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"Widening the Road for Independent Scholarship and Personal Narratives" to be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Independent Scholar*, under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## WIDENING THE ROAD FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOLARSHIP AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

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### **Abstract**

*In the field of History, the relative dearth of primary sources from the late nineteenth century has plagued revisionist scholars bent on retracing the shared experiences of divergent groups such as indigenous peoples and the "mixed-bloods" within their communities. Despite the relative paucity of minority voices, new sources and perspectives do emerge. When they do, how are they received? This paper discusses the challenges of meaningfully situating original voices within the broadening landscape of interdisciplinary studies. Drawing on an independent scholar's experiences in seeking an academic publisher, the paper argues that a cross section of scholars—in contesting traditional historical frameworks—are expanding opportunities for fresh perspectives tendered by independently-minded researchers. It further suggests that works exploring aspects of the racial mixtures that underpin our collective biography may find receptive audiences across disciplines. The successful publication and subsequent recognition of the manuscript in question indicate a receptivity to unconventional narratives from those whose personal accounts may strengthen rather than undermine their value to the field of mixed-race studies.*

**Keywords:** *Interdisciplinary Studies; Mixed-Race Studies; New Social History; Allotment Era; American Indians; African American Studies; Federal Indian policies; personal narrative; our collective biography*

In the field of History, the relative dearth of primary sources from the late nineteenth century has plagued revisionist scholars bent on retracing the shared experiences of divergent groups such as indigenous peoples and the "mixed-bloods" within their communities. Despite the relative paucity of minority voices, new sources and perspectives do emerge. When they do, how are they received? This paper discusses the challenges of meaningfully situating original voices within the broadening landscape of interdisciplinary studies. Drawing on an independent scholar's experiences in seeking an academic publisher, the paper argues that a cross section of scholars—in contesting traditional historical frameworks—are expanding opportunities for fresh perspectives tendered by independently-minded researchers. It further suggests that works exploring aspects of the racial mixtures that underpin our collective biography may find receptive audiences across disciplines. The successful publication and subsequent recognition of the manuscript in question indicate a receptivity to unconventional narratives from those whose personal accounts may strengthen rather than undermine their value to the field of mixed-race studies.

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These concerns arose for me during the development of a recent publication, *Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage: A Personal History of the Allotment Era*,<sup>1</sup> which will serve to illustrate the challenges and opportunities afforded independent scholars. Few may be familiar with this span of history, for the events that followed the Trail of Tears and preceded the series of Oklahoma land rushes are rarely linked and generally neglected in the great sweep of western expansion. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Indian Territory and its neighbor, the Oklahoma Territory formed a last frontier, one that closed with the waning of the Indian Wars.<sup>2</sup> The Allotment Era itself was a brief period of rapid transformation prompted by the division of Indian Territory into self-sustaining homesteads, accelerated by throngs eager to possess land, and culminating in the formation of the state of Oklahoma which overlay the former territories of indigenous peoples removed—just 50 years earlier—from the Southeast. Settled west of the Mississippi, these tribal lands had been given in fee simple and the Five Southeast Tribes were promised independence in perpetuity.

For the independent scholar engaging both memoir and history, one challenge can be securing space that resists the boundaries of conventional disciplinary frameworks while negotiating the peerage associated with academic publication. This was the case for me. Recognition meant claiming space within an academic discipline bent upon maintaining high standards but grappling with its own record of integrity in accounts of the western frontier. Without a historian's credential or formal experience in conducting historical research, I nevertheless argued that the project was worthy of joining the canon. The unearthing of collected stories, photos and memorabilia of a seven-generations-long family history would be tantalizing for most scholars. Yet the same scholars who lament the dearth of primary sources can be leery of how these materials are handled and by whom.

