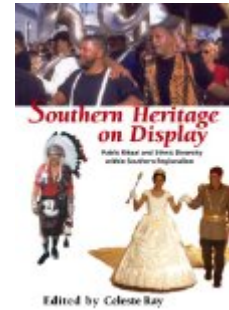


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Celeste Ray, ed. *Southern Heritage on Display: Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity within Southern Regionalism*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. viii + 301 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1227-5.

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Anthropologists and Lost Cause Mythology

This collection of ten “event-centered” essays is edited by Celeste Ray, who contributed one substantive essay of her own, as well as writing the book’s introduction. The collection’s focus is on analyzing public celebrations of culture within the context of “Southern regionalism,” which for Ray refers to “research strategies as well as indigenous sentiment and popular movements” (p. 6). Although the book’s contributors come from diverse scholarly backgrounds, many of the essays are ethnographic, and thus the book exhibits the disciplinary sensibility of anthropology. For example, a number of the book’s contributors refer to experiences of “communitas” (although several of the authors have an imperfect grasp of this theoretical concept).

In the book’s introduction, Ray conceptualizes ethnicity following Frederick Barth, arguing that “ethnicity lies in the boundary-making process itself rather than in bodies of cultural ideas and practices” (p. 7). While this is a venerable theoretical tradition, few of the authors address it, and those that do pay only lip service to it. Ray’s own substantive essay strenuously avoids dealing with the boundary-making implications of her research. The collection could have been strengthened had more of the authors actually focused in on this theoretical core.

Helen Regis’s chapter addresses “blackness and the politics of memory” in New Orleans jazz funerals (p. 38). It is a brief look at the commodification, for the benefit of tourists, of the jazz funeral tradition in New Orleans’s African-American community, and the community’s un-

ease with this development.

Kathryn VanSpanckeren’s chapter considers the songs of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition among New Orleans’s black community. Following George Lipsitz, VanSpanckeren argues that the Mardi Gras Indians “affirm a proud black nationalism yet simultaneously suggest ‘a pan-ethnic anti-racism that moves beyond essentialism’” (p. 59).

But the Mardi Gras Indian imposture could also be seen as the very embodiment of essentialism. One of the common couplets of the Mardi Gras Indian song cycle goes: “I don’t care what the white man say, I’m gonna have fun on the holiday.” The Mardi Gras Indian imposture symbolically expresses opposition to white oppression, by means of taking the role of Indians, who represent a wild, unconquerable ideal. Under slavery, and then Jim Crow, such opposition could not be expressed openly, and so blacks instead expressed resistance covertly through playing Indian. Black nationalism this is not.

VanSpanckeren declines to elucidate the boundary-making implications of this expression of ethnic identity. She does, however, offer an ethnographic view of the Mardi Gras Indian song cycle, in a study that is more descriptive than analytic.

Clyde Ellis’s chapter considers powwow culture among the Indian tribes in southeast North Carolina. The Indians of this region are Lumbees, their derivatives, and

similar groups. This chapter is flawed by Ellis's abdication of ethnohistorical research into his subjects. Instead, he accepts the origin myths of these tribes at face value. But these groups are not contemporary remnants of indigenous Native American groups, as they would like to believe. Rather, they descend from antebellum "free people of color" families. While they may plausibly have a modicum of genetic Indian ancestry, there is no credible evidence of any indigenous cultural survivals that would distinguish them from their neighbors. In other words, these Indian tribes are the product of a very recent ethnogenesis. This is key to understanding their contemporary culture.

Ellis repeatedly emphasizes his informants' powwowing as a display of their Indian identity to outsiders. What Ellis doesn't apprehend is that for these tribes, a public performance of Indian identity—using borrowed cultural signifiers of Indianness—is functioning to a significant extent as a public denial of their African and slave ancestry. Hence, any ethnographic study of these groups begs for the Barthian analysis promised in Celeste Ray's introduction, which Ellis declines to deliver.

Ellis describes well how all of the powwow traditions are very recent borrowings either from Plains Indians, or from white hobbyists. However, he also takes at face value some preposterous claims of cultural survivals. Ellis's credulousness with regards to his informants' origin myths mars his analysis, and raises questions about the validity of his work in this chapter. Nonetheless, his essay does offer some worthwhile information about the origins and workings of North Carolina powwow culture.

Melissa Schrift's chapter discusses the Melungeon heritage movement. Schrift begins by summarizing the various origins theories, accepting at face value that the contemporary movement represents the survival of an historical ethnicity. But previous researchers have already demonstrated that the word "Melungeon" did not denote an ethnic group, but instead was a racial pejorative current in the early nineteenth century.[1] Toward the end of the nineteenth century, journalists and amateur ethnologists mistakenly imagined the existence of a Melungeon people. Not until the late twentieth century is there any indication of anyone self-identifying as Melungeon. In 1994, Brent Kennedy published a book on Melungeon history that sparked the current Melungeon identity cult, a movement that exists mainly online. Schrift does not mention that scholarly reviewers have castigated Kennedy's book as brazenly fraudulent.[2] Schrift states that her focus is not on origins,

but on the celebration of heritage. But such celebrations are shaped by the interaction between origin myths and history. Ignoring the evolution of origins myths results in an incomplete understanding of how and why people choose to define and celebrate one specific heritage in the manner they do. Schrift describes well the movement as it exists today, focusing on the annual Melungeon convention she attended. For those unfamiliar with the movement, this is a good ethnographic introduction, but the chapter's opening section on origins is misleading.

