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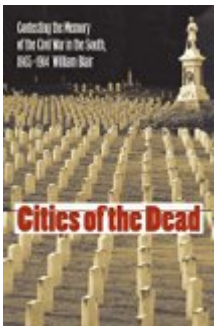

William Blair. *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xii + 250 pp. $ 34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2896-0.

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William Blair's *Cities of the Dead* is among several recently published works treating on the formation of historical memory in the post-Civil War South.[1] It goes without saying that southern memory has been overwhelmingly influenced by the experiences of slavery and civil war. What is less obvious is how the study of southern memory has itself progressed. There have been two main trajectories. The first has charted how white southerners established the myth of the Lost Cause in order to cope with defeat, re-establish white supremacy, and facilitate the reconciliation of the white North and South by the last decades of the nineteenth century. The second trajectory is of more recent vintage. Its focus has been on how black southerners, as well as other non-dominant and marginalized groups in the South, have preserved memories of slavery, the Civil War, and other episodes of the southern past at odds with or varying from the dominant white version. Only in the past five or so years have scholars begun to consider the two trajectories together, in order to highlight how these memories collide, complement, and contest one another.

Blair's study contributes to this most recent trend in several ways. Drawing from the work of Eric Hobsbawm and others, Blair considers how white and black southerners in postwar Virginia claimed public space through their various commemorative acts. The claiming of public space expresses, as readers of these authors know, political tensions and claims to political power. For Blair, the focus on public space leads him to his central thesis: commemorative events such as the Memorial Day rituals performed in Confederate "cities of the dead," and by southern African Americans in their freedom celebrations, were both shaped by and helped to shape near-term political outcomes in the postwar South. His close reading of how commemorative acts reflect and help shape ongoing political contests also leads him to question the threefold model of Civil War memory offered by David Blight in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001). Whereas Blight's sweeping account sought to illuminate the sources and ideological applications of the emancipationist, reconciliationist, and white supremacist memories of the war, Blair's political focus reveals how different commemorative prac-

tices often conflicted with one another, at times negotiated space with each other, and on a few occasions even overlapped. Most important, rather than consider public memory in the context of ideology formation, Blair considers commemoration as an essential, public part of politics.

Organized into an introduction and seven chapters, ***Cities of the Dead*** proceeds chronologically to consider the evolution of black and white commemorative practices in Virginia from the end of the war to the onset of World War I. Primary sources include era newspapers, periodicals, correspondence, government and local records. The opening chapters begin familiarly enough, by describing the origins of black freedom celebrations and white southern decoration days in the immediate postwar period. Blair's focus on public space and politics, however, results in a different take on matters, as he considers these commemorative actions less for their ideological significance than as public rituals invested with political content. In the case of the black freedom celebrations, they were, as might be expected, contested early on by white southerners and protected for a period of time by federal authorities. For a period of time they were also racially mixed, and white Republican participation often turned the proceedings into ***de facto*** political rallies. Given that African Americans were almost entirely denied access to public space during slavery, these celebrations were significant at a personal and political level. Black Virginians used the occasion to demonstrate their support for the Union and advocate for political rights.

In the case of white southern memorial observances, the decoration of graves and other mourning rituals provided a non-confrontational means for expressing political resistance to northern occupation. Significantly, it was white southern women who functioned as the principal commemorative agents, as federal authorities prevented southern white men from engaging in public rituals immediately following the war. White women therefore leveraged their traditional roles as caretakers for the dead to political use, a fact that did not go unnoticed by federal officers. Blair's attention to the gendered aspect of public commemoration rituals extends to considering the role of African American women in freedom celebrations and other public occasions. In this case, the presence of black women in public spaces was viewed by whites as a formidable challenge. In contrast to their white counterparts, however, black women occupied public space more openly, both to enhance notions of African American manhood (considered an indispensable element in claiming citizenship) and to demonstrate their keen interest in political matters.

