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An Antidote for American Amnesia

Tiya Miles maps forgotten corners of slave history

By *Marc Parry*

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GLENN TRIEST FOR THE CHRONICLE

Tiya Miles at Detroit's Second Baptist Church, whose members and facilities played an important role in sheltering runaway slaves during the Underground Railroad.

This is where the facts of history meet the life of memory. Inside Second Baptist Church, home of Detroit's oldest black congregation, a polo-shirted tour guide leads a small group of visitors on a journey to the Underground Railroad. She sings a spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," as the tour descends into a cold basement lecture room decorated with historical maps. The story she shares there is as uplifting as the 2,800-pipe organ upstairs. It's the story of how a city's residents, some of them from this church, collaborated across the color line to shelter fugitive slaves and get them to freedom in Canada. Fugitives who had been enslaved someplace else.

And the story is true. But there's another story about slavery in Detroit. Chasing it has become a chief pursuit of one of the visitors touring Second Baptist this Wednesday morning. Tiya Miles is a University of Michigan historian with glasses, long locks, and a voice so quiet it sometimes verges on inaudible. Her demeanor can be misleading. The MacArthur "genius" grant [winner](#) and part-time novelist has made a career of doggedly challenging America's slavery amnesia. "A gentle hammer," one friend calls her.

In her best-known book, *Ties That Bind* (University of California Press, 2005), Miles followed the trajectory of one black and Indian family to examine the often tragic relationship between two groups whose land and labor built the United States. She told the story of how the Cherokee Indians came to possess 4,000 black slaves by the eve of the Civil War, a history that [haunts](#) contemporary struggles over the citizenship rights of those slaves' descendants in the Oklahoma tribal nation.

Reckoning With Slavery

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But six years ago, chafing at celebratory narratives like the one in this church, Miles decided to dig deeper into Detroit's past. She discovered that Detroiters held hundreds of people in bondage between the mid-1700s and the early 1800s. The city's slave system persisted under three colonial regimes, first the French, then the British, and then, thanks to legal loopholes, the American. It implicated storied families whose wealth financed the University of Michigan and whose names continue to grace the region's landscape.

That "alternative origin story," told in full for the first time in Miles's new book, *The Dawn of Detroit* (The New Press), will be news to many of the city's residents. "People aren't going to want to hear and think about the fact that we were a city built in part around slavery," says Roy E. Finkenbine, a historian at the University of Detroit Mercy.

If anyone can make them come to terms with that, it's Miles. At a time of polarized battles over who owns history, she may be one of her profession's most effective diplomats. Her career as a self-described "public historian" is a window onto the expanding reach of slavery scholarship. Her efforts to resurrect the voices of forgotten slaves have been felt far beyond academe, in locations as remote as the Klan-pocketed

hills of northern Georgia. But before she began to help those communities face their myths, she first confronted the ones in her own family.

Not too long ago, Miles, 47, sat down to tell that story over lunch in the bustling cafeteria of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. She'd come to the Smithsonian's newest museum to [review](#) it for an academic journal and to research a fledgling book project. Her mood was exuberant. Of all the highlights — Nat Turner's Bible, Harriet Tubman's shawl — what especially moved her was a little girl who shouted with joy upon seeing a photo of Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and women's-rights activist. "We spend so much time worrying about, wondering about whether or not our work is relevant to people's lives today," Miles says. "This museum says yes. It wouldn't exist without that scholarship. Generations of that scholarship."

With all the recent discussion of slavery's legacy, from [Georgetown University](#) to [Jack Daniel's whiskey](#), it's easy to forget how much academic spadework paved the way for this cultural moment. As late as the mid-1950s, mainstream historians portrayed black people as inferior and slavery as a benign institution needed to civilize them. Scholars saw slavery as an unprofitable social system that "might well have died out peacefully had the Civil War not intervened," as historian Eric Foner has [described](#) that earlier view.

