

Book Reviews

Our National Amnesia About Race: A Review Essay of David Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*.

In *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, David Blight is not concerned with “developing [a] professional historiography of Civil War” but rather with documenting the ways that “contending memories [of the war] clashed or intermingled in public memory.”¹ Blight and others working in the interdisciplinary field of “historical memory” have broadened the scope of historical writing in their insistence that uncovering “what really happened” in the past is but one piece of the historical puzzle. Another important piece is the recovery of how historical agents conceptualized and remembered their pasts and in turn how these memories impact the present. What were their motivations in constructing their memories in particular way? What did they choose to remember; what did they willfully or unconsciously decide to forget? It quickly becomes clear in *Race and Reunion* that these individual and collective memories of the past—in this case specifically of the Civil War—may or may not have much bearing on what really happened. However, historically inaccurate memories still are revealing, often because of their inaccuracies rather than in spite of them. For as Paul Thompson claims, “one part of history, what people imagined happened, and also what they believe might have happened—their imagination of an alterna-

tive past, and so alternative present—may be as crucial as what did happen.”²

Race and Reunion is a testament to the importance of understanding the imagined alongside with the actual past. Blight makes it clear from the onset that memory has an important political dimension. Almost immediately after the war ended, participants on both ends of the struggle began searching for a way to remember the war best serving their political needs. “Historical memory [of the war] was,” according to Blight, “a weapon with which to engage in the struggle over political policy” (282). These early Civil War memories manifested themselves in various ways. Blight identifies three primary categories of Civil War memory: the “reconciliationist vision,” the “white supremacist vision,” and the “emancipation vision” (2).

The book begins and ends with a detailed description of the Blue-Gray reunion held in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg in 1913. A total of 53,407 veterans attended the event, arriving in Pennsylvania from all over the country. President Wilson, the first Southerner elected President since the Civil War, made a short speech, which summarized the reconciliationist tone of the celebration, “We have found one another again as brothers and comrades in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten” (11). *Race and Reunion* describes in great detail how a memory of the Civil War was constructed, making this unique event and Wilson’s remarks possible.

A peculiar intermingling of motivations and ideologies fed this reconciliationist vision including war weariness, the economic interests of those involved in North-South partnerships, an elaborate Southern “Lost Cause” mythology, and a growing apathy about the fate of the freedman. Furthermore, new memories about the causes of the war were constructed, whitewashing the role of slavery as the root cause of the Civil War. Northerners remembered a Civil War fought to preserve the Union. Southerners remembered a war against Northern aggression and in defense of states’ rights. Both sides remembered the heroism and loyalty of their troops. In this realm of the cult of the valiant soldier, northerners and southerners found a basis for mutual admiration. Stripped of its sig-

nificance as a war over slavery, the Civil War could be remembered as a war between patriots on both sides. All of a sudden the origins of the conflict seemed less important than the idea that both sides fought a good but tragic fight. The nation had been tested and was now stronger as a result.

Blight concludes that by 1913 the reconciliationist version of the Civil War had been triumphant in America's collective memory. However, such a brief summary of his conclusion does an injustice to the multi-faceted memories he describes. Memory is dynamic. It changes. According to Pierre Nora, "It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialect of remembering and forgetting....vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation." ³ A close reading of *Race and Reunion* reveals how memories can and do change in response to circumstances in the present. For example, many early, northern memories of the war were founded on the beliefs in southern war guilt and that slavery was the root cause of the war. However, these memories began to fade as a response to the Gilded Age of "teeming cities, industrialization, and political skullduggery, [when] Americans needed another world to live in [and] yearned for a more pleasing past in which to find slavery, the war, and reconstruction" (222).

Furthermore, this study reveals that collective memory is neither accidental nor absolute. In his essay, "For Something Beyond the Battlefield': Frederick Douglass and the Memory of the Civil War," Blight argues convincingly that "historical memory is also a matter of choice, a question of will. As a culture, we choose which footsteps from the past will best help us walk in the present." ⁴ White, reconciliationist historical memories of the Civil War were deliberately stripped of all references to emancipation and slavery. This was no historical accident but a deliberate choice. As a result commitment to emancipation and all its political implications were forgotten. The fate of the freedman was offered as a sacrifice in the name of reunion.

