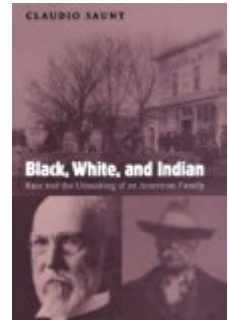


**Claudio Saunt.** *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xii + 300 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-531310-9.



**Reviewed by** Greg O'Brien

**Published on** H-AmIndian (September, 2006)

In the summer of 2006, I taught a graduate seminar on the specialized topic of "Southeastern Indians and Southern History," and Claudio Saunt's new book was one of the assigned readings. The goals of the course were to enable students to begin to identify the myriad ways that American Indians shaped and participated in southern history and to seek ways of exposing the Indian role within southern history. *Black, White, and Indian* fit the bill in expected and unforeseen ways. My class read several articles from throughout the twentieth century that tried to expose the "central theme of southern history." Indians were notably absent in all such efforts, but race, in some form or another, was nearly a constant, from the racist U. B. Phillips early in the century, insisting that southern history was best explained by focusing on southerners' attempts to preserve a "white man's country," to later explanations focusing on what makes the South unique from the rest of the United States, especially culturally. Southern Indians, Saunt's book makes clear (better than any other work presently available), participated in and were victimized by the entrenchment of racism and racial understandings of hu-

man abilities by southerners and Americans generally. That dichotomy between Indians as enablers of racism and Indians as victims of racism guides Saunt's book and exposes sometimes discomforting realities of life for southern Indians since the United States arrived in their world.

As the subtitle suggests, this is a story about a family, the Graysons, refracted through the lens of race against the backdrop of U.S.-Indian relations from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. As other recent works on the Creeks, such as Andrew Frank's *Creeks and Southerners: Biculturalism on the Early American Frontier* (2005), have made clear, racial intermarriage was a common phenomenon among the Creeks. Unlike those other works on the Creeks, Saunt shows just how important perceptions of race and racial ancestry became to not only American officials but also the Creeks themselves. The Creek Indian Graysons descended from Scottish trader Robert Grierson and his Creek wife Sinugee. Grierson lived in the Creek Nation, participated in the emerging market economy, and owned African American slaves. Two of his chil-

dren, William and Katy, had children with African American partners in the early nineteenth century. However, as Saunt portrays it, both William and Katy had to make momentous decisions about how they would relate to African Americans—relatives or not—in the future, and their different choices shape Grayson family relations to the present day. Katy left her African American mate and married a Creek man of high stature named Tulwa Tustanagee. She and her new family, like her father, owned slaves and pursued profit-making activities. William, on the other hand, had seven children by a Grayson slave named Judah. When Grierson died in 1823, he left slaves and other items to Katy and other children, but nothing to William, demonstrating, Saunt suggests, that his father did not look upon William's choice with favor whereas he did Katy's. William worked for a decade to gain ownership of his partner and their children from another sister named Elizabeth and then headed west in 1834 to Indian Territory, where he soon had them registered as free citizens in the Western Creek Nation. Katy, her family and the rest of the surviving Graysons and their slaves arrived in the west a couple of years later, but none of them lived close to William and his family. Although, as Saunt points out, it is easy to admire William's devotion to his family and support his decision, it was Katy's non-African offspring who would benefit most from the decision that she made as William's family found that they were constantly discriminated against, vulnerable to slave-catching raids, and desperately poor.

A major strength of Saunt's book is how it demonstrates that Creeks crafted most of the legal discrimination that William's children and other Creeks with African ancestry experienced in Alabama before Removal as well as in Indian Territory and Oklahoma after Removal. Trends towards scientific racism in the early-nineteenth-century United States became embedded and fortified in legislation passed by the Creek national government with some non-African Graysons playing a role in crafting laws that negatively im-

pacted the status of their part-African relatives. Such legal actions worked to strengthen Creek claims to sovereignty by bringing them into line with mainstream white American thinking, while also reserving privileged access to lands and other resources to an increasingly white-looking Creek elite. The Creek national government, to put it simply, was racist, just like its American counterparts at the national and state levels. Saunt makes light but effective use of post-colonial notions about how colonized peoples embody the views of the colonizers as a sort of coping mechanism, but by focusing on one family and exposing how relatives treated each other across generations, Saunt places responsibility for these discriminatory policies squarely on the shoulders of the Creek economic elite. Though we are left to wonder how so-called full-blood Creeks with no interracial ancestry viewed these developments, since Saunt does not discuss them in depth, it is clear that since at least the Red Stick Civil War before Removal to today the Creeks are a people divided deeply by race.

