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REVIEW ESSAY

Gettysburg 1963 and Contesting Commemoration

Jill Ogline Titus, *Gettysburg 1963: Civil Rights, Cold War Politics, and Historical Memory in America's Most Famous Small Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021, $27.95). Pp. 264. ISBN 978 1 4696 6534 4.

Jack D. Noe, *Contesting Commemoration: The 1876 Centennial, Independence Day, and the Reconstruction-Era South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021, $45.00). Pp. 244. ISBN 978 0 8071 7558 3.

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Commemoration often sees chronology become an agent in itself. Monuments are erected, pageants are organized, and people celebrate, simply because a certain amount of time has passed. This ritualistic behaviour and collective investment in timekeeping offer cultural security and imply future action according to the count of past years. In Titus's *Gettysburg 1963* and Noe's *Contesting Commemoration*, such temporal operations are central, yet neither makes a case for the mindless observation of anniversaries or rote recital of ideals. Instead, these two engaging books offer important case studies of the way nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans made conscious use of the past for political purposes in the present.

For Titus, Gettysburg in 1963 takes centre stage in the country's centennial celebrations of the Civil War. The book offers an in-depth exploration into the ways the contemporary contexts of the Cold War and the civil rights movement profoundly shaped the commemorative events that took place in "America's most famous small town." From carefully crafted speeches, new buildings and monuments, to living-history "vignettes," Titus assembles a range of different media to provide a compelling account of what the Civil War battle and battlefield meant to Americans in the mid-twentieth century. In the process, she identifies three critical narratives that emerged over the course of the celebrations. The first advanced a states' rights, "Lost Cause" interpretation of the war and was used in defence of

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segregation; the second emphasized the unfinished work of emancipation and the continuing fight for racial justice; and the third, Cold War-inspired narrative cast the event in terms of patriotism, unity, and American exceptionalism.

It is not hard to see how these narratives conflict with as well as complement each other, and one of the key strengths of Titus's account is her attentiveness to their intersections and championing of their multiplicity. Chapter 1, for instance, begins with the disturbing image of a Ku Klux Klan gathering on the battlefield and ends with the historical significance of the same site being used as justification for increasing Black leadership in the Civil Conservation Corps New Deal programme. While most readers will be in little doubt of Gettysburg's symbolic potential and propensity for appropriation, examples such as these offer a refreshing take on how the town has been mobilized to different ends – to grant patriotic legitimacy in the case of the KKK and to forward racial-justice goals in the case of the CCC.

Importantly, for Titus, however, Gettysburg should not just be viewed "as an image in the national imagination," but "simultaneously [as] an idea, a landscape, and a living community" (178). Pursuing this multifaceted account of place allows a fascinating history of the town to emerge, one that grounds its symbolic and rhetorical uses in relation to the day-to-day experiences and concerns of its residents. Thus, considering the implications of proximity, Titus provides an important record of segregation in the town and vicinity as well as efforts to dismantle it. The book's early chapters address this history in the decades leading up to 1963, as well as Gettysburg's well-known reliance on the domestic tourist industry and its placation of white southerners. Chapters 2 and 3 provide ample evidence of Titus's claim that Cold War imperatives influenced the centennial's organization and reception, while chapters 4 to 6 examine the commemorative events that took place for the battle's anniversary in July and the anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in November. Collectively, they reflect Titus's commitment to understanding Gettysburg in all its dimensions and, in particular, the intersecting histories of Civil War memory and Black civil rights.

