“We Are Cherokee”: Exhibiting Material Culture as an Act of Reconciliation, a Roundtable

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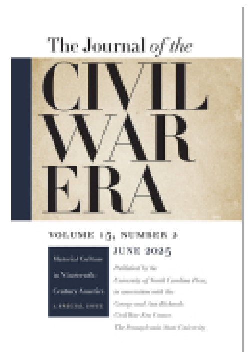

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ROUNDTABLE

"We Are Cherokee" Exhibiting Material Culture as an Act of Reconciliation, a Roundtable

In this roundtable, convened by Alaina E. Roberts, historian Julie L. Reed and two Cherokee Nation employees, Melissa Payne and Karen Shade-Lanier, discuss the groundbreaking exhibit "We Are Cherokee: Cherokee Freedmen and the Right to Citizenship." One of the five Southeastern tribes to enslave Black women and men in the 1700s and 1800s, the Cherokees also spent decades after emancipation discriminating against their former slaves, eventually illegally disenfranchising them. "We Are Cherokee" is the first exhibit by the tribe to truly represent the humanity and marginalization of Black Cherokees. As such, the curation team faced issues around trust and transparency when soliciting objects, documents, and materials from the community. The roundtable includes information about how the curation team overcame these obstacles and how they, along with tribal leadership, see the exhibit as one part of the Cherokee Nation's effort to acknowledge its history and work toward full incorporation of the Black Cherokees the nation once rejected.

ALAINA E. ROBERTS, MODERATOR,
WITH PANELISTS JULIE L. REED, KAREN
SHADE-LANIER, AND MELISSA PAYNE

As African Americans and other minorities in the United States well know, feeling like a full member of one's nation is about more than mere legal recognition. Museum displays about history can correct inaccuracies, dispute myths that feed racial resentment, and help foster a sense of belonging in the wake of historical wrongs and misunderstandings. The Cherokee Nation's 2022 exhibit, "We Are Cherokee: Cherokee Freedmen and the Right to Citizenship" did just that. It was the first exhibit in any of the five former slaveholding Southeastern tribes to focus on Black history and marginalization. "We Are Cherokee" exemplified how public history practitioners can, with the help of objects from the past, confront historical injustices and contribute to the repair of relationships between disparate groups.

The exhibit was housed in the Cherokee Nation's National History Museum, in its capital, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, from August 2022 to July 2023. During that time, more than nine thousand visitors saw the exhibit. Next, the exhibit spent two months in the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities at the University of Tulsa, a location that allowed the Cherokee Nation to share the exhibit with a broader audience. Then in May 2024, it moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas's US Marshals Museum; from there, the nation is open to new possibilities to share and educate. "We Are Cherokee" features seventeen objects and works of art and a narrative compiled from primary and secondary sources, drafted, in part, by undergraduate students in a class facilitated by Julie L. Reed, a Cherokee citizen and associate professor of history at the Pennsylvania State University.

The exhibit's origins lie in the Cherokee Nation's efforts to create a sense of belonging for Cherokee Freedmen. *Cherokee Freedman* is a legal and historical term used to describe the Black women and men directly enslaved by members of the Cherokee Nation, as well as their descendants, who faced discrimination, violent incidents, and attacks on the full and equal citizenship granted them by the nation's 1866 treaty with the United States.[1] Beginning in the 1970s, Cherokee tribal leaders, including eventual principal chiefs Ross Swimmer and Wilma Mankiller, resented the voting power of Cherokee Freedmen and began campaigning on the idea that freedmen were interlopers who did not deserve rights in the nation. In 1983, during Swimmer's term as principal chief (with Mankiller as his deputy), some Cherokee Freedmen were blocked at polling places; from then on, various laws and constitutional changes, referendums, and tribal supreme court rulings stopped freedmen from fully participating in tribal life until only just a few years ago. This return was the result of decades of work by freedmen activists including Rodslen Brown, Raymond Nash, Marilyn Vann, and others, who used their intellectual and economic resources to seek recourse at local, state, tribal, and national levels. They were finally vindicated in 2017, when the US District Court for the District of Columbia held that an 1866 treaty, which stated that Cherokee Freedmen were entitled to the same rights as non-Black Cherokees, must once again be upheld.[2] As a result of the persistence of brave Cherokee Freedmen, today the Cherokees are the only one of the Five Tribes to recognize freedmen as full citizens of their nation.

In the "We Are Cherokee" exhibit, the Cherokee Nation sought to transform a legal ruling into lasting social change as part of a larger, continuing project led by Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. As chief, Hoskin committed

Cherokee freedmen point out their ancestors' names in the exhibit. (Photo provided by Cherokee Nation)

to encouraging Cherokee citizens to grapple with the tribe's tough history of slavery and racism. Hoskin and the Cherokee citizens involved in the creation of the exhibit aimed to demonstrate that celebrating the diversity of the tribe's membership was connected to upholding treaty promises and strengthening the Cherokee Nation as a whole. Material objects served as irrefutable evidence of the longtime Black presence in the nation, the mistreatment Black women and men suffered at the hands of non-Black Cherokees, and the long road to attaining freedmen equality.