A key moment among Indians on the march towards defining peoples racially was when eastern Indians began in the late eighteenth century to speak about white, black, and red peoples being created separately by the Great Spirit. Saunt cites such talk in a speech given in 1823 or 1824 by the Seminole leader Neamathla, in which he stated that blacks were created to labor for whites and Indians, while whites were given the "weak" skills of writing and using compasses, and Indians were made as warriors. While obviously a masculine ideal, the story emphatically placed people of African descent at the bottom of the social scale at the moment that southern whites and Indians were busy making that a reality. (Though whites held onto the single creation story found in the book of Genesis in the Bible.) The meaning of such stories depends a great deal on the storyteller, however. In 1847, this same "Origin of the Human Race" story by Neamathla, or a "wise man" accompanying him, made the round of southern news-

papers such as the Charleston *Mercury* and the New Orleans *Weekly Delta*. In that version, the basic skills of the races remained the same, but whites were to rule and instruct the others. Ominously, the Seminole storyteller in the article warned that "while these relations exist, peace and harmony will prevail; disturb them and no other result can follow but *annihilation to the Black and Red race*" (emphasis in original).[1] White southerners in 1847 may have altered the original meaning of Neamathla's story to fit their notions of race, while seeking an American Indian justification for their racist views. Though not cited by Saunt, this later version of the Seminole separate creations story also supports the trajectory of Creek and white American understandings of the racial hierarchy that he exposes. Once in Indian Territory, after Removal, elite Creeks increasingly emphasized their European ancestry and tried to define Creeks with any amount of African blood as black and second-class.

One of those responsible for denying Creeks with African ancestry equal citizenship was Katy Grayson's grandson, George Washington Grayson, known as "Wash." Wash fought for the Confederacy, lost an economic fortune when Oklahoma statehood abolished communally held Creek lands, and became chief of the Creeks in the early twentieth century. It was Wash's autobiography that prompted Saunt to explore this topic of race among the Creeks in order to explain the numerous ellipses in the book when topics of African ancestry among the Creeks, especially among Wash's relatives, arose.[2] Wash was certainly a racist and hypocritical for denying the existence of his African-Creek relatives. Saunt suggests that the level of Wash's hypocrisy went beyond denying that he had relatives with African blood (a not uncommon southern phenomenon), to denying that Katy's other offspring had African ancestry as well. Controversy about the racial identity of the Grayson descendants starts with the first coupling between Grierson and Sinnugee, for Saunt claims that Sinnugee, being from the "Spanalgee or Span-

ish clan," was a captive or run-away from Spanish Pensacola and therefore likely part African (p. 11). Sinnugee's racial identity is probably impossible to ascertain beyond a doubt, and some of Wash's contemporary descendants vehemently deny the possibility of African ancestry (pp. 213-14). But in so aggressively denying the possibility of African pedigree, Wash's descendants sound very much like other Creeks who falsely deny their African heritage.

Saunt introduces each chapter with a journalistic profile of people he met in the course of researching this book. My students and I found these excursions a highlight of the book for the way they connected the historical facts in the text to present-day realities. The relationship between Creeks of African descent and other Creeks is frequently the topic of the asides. Two of them stand out for what they reveal about Creek history and contemporary issues. In one profile, Saunt meets Bob Littlejohn, an African American man purportedly descended from William Grayson, who shows the author the manuscript copy of naturalist S. W. Woodhouse's diary from 1849-50. One passage describes Lewis Perryman, a prominent Creek, considered to be the founder of Tulsa, Oklahoma, "who showed evidently that he had considerable negro blood in him" (p. 170). The version of Woodhouse's diary published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1992 has omitted that passage in an apparent attempt by someone to deny the African ancestry of a leading Creek man from the mid-nineteenth century, who also happens to be a leading figure in Oklahoma history. The second profile I found particularly illuminating was Saunt's interview with Buddy Cox. His uncle was a principal chief among the Creeks in the 1970s, who oversaw the disfranchisement of the descendants of Creek slaves in the new Creek constitution of 1979. Buddy, though supportive of his uncle's political stance, admitted that they had relatively recent African American ancestry themselves, despite previously and publicly denying it. He advised Saunt that when Creeks are preju-

diced against blacks it "is a good indication that they might be black" (p. 150). Taken as a whole then, *Black, White, and Indian* is enlightening, disturbing, and a welcome addition to American Indian and southern history. The research is deep and comprehensive. Some readers will take potshots at the book's uncompromising and exposé-like discussion of race and racism, but this is a story that needs to be told in order to see the realities and tragedies of American history and the Indian role within that history. As more books explore the long-misunderstood relations between southern Indians and peoples of African descent at the family level, such as Tiya Miles recent *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (2005), we will see more than ever before how Indian people made southern history and continue to deal with legacies of race and class that haunt all of American history to the present. University of Georgia professor Claudio Saunt has burst open a door that can never be shut again.

#### Notes

[1]. "Origin of the Human Races," *New Orleans Weekly Delta* (July 19, 1847).

[2]. W. David Baird, ed., *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy: The Autobiography of Chief G. W. Grayson* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

**Citation:** Greg O'Brien. Review of Saunt, Claudio. *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12228>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.