UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family. By Claudio Saunt.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2b26g2bv

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(4)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Piker, Joshua

Publication Date
2005-09-01

DOI
10.17953

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family. By Claudio Saunt. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 320 pages. $35.00 cloth.

Given that scholars have paid relatively little attention to African-Indian relations, it is fitting that *Black, White, and Indian* begins with a discussion of two acts of erasure: the published version of George Washington ("Wash") Grayson's autobiography uses ellipses in place of words and phrases that would hint at his Creek family's African heritage, and the uncensored manuscript version—housed in the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collections for half a century—was withdrawn by family members in 1987, a year before the published version appeared. Claudio Saunt's book is an "attempt to fill in these ellipses" (ix) and rewrite a family's history. It is a memorable and powerful work of historical recovery, one that will attract both a wide readership and a good deal of controversy. Some people will be outraged by this portrait of the Grayson family "and how it came to terms with a central American obsession, race" (4). These include not just the many Graysons who refused to speak to Saunt but also inhabitants of Creek country—and Indian Country more generally—who will not recognize their history in sentences such as, "In the shadow of the United States, Indian survival sometimes demanded the strength not only to walk the trail of tears but also to disown family members, disenfranchise relatives, and deny the past" (216). Because this is controversial material, Saunt has taken care to combine exhaustive archival research with oral testimony from modern-day Creeks, including those Graysons who did support his project. He has, moreover, fitted his writing style to his subject matter, crafting a narrative that depends in equal measure upon precision and passion. The end result is impressive and, for my money, convincing. There is certainly no arguing with Saunt's assertion, "This is an American Indian story, but it is an American story, too. . . . [W]ith race, inequality, and conflict at the core of their story, the Graysons are truly American" (5).

Saunt's book centers on the descendants of Robert Grierson (later changed to Grayson), a Scot who traded in Creek country in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and Sinnugee, a Creek woman who likely had "Spanish, Mesoamerican, and African" (11) ancestors. Saunt is particularly interested in the families of two of their children. Their son William married Judah, an African slave; together they had nine children. William's sister, Katy, had two children by an unknown man of African descent before marrying a Creek man, Tulwa Tustanagee, and raising another family; Katy and Tulwa Tustanagee's son James became the father of Wash, the future autobiographer and principal chief of the Creek Nation. Over the course of the nineteenth century, these two branches of the Grayson family had drastically different experiences. William's descendants found themselves impoverished, discriminated against, and, in some cases, unable to obtain recognition as Creeks because of their African heritage. Katy's family, by contrast, worked to claim the benefits that came from conforming to Euro-American ideals, distancing themselves from their black kinsfolk and denying their own African backgrounds. Saunt traces these developments in a series of carefully argued and emotionally wrenching chapters that follow the increasingly distinct families through Removal, the antebellum years, the Civil War, Reconstruction, allotment, and into the early-twentieth century. By the end of the book, the reader is not surprised to learn that, while William's descendants struggled to overcome segregation, poverty, and "the stigma of African ancestry," Katy's grandson Wash had become a staunch supporter of Jim Crow laws, an apologist for lynching, and an avid participant in Confederate memorial services (201).