With the decline of Radical Reconstruction, emancipation celebrations lost their bi-racial aspect and endured overt hostility from whites. For its part, white southern commemoration moved from surreptitious political messaging to open celebration of the Lost Cause. Here again, Blair's narrative agrees in its main outline with existing scholarship on commemoration in the Gilded Age. However, his attention to memory's use in politics reveals instances when southern whites supported (or at least tolerated) black commemorative events for political purposes. Independent political parties in the South, including the bi-racial Readjuster coalition in Virginia, provided the political space within which black public commemoration continued to maneuver. As Republicans waffled in supporting African American civil rights, black leadership sought out alternate alliances: the Readjuster movement was the most promising instance of bi-racial cooperation aimed at challenging elitist white politics. Faced with a potential revolution from below, white Democratic and Conservative supporters initiated a commemorative counterattack, intended to drive a wedge between lower class whites and blacks. From memorializing the exploits of Confederate leaders, white apologists moved to celebrating the heroism (and sacrifice) of the common soldier. On

the African American side, the period also witnessed a growing ambivalence towards the memory of slavery, frustration with the Republican Party, and greater assertion that the freedmen had proven their worthiness as citizens and thus should be accorded full rights without delay. Blair concludes optimistically by suggesting the 1880s offered a chance at commemorative harmony, however fleeting. His case in point is Grover Cleveland's first inaugural procession which included a regiment of Confederate veterans garbed in gray followed by a regiment of African American veterans in Union blue.

The final period, from the 1890s through 1914, witnessed the growing segregation of southern commemorative practices, and the apparent de-politicization of black commemoration in favor of approaches emphasizing economic self-help. Drawing from Kevin Gaines's study of black political leadership (***Uplifting the Race*** [1996]), Blair points out that instead of a single approach, black freedom celebrations actually ran the gamut from accommodationism to a militant wing advocating electoral independence. In the atmosphere of increasing Jim Crow, lynching, and federal abandonment, black leaders continued to use public commemorations as a vehicle for asserting their political presence and rights. Gradually, however, they adopted Booker T. Washington's vision of racial uplift through economic self-help. On the white side, the 1890s and early 1900s witnessed the triumph of a reconciliationist and white-supremacist memory of the war whose tangible markers included federal funds to care for Confederate graves and the acknowledgment, on national commemorative occasions, of Confederate heroism and loyalty.

As noted earlier, it is the focus on political particulars rather than ideological content that distinguishes *Cities of the Dead*. Furthermore, while other recent works have analyzed the politics of memory (see, for instance, Paul Shackel's essay on the faithful slave monument at Harper's Ferry in the work cited below), this is not the same as analyzing memory in politics. The former concerns how politics influences the construction of a particular monument or commemorative event. It is static in the sense that it views the event or monument as the end product of various political forces and tensions. Memory in politics, on the other hand, views the commemorative event as an active force, capable of influencing present and future political outcomes. The commemorative event constitutes a bonafide political action in the public sphere.

Commemoration as politics and the politics of commemoration are not always easy to separate, and there are places where Blair could have more clearly distinguished between the two effects. But over the course of his study he provides enough detailed accounting of how commemorations performed political work to demonstrate his main argument. However, in the process, ***Cities of the Dead*** also resurrects the problem of relating symbolic action to tangible social and political outcomes. We know the linkages exist--as do political strategists and marketers--but can we establish with any certainty the political effect of a given symbolic (commemorative) act? In fairness to Blair, he did not set out to answer this question, and it is a measure of the work's success that it prompts the asking. However, the recent work on memory is itself enmeshed in some very compelling present-day contexts. Many of these studies, including Blair's, seek to demonstrate the contingent nature of memory formation. In so doing they join a broader stream in current historical practice aimed at countering mainstream America's continued fascination with the Lost Cause with narratives stressing the Civil War and Reconstruction as struggles for racial justice. Recovering the memory of the Civil War as a war to end slavery is a crucial academic task. The arguments for memory's contingent nature and political utility are essential underpinnings for this effort. The more clearly we understand how commemorative activities have functioned in the past to influence

political outcomes, the more effective we can be in the present. William Blair deserves credit for a fine effort in this direction.

Note

[1]. Other recent works include Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2003); and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005); and Kathleen Ann Clark's *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).