Fortunately, questioning the appropriateness of engrained historical standards now has a substantial grounding in revisionist history or what some have called "the new social history."<sup>3</sup> These efforts have shifted the framing of historical events away from an "elite" comprised of victors and heroes, or the rich and powerful, toward a fuller account of the lived experiences of "ordinary" people including women, minority groups, and populations eking out lives with the most modest of means. Recent years also have seen a growing recognition of the unsavory side of settler colonialism and the exposure of an underbelly of unseemly acts carried out in the name of democracy.<sup>4</sup> The need for correcting our national narrative may be seen in an increasing awareness of the contradictions embodied in a constitution that declares equality for all while ignoring the rights of selected groups. Examples of the double standards of no-less a man than Thomas Jefferson were exposed by Annette Gordon-Reed, while Erica Armstrong Dunbar excavates the prejudices of George and Martha Washington in their endless pursuit of Ona Judge, a runaway slave.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville anticipated the challenges for a nation comprised of three races coexisting in uneasy proximity.<sup>6</sup> He was certain that the young nation could not remain viable if it continued to sanction slavery. He also stressed the need to reconcile treatment of Native Americans with aspirations for a true democracy if the young republic wished to fulfill its ideals. Yet, based on conventional texts, generations of Americans have taken burnished tales of the founding fathers as gospel.

More recently, scholars have challenged these views, offering alternative perspectives on our shared American experience. Yet, we still struggle with "the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences."<sup>7</sup> Attempts to clarify the limitations of our nation's racial discourse quickly confront the intersections of identity politics, interdisciplinary spaces, and a more heterogeneous public square, one where, to quote de Tocqueville, we no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Darnella, *Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage: A Personal History of the Allotment Era*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Edmund, "Growth and Causes of Iroquois Resurgence" in *Apologies to the Iroquois*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Limerick, Patricia Nelson, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds. *Trails Towards a New Western History*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991. Rita Napier, "Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future." *Kansas History* 24 (Fall 2001): 218-47.

<sup>4</sup> See Chang, David, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Land Ownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina; and Katja May, *African Americans and Native Americans in the Creek and Cherokee Nations*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Reed, Annette, *The Hemings of Monticello, an American Family*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught, the Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, New York: First 37 Ink/Atria Books, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Coates, Ta Nehisi, *We Were Eight Years in Power, an American Tragedy*, New York: One World Publishing, 2017, p. 202.

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"remain strangers to each other."<sup>8</sup> In this space, linguists, historians, legal scholars, and social critics are troubling the canon, poking at comfortable fictions, and unpacking exhausted taxonomies, while collaborating through organizations such as the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) that encourage interdisciplinary scholarship.

Theda Perdue was among the vanguard of historians to begin tracing the evolution of race thinking among indigenous peoples whose traditional "color-blindness" proved disadvantageous as settlers wielded their Whiteness with increasing power.<sup>9</sup> She questioned the notion of racial purity and the origins of the use and abuse of "blood" quantum to differentiate individuals. Jack D. Forbes has interrogated the freighted nomenclature of racial hierarchies in examining the language of race and the evolution of "Red-Black" people.<sup>10</sup> Fay Yarbrough studied the role of Cherokee citizens who created legal templates that were often emulated by other tribes for redressing governmental abuses.<sup>11</sup> She disrupts the conceit that the Cherokee were in any way ill-equipped to represent their legal interests. Celia Naylor, Claudio Saunt and Tiya Miles all have resurrected neglected records of the past, giving fresh interpretations to the events that shaped life among the tribes indigenous to the Southeast who were removed west of the Mississippi in the 1800s.<sup>12</sup> In *Ties that Bind, the Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*, Miles exposed the hypocrisy of race-based policies invoked by the Cherokee in mirroring a White ethos. Barbara Krauthammer's work points to the loss of racial complexity embodied within the Five Southeast Tribes with the government-imposed category "freedman" and its baggage of hypo-descent.<sup>13</sup>