For this roundtable, I spoke to three Cherokee citizens involved in creating the exhibit: Julie L. Reed, who helped shape the exhibit's narrative; Karen Shade-Lanier, exhibits manager for Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism; and Melissa Payne, a Cherokee Freedman who, as Cherokee Nation cultural liaison Cherokee Nation cultural liaison, answers directly to Chief Hoskin. I wanted them to tell me about their goals, the difficulties in telling a story of Black marginalization in a space seeking to celebrate Native identity, and the way this piece of public history fit into the broader context of our modern ideas about race, equality, and inclusivity.

As they developed the exhibit, members of the Cherokee Nation's Department of Cultural Tourism unearthed objects already in their collection and issued an open call for historical objects and documents related to slavery, as well as modern-day artistic renderings of freedmen identity and community. In doing so, they sought to open pathways of dialogue with previously ignored Black Cherokees and showcase evidence of freedmen ancestors' presence in and influence on Cherokee history. One of the most piercing examples of this recognition of humanity and shared history was the wallpaper that lined one of the exhibit's walls; it showcased rows upon rows of the original freedmen's names. As a descendant of people enslaved in the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, with hopes that my nations will follow the Cherokee Nation's lead, I undertook this conversation with one overarching question in mind: should we, as historians but also citizens of various countries divided by race and a host of other factors, consider the Cherokees' use of material culture in this exhibit as an example of how true racial reconciliation might take place?

This conversation has been edited for conciseness and readability.

Alaina E. Roberts: I want to get a sense of the trajectory of Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr.'s projects. Where does the exhibit fit with other ways he is making it clear that freedmen are a part of the nation?

Karen Shade-Lanier: I became involved in the Cherokee Nation Department of Cultural Tourism—which works on Cherokee museums, public history sites, and cultural education—at the end of 2019. Chief Hoskin had come into office shortly before that, and by the time I was getting my hands into exhibit development, Cultural Tourism was already beginning to insert more of the freedmen history into its permanent exhibits. The Cherokee National History Museum had just opened that summer, and there was an effort to bring more freedmen history into the overall telling of what took place in Cherokee Nation: yes, freedmen were with Cherokees on the Removal, and reestablishing home, and all the chaos and the tumultuous period that followed that as well.

It was in 2020 that Chief Hoskin announced the establishment of the Cherokee Freedmen Art and History Project, which was intended to uplift the voices of Cherokee Freedmen and to highlight this history to make sure that it is told and not forgotten. At that time, we were also looking at the acquisition of the Cherokee Heritage Center, which had previously been owned by the state of Oklahoma. With that acquisition also came the acquisition of the Cherokee National Archive, and with that archive we were working toward creating a more permanent and appropriate home for all of these records, acquiring freedmen stories, and making sure we always have an accessible place for the records of Cherokee Freedmen.

So the "We Are Cherokee" exhibit included trying to make sure that freedmen voices are heard. We would include anything in the way of photographs, documents, anything written down, family histories written in Bibles, census records. And we knew that it was asking a lot for descendants to be able to entrust that to us. This exhibit was always created with a sense of working toward reconciliation, which needed to take place. In 2021, we really started doing the heavy research, and into 2022, once we started collecting that material, then we began with exhibit development. The exhibit itself opened in August 2022. We held an opening reception in which we invited the contributors, the Cherokee Freedmen community, and, of course, all of the usual groups that we reach out to whenever we are trying to talk about the annual Cherokee National Holiday, which celebrates the September 6, 1839, signing of the Cherokee Nation Constitution after Indian Removal.

Chief Hoskin issued an Executive Order on equality in 2020, created to prohibit discrimination.[3] There was the effort to remove the Confederate monuments on the Cherokee National Capitol Building Square in Tahlequah, and we've made ongoing efforts to continue to add the freedmen history into our permanent exhibits.

Melissa Payne: Chief actually started a task force, and he allowed me to be chair, so that we can make sure equality is taking place. Right now, we're actually pulling from the different departments in Cherokee Nation to see how many individuals who are of freedman descent access social programs, such as health clinics and childcare centers, so that we can find a way to reach them if they're not informed properly of what's there to assist them. The nation will fly me out to any location if a Cherokee nonprofit requests me to come teach about freedmen history. Karen and I also created some flyers, and they have a little bar code that you can scan, and it takes you to a link where it tells you more history about the freedmen and their descendants. I think it's a beautiful thing that's taking place in the nation right now. I'm grateful for Chief Hoskin because he has made great changes. I mean, it's been tremendous.

