

NATION AND REUNIFICATION

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Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary. *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. xiii + 365 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95.

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks in writing the history of nationalism is to tie its obvious cultural manifestations to a sense of agency and materiality among those who are, or hope to be, citizens. While we have known that patriotism motivates great sacrifices on the part of citizens in time of war, we know a great deal less about why. Cecilia O'Leary's *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* begins to answer that question. She reminds us that the United States re-invented itself as a modern nation-state after the Civil War by mobilizing a romanticized militarism, but that the emergence of a patriotic culture was characterized by widespread demands on the state to memorialize the sacrifices of that conflict. Drawing primarily on Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined community, and on Eric Hobsbawm's work on nationalism and invented tradition, O'Leary has done the hard work of pinning theories that seem sensible and self-evident to the material and structural creation of a nationalist imagination.¹ While the state benefitted from nationalist impulses and abetted them at certain points, until World War I the invention of patriotic discourse was uneven, contested, and often propelled simultaneously by groups who had differing objectives and divergent pasts: freed and free born African-Americans, native born and immigrant whites, women and men, adults and children. From the Civil War to World War I, "there was considerable disagreement and conflict over which events and icons would be inscribed into national memory, which traditions would be invented to establish continuity with a 'suitable historical past,' which heroes would be exemplified in national narratives, and whether ethnic, regional and other identities could coexist with loyalty to the nation" (p. 3).

Nationalism made political disagreements and conflicts visible in the post-bellum United States, and was understood as the path to resolving them; this is but one of the "paradoxes" highlighted by O'Leary in this engaging narrative. The emergence and impact of organizations dedicated to the memorialization of the Civil War, primarily the Grand Army of the Republic

(GAR) and its sister organization, the Women's Relief Corps (WRC), sparked struggles over inclusion and meaning that reverberated in the political realm, as they refracted struggles over electoral participation and the rights of citizenship in the nation at large. If most women and African-Americans had been barred from military service, "to what extent would militarism and claims of safeguarding the security of the nation-state take priority over democratic demands for social equality?" And "would patriotism thwart or present opportunities for expanding the circle of citizenship" (p. 8)?

O'Leary traces the resolution of these problems through familiar political events—Reconstruction, the War of 1898, and World War I—as the demands of nationalist whites were increasingly met, and the hope for full African-American citizenship was increasingly circumscribed. By analyzing political events in their cultural context, O'Leary reminds us that without statist commitments to sentiment and romantic memory, nationalism would have limited impact on historical outcomes. But romantic militarism was a powerful engine in its own right. As other historians have shown, middle-class culture in the nineteenth-century United States elevated the expression of sentiment to a high art; after the Civil War, patriotism emerged as a public expression of the citizen's ability to feel deep and genuine emotions. The war thus elevated the cultivation of sacred memory to a preoccupation, particularly with the dead, but also with the cultural symbols that might remind a community—national or local—that the sacrifice of loved ones had transcendent meaning.²

In this context, the emergence of a single flag for national representation, originally popularized during the 1848 Mexican-American war, became a crucial sign which, by the Civil War, linked the idea of a political state to that of a national people among Unionists and, less successfully, Confederates.³ From the surrender of Fort Sumter onward, soldiers and civilians on each side began to fetishize flags as symbolic of the nation for which they imagined themselves fighting. Flags on both sides were sung to, rescued, and kept aloft by relays of men, often private soldiers, who were then themselves killed or wounded. Those who captured enemy flags were awarded medals, an exchange between state and citizen that was at once symbolic and, since flags were fiercely defended, a material reward for outstanding courage. Flags gave men common cause in a wartime world of pain and fear, and they bound men on the battlefield to those at home, often women, who stitched the flags carried into battle and flew similar ones in their own communities. For Union soldiers in particular, "The Stars and Stripes became a symbol of their own and their comrades' endurance" (p. 26). That this flag would then be a link to a past of earned citizenship claimed differently by black and white, male and female, leads O'Leary into her study of the contested post-bellum period.