The Civil Rights era propelled historians to re-examine the origins of America's racial problems. By the 1970s, a surge of revisionist slavery scholarship had pushed the old ideas aside and replaced them with a fresh sense of slaves as historical actors who shaped their fate and culture. According to another historian, Peter Kolchin, subsequent scholars [broadened](#) that story — geographically, chronologically, demographically. That, says Miles, allowed it to reach people who had imagined that they were living in places disconnected from slavery. Places like Texas. Or the North. Or the Cherokee Nation. "It's created this map that doesn't end of where slavery was practiced and where it was experienced," she says.

Growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, Miles had nothing like this museum from which to learn African-American history. What she had, at first, were the stories that her grandmother, Alice Banks, would tell her while working in her vegetable garden. She remembers feeling Banks's sadness as she described the moment her family lost their beloved land in Mississippi. As Banks told it, some white men got her father to sign a paper that stripped them of the property. Seeking a better life, Banks eventually brought her five kids north during the Great Migration.

When Miles was in junior high, her mom saw an ad in the local newspaper for "A Better Chance," an organization that helps place minority kids in elite schools. Miles applied, and it transformed her life. Instead of staying in Cincinnati and becoming a teacher there, like her father, she went to Middlesex, a private boarding school in Massachusetts, and then on to Harvard University. This was 1988, a time when Harvard's department of Afro-American studies remained a tiny, struggling unit. Still, Miles loved it. After Middlesex, where black history had been limited to a brief slavery lesson, Harvard's classes were "manna for the soul."

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What gripped Miles the most was reading narratives of former slaves, like Frederick Douglass. She found the stories so distressing that she would call up her grandmother in tears. How had their ancestors survived this? The stories that Banks shared in response to such questions would later fuel Miles's fascination with the uses of history. Banks soothed her granddaughter by recalling her own father, who, she said, had been enslaved. She said he was half Indian. She spoke as if that ancestry gave him superpowers: fortitude, longevity, the eyesight of a hawk. Her message: We were strong. We survived. And (this was implicit) our Indian ancestry was partly why.

Those stories weren't unique. Many African-Americans have viewed Indian descent as a point of pride and Indian lands as safe havens. That's conveyed in tales of Native Americans sheltering runaway slaves. It's evident in stories of freely chosen black and Native marriages. You hear it in the [fiction](#) of Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, the blues of Bessie Smith, the [essays](#) of Ralph Ellison. And there is some truth to the stories of black and Indian alliance. But there's also a much uglier reality, one that Miles discovered as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota.

By this time, Miles had become passionate about the struggles of contemporary Indians, not just the mythical-sounding ones who populated her grandmother's stories. At Harvard, she had met the man who would become her husband, Joseph P. Gone, a citizen of the Gros Ventre tribal nation of Montana (and today a psychologist at the University of Michigan). She had volunteered for a women's shelter at the Yankton Sioux reservation, in South Dakota. She had taught English at a college on the Fort Belknap reservation, in Montana.

Now, as a budding academic in Minnesota's American-studies program, she wanted to study and write about the experiences of both black and Indian people. But she soon found out that Indians hadn't just sheltered fugitive black slaves. They had also owned them. If her family really did have Indian ancestry, it was much more likely to have resulted from a master-slave relationship than a free one.

Miles first encountered that story of Indian slaveholding in James Merrell's research on a Carolina tribe, the Catawbas, who had both intermarried with black people and also held black slaves. Her shock was compounded by something Merrell revealed in a visit to her Native history seminar. When Miles asked what modern Catawbas thought of his work, he said tribal council members had endorsed it but asked him to "leave out or scoot to the side the part about the black people," Miles recalls. "First there's slavery, and now there's denial. I was really angry. I almost couldn't believe it. It was nothing like my grandmother ever told me."

Miles went on a hunt for other historical possibilities. When she came across a footnote alluding to what was allegedly the first Cherokee-black marriage, she was thrilled. This 19th-century union between Shoe Boots, a Cherokee war hero, and Doll, a black woman, seemed to have the makings of the positive story she hoped to tell. A story, perhaps, of two people who chose each other and fought together against slavery and colonialism.

