

H-Net Reviews

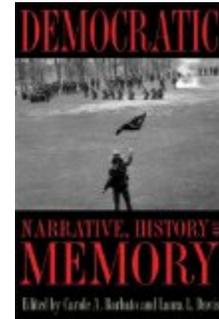
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carole A. Barbato, Laura L. Davis, eds. *Democratic Narrative, History, and Memory*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2012. xi + 257 pp. \$29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60635-119-2.

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Democratic Narrative, History, and Memory

No template exists for commemorating historical tragedy that erupts from the collision of values, rights, and violence. The events surrounding May 4, 1970, at Kent State University in Ohio that left four students dead and nine wounded remain contested even now, forty-two years later. This volume of essays—delivered at Kent State’s 10th annual Symposium on Democracy, founded in 2000 to commemorate the shootings by the Ohio National Guard—enacts a multidisciplinary exploration of the delicate process of documenting tragedy, negotiating conflicting perspectives and communal needs, and honoring victims. The book offers a wide range of perspectives on the varying roles of media in shaping memory and history, as well as essays comparing Kent State’s process of negotiation with other communities dealing with the aftermath of tragic events in that era (Little Rock, 1957 and Greensboro, 1979); the volume provides both a wide lens on the difficulty of constructing social memory in the context of public violence, and a detailed focus on May 4 as a case in point. Readers interested in news and documentary journalism, media and history, social remembering, memorial representation, and cultural/public memory will find this a moving and informative series of engagements with issues that strike at the core of human experience.

The book and the symposium it documents participate in the act of commemoration, as the editors make clear. Barbato and Davis, with Mark A. Seeman and Jerry M. Lewis, all current or emeritus faculty at Kent, co-wrote the successful nomination to place Kent State

on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. Additionally, Barbato and Davis led the design for the May 4 Visitors Center exhibit, for which they received a \$300,000 NEH grant in 2011, and co-created the May 4 Walking Tour.[1] Several of the essays—especially the concluding one by Lewis, a faculty eyewitness to the shootings in 1970, and the opening essay by Thomas M. Grace, one of the undergraduates wounded that day, now a PhD in history—examine the ongoing tension within the Kent community regarding the process of memorializing.

Reflecting the 2009 Symposium theme, “Remembering: Framing, Embracing, Revising History,” the ten essays are grouped into three primary sections (“From History to Humanity,” “Corporate Media Culture and Public Memory,” and “Memory, History, and Justice”) with section introductions that provide useful contexts and points of connection. An appendix offers an important narrative chronology, with much new information, of the events between May 1 and May 4 on the Kent campus. The notes following each chapter and the concluding bibliography are also extremely useful for those researching the civil rights/antiwar era broadly, the voluminous field of studies on history and memory, and the intersections of these with media history.

Grace offers a tangible example of those intersections, pointing out the conflicting role of local newspapers and legal entities in the public representations of the shootings. “After reporting the death of the students,” he writes, “the local paper, whose publisher was the pres-

ident of Kent State's board of trustees, issued a front-page editorial calling for 'the sternest repression,' while the Portage County grand jury that indicted antiwar students devoted paragraphs in its report to the vulgarities chanted by the protesters, but made no mention of the fatalities" (p. 9). The tensions among the stakeholders in what he calls "the long battle over the memory of the Kent State killings" (p. 8) have eroded the social cohesion of Kent State and its wider community, just as the long aftermath of the Vietnam War itself continues to fracture and polarize national debate over its legacies. Grace provides crucial first-person research on the legacy of events at Kent State and he opens the collection alert to the significance of historical interpretation on private memory. Christopher Powell, a Canadian historian whose work focuses on the transnational aspects of the U.S. and Canadian anti-Vietnam War movement, provides an important international perspective to the Kent State shootings in his essay. Documenting the spike in protests across Canada following the incursion of U.S. troops into Cambodia and the subsequent violence at Kent State, Powell connects Canadian protest to the international reaction, opening out the ramifications of collective remembering to include those far beyond North America.

The volume finds its theoretical center in the essay by Yale University historian Jay Winter, who served as the keynote speaker for the Symposium and whose extensive work on World War I and memory earned him an Emmy as co-producer and co-writer for the eight-part documentary series *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, which aired on PBS and the BBC. Winter has recently focused more on the silences inherent in memory.[2] Here, he notes that: "the vast array of writing on memory and forgetting has reached an impasse, one imbedded in the time of its creation. I believe that introducing the category of socially constructed silence into the literature provides a way out of the difficulties in the current literature, where memory and forgetting are constructed as polar opposites" (p. 53). Winter's essay deftly summarizes the impasses alluded to in the above quotation for those who are new to a field that has overdetermined the Holocaust, and offers tangible support for the work at Kent State to navigate the various local interests after nearly forty years of what Winter names "judicial silence" (p. 62). Even more urgently, his essay argues that those who are working in fields connected to public memory should work "not to transcend injustice, which is an impossibility, but to transform silence about injustice into something active, purposeful, dynamic" (p. 63).