Gwen Neville's chapter analyzes family reunions, employing the style of Victor Turner, who considered all rituals to have religious connotations. Neville imaginatively reads family reunions as "folk liturgies" that are influenced by Catholic Mass and other religious rituals: "These liturgies also involve repeated partaking of the sacred foods of the reunion—fried chicken, ham, potato salad—they are made holy by the shared communal experience, the *communitas* of eating together..." (p. 136).

Susan Keefe's chapter discusses religious healing in southern communities. Neither Keefe's nor Neville's chapter addresses phenomena that one could consider to be uniquely Southern.

Joan Flocks and Paul Monaghan's chapter is an ethnographic study of Mexican Independence Day festivals in central Florida.

The two penultimate chapters are the strongest in the collection. Laura Ehrisman writes about public celebrations of history in San Antonio. Steven Hoelscher discusses the same phenomenon in Natchez. Both authors offer insightful ethnography, set within the historical context. Unlike some of the other chapters in this collection, both authors scrutinize the role of class and race in shaping conflicts over historical memory, and how this process evolves over time. Both chapters are highly recommended to students of public history.

Celeste Ray's concluding chapter is an abstract of her excellent book, *Highland Heritage: Scottish Americans in the American South* (2001), which is primarily an ethnographic study of contemporary celebrations of Scottish American identity. It also offers an analysis of the historical development towards the contemporary scene, although there remains much more to be learned about nineteenth century Scottish American ethnic processes.

Ray's major contribution with this body of research is her pertinent observation that Scottish American and

other southern identity claims are patterned on “Lost Cause” mythology. White Southerners consciously link their historical memories of Scotch resistance to British colonialism with their historical memories of Southern resistance to Yankee domination. What goes unacknowledged by Ray is that “Lost Cause” rhetoric has always been intertwined with appeals to whiteness. But Ray denies that her subjects have any racial motivation whatsoever, insisting that: “The vast majority of Scottish Americans are not celebrating ‘whiteness’” (p. 266). When and how did the Lost Cause get de-linked from whiteness? This begs for an explanation.

Ray claims knowledge of only seven members of the neo-Confederate “League of the South” among her informants, two of whom deny that they have a racial agenda. Ray argues that these League members are not “representative of the hundreds of thousands of participants at Scottish heritage events in the American South” (p. 266). Ray gives no indication that she has actually surveyed a representative sample about their memberships in voluntary organizations. Ray also does not mention that the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens claims to be successfully recruiting new members at Scottish heritage festivals.

Ray goes on to note that African Americans have attended Scottish heritage celebrations. One has to wonder if Ray actually believes that those black celebrants are attracted to the movement by its Lost Cause mythology. Does the presence of a handful of blacks at a meeting really signify that whiteness is not being celebrated by the crowd of people sporting the Confederate flag and burning crosses? (pp. 271-273).[3]

Ray denies that such symbols of Scottish heritage have anything at all to do with race: “The multifarious, twentieth-century meanings of the flag fade in a selective focus on links between antebellum southerners and ancestral Scots. For them it symbolizes the “Old South” as the product of their idealized Scottish ancestors’ further idealized accomplishments and the double loss and reclaiming of Scottish and southern traditions” (p. 272). But what, specifically, are those lost traditions that the celebrants want to reclaim from the “Old South”? Do minorities have cause for concern?

Despite Ray’s denials, it is clear that over the past century-and-a-half, the Scottish heritage movement has always traveled on a parallel track with southern na-

tionism. Today, both movements still obsess over Old South and Lost Cause mythology, advocate pseudoscholarly Celtic essentialism, situate their ethnic claims in a religious context, and display symbols that they well know are offensive and frightening to minorities and anti-racists. Ray is studying a cultural nationalist movement, one whose ideology and rhetoric overlaps to a significant degree with the more explicitly political, separatist nationalism espoused by the neo-Confederate “League of the South” and similar organizations.

Ray has made a significant contribution with her research on this topic. But Ray’s excellent and insightful scholarship is marred by her strange refusal to fully acknowledge and confront the racial and political implications of Scottish heritage celebration in the South. One cannot help but observe that Ray’s blind spot conforms exactly to southern white nationalist political rhetoric. A central project of contemporary white nationalists in the South is to redefine themselves as a distinct ethnic minority. Whether intentionally or not, Ray’s work serves to legitimize that project.

Notes

[1]. Sandra K. Ivey, “Oral, Printed & Popular Culture Traditions Related to the Melungeons of Hancock County, TN” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1976); Melanie L. Sovine, “The Mysterious Melungeons: A Critique of the Mythical Image” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1982); David Henige, “Origin Traditions of American Racial Isolates: A Case of Something Borrowed,” *Appalachian Journal* Spring (1984): pp. 201-213.

[2]. N. Brent Kennedy and Robyn V. Kennedy, *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People: An Untold Story of Ethnic Cleansing in America* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1994). See also Virginia Easley DeMarce, “Review Essay: The Melungeons,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 84, No. 2 (1996): pp. 134-149; David Henige, “The Melungeons Become a Race,” *Appalachian Journal*, 25, No. 3 (1998): pp. 270-286; and David Henige, “Henige Answers Wilson,” *Appalachian Journal*, 25, No. 3 (1998): pp. 297-298.

[3]. Re: cross-burning, see Celeste Ray, “Scottish Heritage Southern Style,” *Southern Cultures*, 4, No. 2 (1998): pp. 28-45; and, Celeste Ray, *Highland Heritage: Scottish Americans in the American South* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

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