She quickly hit a wall. In planning her first real research trip, to the Georgia state archives, she told an archivist that she was seeking links between black and Native people in the Southeast, particularly women. He laughed at her. “Black women weren’t important enough, and Native women weren’t important enough, to be written about alone,” he said. “Let alone you’re trying to put them together.”

Miles persisted, and soon unearthed a document that unlocked her project. The story that she ended up telling in her first book, *Ties That Bind*, was rooted in a period of epic change for the Cherokee people. After the Revolutionary War, Miles writes, the administration of President Washington aspired to “civilize” rather than destroy the Indians whose lands now fell within America’s borders. Native people were to coexist with whites by adopting their ideas about farming and private property. In that context, a segment of Cherokee society embraced chattel slavery, chiefly in northern Georgia and southern Tennessee. “The process of becoming more civilized in the eyes of white federal officials depended on Indians adopting practices of American barbarity, namely, slavery and racism,” Miles writes.

Despite the Cherokees’ efforts to remake themselves — their constitution, their newspaper, their embrace of missionaries — the government eventually decided to evict them. That 1838-39 forced march to what is now Oklahoma, which left some 4,000 Cherokees dead, is famously known as the Trail of Tears. What’s less well known is that the expelled Natives [took](#) their black slaves with them.

That history is not unique to Cherokees. Each of what used to be called the “Five Civilized Tribes” — Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Seminoles — adopted racial slavery. According to Claudio Saunt, a historian at the University of Georgia, some of their slaves “toiled on sprawling plantations while their masters relaxed on distant verandas.” But many others worked next to their masters. Slaves “inevitably became family, marrying Indians and fathering or bearing their children,” [writes](#) Saunt, author of a 2005 book about an Afro-Creek family, *Black, White, and Indian* (Oxford University Press). “Intermarriage blurred racial boundaries and sometimes made it difficult to separate family slaves from family members.”

The story of Shoe Boots and Doll turned out to be a relationship along similar lines, as Miles learned when she found that crucial document: a petition from Shoe Boots for the freedom of his children. The petition made clear that his link to Doll was not the freely chosen, fight-the-power union that Miles had initially envisioned. She was his slave, and he referred to her disparagingly. But the document also revealed something else: a real family. Shoe Boots wanted the kids that Doll had borne him to become full Cherokee citizens.

The award-winning book that Miles wrote about their relationship, *Ties That Bind*, made two broad arguments. The first was to push back against the widely held notion that Cherokees had practiced a far more benevolent slavery than whites. Miles showed that Cherokee slavery had been a cruel system at the core of tribal wealth and governance. Her writing humanized the victims of that system, especially Doll.

This female slave led so marginalized a life that record keepers could scarcely bother to record it. But Miles tried to describe Doll’s interior world regardless, including details as intimate as how she might have felt about bearing children into slavery. She managed that by patching together sources like slave narratives left by other women, combined with fictional renderings of bondage, such as the portrayal of slave motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. “She delves into the emotional side of these people’s lives in a way the vast majority of historians wouldn’t dare,” says Saunt.

The second argument that Miles put forward was that, despite the cruelty of the Cherokees' slave system, a more flexible situation existed on the ground. Ties of kinship could supersede categories of race. They could even be a loophole out of slavery.

The corollary was unspoken: Consider thinking that way now. *Ties That Bind* appeared amid a long-running conflict over the political status of descendants of the tribe's former slaves, known as Cherokee freedmen. This fight would lead to a 2007 vote in which the Cherokee Nation approved a constitutional amendment limiting citizenship to Indians "by blood," blocking roughly 2,800 freedmen and freedwomen descendants from membership. Miles's narrative heartened some slave descendants, who interpreted her research as a positive story about a Cherokee man who had a black wife and freed his kids.