Because memory involves choice, an important theme in *Race and Reunion* involves the existence of those who chose to reject the reconciliationist version of the war. Blight acknowledges that "countless private memories began to collide, inexorably, with the politics of collective memory" (19). For memory, which can be collective, is also private and individual.

Albion Tourgee, a Union soldier, carpetbagger, novelist, and North Carolina federal judge, remained outspokenly devoted to an emancipationist conception of the war throughout his life. Union veteran and gifted writer Ambrose Bierce's war memories were so consumed with agony over the dead and dying that he was unable to couch his memories in any greater ideological understanding. He was unable to embrace reconciliation's implied promises of a better future, and according to Blight "[his] ultimate tragedy was that in the America where he grew old, in a society tortured by racism, he found no higher meaning in Civil War cemeteries nor on his old battlefields than the precious deaths he recollected" (251). Finally, the strongest opposition to the reconciliationist historical memory of the war came not from a handful of individuals but from the class of people most affected by the war's outcome, African Americans.

Frederick Douglass and later W.E.B. Du Bois were champions of an emancipationist version of Civil War memory. These spokesmen did not need to remind the newly freed men and women of the central role slavery played in the Civil War. Theirs was a battle against the historical forgetting of the reconciliationists who believed in forgiving and forgetting and who spoke of the war in remote terms of soldierly heroism and shirked the issues of outcomes and root causes. Frederick Douglass ceaselessly articulated memories of the Civil War and reconstruction, which put emancipation and the promise of African-American political incorporation at the center of his analysis. At a Memorial Day observance in 1871 he asked, "if this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?"⁵

In creating this complex portrait of collective memory, David Blight identifies a number of mediums where historical memory is simultaneously being reflected and created: political speeches, diaries, advertisements, poems, published memoirs, short stories, Memorial Day celebrations, and monument building campaigns. Some of the richest passages in the book consist of Blight's analysis of literature inspired by the Civil War. He is sensitive to Genevieve Fabre's and Robert O'Meally's observation that "the writing-narrating-of history has not been the exclusive concern of historians; it has also been

the province of artists and writers as well as other thoughtful and sometimes brilliant people.”⁶ Soldiers who published their reminiscences did so often to make a buck in the economic hard time after the war but in so doing they made their voices part of historical record and transformed themselves into historical narrators. Thomas Nelson Page wrote sentimental stories, which romanticized the Old South—complete with benevolent masters and ever-loyal slaves. When read in context of the battle over historical memory, however, his writings are anything but lighthearted tales. They function as political tracts, which helped pave the way for reunion. Page was a narrator of fictional histories, which were readily employed in the in the creation of an imaginary past that made reconciliation possible. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois narrates African-American history from a number of rhetorical positions. He alternately wears the hat of historian, fiction writer, autobiographer, and folklorist. In the second essay in *Souls*, he provides one of the briefest and most eloquent summaries of the aftermath of the Civil War: “Three characteristic things one might have seen in Sherman’s raid through Georgia, which threw the situation in shadowy relief: the conqueror, the conquered, and the Negro” (48). Thus in one sentence, Du Bois narrates an entire history wiped out by the false memories of reconciliation, which no longer acknowledged winners or losers in the struggle and robbed the former slaves of their right to historical significance.

In analyzing various literary responses to the war, Blight makes a number of aesthetic evaluations in passing. Describing Ulysses Grant’s *Prose in Personal Memoirs*, he says “[Grant] wrote without flair and almost stoic detachment. His diction is unmarred by pompous excesses...” (212). In his wry criticism of fiction about the Civil War and slavery that appeared in periodicals in the 1880’s and 1890’s, Blight observes that “an American genre was reborn and Civil War memory fell into a drugged state, as though sent to an idyllic foreign land from which it has never fully found the way home” (217). Blight identifies Albion Turgee’s clear-headed writing as an antidote to the sentimental excess of other Civil War literature, and he credits Ambrose Bierce with writing “one of the most artful and honest characterizations in Civil War literature”

(246). Blight's highest praise, however, is reserved for Du Bois, and he describes *Souls* as a "masterpiece" (251).