All of these scholars are lending greater clarity to the debate over tribal citizenship and cultural integrity that is reflected in tensions among those engaged in tri-racial studies. They also embody the cross-disciplinary value of works that rewrite our national narrative, especially as it undergirds current racial discourse. In particular, Tiya Miles, now a professor at Harvard, has become a frequent contributor to periodicals such as the *New York Times*. She now stands as a public interpreter, most recently reflecting on the 1619 Project commemorating the arrival of the first ship bringing slaves to this continent.<sup>14</sup> In these respects, their revisionist work has highlighted the benefits of reexamining history with a broader lens. Likewise, my work—covering seven generations of racial mixing—offers a corrective to the devaluation of minority points of view during the waning days of what, until the close of the Indian Wars, had comprised the western frontier. My work also links the past to the present, noting the dated terminology of empire and looking beyond our shores for alternative scenarios that might enliven our conversations about racial mixing. Nonetheless, we still ask: what is the value of personal recollection when peer reviewers consider a potential publication—especially from a first-time author with no academic affiliation, one who asks uncomfortable questions on topics traditionally avoided, and who may be susceptible to the same burnished tales so long taken as fact?

Here again, non-historians are sorting fact from fiction in our complicated national narrative. Innis and Pratt, both legal scholars, have recovered sources that can be joined to the present as minority factions within the Five Southeast Tribes struggle with the adequacy of the racial categories assigned during the Allotment Era that, at times, belie their racial and cultural realities.<sup>15</sup> How widely is it known that some of the Five Tribes had ejected Freedmen (descendants of slaves owned by tribal members at the close of the Civil War) from their citizenship rolls and how well do we understand the reasons for this particular type of racial profiling? Although U.S. District Judge Thomas Hogan decided the case for the

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<sup>8</sup> De Tocqueville, p. 412.

<sup>9</sup> Perdue, Theda, *Mixed Blood Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Forbes, Jack D., *Africans and Native Americans, The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Yarbrough, Fay A., *Race and the Cherokee Nation, Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Naylor, Celia E., *African Cherokees in Indian Territory, From Chattel to Citizens*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Claudio Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of the American Family*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind, The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Krauthammer, Barbara, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Miles, Tiya, "Chained Migration: How Slavery Made its Way West" and "Municipal Bonds: How Slavery Built Wall Street," *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times*, August 18, 2019, p. 22 and 24, and p. 40, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> See Innes, Lolita Buckner, "Cherokee Freedmen and the Color of Belonging," in *Columbia Journal of Race and Law*, Volume 5.2, 2015, pp. 101-118; and Carla D. Pratt, "Tribal Kulturkampf: The Role of Race Ideology in Constructing Native American Identity," in *Tribal Kulturkampe*, Volume 35:1241, pp. 1241-1260, 2005.

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Cherokee Nation in August 2018—ruling that the ousted Freedmen must be reinstated—other tribes are still struggling with questions of who counts as a citizen and whether “blood” is a viable criterion for inclusion.<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, historians and legal scholars’ efforts to unpack uses and abuses of race in our nation’s policies add social and political dimensions to the study of contemporary American Indians. Their relevance in understanding how intimately bound we are to our collective biography demands a broadening of our national narrative as well. Their diligence gave me the courage to critically interrogate the archival records, deconstructing accepted narratives and contrasting them with the oral accounts I’d hoped to confirm. That exercise made the value of my family’s century-long legacy clear.

Although revisionists may be paving the way for broader interpretations of our nation’s narrative, many academics, and perhaps even more historians in that number, are uncomfortable with memoir. Any account that contains it can expect a thorough vetting. My own manuscript underwent a rigorous and illuminating peer review. Happily, early indicators appear positive as the book has been recognized in the national press and garnered a sound review in a scholarly journal. It has drawn interest at talks and discussions at an array of professional conferences that cover disciplines such as History; American, African American and American Indian Studies; Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology, as well as Law. Throughout, the neglected study of the history of racial mixing in America forms the thread that connects these disciplines and engages even the general reader.<sup>17</sup>

