

'WHAT WILL PEACE AMONG THE WHITES BRING?':
REUNION AND RACE IN THE STRUGGLE OVER
THE MEMORY OF THE CIVIL WAR IN AMERICAN CULTURE

David W. Blight
(Amherst)

It's gonna hurt now, anything dead coming back to life hurts.
(Amy Denver to Sethe, while helping deliver Sethe's baby, somewhere
along the Ohio River, during the 1850s)
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 1987

I believe that the struggle for life is the order of the world... if it is our
business to fight, the book for the army is a war-song, not a hospital sketch.
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1895

As a recent film series demonstrated once again, one of the most vexing questions for American historical consciousness and national identity has been to understand the meaning and memory of the Civil War.¹ The Civil War itself has long been the object of widespread nostalgia and the subject of durable myth-making in both North and South. In the final episode of the Ken Burns' film series scant attention is paid to the complicated story of Reconstruction. The consequences of this American "Iliad" are only briefly assessed as the viewer (likely quite taken by an artistically brilliant and haunting film) is ushered from Appomattox, through some fleeting discussion of Reconstruction politics, past Ulysses Grant's final prophecy of an "era of great harmony" to Joseph E. Johnston's bare-headed encounter with pneumonia and quick death after attending William Tecumseh Sherman's funeral in 1891, and finally to that irresistible footage of the old veterans at the 1913 and 1938 Gettysburg Blue-Gray reunions. Along the way, the narrative is punctuated by Shelby Foote informing us that the war "made us an i" (a reference to how the United States "is" rather than "was" became a common expression), and Barbara Fields reminding us of William Faulkner's claim that history is not a *was* but an *is*. The film did leave us with a sense that the past and the present inform, and even flow into, one another.

On one level, the ending of Burns' remarkable film offers a vivid reminder of just how much interpretations of the Civil War provide an index of our political culture, of how much the central issues of the war - union and slavery, reunion and racial equality, diversity as the definition of America or as its unraveling - remain for each succeeding generation of Americans to grapple with. However, on another level, the ending of the film offers most Americans perhaps the legacy they find most appealing: the rapid transition from the veteran just returned to his farm, standing on a hay wagon in 1865 to the 1913 Gettysburg reunion is the stuff of earnest nostalgia, and it makes good fast-forward history. As Richard Slotkin has written, "Burns evokes as

1. "The Civil War," episode 9, "The Better Angels of Our Nature," produced and directed by Ken Burns, WETA television, Washington, D.C.

well as anyone the paradoxical and complex emotion of Civil War nostalgia, in which one recognizes the awful tragedy of the war, yet somehow *misses* it". Such an ending becomes transhistorical in American social memory: the time between the real battle of Gettysburg and its fiftieth anniversary reunion becomes at once a great distance and no distance at all. Abraham Lincoln's haunting passage about the "mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave..." had, indeed, swelled "the chorus of the Union" and conquered time itself. The pleading poetry in Lincoln's First Inaugural in 1861 was delivered, of course, in the midst of crisis and on the brink of war. But the deep conflict buried in shallow "patriot graves" could be finely displaced, comfortably forgotten, and truly "mystic", as Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain recalls the 1913 reunion, as a "transcendental experience" and a "radiant fellowship of the fallen". American history had "progressed" through Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, the myriad crises of the 1890s, a short foreign war with Spain; through massive urbanization and industrialization, to be a giant of corporate capitalism and a society divided by a racial apartheid and seething with ethnic pluralism on the eve of World War I. Rarely was there a more confirming contest for William Dean Howells' turn-of-the-century assertion that "what the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending".²

