

My Confederate Kinfolk: A Twenty-First Century Freedwoman Discovers Her Roots

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Review

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Davis, Thulani *My Confederate Kinfolk: A Twenty-First Century Freedwoman Discovers Her Roots*. Basic Civitas Books, \$25.00 ISBN 465015557

Reconciling the Past

America's Multiracial Identity

The questions asked in **My Confederate Kinfolk** abound in African American society. Who are our people? What is our claim to the great narrative of the American past? Of the many nameless faces of slavery Thulani Davis states on page four, There are no statues of these African Americans anywhere cotton is grown. If the historical documents—the journals, court records and newspapers—did not see a slave as a person with a name and a history, how then do we write her into history as a centerpiece in our understanding of family, war, migration, suffering and opportunity? Davis faces these seemingly insurmountable tasks as she traces her lineage, her Confederate kinfolk.

Armed with nineteenth-century family photos and her grandmother's incomplete memoir, Thulani Davis begins a journey through the nineteenth-century South. The search for her relatives unveils an intriguing milieu representing the greatest of American paradoxes—freedom and slavery, rich and poor, man and woman, white and black. From the outset, Davis states that her story is not uncommon; it is also timely, as historians are uncovering similar stories of America's complex, multiracial past. Adele Logan Alexander traces her mixed-race, free ancestors in *Ambiguous Lives Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879* (The University of Arkansas Press, ISBN 1557282145, \$19.95 softcover). Edward Ball unearths his family's slaveholding past in *Slaves in the Family* (Ballantine Books, ISBN 0345431057, \$16.95 softcover). In *Celia, A Slave* (Harper Perennial, ISBN 0380719355, \$12.50 softcover), Melton McLaurin documents the short life of a nineteen year old enslaved Missouri woman who was hanged for the murder of her master—the father of her children. Similar stories in her family's oral histories encouraged

Davis to challenge the mythology of American identity with a more truthful story of black and white in the era of Reconstruction.

Beginning in Silver Creek, Mississippi ca. 1875, Davis introduces two families, both recent migrants to Yazoo County. Her black great grandmother, Chloe Tarrant Curry, and her white great grandfather, William Argyle Campbell, moved to the area with their families seeking a better life following the hardships of the tumultuous Civil War era. Through meticulous archival research, Davis examines government documents, plantation records, letters and novellas as she traces the wartime struggles of a slaveholding family desperately clinging to an institution in rapid decline by 1863, as well as a newly-freed family carving a way through the confusion between slavery and freedom. Both families, slaveholders and former slaves, seek economic opportunities and greater social and political position, somewhat surprisingly, in Mississippi. Davis's study is more than a genealogy. She carefully places her relatives in the whirlwind of Reconstruction, where in Yazoo County, black political participation was organized and on the rise. Black voters, white Republicans, economic competition and even a proposed anti-concubinage clause in the new constitution all stirred Mississippi's old guard in a power struggle that yielded bloody terror for those they deemed threats. White supremacists attacked, burned, raped, maimed and lynched. Along with its martyrs, including black politician James G. Patterson, Reconstruction, too, suffered a violent death.

It was in this mayhem that Davis's great grandparents, Chloe Curry and William Campbell, shaped their complicated union. Campbell summoned Curry to his home and offered her work. Their daughter, Georgia Campbell Neal, says that her mother accepted the job and began an intimate relationship with Campbell. The birth of Chloe's white child, Georgia, ultimately led to a divorce from her husband. Color prejudice and racism separated Georgia from her siblings who were deemed inferior. Still, Curry continued her relationship with Campbell until his death in 1902. He left her all of his land, which she kept after a bitter legal contestation waged by his sister, Sarah. On page 267, Davis captures the complexity of the outcome stating There is an irony in an illiterate former bondswoman assuming the debts of a planter and having to run his plantation to pay them. Curry's sacrifices and, dare say, dedication to Campbell placed her in position to support and educate all of her children as well as other relatives. Davis shares a photo of her great grandmother, Chloe, standing proudly at a flooded Grand Oaks Plantation during the late 1920s. A mother, an agriculturalist, a former slave and a survivor of her country's most brutal war, the

reader stares at this last image of Chloe and must ponder, how *did* she do it?

Davis's multiracial (black, white and Indian) past is common among African Americans. One drop laws, passing and secrecy poured such mixtures into black communities over the years. Still, Davis, like many in her community, had little knowledge of her white and Indian kinfolk. The irony of her journey into her family's past is that she offers much more information about her nineteenth-century white ancestors. Understandably, Davis finds that far less documentation exists of the black family she knows so well, and evidence of Indian relatives does not go much past family tales and conjecture. Aside from a remarkable discovery through DNA testing that a maternal ancestor was probably a Temne from West Africa, these gaps leave many questions unanswered. A journalist, novelist, playwright and screenwriter, Davis is better prepared than most to imagine and assume as she reconstructs her family's past around the missing information. That part of her methodology will not sit well with some. Likewise, Davis's research is peppered with personal commentary and anecdotes about her frustrations and victories. This will no doubt bother some traditional historians, as it questions whether or not Davis is too invested in how the story of Chloe Curry and Will Campbell is presented.

Whether finding parts of her grandmother's story irritating or questioning terrible old books that romanticized the Old South, no historical document, oral history or secondary source passes Davis's eye without serious critique. Keeping in mind the book's subtitle, **A Twenty-First Century Woman Discovers Her Roots**, helps us to understand why **My Confederate Kinfolk** is more than a notable contribution to the historiography of the era; it is an invaluable and rare look at the ways in which grappling with the nation's multiracial and complex past shapes and reshapes an American's identity. Moved by Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (Thunder's Mouth Press, ISBN 1560252472, \$16.95 softcover), Davis concludes on page 281, To some extent, we [African Americans] are not what we seem to ourselves as well. Finding our own strange stories is a kind of psychic toil.

Tiwanna M. Simpson is an assistant professor of history at Louisiana State University. She is currently completing her first book manuscript on African life and slavery in early Georgia.