While Interdisciplinary Studies platforms may serve to widen the road for works such as *Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage*, they may also expose such works to greater scrutiny if the projects explore uncomfortable, unsettling, and unpopular spaces. As History departments are cut back and competition for scarce tenured positions heats up, some worry that the discipline is falling prey to overspecialization.<sup>18</sup> In *Range, Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, David Epstein underscores this point in asserting that interdisciplinary scholars may be negatively viewed as generalists whose grasp of any single discipline is shallow and possibly even *unobjective!* However, Epstein argues that specialists, in their narrower fields of expertise often lack the imagination for more supple or even creative interpretations of experiential evidence.<sup>19</sup> Such rigidity echoes in the hallways of conferences as attendees question what might be gained if, for example, historians worked more closely with genealogists. More generally, these dynamics place the work of interdisciplinarians in tension with established scholars who may question the education, credentials, methodology, analysis or professional integrity of those working across disciplines and especially independent scholars plying their skills without an institutional affiliation. In this regard, some independent scholarship may even be regarded as an act of refusal to acknowledge rigor rather than a response to greater flexibility and breadth in a rapidly changing landscape.

To illuminate these tensions, we turn to how my own work developed. I started researching my family history as a means of qualifying for graduate school funding. Like my cousins, aunts and uncles, I anticipated that I could provide evidence of my Native American heritage to the appropriate authorities and receive financial support for a master’s degree. Using the information that I had for my father’s Cherokee forebears led to a dead end as they were listed as former slaves or Freedman of that tribe. Following legal precedent, anyone with a drop of Black blood was rendered “Negro” and no degree—real or imagined—of Indian blood was recorded by census officials. Thus, authorities were unable to provide me with a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood or CDIB required to access funds from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>20</sup> I was sure of my Indian heritage. However, it took many years and a series of fortunate events before I was able to establish my links by-blood to my mother’s tribe, the Muscogee Creek Nation. By then, my research into our family’s past had taken on a life and significance that far exceeded my modest objective of securing funding for advanced studies.

Among the first (in hindsight) of many fortunate events was a move to Washington, DC that gave me unlimited access to archival documents covering both sides of my family. In the nation’s capital, I pursued further opportunities for advanced studies, completing a doctorate in Education Policy that evaluated federal initiatives aimed at engaging our

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<sup>16</sup> Cherokee Nation v. Nash et al., U.S. District Case No. 13-CV-1313.

<sup>17</sup> Tucker, Neely, “A Lone Journey to Prove Her Identity,” Outlook, *The Washington Post*, Sunday, January 6, 2019, p. B6.

<sup>18</sup> Grossman, James, “Next Steps for Career Diversity,” *Perspective on History*, Volume 55:9, December 2017, pp. 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Epstein, David, *Range, Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2019, p. 278.

<sup>20</sup> Years later, I learned that Cherokee citizenship and even funds could be had without a CDIB.

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poorest performing students, Native Americans. Rather than the academic route, on completing my terminal degree, I was drawn to research and evaluation, enjoying a career mainly centered on assessing the impact of federally-funded programs on increasing access to quality educational opportunities for underperforming student populations. In the course of that work, I had the opportunity to appreciate the power of federal policies and also, through travel, to access the family's Allotment records housed in the western branch of the National Archives in Fort Worth.

As my collection of archival documents grew, I queried family elders about their memories growing up on land we'd held for over 100 years. They added to the many stories I'd heard as a child and fleshed out the evidence I was finding in my archival research. By the time I retired from my day job, the weight of their narrative had grown into a conviction that their voices should be resuscitated and the realization that no one else was in a better position to do so than I. That responsibility was heady. In my hands I had the stories of two families who lived in Indian Territory and were allotted land as a consequence of a dual set of federal policies. One was based on the status as former slaves of the Cherokee using the convention of hypo-descent that erased any blood relation to Indian parentage. The other was based on the blood quantum of the tribal member—with greater restrictions placed on the transfer of land for those with higher blood quanta—under the assumption that they were less assimilated, perhaps spoke less English, and were more likely to be exploited by unscrupulous and land-hungry Whites.