I didn't know what I was signing up for when I took on the position as a community liaison. Before I took that position, I was just a part of the freedmen steering committee appointed by Chief Hoskin to work on this exhibit. That was my first step into working hands-on in the nation. At the end of 2020, Chief told me what he wanted to do with the museum exhibit. And in August 2021, we started our meetings, as Karen said, to collaborate and come up with how we were going to do the call for freedmen objects and documents. As we proceeded with that, we were building trust with individuals in the communities. It took a lot of hands-on work; I was out speaking to individuals, going to churches. It wasn't just me, it wasn't just Karen, it was a whole team of us. I'm grateful for that team. It took all of us to make it happen.

Our ancestors, they deserve to be known. It was important for us to get these stories out. Those individuals who had stories that their families did tell them, they had documents, they had newsletters, they had different things that they went and pulled out and submitted them. My mother was a basket weaver; you had her art there. You had so many documents.

Alaina E. Roberts: In these moments, when you were interacting with members of the community and saying, "We're doing this exhibit, please contribute any items or objects or stories that you have," what were people thinking and saying to you? Was there anger, resentment, worry?

Melissa Payne: I experienced a little bit of both, actually. I had some who were still angry, who resisted. Actually, one of my aunts did, and she's just like, "I'm not turning in anything to them. They're not doing nothing." That was her mindset, and I said, "We can continue to think that way. But here's an opportunity to share our history." When you go in depth talking to individuals with this mindset because of the past hurt, you just have to help them open their hearts and understand this is an opportunity. I understand that you are upset and offended by the prior rejection. But we have someone in office now, we have individuals who are in the nation who are for our cause.

I wouldn't be able to tell you who is against us at this point in time, because they know not to show it on their face. Chief Hoskin is not tolerating that. But we have a lot of individuals who are learning just as we are learning; we have individuals who are accepting us. They're willing to embrace us as they're embracing the history themselves. It's hard for them to even speak on what their ancestors did. So it was not only a healing process for the freedmen descendants. It's a healing process for all the Cherokee citizens in the Cherokee Nation, because you have to face what your ancestors did. You have to allow yourself to let go of carrying that weight of feeling like you're guilty, or you're wrong for what they did. This was an opportunity for us coming together, uniting, embracing one another, understanding one another, and growing with each other. So as I dealt with freedmen individuals who were resistant, I would always try to share that and enlighten them a little bit to open their hearts, saying, "Let's try to make these changes happen." Some people didn't share their stories.

That's fine. But I will say, later, when they visited the exhibit, they wished they would have shared their stories. I believe at first it was scary. It was scary for individuals to put information out. And then you had some who were excited. They were excited to tell the story. And they submitted so many documents.

Alaina E. Roberts: Very complicated for sure. Julie, how did you come to be involved in this?

Julie L. Reed: I've had a pretty long history working with Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism, because I worked in that office when I was in graduate school. Then, in 2018, I did some fact-checking of previous exhibits in the old Cherokee National History Museum, and there were conversations about the inclusion of freedmen. Even at that time, I felt that if we're not having a conversation about the legacies of slavery and the descendants of freedmen, then we're opening an exhibit that is already outdated. Just from a museum standpoint, how can you do that? Why would you *want* to do that? There was this really great conversation about how this is an important part of our history that we now have access to and know about. So that was a conversation I was part of back in 2018, before the new Cherokee National History Museum opened.

I periodically reach out to Travis Owens, the vice president of Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism, to try to partner on things that I want to work on, or if I'm doing public history courses, to try to involve my students in a process that would be fruitful and useful both for me and for them. This time it just worked perfectly that I had a group of students and the exhibit was on a timeline that actually would work. So I offered my students' services, like, "Let us do some of the research and writing not of the stories of freedpeople and their descendants, but of the history." We could do that, and I could oversee that. I got to know Karen through that process, and obviously I reached out to you, Alaina, during that process to have your eyes on what my students were doing and have you visit with them as well.

It honestly is the best course I've ever taught as a professor, for any number of reasons. It was a public history course where they were asked to learn and master Cherokee history very quickly, and then deal with this much more complicated history of enslavement and the legacies of enslavement and the realities of freedpeople and their descendants. And then they had to integrate all of this and synthesize it into very concise panels for an exhibit. The students helped kind of rein in my knowledge base for a much different kind of audience.

It was great to start to put some of the research that I've gathered into a more meaningful place—into the community. Handing over my research is also useful to the Department of Cultural Tourism and to genealogists in the communities, so it just felt like a win-win all the way around: getting to partner with cultural tourism, benefiting a group of students who know nothing about this history, collaborating with the nation, and dealing with topics that are hard, which we need to do more of in educational spaces. We're just putting all of my interests together in a way that felt meaningful for community engagement. Hopefully I'll get to do more of this. I also feel like I'm tuned in to additional information gathering. It's changed my work to see the exhibit and to see what the freedmen descendant communities have brought forward. Seeing all the information on the town of Vian, Oklahoma, which is where my family is, created some powerful questions for me, relative to my own research. I felt I got to give a lot to this project but also that I've received a lot from it.

