

Tara McPherson. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. xii + 318 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-3040-0.



Reviewed by Jennifer L. Gross (Department of History, Jacksonville State University.)

Published on H-South (September, 2004)

Dixie: A Southern Lady Reconstructed

Reconstructing Dixie is a densely written, thought-provoking examination of how the South imagines itself and how that image figures into the larger national identity. Utilizing popular cultural representations of the South, both those produced by the media and those produced by individuals or organizations, McPherson examines how they "serve to reinforce or reconstruct familiar notions of southern identity" (p. 33). Her sources of popular culture, which begin in the era of *Gone With The Wind* and continue through the present, range from literature and tourism ads to television and film, to art and internet sites. The cultural representations she covers include some of the most popular icons of southern identity from the "Old South," the "Civil War South" and the "Sunbelt South." As McPherson puts it, "Southern identity comes from somewhere—it has a history and is located in geography—yet it is also in flux, under construction, subject to change, moving between sameness and difference" (p. 8).

The southern lady in particular draws McPherson's attention because though she is fictional, as

many scholars have pointed out, she continues to resonate as a potent symbol of the South. Playing off the idea that Dixie is both a woman's name and a reference to the South as a whole, McPherson uses southern femininity as a lens through which she traces discourses on race, region, and gender. By refusing to see southern femininity as something that is static or fixed, McPherson effectively examines "the cultural work that femininity performs within particular regional terrains," emphasizing the interrelation of race and gender in southern history despite the absence of connection between the two in popular culture (p. 23).

In conjunction with her examination of the changing nature and historical uses of southern femininity, McPherson also attempts to decenter the binary conception that race equals black. Instead, she examines how whiteness and blackness are constructed and how they are interdependent. In her introduction, McPherson adeptly uses the example of a 3-D postcard that when viewed from one direction presents a picture of a hoop-skirted belle in front of an antebellum mansion, not un-

like Tara in *Gone With the Wind*. When viewed from another direction, a new image emerges—it is the stereotypical, grinning, black mammy. Though the viewer can see both of these images, the lenticular structure of these cards makes it nearly impossible to see them both at the same time. This "lenticular logic," as McPherson calls it, is present today in many popular representations of the South, and though we as scholars can certainly surmise the interdependencies of the belle and the mammy in southern history, McPherson astutely points out that these connections are rarely present in popular conceptions of either. Black and White are both represented, but the connections and interrelations between them are obscured or hidden from view. The problem with the lenticular, McPherson argues, is that it sanctions the idea that "the past is partitioned from the present, black from white, old racism from new," which creates problems for both the South and the nation as a whole in coming to terms with its racial and gender realities. Criticizing the idea that there ever was or ever could be a separate white or black South, McPherson challenges her readers to explore racial and gender issues in the South as interconnected identities.

The author's focus on "lenticular logic" in representations of the South and southern identity enables her to accomplish four distinct yet related goals in her examination of Dixie. First, she uses the popular and resilient images of the South in mass culture, including most notably the southern lady, the southern home, the southern gentleman and the Civil War, to illustrate what is a nostalgic romanticization and, quite literally, a white-washing of the region's past. Her examination of the presentations of each of these icons reveals how "lenticular logic" prevents southern culture from becoming truly inclusionary and representative of the South's past in its entirety. For example, the continual representation of the Civil War as a war of "brother against brother" erases from popular understanding recognition of the role that slavery played in southern society and as a provocation

for the war. History Channel documentaries on the Civil War and presentations by national park workers at battlefield sites may indeed include information about slavery and enslaved people's experiences, but they are generally treated separately from the war, allowing the Civil War to become a romantic event in which all soldiers were gallant and noble and true to their various causes. What those causes were is not as clearly explored.

Second, McPherson explores expressions of southern identity, specifically the emergence of guilt as "a central aspect of twentieth-century southern feeling." Through an examination of various sources including southerners' writings, fictional and autobiographical, as well as neo-Confederate websites, she points out the various responses to such guilt—in the first case "endless confession" and "self-indulgent fixation," and in the second case "self-righteous anger, which denies the source of guilt, blaming the other" (p. 6). Here too McPherson exposes the "lenticular logic" that leads to claims of southern distinction that ignore the heterogeneity and diversity of the people of the South. Such claims are most obvious in southern heritage groups that constantly decry the erasure of southern heritage whenever someone challenges the celebration of Confederate Memorial Day or the presence of the Confederate battle flag atop a state capital building. That such heritage is predominantly white goes unstated by such groups.

Third, McPherson highlights several modern revisionist approaches like Octavia Butler's *Kinred* or Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* that offer solutions to the "lenticular logic" of much of southern imagery. By exposing the shortcomings of lenticular logic and at the same time presenting examples of alternative representations, McPherson hopes to "introduce new models for understanding how race came to be figured in dominant southern narratives as the last century unfolded," and to reconfigure southern identity so that it is no longer one in which whiteness and blackness float

free from one another "denying the long historical imbrications of racial markers and racial meaning in the South" (p. 7).

And fourth, through an examination of southern studies and the role that the South has played over time in the construction of a national identity, McPherson reveals how the "lenticular logic" that has dominated the South's remembering of its past has also infused our national identity.

At all four goals, McPherson artfully succeeds. *Reconstructing Dixie* is persuasively argued and should find an audience among historians of the South as well as historians of the modern United States.

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

Citation: Jennifer L. Gross. Review of McPherson, Tara. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9815>



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