Indeed, if, as David Blight has written, these two phenomena operated "like planets in separate orbits around different suns" during the 1960s, then Titus's homing in on Gettysburg literalizes the simile to prove otherwise.[1] Chapter 3, for instance, explores the modernist architecture and Space Age aesthetics of Richard Neutra's Cyclorama Building, designed, according to Titus, as a "shrine for the free world and a tool for enhancing national security and supporting the goal of world peace" (53). Ambitious in spirit as well as form, Neutra's building reoriented the nineteenth-century battlefield from the past to the future and, as Titus writes, "embodied a message about the advantages of Western capitalism and the superiority of political principles as expressed in the Gettysburg Address" (55). Titus interrogates this Cold War conception of freedom further on other occasions, noting the ways in which the Civil War's role in emancipation was universalized and generalized, allowing "freedom" to become an American export, even though campaigns for liberation were still being fought at home.

[1]David W. Blight, *The American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

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In this respect, *Gettysburg 1963* makes a valuable contribution to existing scholarly trends and public-history initiatives that are seeking to spotlight the entwined legacies of the Civil War and the ongoing struggle for racial justice.[2] In an era when the Civil War and its monuments have become pivotal in contemporary campaigns for racial equality, this focus takes on new significance. Indeed, one of Titus's most compelling points is that the centennial years saw the battlefield shift from a Union memorial park to a Confederate space, "ushering in a new wave of Confederate monumentation at Gettysburg that would continue for the next fifteen years" (2). It was also during this time that the battlefield's main narrative was redefined, not as a site of Union victory, but in terms of Confederate achievement, coming to represent the "High-Water Mark of the Confederacy."[3]

Responsibility for this interpretive shift is diffused somewhat in Titus's account. On one occasion, the Cold War context is suggested as an explanation: "fostering the association of anticommunism with states' rights and traditional race relations, [and] resulting in a kind of open celebration of the Confederate cause on the Gettysburg battlefield not seen in previous decades" (5), while on another, the management of the National Park Service in 1933 is identified as a culpable body in facilitating the change (17). Nevertheless, the observation retains a powerful resonance, especially for readers following the current debates over Confederate commemoration in the US. Thanks to the research and high-profile report *Whose Heritage?*, issued by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2017, the increase in Confederate statuary in public spaces during the civil rights era is now being more widely understood as a form of symbolic retaliation and racist intimidation.[4] If, akin to cemeteries or museums, heavily historicized grounds like Gettysburg might be proposed as exceptions or solutions to this reading, *Gettysburg 1963* reminds us that such sites and the monuments that occupy them are no less politicized.

The concrete forms of such monuments, as well as their traditional associations with permanence and historical closure, however, beg questions over the centennial's lasting impact. This is the subject of Titus's final chapter, which suggests, despite the new Confederate interventions on the physical landscape, that emancipationist interpretations of the war also made important gains (150). Titus's detailed research and documentation of these instances underscore the importance of the book in providing a record of more ephemeral types of commemoration, yet the multi-vocal account of the celebrations she offers also serves as a subtle means of assessment. Contrary to the official drive towards consensus, which aligns with the Cold War vision and the formal committees of the centennial, the competing

[2]For example, ibid.; Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011). For public history see National Park Service, "Civil War to Civil Rights Commemoration—Summary Report," 2015, at www.nps.gov/civilwar/upload/CIVIL-WAR-TO-CIVIL-RIGHTS-SUMMARY-REPORT-1-v2.pdf.

[3]In this sense Titus expands upon existing works such as Jennifer Murray, *On the Great Battlefield: The Making, Management and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014); and Robert E. Weir, "The Graying of Gettysburg National Military Park," in Lawrence A. Kreiser Jr. and Randal Allred, eds., *The Civil War in Popular Culture: Memory and Meaning* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 61–82.

[4]Southern Poverty Law Center, *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy*, 2017, at www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/com_whose_heritage.pdf.

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interpretations and narratives highlighted throughout *Gettysburg 1963* demonstrate the limited extent of this vision in practice.