Three points surface again and again in this affecting and effective narrative. To begin with, Saunt makes clear that individual human beings made choices that had, and continue to have, tragic consequences. The chapter titles alone—"William's Decision," "Katy's Compromise," "Separate Paths"—highlight this point, and Saunt shows his readers the hard work—"a concerted effort of deception and self-fashioning" (83)—that went into the construction and maintenance of racial categories within the Creek Nation: "Abiding by America's racial hierarchy was a survival strategy—part cynical ploy, clever subterfuge, and painful compromise" (4). As the term "survival strategy" suggests, however, Saunt is not simply playing the blame game here. Thus, the second point to which he returns frequently is that Creeks used racism to resist imperialism. In the 1820s, for example, Saunt describes the emergence of "two political camps" within Creek country, one that sought to strengthen the nation by eliminating outsiders and another that planned to protect the nation by conforming to Euro-American practices (33). Both were responses to imperialism; neither looked kindly on close personal relationships between Creeks and blacks. In such a context, Katy's decision to distance herself from her Afro-Creek family and to emphasize her role as slave owner made sense in a way that William's decision to stick by his Afro-Creek family did not: "If William's decision was the more admirable, Katy's was the more prescient" (211). And, Saunt makes clear in his third point, this is as true in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth century because "even today, Creeks self-consciously maneuver in the white racial hierarchy" (130–31). Saunt emphasizes this notion in his afterword—in which he discusses recent efforts to exclude descendants of African slaves from the membership rolls of Native nations—but also ends each chapter with two-to-three page profiles drawn from his fieldwork among modern Creeks. Some "profiles" are more effective than others, but all provide ample support for his assertion that "to this day race still haunts both the Grayson family and native people more generally" (5).

Throughout, Saunt writes in an accessible style. He deals with complicated and, at times, unpleasant issues in a clear and concise fashion. Saunt succeeds, moreover, in placing the story of this particular family within a broader Creek and American context. His narrative brings abstract concepts such as "race" and "sovereignty" down to earth and personalizes large-scale events such as Removal and allotment. *Black, White, and Indian* is, then, an enormously valuable book, one that any scholar interested in Native or American history could profit from and one that could be taught in undergraduate and graduate classes. To be sure, specialists in the history of Native Americans' engagement with racial ideology may wish that Saunt had devoted more time to discussing how traditional Creek perspectives on difference merged with those of the dominant Euro-American society. Other specialists, familiar with debates on the need to respect Indian peoples' silences on certain issues, will look for a discussion of the intellectual, political, and ethical implications of narrating a deliberately hidden story. These points notwithstanding, this book remains a wonderful example of what can happen when a talented historian tells an important story about which he cares deeply. The results are likely to stay with you for a long, long time.

Joshua Piker
University of Oklahoma

Chaco Canyon: Archaeologists Explore the Lives of an Ancient Society. By Brian Fagan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 256 pages. $30.00 cloth.

Authors from many walks of life have published prolifically on Chaco, the Pueblo society that emerged in the American Southwest in the 800s to 1200s CE. The National Park Service (NPS), stewards of Chaco Canyon, conducted a research project in the canyon in the 1970s and 1980s and various studies have followed. The project produced, and is still producing, many pages of detailed reports. The Chaco Project lacked a synthesis of these materials and took measures to provide one. Stephen Lekson organized a series of topical meetings whose participants in turn convened to generate an overall view of Chaco: the "Chaco Capstone." In addition to the professional papers assembled, Lekson and the NPS planned a publication for the general public, the sponsors of the various efforts. Brian Fagan is the acknowledged doyen of writing about archaeology for popular audiences, and the capstone organizers were pleased when he agreed to undertake the popular book. He attended the penultimate capstone meeting in 2003 and produced the present book in a very timely fashion—the capstone volume itself is still in preparation.

This book appeared at the same time as two others aimed at a general audience: Kendrick Frazier's updated *People of Chaco: A Canyon and Its Culture* (2005) and David Noble's *In Search of Chaco: New Approaches to an Archaeological Enigma* (2005), each of which took a different approach to the challenge of a popular synthesis of Chaco studies. Noble's book incorporates articles by various students of aspects of Chaco. Frazier's work, like Fagan's, speaks with a single voice but covers a wider range of topics.

Having been involved with Chaco studies since the 1970s and having participated in the capstone meetings, I was pleased to have the opportunity to get an early read of Fagan's book. That intimate involvement with Chaco studies means that I read the book differently from its intended audience, paying attention to detail and nuance that those reading the book for a broad overview might not. I do find editorial, factual, and theoretical problems in the book, but a final assessment of it must come down to whether it succeeds as a popular publication. I will attempt to balance those perspectives here.