
Reviewed by Anastasia Pratt (SUNY Empire)

Published on H-Material-Culture (December, 2023)

Commissioned by Jennifer M. Black (Misericordia University)

In American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory, Matthew Dennis offers a fascinating and compelling look at the manner in which objects in US history and culture have become sanctified as the vestiges of a shared civil past. Those objects, which Dennis importantly refers to as relics, “sit at the center of public memory in the United States” (p. xvii), their messages shifting “depending on their nature, the stage they occupy, [and] the audience they engage” (p. xv). With its focus on the creation and understanding of relics in the United States, Dennis’s monograph makes a significant and timely contribution to the fields of material and visual culture, public history, historic preservation, museum studies, and American studies.

Divided into three parts, American Relics traces the history of objects as relics from the founding of the nation to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. That trajectory allows the reader to follow the ways in which our use and understanding of objects has changed according to the era and the political need of the actors involved. For example, in part 1, “Foundations,” Dennis first turns his attention to “founding objects,” which helped to establish a sense of nationalism. The fledgling nation, while celebrating its newness, needed a past that would tie its members together. They turned to antiquities, with the wealthiest stocking public museums and private art collections with the “books, pamphlets, and manuscripts and publications ... [and] objects associated with them” (p. 12). These objects, which originated with the ancestors claimed by colonial Americans (European thinkers and artists), offered a shared history. Over time, the objects we considered to be “American antiquities” would also change, moving from those of Europeans to objects and images created by Indigenous Americans and, eventually, by the political and material founders of the United States, which are covered in the subsequent two chapters of the book.

Part 2, “Supremacy,” tackles the issues of racism that have riddled the United States from its foundation. By looking at the relics of American pioneers and westward explorers, Dennis first
confronts the treatment of Indigenous peoples in the United States. Whether historic maps, restorations of the trails used by westward travelers, or the gravesites of those who died along the way, the relics considered in chapter 4 “support a purposeful amnesia about the actual, difficult, sordid pioneer past—the product of colonialism, conquest and exploitation of Native people, and expropriation of their lands. At the same time, such memorializing could enable a more general and useful prospective forgetfulness. Having fulfilled the obligations of eulogizing pioneers, westerners could embrace a kind of closure—that is, respectable sequestering of history—and give themselves permission to focus guiltlessly on the future” (p. 97).

Bloody shirts as political tropes (chapter 5) and “atrocious” relics round out part 2 and force readers to confront the bloody and violent uses of relics within American history. That “sanguinary object,” whether it be the bloody shirt, coat, shroud, handkerchief, or flag, has often been preserved and used “to provoke memory—particular, purposeful remembrance—and to inspire action. Blood relics could arrest attention, shape identity, link the public directly with dead heroes and martyrs, and inspire passion for the causes with which they might be linked” (p. 119). Similarly, the “severed heads and scalps, mutilated corpses, dismembered parts of lynched bodies, or associated fragments of rope, chain, and charred wood collected from such sites” (pp. 166-167) considered in chapter 6 were used with a definite purpose, this time “to terrify, daunt, and dominate opponents” (p. 167). Strikingly, Dennis pushes us to understand that Americans continue to use both types of relic—sanguinary and trophy. Rather than a scene from the past, these sorts of relics continue to push us toward pride in a cause, an identity, or a community and to warn our enemies, perceived or real, of the potential cost of their opposition.

The final section of American Relics focuses on heroes and victims, considering the ways in which relics have endured. Dennis points out that, “following the massive, industrial, genocidal killing of the Second World War ... a new sort of victimhood emerged and offered unique status, which shaped postwar identity and became a source of political legitimacy and strength for various survivors—of genocide, human rights violations, large-scale conflict, racism, violent crimes, [and] terrorism. And the relics of such mayhem became material mementos and currency to establish public wrongs and to press collective claims” (p. 221).

The quest to remember and glorify those victimized by acts of violence, whatever the scale, has a much longer history, but rather than simply offering a chance to grieve, these relics “put the public memory of discrimination and violence, embodied in relics, to renovative use ... they push visitors to rethink the past and to take action to transform the future” (p. 251). Thus, the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, becomes a means of claiming the status of “hero” for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., rather than supporting the idea that he was merely the “victim” of murder. In the same way, 9/11 memorials throughout the country tell a story of heroic and brave Americans rather than one that denies the victims any kind of agency within the terrorist attacks of 2001.

Meticulously researched, Matthew Dennis’s work is eminently readable and useful for scholars and students alike. He builds on histories that are familiar to students of American history, but disrupts the narrative at important points, offering us a material sense of how those who came before us considered the same events. And, he never fails to remind us—through the objects we venerate in our civic spheres—that ours is not an idyllic and saintly past. Through showing both the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, Dennis gives us a more balanced vision of US material history than is often available, and pushes us to always consider the context in which an object was
made and politically sanctified. Relics connect us “in the present both to the past and to the future” (p. 298), which is the best reason for considering those objects and building upon the foundation that Matthew Dennis has set in this work.

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


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59698

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