Cherokee scholars and officials, meanwhile, criticized Miles's findings as marginal to their history. They saw her as trying to steal the Cherokees' spotlight by turning the Trail of Tears into a "black" story. One prominent Indian elder from a Great Plains tribe went further. After she heard Miles speak prior to the publication of *Ties That Bind*, she implored her, "Don't write your book; it will destroy us."

Attitudes to that past are changing, though, in part because of where Miles took her work next: the public realm of historical tourism destinations that shape how millions of Americans see their history.

In 2002 a pair of sociologists published an important study called *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Smithsonian Books). The authors, Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen A. Small, had investigated more than 100 public and private plantation museums across the South, taking tours and counting how many times the docents mentioned enslaved people. They found in many cases that tour guides would say little about slavery, if they mentioned it at all. The sociologists labeled that neglect "symbolic annihilation."

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Eichstedt and Small’s work would become a model for Miles as she wrestled with a similar case of slave erasure on a plantation in northwest Georgia. She discovered the site in the late 1990s while trying to locate Shoe Boots’s old farm. It turned out that place no longer existed. Nearby, though, Miles found an imposing, white-columned brick home connected to the broader story of Cherokee slavery. This was known as the Chief Vann House State Historic Site. In the early 19th century, the land had been a plantation, Diamond Hill, set up by a wealthy Cherokee entrepreneur and political leader, James Vann, whose family possessed 115 of the 583 slaves held by Cherokees at that time.

In this mostly white corner of Georgia, state officials and academics had come to showcase the site as a “grand estate in the antebellum Southern style,” as Miles puts it, with a bit of an “Indian twist.” What motivated her to develop a project about the plantation — which led to her second book, *The House on Diamond Hill* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010) — was a film she saw on one of her visits. The movie ended with a group of mostly black children, probably from Atlanta, running out of a school bus up to the steps of the house. A voice-over said, *If you don’t know your history, you don’t know where you’re going*. Miles was stunned. Here was a place telling black kids to learn their past. Yet officials had excised discussion of slaves who had enabled the luxury of the site.

Miles decided to tell that story herself. How she went about it may be instructive to scholars who hope to get their ideas heard across borders of race and class. She didn’t browbeat the Vann House staff about the lack of black narratives. Instead, the next time she visited, she took a careful look at how people communicated there. She noticed that they enjoyed telling stories through historical booklets available at the gift shop. And so Miles and her Michigan students delved into the archives to create their own booklet about black life at the plantation. She printed 200 copies and shipped

them to the museum as a gift just before its most popular annual event, the “Christmas by Candlelight” celebration. Then she held her breath.

Within two weeks, the house’s director emailed Miles to say copies were running out and he wanted to print more. The booklet prompted Julia Autry, then the site’s interpretive ranger, to reread historical records for stories of slaves linked to the site. Autry was a Georgia native, one of whose own ancestors had held close to 80 slaves. But she had grown up not giving the matter much thought. Nudged by Miles, she began to see not just slaves, but people. Michael. Pleasant. Patience. She shared their stories in a new display that opened in a cabin on the property. “In some ways, I fought so hard to get the slave exhibit because that is the only reparation I can offer,” Autry says. “I don’t know who my family owned. I don’t know where their descendants are today. But it’s my way of saying I’m sorry.”

Cherokee critics saw her as trying to turn the Trail of Tears into a ‘black’ story.

If this comes off like a fairy tale, there’s a darker aspect to the story. The Vann House sits on a hilltop in the isolated foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Ku Klux Klan has been known to hold rallies in a town not too far away. As Miles’s Vann House ties deepened, she began to learn that staffers there had been shielding her from certain white people in the community, like a local college professor known for spouting his anti-black views. They also didn’t want her to travel by herself. And when the slavery exhibit first went up, they worried that someone might try to burn it down.

