The story of slaves of African descent in the United States is, on the one hand, a very familiar story of enslavement, forced migration and then eventual emancipation. And yet this story is in fact far more complicated, especially if we consider the lives of African-Americans who were enslaved not by European-Americans but by Native Americans, and enslaved not in the southeastern states of Virginia and the Carolinas, but much further west in a place called Indian Territory (currently northeastern Oklahoma). The story for these African-Americans begins in the familiar manner of enslavement and forced relocation and also ends eventually with emancipation. However, their story serves to challenge the usual portrayal of African-descended slaves and, indeed, monolithic African-American racial and cultural identities in the United States.

After their forced relocation from southeastern states to Indian Territory in the early nineteenth-century (the heinous migration often referred to as the "Trail of Tears" in the Cherokee Nation), some Native Americans and their African-descended slaves, began the process of rebuilding their communities and nations. Having been born and raised among Native Americans—in the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw and Choctaw nations—some slaves of African descent identified Indian cultural ways as their own. The extent of their cultural interactions, oftentimes intensified by their blood relations, established a group of persons of African descent whose cultural and social ties were with Indians. In this presentation, I specifically examine how some African-descended slaves of Native Americans in Indian Territory used particular cultural manifestations of "Indianness" (namely clothing, language and food), as a way of declaring their connection to Indians. Identifying their racial and cultural links to Native Americans potentially served as a strategic way of claiming an Indian national identity. By so doing, some African-American ex-slaves attempted to gain due recognition as citizens of Indian nations, as well as access to tangible benefits in the late nineteenth century.

The stories of enslaved African-Americans in Indian Territory broaden the parameters of African-American racial, cultural and national identities by reframing and challenging the very constitution of nineteenth-century African-American lived experiences. The ongoing unveiling of their history requires scholars to expand the traditional borders of African-American history, Native American history and southern history. The experiences of enslaved African-Americans and free Blacks living within Indian nations, east and west of the Mississippi River, disrupt the usual tale of African-American sociocultural legacies in the United States. Their stories weave yet another layer into the cultural quilt that is African-American history. Furthermore, understanding the forged relationships between African-Americans and Native Americans in nineteenth-century Indian Territory provides one avenue for assessing the historical and cultural connections to Native Americans claimed by African-Americans and Black Indians today.