Part 2 includes a stunning indictment of media cul-

ture by Edward P. Morgan, distinguished professor of political science at Lehigh University. Morgan's work creates a political and theoretical counterpoint to Winter's work on silence, by documenting media complicity with "commercial and ideological forces" that framed coverage of the activist protests of the era as "illegitimate, if not incomprehensible." (p. 92) This frame drove mainstream media, increasingly aware of its commercial viability, to equate coverage with spectacle. "Extreme postures, unusual appearances, symbolic actions, dramatic conflicts, and most compellingly, acts of violence" (p. 93) drove the protesters in various movement activities to adopt increasingly outrageous postures in order to gain coverage. The legacy of such media coverage—I write this in the aftermath of the media's one-year anniversary "coverage" of the Occupy movement—is neatly summarized by Morgan: the warping of political discourse into self-sustaining myths of the Other and the fracturing of initiatives challenging the status quo.

The companion essays in the second section actively demonstrate crucial implications of the power of representation and silence for democratic narrative and public memory. Media historian Devan Bissonette examines *Life* magazine's transformation from the Cold War to the "unraveling of the American Century," as his title puts it. Janet Leach and Mitch McKenney, both former editors of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, which won a Pulitzer for its coverage of May 4, trace the difficulties of producing anniversary coverage of tragic events such as those at Kent State when there is no consensus among newspaper readers regarding the event. Daniel L. Miller and Suzanne Clark, faculty in history and English, respectively, at the University of Oregon, offer a detailed analysis of the rhetorical impact of documentary films on the analysis of war in the section's final essay.

The final section constellates what happened at Kent State with two other traumatic events in U.S. history, one before May 4, one after—the violent desegregation of Little Rock High School in 1957, and the fatal shooting of four labor and civil rights activists by neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan in Greensboro, NC, in 1979. The essay by Cathy J. Collins, who played a key role in efforts to memorialize the "Little Rock Nine" (and was herself a graduate of Little Rock High fifteen years after Ernest Green's breaking of the color line there), offers disturbing testimony of how memorialization can ironically also create silence and reconfigure who is perceived as a victim. Renee Romano provides a companion essay on the KKK/Nazi Party shootings of Communist Workers Party members during a planned, nonviolent

protest against the KKK in Greensboro where four died and ten were injured. Romano argues that truth commissions may be more helpful than other methods in creating truthful and legitimated narratives of contested events. In 2005, Greensboro instituted the first international-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the United States in order to deal with the impasse on how to come to terms with the aftermath still haunting the community. The commission challenged misperceptions and media myths, while offering different interpretations regarding officials' involvement in the event. The commission's report also outlined the damage to the community's self-image that had continued to the present.

Sociologist Jerry Lewis, both as a faculty eyewitness to the May 4 events and a subsequent co-founder of Kent State's annual Candlelight March and Vigil, draws the varying threads together in the volume's concluding essay. Lewis documents the conflicts over the May 4 Memorial—which wasn't even initiated by the Kent State administration until 1985 because of the deep divisions regarding even the basic events (hence the significance of the narrative chronology which serves as the volume's appendix). Lewis's contribution provides, in a poignantly dispassionate tone, the historical record of Kent's difficult journey to appropriately mark the significance of

what happened in 1970; in the context of the volume as a whole, he reveals the decades-long turmoil that a community experiences in the face of public violence and the residue that never completely fades. He concludes with the wish that the May 4 Visitors Center might form the long-awaited "bridging of the social remembering and analytical history processes" (p. 191) in his community.

That Visitors Center will celebrate its open house on October 20, during Kent's homecoming weekend. This searching collection of essays and those delivered at future symposia form another kind of commemoration, one that puts into practice the only words inscribed on the nonrepresentational May 4 Memorial: "Inquire, Learn, Reflect."

Notes

[1]. See the Kent State Web site for more details on the May 4 Visitors Center and related memorial events: <http://www.kent.edu/may4>.

[2]. See Winter's recent co-edited volume on this issue: Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter, eds., *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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