Alaina E. Roberts: I've shown my students at least one Cherokee Nation educational video that you're in, Julie, maybe even two. So I've definitely enjoyed seeing the different iterations of your involvement with the nation. And it seems like that's very rich for you as a scholar and as a professor and teacher.

Julie L. Reed: Yes—if I can't be in the nation, I still want to be a participant and a collaborator as much as I can.

Alaina E. Roberts: Let's talk about some specific objects. Could you talk about an object, or objects, that you think most effectively conveyed the message that Black people have been a key part of Cherokee history and are a key part of Cherokee people today?

Melissa Payne: I would say the bill of sale where you could actually see that Black people were being sold and purchased by Cherokee citizens. The timeline in the exhibit goes back to the 1700s and shows all of the different battles and fights that we went through to be part of the nation. There is a painting of the Trail of Tears showing that we were a part of the nation before, during, and after the removal. It shows how intertwined and connected our stories were. The basket weaving shows that too, including my mother's basket, which is part of the exhibit. She was a freedmen descendant, yet she did the arts and crafts of a Cherokee individual. The basket showed that that's who she was, that she was Cherokee as well. The nation was built by the hands of my ancestors, so how are they not a part of the nation? That's how I'd like to answer that.

Karen Shade-Lanier: The documents related to the purchase of slaves were very, very powerful. Being able to find those in the archives was amazing, and those were the things that we really needed to be there to help tell that story. There were two art pieces that were used in this exhibit that I would like to bring up. One is a painting of Joseph Stick Ross, a Cherokee freedman who served in tribal political offices in the early 1890s and was known as a community leader. The painting was done by a Cherokee Nation artist named Roy Boney Jr. It wasn't part of the call for art specifically for this project; it was already in our collection.

We're aware of no existing photographs of Joseph Stick Ross. But he is somebody I think a lot of people in Tahlequah are very familiar with—at least his name, because there's a Stick Ross Mountain Road that goes through town that everybody would have heard of, and there's a cemetery with that name. I think students of history will be familiar with Ross as one of the Cherokee National Council members for the Tahlequah district, prior to the allotment era.

It was fascinating to be able to go into the history of Stick Ross working with other freedmen and really speaking up on their behalf when payments for the sale of communally owned Cherokee land were dispersed and there were Cherokee Nation citizens who wanted to exclude freedmen. But Stick Ross was one of those who advocated for freedmen receiving their payments, and they eventually did.[4] Stick Ross was a slave of John Ross, the very well known, longest serving chief of the Cherokee Nation. To me, so much of the history just comes together in that individual. So it was great being able to see a portrayal of him, as somebody who was living his truth as a Cherokee Nation citizen. I just love that painting and what he represents in the exhibit as a whole: a former slave who became an advocate and spoke for himself and other freedmen as well.

Another notable painting was submitted as part of the open call for Cherokee Freedmen art and historical objects. This painting was created by a young woman named Chayanne Hubbard, and it depicted her family in Vian, a town in the Sequoyah county of Oklahoma, within the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation. I'm actually also from that area. So finding that local point of connection to understand this history is very meaningful for me, and I think that might be the case for a lot of other people too. It was just a beautiful rendition of that history, and that history in a very particular place at a very particular time. Those are my two objects that I always go back to.

Alaina E. Roberts: Julie, what about you, as a visitor and as someone who's familiar with this history? Did you have any kind of emotional reaction to seeing the exhibit?

Julie L. Reed: I've thought more and more about the power of visuals. I don't think of myself as a visual person, but the exhibit's use of wallpaper to show freedmen's names was amazing. The power of being named, right? That's amazing. So much of history is trying to locate the people whom we know matter, whether it's Cherokee people, whether it's our Cherokee Freedmen community members, whether it's women . . . the people who get lost to history. And this just felt like one of those kind of cumulative places where their voices were being recovered. As a person who has not descended from freedmen but who understands the power of being named and being heard in the archives—that, for me, was incredible.

Added to that, just seeing how Vian, the town my family is from, factored into the story and realizing the continued absences in my own understanding of Cherokee history. How could this be a place that I feel like I know so well, yet, clearly, I know nothing about freedmen's history in this area? That led me to dig much harder into history and understand a little bit more about what happened there. Learning more about Black Cherokee history changed how I wrote an entire chapter of the book I'm working on. This exhibit forced me to ask different kinds of questions about those communities. I'm still not there with what I feel I need to know. But the powerful visuals led me to say, "I've got to record more names whenever I find them, and I've got to think about communities where I somehow think that I know who's there and what's going on, but in fact, I don't know anything."

Alaina E. Roberts: I felt everything that you said visiting the exhibit myself, especially knowing that this is not happening in the nations that I'm connected to. I appreciate what you're saying about how it's not just like a puzzle with a piece missing; it's that not knowing the Black Cherokee part of Cherokee history is not knowing *Cherokee* history, not fully understanding *all of that history*.