Postwar veterans' organizations became the foundation for the new patriotism. Initially organized in the communities to which soldiers returned, they were characterized by the desire to preserve the comradeship and democratic sentiments of the battlefield experience. These units were often segregated, reflecting the racial order of the army as much as postwar equivocation by whites over social equality. Founded as one of many veterans' organizations in 1866, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) quickly prospered; as it eclipsed and subsumed other military fraternities, men met across class and racial lines in annual celebrations and parades, particularly on July 4, and the emerging "Memorial Day." Through militaristic display, veterans reaffirmed their ties to each other; spectators were also reminded of their debt to those who had fought and died to preserve the Union.

During the 1870s GAR membership declined dramatically, and was revived as a far more commercial and politically powerful organization in the 1880s. O'Leary ascribes languishing memberships to the end of Reconstruction, the economic crisis, and westward migration; her explanation for the GAR's revival is lodged in the nationalizing impulses of print and consumer capital. While this is a speculative argument, it is a good guess. If a revived economy restored the capacity of veterans to pay dues, new technologies expanded the capacity to manufacture and sell Civil War memories on a national scale. As Richard Ohmann has shown, new publishing and advertising imperatives accompanying the rise of consumer capitalism created the grounds for a new, national middle-class consciousness.⁴ By the 1880s, the GAR probably benefitted from this general proliferation of nationalizing symbols; it also became a location for entrepreneurial activity, where patriotic artifacts could be generated and recirculated for a profit. The annual tent encampments which came to sustain the GAR also became an opportunity to sell train tickets, camping space, and memorabilia; for the participants, they became a structured way to renew old friendships and engage in a form of fraternal organizing that grew increasingly popular among different ethnic groups in the decades after the war.⁵

While black veterans continued to be a significant presence in the GAR, and the organization served as an important political base for African-Americans, the 1880s and 1890s also saw white veterans shaping the organization's activities toward rituals of reunification with Confederate veterans. The commitment to reunification was fortified by academic revisions of the conflict, typified by the work of William Archibald Dunning at Columbia University, which rewrote the Civil War as a constitutional conflict rather than a struggle over African-American freedom. Both dynamics facilitated the political disenfranchisement of African-American men, and as the

war itself faded into memory, GAR parades produced a visual representation of the evolving body politic: white veterans with black veterans marching behind, women, children and African-American spectators watched from the sidewalks. This was aggravated, as O'Leary points out, by the founding of white GAR posts in the South as those veterans relocated to communities where segregation had replaced slavery as the primary technology of racialization. And yet, it is worth emphasis that migrants who had previously belonged to integrated posts assented to these new norms and were often willing to oppose the national organization to enforce them.

Women, black and white, were automatically excluded from GAR membership and other veterans' organizations. This reflected wartime controversies about appropriate forms of female service to the nation; it also problematized the status of female and African-American participation in the war, which was often improvised and unrecorded. In 1883, tacit agreement that female service on the home front and in the hospital could be memorialized appropriately was reached when GAR veterans approached a Massachusetts female patriotic organization and asked them to form an umbrella organization to memorialize women's service. The result was the first national organization of patriotic women, the Women's Relief Corps (WRC). "But," as O'Leary points out, "without the unifying experience of war, the women faced fundamental contradictions over the meaning of allegiance in time of peace" (p. 77). Whereas organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), founded seven years later, restricted membership to those who could prove descent from a participant in the war (and therefore recruited heavily among upper-class "old" families), the WRC proposed that the nature of the Civil War, the demands that the conflict made on all women, and the future burden of patriotic service, demanded a more expansive membership. In 1884, Florence Barker, the first national president, proposed that all women who had maintained loyalty to the Union merited inclusion, a criteria which automatically defined the organization as race and class integrated. Indeed, African-American women joined in large numbers, particularly in the former Confederacy, where they played a substantial role in decorating Union graves, white and black, that were beyond the reach of Northern families.