That didn’t happen. But the exhibit, like the ones at many other plantations, remains problematic. Driven by scholarship, by better-informed tourists, and by a National Park Service [report](#) that encouraged the telling of more complicated stories, historical sites around the country are paying more attention to slave history. But many sites segregate those exhibits in facilities beyond the main houses, says Derek H. Alderman, a geographer of public memory at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Another

form of inequality is emotional. Many plantations tell stories that evoke a connection to the master class, Alderman says. They often fail to do so for the slaves, whose history gets relegated to dry facts.

“**T**he struggle over slavery’s memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself.” That sentence appeared some two decades ago in the introduction to a [collection](#) of ex-slave interviews co-edited by Ira Berlin, a dean of American slavery scholarship. The struggle it describes, still so far from finished, is not limited to the South. That’s the basic [lesson](#) of Miles’s new book about Detroit.

The history Detroiters generally know is the narrative of the Underground Railroad during the decades immediately preceding the Civil War. As that story goes, slavery happened below the Mason-Dixon line. Detroiters were on the right side of history — the good guys whose city, code-named “Midnight,” had been the final stop before fugitive slaves crossed the Detroit River to freedom in Canada. The region celebrates that heritage today in a pair of bronze statues that occupy opposite banks of that river, one in Detroit’s Hart Plaza, the other in Windsor, Ontario.

The excitement it evokes is evident during Miles’s tour of Second Baptist, whose members and facilities played an important role in helping runaway slaves. A student from University of Detroit Mercy says she didn’t know the Underground Railroad was here until the Hart Plaza statue was installed to commemorate the city’s tricentennial, in 2001. “I was just like — great! — we got a part of the history in our city. And I got the opportunity to see it.”

How she went about telling the plantation’s slave story may be instructive to scholars who hope to get their ideas heard across borders of race and class.

What's less well known is that the streets this student may have driven through to get here, even the garage she probably parked in, are named for people who committed, as Miles puts it, "crimes against humanity." The slave-owning part of the city's history doesn't fit neatly on a plaque. Wrapping your head around it means going all the way back to 1701, when Antoine Laumet de La Mothe Cadillac, a French explorer, established the settlement originally known as Fort Pontchartrain du Detroit.

Cadillac aimed to encourage Indians to settle nearby as trading partners so France could strengthen its influence over the booming Great Lakes fur business. As Detroit expanded, Miles [writes](#), it needed workers to do things like grow food, handle furs, and maintain homes, so that trade extended to slaves: captive Indians offered by other Indians in exchange for manufactured goods. After war with the British cost France its North American territory, slavery became an increasingly biracial system. Indians would go down to a place like Kentucky, capture black people, and bring them back to Detroit.

The Brits, too, soon lost Detroit, but slavery didn't end then, either. For example, Detroit's richest person in the late 1790s was a Scots-Irish merchant, William Macomb, who owned at least 26 black slaves. His wealth passed to his wife and sons, later among the University of Michigan's first trustees, according to a recent opinion [piece](#) that Miles published in *The New York Times*. Only in 1835, with the adoption of Michigan's first constitution, was slavery completely squelched.

When Miles began trying to untangle that story, she says, it was nothing more than a blip in the history books. Like her work on the Vann House, the project sprang from a sense that the community's public narratives were incomplete. She felt the Underground Railroad fanfare did a disservice to the complicated story of what had actually happened. But her attitude shifted over time. Studying records, taking tours, meeting people, she rethought her views on the public's attachment to the Underground Railroad. She began to appreciate how that story was a source of

identity and community building. She didn't want to take that away. Rather than framing her book in opposition, she came to see both stories as part of a larger whole.

And, slowly, those stories may be starting to merge. Back in the pews of Second Baptist, as the tour guide plunges into a thrilling 1830s tale of fugitive slaves who escaped to Canada, she suddenly pauses.

“Did you know that there were slaves here in Detroit at that time?”

Marc Parry is a senior reporter at The Chronicle.

A version of this article appeared in the [November 10, 2017, issue](#).

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OPINION



Marc Parry

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