The exhibit was in the nation's National History Museum in Tahlequah for about a year, and then it moved to Tulsa. Karen, you mentioned that you're still working on it. So is it coming back to the nation in another form?

Karen Shade-Lanier: Yes, we did take the exhibit to Tulsa, to the University of Tulsa at their Oklahoma Center for the Humanities. They acquired a space in downtown Tulsa. Part of their overall goal is to highlight art that supports conversations about social justice, including about representations of the past that we still haven't really entirely dealt with, in addition to more contemporary issues.

We were contacted by the Tulsa center in early 2023 as we were about at the halfway point of our run at the Cherokee National History Museum, and they expressed that they would love to have the exhibit there. It was always our intention to try to spread this exhibit, to spread this story to as many places and locations as we can. Chief Hoskin has been very supportive, and also very direct that we should take these voices and share them as much as we can, and where we can, and look for places where we can do this. This was a great opportunity for us to at least take that first step. They found they had a space on the calendar that was open for a two-month run from August 2023 to the end of September 2023. We said, "Yes, we'll take it," and fitted the exhibit into that space. I found the exhibit's design to be very easily adaptable, so we were able to do it relatively quickly. The adaptable design makes it easy to move a lot of pieces from one place to another.

The University of Tulsa art space, 101 Archer, has a standing opening reception for its new exhibits every couple of months. It held our reception toward the end of the run, and it was actually more of a luncheon. We had an incredible response from the Tulsa area to this exhibit. By the end of the run at the center, I think we had more than eighteen hundred visitors, and that's pretty good for just two months, especially in August in Tulsa. That gave us opportunities to visit with a lot of people who just had not heard about this story or who had not really had a chance to go visit the exhibit at the history museum in Tahlequah. So, this is something that we will continue to take forward. We're preparing this exhibit to go to the US Marshals Museum in Fort Smith, Arkansas next month, May 2024.

Alaina E. Roberts: I was just there! It could really use it. Melissa, were you going to respond as well?

Melissa Payne: There's no limit, and I'm grateful. I just want our story to be told, the story of my ancestors, the story of our history. So I think moving it, having a traveling exhibit, will reach more individuals than staying still in one location. I'm just going to see where it leads us, and I'm thankful for as far as we went and looking forward to more locations to share the history.

Karen Shade-Lanier: A lot of programming gets attached to these exhibits as well. We have a programming and events department within the Department of Cultural Tourism. This department has facilitated talks and lectures that support the exhibit. For instance, our steering committee members came out to talk about the experience of working on the development of this exhibit and how they see it working in their communities. We added some fun to it too: at our receptions we have musicians, we have spoken word artists, and we have speakers. Chief Hoskin has gone out to these receptions and personally engaged with guests to hear them out and to add that we're not done yet. This is still something that we are pushing, and we're going to do even more. So, it feels like it's hard to go wrong when you have that kind of inspiration driving all of this. It's been tremendously important for us.

Alaina E. Roberts: Was there any difference in the kind of reception that the exhibit got in Tahlequah versus Tulsa?

Melissa Payne: Not really. All of the art was moved over to the Tulsa location. So those visitors got the history that you could get in Tahlequah, and also the visuals. We didn't do a closing reception in Tulsa, but we did do an opening reception, and a nice amount of individuals showed up. The only difference was that we did an opening *and* closing ceremony in Tahlequah. And it was a large turnout in Tahlequah, especially the closing ceremony. You could just feel the energy from everyone, the connecting. As Karen said, we had artists, and the individuals who participated were freedmen descendants. You could just feel the energy from our ancestors, you could feel the energy from the individuals attending. And it was just a beautiful moment of healing and acceptance. So it was an amazing feeling, I'd say even more so at that closing ceremony in Tahlequah. But both locations had a great turnout, a great feeling, a great response from all.

Alaina E. Roberts: I went to the Tahlequah exhibit on a weekday in the middle of the day. There weren't many people there at that time, but the people who were there were not Cherokee citizens. They were just kind of visiting Oklahoma, had seen the museum advertised, and decided to visit. All these groups—non-Black Cherokees, Black Cherokees, other Native folks, non-Native folks—are these all equally the audience for the exhibit? Or was it particularly important to reach one of those groups?

Melissa Payne: It was most definitely diverse. It was open for everyone. I know my mother actually spoke with Chief Hoskin before she transitioned. In 2019 or whenever the museum came about or was open, she asked him, "What about our story? What about the freedmen story?" I feel like that's what played a huge part in chief saying we need to do this. And so we moved forward and it happened. It was for the audience of freedmen descendants, but it wasn't *just* for them. It was for every Cherokee citizen. It was for us to understand the history. That's how you move forward.

