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Reviewed by David Cullen (Department of History Collin County Community College)

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The Third Reconstruction: Memories of the Civil Rights Movement

What happens when the struggle over the memory of a historical event becomes more important than the event itself? This is the question addressed in the thirteen essays of this edited volume. The editors approach the historical memory of the civil rights movement as expressed in popular culture through an analysis of the following categories: institutional memory (public acceptance), visualizing memory (film and television), diverging memory (contested versions), and deploying memory (public policy).

Three essays in particular deserve attention. The first, "Narratives of Redemption: The Birmingham Church Bombing Trials and the Construction of Civil Rights Memory" by Renne C. Romano (associate professor of history and African American studies at Wesleyan University), examines the three trials held by the state of Alabama in response to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four children on Sunday morning September 15, 1963. Although both state and federal officials quickly identified four men as the likely murderers, the first trial to prosecute the accused did not occur until fourteen years later. Eventually, the state held three trials and found three of the four defendants guilty (the fourth man died before he could be brought to trial). Between the murders and the final trial in 2002, Romano argues that a new narrative about the civil rights era had been constructed with blacks portrayed as victims, whites as heroes, and the murderers as isolated social misfits who did not reflect the communities in which they lived. According to this narrative, southern racism was institutional, not individual; unique, not common; and past, not present.

Jennifer Fuller (assistant professor of radio, television, film at the University of Texas at Austin) supports Romano's conclusions in her essay, "Debating the Past through the Present: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s." The 1990s produced more films and television programs devoted to the modern civil

rights era than the three previous decades combined. The trial of O. J. Simpson for the murder of his wife and that of the Los Angeles Police Department for the beating of Rodney King acted as catalysts for a public debate over race, racism, and an assessment of the civil rights movement. Fuller examines this discourse through an analysis of movies and television shows that appeared during the decade. The majority of these productions had a similar approach; they examined the divisive issue of southern racism through the eyes of "common" people who found themselves in a world that they supposedly did not create. Women were the main characters of this narrative in such programs as *Any Day Now* (1998-2002) and *Iâll Fly Away* (1991-93) and in films like *Heart of Dixie* (1989) and *Long Walk Home* (1990). None of these efforts, however, do justice to the importance of women within the movement (surely the heroic struggles of Fannie Lou Hamer and Diane Nash are worthy of screen time). Three productions focused upon the murder of three Freedom Summer Civil Rights workers in 1964. NBC's *Murder in Mississippi* (1990), Rob Reiner's *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) and Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (1988) all failed to present a story that includes all participants. The point of view of the three films is that of the white world, not the black community, and *Mississippi Burning* ignores history altogether by suggesting that the F.B.I were the heroes when in fact they had more in common with the White Citizens Council than the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Fuller does provide some praise for the TNT network for its commitment to tell the civil rights story from the point of view of the black community in such productions as *Freedom Song* (2000).

What all these productions have in common, however, is a redefinition of progress from that of the original goal of the movement–social equality between two racial groups–to that of racial harmony between individuals of different races. The distinction between these two goals is that the former requires a public commitment (money, policy, and the recognition of class as part of the problem) while the latter needs an individual commitment (meetings, personal character, and the recognition that the community is responsible for the problem). The latter goal excludes government action.

A redefinition of a different sort is examined by David John Marley (assistant professor of history at Vanguard University) in his article, "Riding the Back of the Bus: The Christian Right's Adoption of Civil Rights Movement Rhetoric." As the past two presidential elections remind us, the cultural wars are alive and well in the United States. The religious Right has become an important base of support for the Republican Party and its political mantra is the claim that, like black citizens living under segregation, its members are victims of prejudice, religious citizens living under secular segregation. Ralph Reed initiated this approach while head of the Christian Coalition. He argued that evangelical Christians should present themselves as an oppressed minority whose rights have been denied them by the liberals who dominate the courts and higher education. And, he added, the coalition should emulate the civil rights movement by using the church as a political forum, the media as a vehicle to strike back at their opponents, and a community-based organizing effort to build a political insurgency that would dominate the Republican Party at the state level.

That the evangelical community is not a minority and is not oppressed, nor is it prevented from participating in the political process (not to mention that it has not suffered violence for being religious), is irrelevant to both the leaders of the coalition and to the leadership of the Republican Party. But Ralph Reed has not been the only individual to attempt to disguise his political ambitions with the cloak of the civil rights movement. The editors include a short piece by author and National Public Radio commentator Sarah Vowell that provides a humorous critique of those who claim to be the modern-day Rosa Parks, heroic figures demonstrating courage for their beliefs (Ted Nugent for rifles and deer-hunting as an example!).

Taken together, the thirteen essays that examine the historical memory of the civil rights movement as expressed through popular culture remind readers of the oft-quoted comment of Daniel Moynihan, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts." Everyone may be entitled to their own memory of a historical event, but the event as historical fact should always remain the focus of the public's memory and its evidence for shaping public policy.

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