The comparison O'Leary draws between the WRC and the DAR is instructive, as it demonstrates another of the paradoxes inherent to the progress of patriotism in these years: the memorialization of the struggle for American "freedom" was most successful when potential dissenters were excluded and the history of the nation was tailored to the desires of a limited membership. While the WRC was occupied by struggles over segregation that mirrored those of the nation, the DAR, class and race segregated from its

inception, suffered little internal conflict as it forged “a common national heritage through a combination of historical restoration and amnesia” p. 83). Significantly, the DAR was a vehicle for national reunification; in the southern states, its membership overlapped heavily with that of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The task of racial unification faced by the WRC was also more complicated because the history of the Civil War was a living one and not immediately subject to reinvention. By the 1890s, however, the nationalist projects the WRC was committed to—memorialization, patriotic education, and the elevation of the flag as a national symbol—were projected into an increasingly segregated public sphere where future “citizens” were understood as white, and in need of instruction by large numbers of white women. The exclusion of African-American women became a logical organizational imperative, so that the broadest possible range of white women might be put to work on patriotic tasks for future (white) citizens. Since one of the more visible activities of such organizations was to memorialize the dead, memory of African-American Civil War veterans was also suppressed among whites. That white women in the southern corps of the WRC initially sought segregated units for “colored” women, that they demanded that such units be “detached” from the state-level organizations and overseen by the national WRC is a predictable story. It is, however, noteworthy, because it demonstrates specifically how white supremacy came to dominate the agenda of such organizations: black women were simply outvoted in a “democratic” process.

In documenting the struggle of African-American corps to retain full membership in the WRC, O’Leary demonstrates the political importance of symbolic worlds. African-American wives, sisters, and daughters of Union veterans fought hard to remain visible despite increasingly powerful grassroots organizing on the part of white patriots which obscured important moments in black history such as Emancipation Day, popularly known among freed people as Juneteenth. The segregation of black women may have been in part an effort to marginalize black men from WRC events, since female patriotic organizations did cultural work which facilitated male sentimental identification with the nation. For example, at Memorial Day events, “men [were given] permission to grieve,” but at GAR events “public displays of sentimentality were scorned” p. 105). Thus, by pushing African-Americans to the margins of Memorial Day celebrations, white women created cultural space for white men to display effeminate behavior without risking potentially invidious comparisons to African-American masculine performances.⁶

In the final chapters O’Leary connects these patriotic organizations to the “new” nationalism of the Progressive years, and in particular, the question of

why twentieth-century Americans, white and black, native and foreign-born, have seen imperialism and global power as opportunities for acquiring rights and privileges from the state. By the Progressive years, memorial rituals had sanitized, and to a certain extent, normalized the war experience. Elaborate patriotic celebrations of the Civil War shifted the public gaze from the horrors of death on the battlefield to aestheticized memories of heroism. Through programs aimed specifically at the immigrant poor and institutionalized in public school curricula, military memories were translated into a series of loyalty rituals which were part of the process of "whitening" and Americanizing those whose national loyalties, as Matthew Jacobson has shown, were tugged toward equally compelling diasporic identifications.⁷ Other forms of public display promoted by patriotic organizations, such as re-enacted Civil War battles between Blue and Gray survivors, also shifted the grounds of memorialization from depictions of a national conflict to the construction of a mutual, national war experience.

"It would not be an overstatement," O'Leary argues, "to conclude that the white South won in the cultural arena what it had lost on the battlefield" (p. 203). The resurrection of failed secession as a heroic "Lost Cause" by Confederate veterans groups was facilitated by the new imperialism, which integrated southern militarism into a new national patriotic ideal. From this vantage, militarists looked to future wars as the crucible that might create new national ties between northerners and southerners, and forge immigrants into new Americans. These wars were inherently racial, whether they were at home or abroad. As Reconstruction was limping to closure, white politicians from the former Confederacy pointed to the need to redeploy federal troops in the south to the nation's western frontier, endangered by Indian resistance to American expansion. When the opportunity for a new war came in 1898, former Confederates were fully rehabilitated and recommissioned, as the white sons of both sections flocked to the flag.