My relations, from both my paternal Cherokee Freedman and maternal Muscogee Creek forebears, had been B-players on the frontier. As relatively minor but still noteworthy members of their communities, they are mentioned with surprising frequency in National Archival files. Whether as laundress or lawyer, judge, council to the house of warriors, midwife, tribal attorney general, entrepreneur, hunter, rodeo rider, school founder or teacher, representative in our nation's capital, or simple farmer and rancher, my forebears lead full lives in their respective communities. And, I was in a position to tell their story. Through their experiences, I could explain just how the federal government identified them racially and how they have identified themselves over 150 years. I could also tell what happened to their Allotment land. In other words, through their stories we can trace the consequences of a federal policy designed to enhance assimilation for what, at the time, were largely mixed-race, and already assimilating peoples.

The many contradictions between my two sources of evidence, official archives and oral narratives, challenged me to reconcile, to deconstruct, their legacy. That meant corroborating evidence and contextualizing their experiences within the activities surrounding the parsing, allotting, and development of the land that formerly had been commonly held but now was to instill its individual owners with the values of yeoman farming or ranching lauded by the founding fathers.

As I studied traditional accounts of the Allotment Era, I discovered that one consequence of the federal policies impacting my family was erasure, especially erasure of the category of "mixed-bloods." For example, the 1890 census of members of the so-called "Five Civilized Tribes" shows only the categories of "White", "Negro" and "Indian." According to that document, the mixed-bloods were gone. Gone were the individuals who had formerly played roles as cultural bridges, translators, negotiators, intermediaries and guides among those pressing into uncharted lands.

Yet, my family remembers its deeply mixed-race past, and continues to embody that legacy to the present. Luckily, I had tools to connect their stories as well as their "erasure" not just with the archival record but with the state of racial discourse consuming our attention in today's headlines. In comparing and contrasting family accounts with archival materials, I experienced the confines of cold objectivity and the merits of well-founded, triangulated documentation. Thanks to the scholars I've mentioned above, I've learned to interrogate traditional histories and to listen for the unheard, to look for the unseen and to detect erasure. They've taught me to engage with uncomfortable issues and to enlarge the space for entertaining contradictory narratives until a more encompassing frame can be discerned. They have secured a space expansive enough to contain conventional *and* revisionist narratives tendered by specialists and generalists, whether within the parameters of academia or from further afield.

In the end, these scholars provided the context for arguing the legitimacy of my work, despite its personal nature. With my original primary sources, missing chapter of history, and lived perspective, I could engage the would-be critics who might question my relative lack of specialized credentials and expertise. With other scholars to lean on, I could envision sceptics as more inclined to give my interdisciplinary approach—part memoir, part history, and part social critique—a fighting chance. While I was convinced of its place in our collective narrative, and every publisher seemed to agree, I had to find one who saw strength in the personal and the academic balance, and, deemed the work worthy of print. I

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had to find an acquiring editor with a broad view. Drawing on an accumulating arsenal of scholarly "authenticity," I found the wherewithal to persist in my quest.

In an article that seeks to extend tools for excavating meaning from ordinary historical accounts, Eric Hobsbawm notes, "all historians...are engaged in...the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world of specialist investigation but to the public sphere of man as a political being." In his view, histories contribute not only to social engineering but in doing so must be interdisciplinary.<sup>21</sup> I'd like to suggest that we consider how taking a more encompassing point of view, one that makes room for contradictory narratives and multiple perspectives from groups with differing values, may lead to richer and perhaps more thoughtful—more productive—approaches to interpreting history.

This paper has argued against narrow conceptions of our collective biography and its consequences, against the diminishment or exclusion of whole swaths of people and events. It calls for the refusal of such erasure. It asserts that these silenced voices warrant space in the evolving revision of our national narrative. In this spirit, relinquishing our "idealized" past by decoding supposed symbols of progress may yet reveal a more authentic, a more genuine reality. The scholars mentioned above offer new models of scholarship to academia. In their fresh approaches, they are widening the road for scholars whose subjects spill beyond the confines of any one discipline. In the context of the new social history, a reviewer writing in this journal suggested, "Maybe it is time to revisit "the new" and see the outcome of that intellectual movement in how we "do" and how we understand history."<sup>22</sup>

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