



## ***Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage: A Personal History of the Allotment Era***

***Darnella Davis***

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**Review by Amy Absher. First published online 22 January 2019.  
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*Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage* (2018) is a history of Darnella Davis's family experience during the allotment era in America. The author began writing and researching this book as a college student when she was looking for scholarships set aside for indigenous students; however, before she could access these funds she had to find evidence supporting her family's place in indigenous history in the United States. What the author discovered was a history in which claims to status had little relationship to tribal devotion, language, religion, or ties to the land (31). Instead, claims to status brought Davis into a world of contested racial meanings.

Divided into three core chapters and a long appendix, this book primarily grapples with the history of the place of Africans in indigenous history. For example, Davis had

to contend with Cherokee Freedman identity, which is a tribal status assigned to the descendants of African slaves held by the Cherokee before and after removal to Indian Territory. In addition to researching this status, the author also discovered links to Muscogee (Creek) history and in the end expresses great affinity for this indigenous group. Yet, being "mixed-race" is problematic because, as the author explains, "Though race is a construct, racial categorization has been a very big political issue in terms of social benefits" (120). Pursuing these benefits brought the author face to face with historical racism and the recent turn toward DNA testing to assess identity. Hers is a difficult family history to untangle because in her roots are the struggles with the specific complexity that comes from origin, othering, ownership, and white supremacy.

Those looking to position this book within a scholarly context might turn to Gary B. Nash's *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America*. Over several editions, Nash wrote and re-wrote this book as he tried to explain American history. However, Davis is trying to do more than write a history. She is writing a family, which links her work to Lori L. Tharps' *Same Family Different Colors* (2016) and Alice Walker's classic *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* (1983). The strength of all of these books is that the authors pay special attention to the voices of those they seek to understand. Being "mixed-race" is a complex reality, and only those who live it can truly explain it. For this reason it is also worth revisiting Alicia Woods' seminal 2006 film *American Red and Black: Stories of Afro-Native Identity*.

It is a difficult task to criticize a book as personal as this one. Instead, readers might focus on the usefulness of the work. For example, over one hundred pages of the book are appendices that reproduce interviews and documents. These pages will be a treasure trove to anyone teaching public history methods, procedures, ethics, and objectivity.

Next, the book requires readers to confront race. Though the author asserts this story is more than about race (9), much of the book discusses concepts of racial purity, which may be of interest to anyone teaching how critical race theory plays out on the ground. Finally, the author uses phrases like "bringing to light," when discussing sources (9), and views her research an act of uncovering history. These phrases are more than metaphors: the language and the methodology clearly link this book to what was once called "the new social history." Maybe it is time to revisit "the new" and see the outcomes of that intellectual movement in how we "do" and how we understand history. *Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage* would be a good place to start.

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