It wasn't set up just to target one group in particular; it was set up to target the citizens in general, just to help them understand and to help them connect. As I said previously, you found a lot of things that showed that we were connected on the Trail of Tears, that we did we did this together, the suffering and different things that we endured was together. Although we were enslaved by Cherokees, they still went through trials right along with us as well. So it was kind of a collaboration of healing for all. I probably went to the exhibit eight times. I would go with different individuals, and it was just nice to do. Sometimes you'd have more people visiting, sometimes it was real mellow, a couple of people in there. Ultimately, a large number of people visited and were able to learn something.

Alaina E. Roberts: I'm trying to get a feel of what the Cherokee Nation, which is a very diverse group of people, is thinking about the changes that are happening. In Chuck Hoskin's reelection campaign in spring 2023, he emphasized again and again, as he has for several years, that this reconciliation is important, that honoring treaties is always about honoring the portion of the 1866 Treaty that provided citizenship to Black Cherokees. What is your sense of where the nation is now? Does more progress need to be made on acceptance of Black Cherokees? Do the majority of Cherokees favor things like this?

Melissa Payne: *We* see progress. I can't speak on behalf of others. Have I endured individuals who may seem a little biased? Of course. I go up to any- and everyone when I'm out in the communities passing out flyers, teaching about the history of the freedmen. So have I met individuals who were not so happy about what was going on? Absolutely. Was I offended? No, because first and foremost, ignorance goes a long way. So, if you haven't educated yourself enough to understand the importance of embracing the freedmen descendants, then you must be ignorant to what occurred. And that's what we're trying to do, help you understand what happened and why we are citizens.

But for those who choose to not get that knowledge or get the understanding, the suffering is with them. And that's how I move on. I don't take it personally. I've come across a couple of individuals who are opposed, but they are not in the nation working, because, of course, if they're working at Cherokee Nation, chief has made it very clear that here is no tolerance for that. So even if they felt that way, they're not going to express it, and I wouldn't see it.

Everyone's been kind to me, and everyone whom I've met and worked with, honestly, I'd have to say, I've built really good relationships with them. And I'm thankful for that opportunity. I do understand that coming up, people may have been taught or told different things about different races. And if that's all you've been around, and that's all you've been told, and that's all you know . . . but the moment you get the opportunity to interact with another individual, and to see that they're not so bad, or it's not what you were always told, you get the opportunity to grow. And no matter how individuals feel about the nation, through my interactions with each one of them, I think I've been able to touch their hearts and warm them up a little bit. So is it progress? Absolutely.

Karen Shade-Lanier: My own family and friends and acquaintances—they know what I do, and they've always been eager to learn more about this subject and hear what's going to happen with it next. I've always known just tremendous support and heard that people think this is all moving in the right direction and are very much in agreement with our chief. They want to see these things through, to go even further working toward reconciliation. But there are other steps that we're going to take to get there, right? Yes. I mean, people want to see that, I believe.

Most of the conversations I've had with other people, outside of my general acquaintances, have been more in the professional capacity—like when I would be doing things at the exhibit like panel updates or changing out or just monitoring the objects that are on display in the cases. We've had individuals who would come up and talk to us. They're curious about this history, and they want to know more. It's exciting for them to see it, even if they might not be entirely familiar with it.

I think that there's very clearly a thirst to know more about this, and opening yourself up to knowing more can only take you in the right direction. Have I had a couple of individuals who have looked at it a little bit less openly? Yeah. But it really became more of an opportunity for them to ask the questions they weren't sure that they should ask, even in a place of education, which is what our history museum is. It was really eye-opening for me to see where some people are starting from whenever they talk about Cherokee Freedmen history or when they talk about Cherokee Freedmen descendants in the present. Even if they think they might not be entirely on board about this subject, they want to know and they want to understand what this is all about.

And in the exhibit, they really do get an eye-opening look at just how far and how deep this history goes. I think this exhibit accomplishes quite a lot. As Julie mentioned, you can't possibly cover the entire history in an exhibit. I don't remember what the stats are as far as how long it takes visitors to go through our exhibit, but they have to cover like two thousand square feet within five or ten minutes or something like that. You have to write with that in mind, to ask yourself, "How am I going to convey the weight of this, the gravity of this and the outcome, in such a short time?"

This exhibit has quite a lot more writing than what we usually do. This was very important, because most of that writing is direct quotations from contributors who talk about the process of getting their citizenship, after decades and decades of their families not being able to, saying, "I am able to call myself a citizen now and that is acknowledged by the nation." You see that history, you hear that history, you read it. I think this is a success for achieving the goals that were set out by Chief Hoskin, to make Cherokees more aware of Black Cherokee history and foster inclusion, and what our citizens of freedmen descent really needed to see. I think freedmen were taking a huge gamble entrusting these stories to us, and their photographs, not to mention their time. I know the work that we put into it. I put 100 percent into it. I think that's really for the viewer to be able to comment on fully, but I hope that we have accomplished some of our goals.