I will return to the 1913 Gettysburg reunion as a touchstone in the development of America's historical memory of the Civil War. But the function of this paper is primarily to suggest in the broadest terms how American culture processed the meaning and memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction down to World War I, with special emphasis on the overlapping themes of reunion and race. My chronological reach here is long and, therefore, risky. The historical memory of a people, a nation, or any aggregate, evolves over time in relation to present needs and ever-changing contexts - both in the realm of historiography and mythology. Societies and the groups within them remember and use history as a source of coherence and identity, as a means of contending for power or place, and as a means of controlling access to whatever becomes normative in society. The study of historical memory might be defined, therefore, as the study of cultural struggle, of contested truths, of interpretations, moments, events, epoch, rituals, or even texts in history that thresh out rival versions of the past, which are in turn put to the service of the present. As events of the past few years have reminded us again and again, historical memories can be severely controlled, can undergo explosive liberation or redefinition from one generation, or even one year, to the next. Serbs killing Croats, young Russian democrats skating through the streets of Moscow waving the pre-1917 czarist flag, a film on Malcolm X bitterly debated before it is even made (as if scripture were about to be blasphemed, rather than history re-told), and a documentary film on the Civil War sensationalized on the cover of *Newsweek* all confirm that the social, political, or psychological stakes of historical memory can be very high.³

2. Richard Slotkin, "What Shall Men Remember?: Recent Work on the Civil War" *American Literary History*, Spring, 1991, p. 13; Chamberlain is quoted in "The Civil War," episode 9; Howells is quoted in Allan Gurganus, *Oldest Confederate Widow Tells All*, New York, 1984, epigraph.

3. There are many theoretical works that discuss social memory as a matter of cultural contestation. Some places to start are Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Use and Abuse of History," in *The Use and Abuse of History*, translated by Adrian Collins, introduction by Julius Kraft, New York, 1949; Peter Burke, "History as Social

Although we are focussing primarily on Northern memory, large aspects of this topic will have to be left outside the purview of such a short paper, notably the impact of popular literature (the "plantation school") on Northern readers and editors in the late nineteenth century, and the myriad ways sectional politics melded into an uneasy national consensus from the administration of Rutherford Hayes to that of Woodrow Wilson and beyond. Instead, I have selected two ways to demonstrate the complicated dialectic between race and reunion as the memory of the Civil War evolved in American culture: first, an encounter between Alexander Crummell and Frederick Douglass in the 1880s over how blacks should best remember slavery and the Civil War; and second, the 1913 Gettysburg Blue-Gray reunion as a ritual of national reconciliation.

In 1875, as the march away from radicalism and protection of African-American rights threatened to become a full retreat, Frederick Douglass gave a Fourth of July speech in Washington, D.C. entitled "The Color Question." Events, both personal and national, had cast a pall over the normally sanguine Douglass, forcing him to reflect in racialized terms on the American Centennial which was to be celebrated the following year. The nation, Douglass feared, would

lift to the sky its million voices in one Grand Centennial hosanna of peace and good will to all the white race... from gulf to lakes and from sea to sea.⁴

As a black citizen, he dreaded the day when "this great white race has renewed its vows of patriotism and flowed back into its accustomed channels." Douglass looked back upon fifteen years of unparalleled change for his people, worried about the hold of white supremacy on America's historical consciousness, and asked the core question in the nation's struggle over the memory of the Civil War:

If war among the whites brought *peace and liberty* to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring? (*italic mine*).

For more than a century, through cycles of great advancement and periods of cynical reaction in American race relations, Douglass' question in various forms has echoed through our political culture. Answers to Douglass' question have depended, of course, on time, place, one's positioning along the color line, the available sources, the medium through which the history is transmitted, and differing revisionist agendas. But always, the answers have emerged from the contentious struggle over the content, meaning, and uses of the past.

John Hope Franklin recognized this in a perceptive 1979 essay on what he describes as the "enormous influence" of the combination of Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, D.W. Griffith's film, *Birth of a Nation*, and Claude Bowers' popular history, *The Tragic Era*, all produced within the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Memory," in Thomas Butler, ed., *Memories: History Culture and the Mind*, London, 1989, pp. 97- 113; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations*, (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-25; Eric Hobsbaum and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Eng., 1983; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, 1985, parts II and III; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. rev. ed., New York, 1991, p. 187-206.

4. Frederick Douglass, "The Color Question," July 5, 1875, Frederick Douglass Papers. (Library of Congress), reel 15. On this stage of Reconstruction, see William Gillette, *The Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869-1879*. Baton Rouge, 1979.