And what of the black soldiers who also flocked to the flag and served with distinction? In the west, they were nicknamed "buffalo soldiers," and in Cuba, "smoked Yankees." As Amy Kaplan has suggested, this verbal sleight of hand distinguished them from "real" Yankees, a term which had come to describe all white American soldiers.⁸ Few literary artifacts show the triumph of this new nationalism, and its implications for a racialized citizenship, better than Theodore Roosevelt's hugely popular account of the Spanish-American War, *The Rough Riders*.⁹ And, as O'Leary shows, despite the shabby treatment African-American veterans of that conflict received in this and other representations, when enlistments were called for again in 1917 "there were few public voices of dissent" among leading African-American citizens. Why? One answer is that the GAR came to deliver, over time, not just psychic

sustenance to veterans and patriotic entertainment for their descendents, but financial benefits and political power. Drawing on Theda Skocpol's crucial work in this area, O'Leary highlights the connections between patriotic service and the political mobilization of patriotic organizations by new national party apparatuses, who then rewarded supporters with pensions, disability benefits, and patronage positions. "As always," O'Leary argues, "black people lived with the paradox that although they were denied the full rights of citizenship by white America, they were expected to be equally patriotic" (p. 214).

But might patriotism, properly enacted through militarism, become a path to those rights? Many African-American men and women believed that they could, employing the language and forms of nationalism in that project that had been nurtured at the community level. Historians such as Robin D.G. Kelley and Steven Reich have pointed to war service as a moment when African-Americans have attempted to rectify their paradoxical relationship to the nation by using their status as patriots and federal citizens to resist racism at the municipal and state level.¹⁰ O'Leary adds an important new dimension to this by suggesting both that there were material benefits to be won from military service, and that patriotic organizations, even as they attempted to suppress the history of African-American citizenship, had in fact opened new cultural spaces where an African-American politics of national inclusion could be articulated. While most studies look at the often physical resistance of soldiers, O'Leary points to the particular importance of female struggles for African-American equality during World War I, as black women and children took to the streets in peaceful parades to claim the flag, their heritage as descendants of Revolutionary and Civil War veterans, and their rights as citizens.

Even O'Leary's excellent research cannot change the dismal ending to this story in the forceful reassertion of segregation after World War I. Building on her earlier analysis, she argues that it was the state's investment in militarism which was crucial in awarding cultural space to the most reactionary forms of patriotism. Ironically, that patriotism, promoted as an historic quest for freedom by Woodrow Wilson, was actualized as a narrow set of demands on the citizen by the state, characterized by violent repression, censorship, and suspension of civil rights. This was not an unwelcome outcome for many self-appointed patriots, veterans of legislative lobbying in the 1890s on behalf of the flag movement and other campaigns to initiate patriotic programming and public holidays. By World War I, O'Leary argues, "The government became an active participant and catalyst in mobilizing the patriotic movement and in promoting a particularly intolerant and authoritarian brand of patriotism" (p. 221). And yet, government repression provokes O'Leary's

final paradox: that forcing racial and political dissidents to the margins of patriotic culture provokes new, marginal spaces where new political strategies emerge, continuing the process of generating "political and cultural meanings from the 'in-between spaces' of the nation-state" (p. 245). As a concluding thought, this offers great promise for reimagining the connections between culture and politics, but also the dispersion of old nationalisms and the emergence of new ones as integral to the consolidation and redistribution of power in the twentieth-century United States.

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1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1991); Eric Hobsbawm, and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (1983); Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990).

2. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (1982); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (1993). See also Reid Mitchell, *The Empty Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (1993).

3. Drew Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (1988).

4. Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of the Century* (1996).

5. See Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930* (1984) and Nick Salvatore, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber* (1998).

6. For the importance of racialized space to the construction of masculinity, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993).

7. Matthew Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (1995).

8. Amy Kaplan, "Black and Blue on San Juan Hill," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (1993), 219-236.

9. Claire Bond Potter, "The Problem of the Color Line: Segregation, Politics and Historical Writing," *Cultural Critique* 38 (Winter 1997-1998): 65-89.

10. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (1994), and Steven Reich, "Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship, 1917-1921," *Journal of American History* 82: 4 (March 1996): 1479- 1504.