Alaina E. Roberts: I would definitely say you have. Julie, what about you?

Julie L. Reed: I know there was a lot of backlash against the removal of the Confederate monuments that previously stood in Tahlequah. That mirrored some of the conversations that were happening in the larger United States. Back to Melissa's point, though. It's about ignorance more broadly; there are lots of citizens in the United States who are ignorant of US history, and there are lots of Cherokee people who are ignorant of Cherokee history. That's just the reality. A lot of opposition to new historical interpretations is coming from other kinds of anxieties, right? For instance, there are anxieties about the rights and privileges of "at large" people that get acted out through some of this.[5] The question of the descendants of freedmen and their place in the nation becomes a dumping ground for people who are trying to articulate all sorts of anxieties that are not, in fact, about the descendants of freedmen, but are about all kinds of others things that we haven't figured out.

I have been privy to some pushback on all of these things, and I think a lot of it does come from general lack of understanding of the complexity of all of this history. It *is* complex. I feel like in some ways the Cherokees were the most criticized tribe in relation to their discrimination against freedmen for a couple of decades. But there's now an acknowledgement that other Native nations are going to have to have a reckoning around these issues, too. We're not the only ones. We are simply the first, in many ways, to have to confront this in a very public way. I think some of this work may also include inviting some larger, more complicated conversations among Native nations, and hopefully also helping our larger US nation have really tough, complicated conversations about these histories. As this moment tells us, none of this is settled. So, it's not surprising to me that Cherokee Nation is having hard conversations through museums that in some ways complicate the conversation we're also having in the United States.

These are complicated, and nuanced, and tough conversations. I'm grateful to have some insights sometimes, but I'm also grateful to have places where I know I need to learn more. That's been a part of my process through this as well. I'm somebody who's an expert in one moment, and somebody who knows nothing in the next moment, and I let both of those things be true at the same time. I'd like to offer that as a model to other people to say, "Here, we're all in this together, kind of learning alongside each other to figure this stuff out." None of us have a full view of the bigger history because of the legacies of colonialism and racism, and all of the -isms. We've got to do better, and here's our chance.

Alaina E. Roberts: I think you've said a lot about why it's important for all Americans to know about Native American slaveholding but also why this history is so important for historians to write about and chronicle. It tells us not just about this *history* of anti-Blackness within some Native American nations but also that continued discrimination against Black tribal members is a legacy of colonization. It's a microcosm of a lot of the issues in broader US history and society.

For over a decade, I've kind of thought that I will never in my lifetime be a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation (where freedmen have never had any citizenship rights) or Choctaw Nation (where freedmen lost citizenship rights when the tribe changed their constitution to exclude freedmen in 1983). What lessons might the exhibit and the changes in the Cherokee Nation offer to other freedmen and other Native people who are interested in ensuring that their tribes grapple with histories of slavery and/or racism?

Melissa Payne: I would say to you and any other freedman descendant to speak positively about it instead of saying, "I probably will never." Speak, "I know it's going to happen." And never give up on that fight. It is just as much your right to be a citizen of that nation as it is for those citizens that already belong to that nation. So I don't think that it's the end. I feel like you should still come forward with the research and with learning the history. I feel like a lot of times when freedmen individuals from other tribes went to court, they didn't come with the documents they needed to be able to move forward. They came thinking they could just talk to someone. But you have to come with your documents, you got to have your *i*'s dotted, *t*'s crossed, as we know. Come prepared, but don't ever give up hope. Continue to press forward.

With those individuals who have been rejecting you, the nations that won't accept you, the tribes—it's a fear of the unknown. A lot of people fear the unknown. They fear: "How much is this going to take from our programs? How much is this going to take from this nation?" There are so many things they don't know about, as Julie was describing. All of us in this conversation were brought up in different environments, we were all raised totally differently. In those environments, you had a justice system, you had a school system, you had your parents instilling all that they knew into you, you had a pastor or a belief system, whatever that may have been. All of those things affect individuals.

We often fear what we don't know. We're talking about these nations, and individuals in these nations, taking on an entire other race. Although we're a part of the tribe, we are Black, so taking on something different . . . they're fearful of that. They may reject it now, but in doing that, they are limiting themselves and their mindsets. They should take down those walls of limitation. We could learn from one another. As Chief Hoskin always says, and I'm in agreement, we are a stronger nation because of accepting freedmen descendants. I believe that strongly and wholeheartedly.

So I say to you, Alaina: "Continue to press on, continue the fight, continue to get with other individuals who have the same desire as you to get all of the things together so that you can continue to press on and move forward with what's rightfully yours." You should be a citizen. To those who are fearful of accepting you, I say: "Try it, you may be able to find something within you that you never knew existed. That growth, that love, and all the things that you may lack, it may be because of what you're doing to others that deserve these opportunities."