Franklin's careful, scholarly analysis of how history can be used as "propaganda" in the shaping of a nation's memory of itself echoed Ralph Ellison's poignant comment during the same year (1979). Nothing in our past, said Ellison, like the question of race in the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction, had ever caused Americans to be so "notoriously selective in the exercise of historical memory".⁵

As Gerald Linderman, Gaines Foster, and others have demonstrated, the 1880s was a pivotal decade in the development of traditions and social memories of the Civil War. The Lost Cause in the South, as well as a growing willingness to embrace sectional reconciliation among Northerners underwent cultural transformation. The situation among black intellectuals was no different: an index of their struggle over how and if to remember slavery and the Civil War era can be found in a debate between Alexander Crummell and Frederick Douglass. Then as now, no single persuasion controlled Afro-American thought; black social memory was as dynamic as were debates within the G.A.R. or among advocates of the Lost Cause tradition. At Storer College, May 30, 1885, Alexander Crummell, one of the most accomplished black intellectuals of the nineteenth century, educated at Cambridge University, and who had spent nearly twenty years (1853-1871) as a missionary and an advocate of African nationalism in Liberia, gave a commencement address to the graduates of that black college which had been founded for freedmen at the end of the Civil War. Crummell later considered this address, entitled "The Need of New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era," to be the most important he ever gave. Although Crummell could not resist acknowledging that Harpers Ferry was a setting "full of the most thrilling memories in the history of our race" his aim was to turn the new generation of blacks (most of whom would have been born during the Civil War) away from dwelling "morbidity and absorbingly upon the servile past" and instead to embrace the urgent economic and moral "needs of the present". As a minister and theologian, and as a staunch social conservative, Crummell's concerns were not only racial uplift - his ultimate themes were family, labor, industrial education, and moral values - but the unburdening of black folks from what he believed was the debilitating, painful memory of slavery. Crummell made a careful distinction between memory and recollection. Memory, he contended, was a passive, unavoidable, often essential part of group consciousness; recollection, on the other hand, was active, a matter of choice and selection, and dangerous in excess.

What I would fain have you guard against - he told the graduates - is not the memory of slavery, but the constant recollection of it.

Such recollection, Crummell maintained, would only degrade racial progress in the Gilded Age: for him, unmistakably, "duty lies in the future".⁶

Prominent in the audience that day at Harpers Ferry, probably in the front row or on the stage, was Frederick Douglass, whom Crummell described as his "neighbor"

5. John Hope Franklin. "The Birth of a Nation: Propaganda as History," reprinted from the *Massachusetts Review*, 1979, in John Hope Franklin, *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938-1988*, Baton Rouge, 1989, pp. 10-23; Ralph Ellison, "Going to the Territory," address given at Brown University, September 20, 1979. reprinted in Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, New York, 1986, p.124.

6. Alexander Crummell, *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses*, [orig. pub. 1891], New York, 1969, pp. iii, 14, 18, 13. On Crummell, also see Wilson J. Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and*

from Washington, D.C. According to Crummell's own account, his call to reorient Afro-American consciousness from the past to the future met with Douglass "emphatic and most earnest protest". Douglass rose to the occasion, as he did so many times in the 1880s on one anniversary or Memorial Day after another, to assert an Afro-American abolitionist memory of the Civil War era, which almost always included an abiding reminder of the nature and significance of slavery.⁷ No verbatim account of what Douglass said at Harpers Ferry survives; but several other speeches from the 1880s offer a clear picture of what the former abolitionist would have said. Douglass and Crummell shared a sense of the dangers and limitations of social memory, especially for a group that had experienced centuries of slavery. A healthy level of forgetting, said Douglass, was "Nature's plan of relief". But in season and out, Douglass insisted that whatever the psychological need for avoiding the woeful legacy of slavery, it would resist all human effort to suppress it. The history of black Americans, he said countless times in the 1880s, could be "traced like that of a wounded man through a crowd by the blood".⁸ Better to confront such a history, he believed, than to wait for its resurgence.