In making these observations, Blight is subtly analyzing these texts not only on the basis of what they say, but also on how they say it. It is also clear in Blight's own writing in *Race and Reunion*, that he is mindful of aesthetics. For example, the last sentence in the book, "All memory is prelude," is both cryptic and beautiful and is perhaps designed to increase the likelihood that a reader will incorporate Blight's study of Civil War memory in his or her own memory. For as Blight himself has observed, "A mixture of the scholarly and literary dimensions of history...may occur in historians' work more than we are likely to admit."⁷ In the instance of *Race and Reunion*, the intermingling of history with literary style is to the book's credit.

Although he doesn't explicitly talk about aesthetics in *Race and Reunion*, he does so in his essay "Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory." He traces a shift in Du Bois' work from "social science to art." Blight situates himself among "many scholars [who] have stressed the importance of aesthetic appeal in the art of memory," and claims that,

The emotional power of a historical image or of an individual or collective memory is what renders it lasting.... The more profound the poetic imagery or the metaphoric association, the more lasting a memory might be in any culture.

With these criteria in mind, Blight labels *Souls* as a memory palace...of unforgettable images, conveyed with such aesthetic power that readers and writers might return to it, generation after generation, for historical understanding and inspiration.⁸

After reading Blight's persuasive essay on the importance of aesthetics in Du Bois' work, one wonders what role aesthetics played in creating or solidifying the historical memory of the Civil War. Was some Civil War literature more influential than others because of its aesthetic appeal? Was the aesthetic power of the lost cause mythology itself more compelling than any contemporary literature? Among the writers mentioned or quoted in *Race and Reunion*, the works of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Du Bois have been most enduring.

Did these writings endure in part because of their aesthetic appeal? What impact do these works have on our current historical memory of the Civil War? Is their net impact larger now because the other, more sentimental war writings which were published at the same time have grown increasingly less prominent?

In his review of *Race and Religion* in the *New York Times*, Eric Foner somewhat offhandedly remarks, "One regrets that Blight did not try to bring [the book] up to the present." This book practically begs for a sequel. Blight makes a few tantalizing remarks about the historical memory of the Civil War in the twenty-first century. For example, he claims,

To this day, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, much of Civil War nostalgia is still rooted in the fateful memory choices made in the better two decades of the nineteenth century" (313).

The battle for the historical memory of the Civil War is still raging and is manifested in film, on television, in recent controversies over the continued use of the confederate flag, and in the bizarre dispute between Alice Randall, an African-American woman and author of a *Gone With the Wind* parody entitled *The Wind Done Gone*, and the heirs of Margaret Mitchell over Randall's right to publish her alternative version of Mitchell's famous saga.

Reading *Race and Reunion* has inspired me to reflect on my own historical memory of the Civil War and to think back to a time long before I was a doctoral student of Afro-American studies and well versed in the historiography on the subject. As a little girl growing up in Arkansas, my elementary school class made yearly pilgrimages to Pea Ridge Military Park. I remember somberly examining charts depicting troop movements, admiring period uniforms and other costumes, eating my sack lunch while sitting under a long defunct cannon, and listening to the park ranger speak about the tragedy of "brother killing brother." Slavery was never mentioned. I read a string of young adult historical novels which were invariably resolved with a charming North-South wedding that put a tidy end to these "sectional" troubles. Indeed in my U.S. history class, I learned the "sectionalism," that peculiar and innocent enough sounding word, was the cause of the Civil War. My

comprehension of the Civil War was vague and impressionistic, filled with romantic emotions and images and bereft of any true understanding of the conflict. My first exposure to a counter-memory of the war came in the form of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, which I read when I was about twelve. Wright tells the story of his aged grandfather, a Union war veteran, who was denied a federal pension for his service during the war. That was the first time I realized that African-Americans too fought in the Civil War. Finally. A partial revelation.

Blight's careful tracing of the development of the historical memory of the Civil War from the actual event up until 1913 is as compelling as it is troubling. As he so convincingly demonstrates, our all too convenient national amnesia about the issue of race is fraught with tremendous moral and political consequences.

Notes

¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-2.

² Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 139.

³ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Representations* (Issue 26): 8.

⁴ *The Journal of American History* 75(March 1989): 1169.

⁵ Quoted in Blight, 1160.

⁶ "Introduction", *History and Memory in African American Culture*, Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

⁷ David Blight, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory," *History and Memory in African- American Culture*, 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53, 55.

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