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Reviews

African Creeks: Estelvste and the Creek Nation. By Gary Zellar. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. 368 pages. \$34.95 cloth.

Gary Zellar's narrative history of the Estelvste, or Creeks of African descent, begins with the earliest contact between Africans and southeastern Indians during Hernando de Soto's expedition in North America and ends with Oklahoma statehood and the imposition of Jim Crow segregation in state schools. Three themes emerge in Zellar's work: first, African Creeks historically were full and equal participants in Creek political, economic, and social life; second, African Creeks were able to achieve their status because of their rights to the larger Creek land estate; and, finally, the racist attitudes that developed in the Creek Nation were a direct result of the US federal government's land-allotment policies. Zellar's account of the Estelvste is one of promise and then decline; that is, in the post-Emancipation period, the African Creeks had all the rights of their Creek Indian counterparts, but those rights quickly diminished because of intervention by Euro-Americans and the federal government.

According to Zellar, the earliest encounters between Africans and the peoples who would later become the Creek Indians "reveal no apparent aversion based on skin color" (6). Slaves of African descent sometimes ran away to join the Creek Indians and "were frequently adopted into clans and absorbed into the Creek community" (8–10). The majority of those people of African descent who were held as slaves among the Creek Indians experienced kinship slavery akin to that practiced in West Africa. In this system, slave status was not permanent, hereditary, or tied to skin color, and slaves were given some autonomy in the determination of labor patterns and the creation of a family life. Thus, though during the first half of the nineteenth century most African Creeks were slaves, Creek cultural practices moderated the institution's harshest effects. Moreover, Zellar argues that these slaves contributed to the Creek economy because they "provided the slave labor that enabled leading Creek families to accumulate wealth and power" and, significantly, often served as cultural mediators who translated information between their Creek Indian owners and Euro-Americans (xvii–xviii).

After the civil war, there was some disagreement among the Creek Indians about the place of their former slaves in the nation, but, ultimately, they adopted legislation that gave African Creeks full citizenship rights. Although some Southern Creeks chose to distance themselves socially or physically from African Creeks despite this legislation, Zellar points out that the Southern Creeks “did not sponsor any legislation in the Creek Council to mandate racial segregation, regulate freed people’s behavior, restrict their mobility, or impede their access to land” (96). The African Creeks exercised their political rights and frequently served as the deciding votes in major elections. Zellar states that the participation of the Creek freedmen in elected offices and the lack of violence directed toward people of African descent to control their electoral behavior in the Creek Nation are part of an “unheralded success stor[y] of the Reconstruction era” (xvii–xviii, 100).

Beyond active participation in the nation’s political life, African Creeks also embraced education and land ownership. Zellar finds that African Creeks often voted for candidates based on their support of African Creek schools. The papers of supervisors of Creek schools show that African Creeks benefited from an educational system that spent more on African Creek students than the surrounding states spent on African American students. This fact would push African Americans to seek African Creek schools, which overburdened the system and sparked tensions between African Creeks and African Americans (248). Zellar also finds high rates of land ownership among the African Creeks in the post-Emancipation period and into the early twentieth century until restrictions on the sale of allotted lands were removed (255–56). Land ownership offered African Creeks independence and material success because it enabled them to become subsistence farmers instead of sharecroppers or day laborers. It was African Creek land ownership, Zellar posits, that permitted African Creeks to have a voice in the political life of the nation (112, 236–37). Thus, the drop in land ownership among the African Creeks threatened more than their economic position in Creek society.

Zellar contends that the process of allotment—the federal government’s attempts to divest Indian nations of their territory and provide more land for white settlement—brought issues of race to the fore. The federal government imposed a racialized system of classification on the Creeks during the enumeration process by placing people of African descent on “Freedmen” rolls in spite of any Indian ancestry and placing indigenous persons on “By Blood” rolls. Moreover, as whites flooded into Creek country, they brought their racial thinking with them. Some Creeks adopted these attitudes to avoid being associated with people of African descent and, thus, relegated them to a position of social, political, and economic inferiority.

Zellar concedes that some racialized ideas about difference may have crept into Creek thinking prior to the late nineteenth century in the form of restrictive black codes passed in 1855 or the denial of Creek citizenship to the children of Creek mothers of “more than half African blood” (39–40). However, Zellar argues that Creek fluid racial thinking mitigated the effects of the laws. Similarly, though Southern Creeks had objected vehemently

to full citizenship for African Creeks, the author points out that the Creek legislature did grant African Creeks full rights in the nation. And while Creek Indians established separate “Colored” towns and listed citizens on separate rolls before allotment, in Zellar’s view the fact that those separate towns were still Creek towns is what is important (219–20). The author might have given these practices more weight or interrogated them more fully to complicate the meaning of Creek identity during the course of the nineteenth century and to consider how African-descended Creeks did and did not fit into this larger category.

African Creeks contributes to histories of the Creek Indians more generally, such as Robbie Etheridge’s *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World, 1896–1816* (2003), and to a growing literature that explores interactions between indigenous peoples and people of African descent in general, such as *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, edited by Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland (2006); *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America*, edited by James F. Brooks (2002); and Murray R. Wickett’s *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865–1907* (2000). Readers of *African Creeks* will find Claudio Saunt’s work particularly valuable because he also focuses more specifically on the Creek case. His *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (1999) charts the changing meaning of property among the Creeks, and *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (2005) explores Creek racial ideology through the lens of the Grayson family, a family that Zellar also features in *African Creeks*.

Zellar draws on a wide array of evidence to support his arguments about the important contributions of African Creeks to Creek society and the status people of African descent in the Creek Nation once held in relation to Creek Indians: the evidence includes interviews of residents of the Indian Territory collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the Indian Pioneer History collection; the narratives of former slaves also collected by the WPA; Creek legislative documents; missionary reports; personal papers; and newspapers. The author uses this evidence to highlight the words and actions of the African Creeks while he illuminates the precarious position of Native peoples in America during the nineteenth century. Through *African Creeks* Zellar adds an important voice to the widening scholarly conversation about relations between indigenous people and people of African descent in North America.

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