.

Tiya Miles' book, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*, is the story of a family and the societies which try to tear it apart. Miles chronicles the lives of a Cherokee man, Shoe Boots; an African woman, Doll; and their children, Elizabeth, John, Polly, William and Lewis Shoeboots; in late 18th and early 19th century Georgia and Oklahoma. The Shoeboots' efforts to remain a family were challenged, sometimes for years, by White and Cherokee groups that possessed political power. Through Miles' detailed notes, each member of the family becomes a mirror for thousands of other Americans in similar situations.

Miles tells her narrative to create a larger discussion about interactions between Blacks and Native Americans in late colonial and early republican America. Her multi-faceted, extensive approach touches on legal rights, ethnicity, kinship, and the idea of home. Miles focuses on the members of the Shoeboots family that she thinks tell the most relevant stories: Doll and her children. In the early 19th century, Doll and her children resided among Cherokee people in north Georgia in the territory of the Cherokee Nation. At the end of the 1830s, Doll and her daughters lived among African-American slaves in Georgia. After Cherokee removal, Doll and several of her children lived on homesteads in the Cherokee Nation West in Oklahoma. Miles says that slavery, emancipation, forced immigration, and marriage were the experiences that defined the identities of Doll and her children.

Ties is a history that begins with the union of Doll and Shoe Boots. It ends at an appropriate stopping point, the struggle of Haskell Shoeboots, one of the Shoeboots' descendants. Yet *Ties* can be read non-linearly as well. This is because Miles separates her chapters by theme: Chapter 1: Captivity; 2: Slavery; 3: Motherhood; 4: Property; 5: Christianity; 6: Nationhood; 7: Gold Rush; 8: Removal; 9: Capture; 10: Freedom; 11: Citizenship; and Coda: The Shoeboots Family Today. Miles segments the book partly in admiration of one of her favorite works of fiction: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Miles also frequently compares her work to Morrison's text. As in *Ties*, *Beloved* breaks the flow of storytelling to travel between the past and the present.

One of the main purposes of *Beloved* is Toni Morrison's exploration of the experience of slavery. Morrison describes the lives of main characters such as Sethe and Baby Suggs to show how individuals were permanently damaged by slavery. *Ties* does this as well. Yet where *Beloved* is introspective, *Ties* looks beyond to reveal the world outside the "case studies." *Ties* accomplishes this feat by moving between the personal histories of Shoeboots family members, Miles' own interpretations of the thoughts of persons such as White slave owners, and details from historical records. Furthermore, Miles changes her sources frequently to show that a family history must be understood in the context of external power structures that affected personal relationships. In the early chapters of *Ties*, Miles references *Beloved* often to highlight important points. One of these points is that Doll's acts of reproduction were both a rebellion against the system of slavery and an acquiescence to it.

Ties is a useful book because it shows there are two ways to examine families: from the inside and from the outside. In addition, *Ties* highlights the importance of the family history as a case study. This work shows that family histories reveal a great deal about how an individual person such as Doll Shoeboots lived her life, and why. *Ties* further explains how larger organizations, such as the Cherokee Nation, changed their attitude about individuals, and why.

Miles' approach, however, may be limited to family histories where there are many documents related to family members. Many family histories seem to stop because documents have been destroyed or lost. The phenomenon of fading from the record books even hit the Shoeboots family. Shoe Boots was a minor celebrity in Cherokee territory when he was alive. His fame did not extend indefinitely on to his children. Miles writes on page 191, "Lewis,

William's [Shoeboots] twin, vanished from the Cherokee records, and apparently from his family's lives, after he was sold into slavery in the 1830s."

Miles' book is also relevant because it shows how legal rights, which are deeply rooted and appear to be concrete, can change quickly. She explains that indigenous, state, federal, and subjugated groups have separate rules regarding rights such as property ownership. Yet what happens when a person with parents from two different ethnic backgrounds challenges these systems? That person may use the contradictions between the systems to fight for what they want. Doll and the Shoeboots children waged many legal battles for land and their freedom. Miles reveals that these personal struggles had long-lasting effects on how local African-American and Cherokee communities saw themselves and interacted with each other. Miles's work adds to the growing literature on the relationship between African Americans and Native Americans, which includes works such as Jack Forbes's book, "Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples;" Alicia Woods's film, "American Red and Black: Stories of Afro-Native Identity;" and Tiya Miles and Sharon Holland's edited volume, "Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: the African Diaspora in Indian Country."

Students and professionals will find *Ties* a book that will help them find many avenues for future research. Miles says that this was one of her intentions in writing the book: "It is my hope that, along with other recent contributions to the study of African American and Native American conjoined histories, this book crosses traditional boundaries of subject matter and perspective to contribute fresh and useful findings to our national conversation about race" (p. 8).

References Cited

Morrison, Toni
1987 *Beloved*. New York, Plume.

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