For Jack Noe, too, consensus is far from what emerged at the centennial celebrations of American independence, although his is less a methodological point than a thematic one. *Contesting Commemoration* looks to the ways nineteenth-century Americans approached the country's hundredth anniversary in the immediate wake of the Civil War and uses its commemoration to probe existential questions of national identity. "Held just eleven years after the end of the Civil War and commemorating one hundred years of national existence," the centennial, the book begins, "presented an opportunity like no other for whites, Blacks, northerners, and southerners to reflect on and engage with ideas about their identity as Americans" (1). As research warrants go, Noe's is a compelling one and offers a novel metric for analysing the war's impact on the South's sense of itself. What, he asks, happens to Confederate nationalism when that nation is no more?

On first take, this might read as an opening to a book on the rise of Lost Cause mythology and its commemorative expression, but Noe's focus on the Civil War generation's relationship to American independence offers an alternative basis from which to rethink the war's legacies and its bearing on commemorative practice. Following a rough chronology, *Contesting Commemoration* provides an overview of 4 July observances in the antebellum period and tracks how attitudes towards the tradition evolved in the South according to sectional animosity and the politics of Reconstruction up until the centennial event in Philadelphia in 1876. As with *Gettysburg 1963*, this narrow time frame allows for a comprehensive survey and examination of sources, most notably, in Noe's case, southern newspapers. In this sense, he achieves his stated aim of demonstrating "the ubiquity of this national anniversary in mid-1870s southern culture" (4).

Noe's real focus, however, is on the way the discourse surrounding the centennial served as "a rhetorical proxy for the political and social divisions" of the Reconstruction era (4). Across the book's six chapters, these conflicts are evidenced in the rationale and reluctance of the southern states to participate in the centennial, which, Noe argues, aligned with race and contemporary political strategies. Indeed, Noe identifies a correspondence between southern pragmatists such as New Departure Democrats, who viewed the commemoration largely as an economic opportunity, and Bourbon Democrats who rejected the celebrations' symbolic dimensions. Noe is also attentive to the perspective of African Americans in this respect, who, compared with the ambivalent attitude of white southerners, he argues, "saw the commemoration as an opportunity to express their essential Americanism" (89).

Noe demonstrates how Black Americans used the centennial and 4 July celebrations to make political statements about citizenship and national belonging, arguing that while "the exhibition in Philadelphia serves as a catalyst for white southern reflection about sectional distinctiveness … African American experiences at the Centennial, in contrast, centred largely around frustrated hopes of using the exhibition as a platform to lay claim to full American citizenship" (120). This is discussed most richly in chapter 5, which details the thwarted efforts of Black Americans to exhibit a bust of Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the AME Church, at the centennial.

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However, if the centennial served as a platform for Black Americans to assert their right to national citizenship and as a gathering point for white southerners to reinforce their regional identity – an identity that, according to Noe, was largely based on sectionalism and the short-lived existence of the Confederate States" (120) – readers might wonder how African Americans conceptualized the South and identified with its regional distinctiveness. Throughout, Noe demonstrates an awareness of how race shaped engagement with the centennial by describing the reactions of "white southerners." However, without a sustained discussion of how African Americans embraced or rejected a southern identity, this focus on race is limited. A more prescient question may be: how did engagement with commemorative events like the centennial contribute to the racialization of the "South" as white?

In his conclusion, Noe draws a connection between the 1876 centennial and the Civil War centennial of the 1960s, noting that both reflected the concerns and divisions of their time as well as the Civil War's irresolution. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that it was the large painting of Gettysburg exhibited in Philadelphia in 1876 that irked white southern visitors the most. Many, according to Noe, saw the depiction of southern defeat as a direct insult and further reason to have nothing to do with the centennial. The transformation of that landscape in the twentieth century, as Titus's book reveals, demonstrates how contexts of commemoration can both shape the spaces of remembrance and reflect the politics of the present. At various degrees of historical proximity, then, both *Gettysburg 1963* and *Contesting Commemoration* address the Civil War's continued relevance and serve as valuable case studies of the polemics of commemoration and centennial histories. Each in its own way incites readers to ponder what difference one hundred years make and to whom.

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