Alaina E. Roberts: Thank you.

Melissa Payne: You're welcome.

Alaina E. Roberts: Karen or Julie, did you want to add anything?

Julie L. Reed: I've been thinking a lot about this, as I've been working on multiple projects, thinking about family history and about Cherokee history all day, every day. Alaina, I constantly think about who you are as a Chickasaw Freedman descendant. In archival research I often encounter Black women articulating for other people, whether it's interpreting, whether it's warning, whether it's protecting, whether it's teaching. Black women are kind of always right there at the edges of everything, whether it's spelled out clearly in the archival records or not. Obviously, I don't spend as much time in Chickasaw and Choctaw records, but *you* are there, and *you* are here. And that doesn't change whether you're a citizen or not. That's what we do as historians. To go back to the importance of naming . . . that's what we as historians do, we restore lives. And so *you*, you are there, as the descendant of all of those women, as an articulator of the bad and the good, as a translator of the fringes, as a translator of all the things that maybe are articulated or are not articulated, that are right there out of reach, that you can make seen. All of us see you, and your work is going to help other people be seen. So, thank you.

Karen Shade-Lanier: Yes, this definitely could not have been done without Melissa and the other members of the freedmen steering committee. Developing those connections has been very professionally gratifying. I've also gotten to know them on a much more personal level, and that has been more meaningful than just about anything else. Learning this history after it's gone so long without the attention it really should receive—it's finally in your lap. I feel so humbled by getting to take this history to the world and to work with freedmen to deliver it. It's been a privilege to be able to look at all of the photos that we've received, all the family trees, the census records.

If we don't keep looking at this history and keep talking to each other about it, we risk a great deal. We risk all the lessons that have been gained from the past. We're risking the greatest potential of what we can be as a strong nation, and strength is what we want. We want to have these connections; we want to grow together. And you can only do that by acknowledging what has taken place and going forward and doing the right thing.

Our documents are living documents. The treaty that was upheld in 2017, when freedmen citizenship was returned, may have been written over a hundred years ago, but it is still important, and it's still with us, and everybody should know that. I feel tremendously optimistic not only for my tribe but also for the freedmen descendants of other nations as well. And I hope this exhibit does bring more people around to understanding what is right and what is just within our own tribal nations, and also how that can speak to and reach out to the greater world around us.

I keep quotations around my office and use those to kind of guide me. I'll read one from Chief Hoskin: "Any nation is a stronger nation if they tell their whole story. The tragedy, the triumph, the chapters that are dark and difficult." Was curating this and getting through the material tough at times? It was, but our chief has been very much a leader, basically saying, "We're going to go forward with this and we're going to do the best job that we can, and you have my full support to make this happen and take it out to the world." That inspires me, and I think that kind of inspiration can really radiate out to have a dramatic impact.

NOTES

1. "Treaty with the Cherokee, 1866," Tribal Treaties Database, Oklahoma State University, accessed August 29, 2024, https://treaties.okstate.edu/treaties/treaty-with-the-cherokee-1866-0942. For more details on the history of discrimination against Cherokee Freedmen, please see Congressional Research Service, "The Cherokee Freedmen Dispute: Legal Background, Analysis, and Proposed Legislation," US Congress, August 7, 2008, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL34321.html; Lolita Buckner Inniss, "Cherokee Freedmen and the Color of Belonging," *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 5, no. 2 (2015): 100–118.

2. Cherokee Nation v. Nash, US District Court for the District of Columbia, August 30, 2017, 77–78.

3. This May 2020 order stipulated that "equal protection and equal opportunity for Cherokee citizens under the law are essential guiding principles under the Constitution of the Cherokee Nation and the policies of the Principal Chief . . . [regardless of] descendancy, race, gender, disability, national origin, religion, sexual orientation or other legally protected status." In addition, it directed executive directors of Cherokee departments and agencies to "ensure that equal opportunity and equal protection under the law are at the forefront of policy making, programs and public outreach . . . [and] develop a written plan of action for community and public outreach to historically excluded groups within Cherokee society, specifically including but not necessarily limited to Cherokee citizens of Freedmen descent." Executive Order 2020-05-CTH.

4. In the same 1866 treaty that granted Cherokee freedmen all the same rights as non-Black Cherokee citizens, the Cherokee Nation agreed to sell a portion of its Indian Territory homeland to the United States. In 1883, the Cherokee National Council decided to distribute some of the payment for that land to its citizens as per capita funds, but it blocked freedmen from receiving these payments. Stick Ross was part of a group of freedmen who organized to petition the secretary of the Interior and commissioner of Indian Affairs, send a delegation to US Congress in Washington, DC, confer with lawyers, and hold conventions until freedmen finally received their payment in 1896. For more on this topic and other information on Black Cherokee history, see Celia E. Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

5. "At large" Cherokees are Cherokee citizens who do not live within the nation's jurisdictional boundaries in Oklahoma.