Douglass' many post-war speeches about the memory of the conflict typically began with acknowledgement of the need for healing and getting on with life. But then he would forcefully call his audiences to remembrance of the origins and consequences, as well as the sacrifices, of the Civil War. He would often admit that his own personal memory of slavery was best kept sleeping like a "half-forgotten dream". But he despised the social forgetting that American culture seemed to necessitate in the 1880s.

We are not here to visit upon the children the sins of the fathers - Douglass told a Memorial Day audience in Rochester in 1883, - but we are here to remember the causes, the incidents, and the results of the, late rebellion.

Most of all Douglass objected to the white supremacist historical construction that portrayed emancipation as a great national "failure" and "blunder". The entire racist theory that slavery had protected and nurtured blacks, and that freedom had gradually sent them "falling into a state of barbarism" forced Douglass to argue for an aggressive use of memory. The problem was not merely the rise of the Lost Cause myth of southern virtue and victimization. The problem was "not confined to the South" declared Douglass in 1888.

It [the theory of black degeneration based on an historical misrepresentation of emancipation], has gone forth to the North. It has crossed the ocean. It has gone to Europe, and it has gone as

Discontent. (New York, 1990); and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth*, Baton Rouge, 1981. Crummell was the founder of the American Negro Academy. On the turn in American cultural attitudes in the 1880s, see Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the Civil War*, New York, 1987, pp. 266-97; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South*, New York, 1987, pp. 63-162; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Myth-Making*, New York, 1970.

7. See David W. Blight, "For Something Beyond the Battlefield: Frederick Douglass and the Memory of the Civil War," *Journal of American History*. (Spring, 1989), pp.1156-1178.

8. Frederick Douglass, "Speech at the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Jerry Rescue," 1884, Frederick Douglass Papers, (LC), reel 16.

far as the wings of the press, and the power of speech can carry it. There is no measuring the injury inflicted upon the negro by it.⁹

Such, Douglass understood, were the stakes of conflicts over rival versions of the past when put to the service of the present.

Although Douglass and Crummell had great respect for each other, they spoke with different agendas, informed by different experiences. Crummell had never been a slave; he achieved a classical education, was a missionary of evangelical Christianity, a thinker of conservative instincts, and had spent the entire Civil War era in West Africa. Douglass, of course, the former slave, had established his fame by writing and speaking about the meaning of slavery as perhaps no one else ever did; his life work and his very identity were inextricably linked to the transformations of the Civil War. The past made and inspired Douglass; there was no meaning for him without memory. The past had also made Crummell; but his connection to most of the benchmarks of Afro-American social memory had been largely distant, international, informed by African nationalism and Christian mission. For Douglass, emancipation and the Civil War were truly *felt* history. For Crummell, they were passive memory; not the epic to be re-told, merely the source of future needs.¹⁰

This contrast could be overdrawn in our occasional preoccupation with dualities in Afro-American thought. But such a comparison is suggestive of the recurring dilemma of black intellectuals in American history: is the black experience in America a racial memory, or is it thoroughly intertwined with collective, national memory? Is the core image of the black experience in America represented by black institutions or cultural forms that have survived by rejecting American nationalism, or by the black Civil War soldier and the Fourteenth Amendment? In this case, dichotomies have always blurred more truth than they have revealed. However politicized, romanticized, or class-based this question has become in each succeeding generation, the best answer has generally been: both. Rival memories among black thinkers should be treated as equally dialectical or dynamic as similar struggles in the larger culture.

As America underwent vast social changes in the late nineteenth century, and fought a foreign war in 1895, so too the cultural memory of the Civil War transformed as it was transmitted to new generations. This is a long and complicated story, but one of the principle features of the increasingly sentimentalized, ahistorical road to reunion was the valorization of the veteran, especially at Blue-Gray reunions, which became important aspects of popular culture in an age that loved pageantry, became obsessed with building monuments, and experienced a widespread revival of the martial ideal.¹¹ A brief focus on the fiftieth anniversary reunion at Gettysburg in 1913 may help illuminate the relationship of race and reunion in Civil War memory. As early as 1909 the state of Pennsylvania established a commission and began planning

9. Frederick Douglass, "Thoughts and Recollections of the Antislavery Conflict," speech undated, but it is at least early 1880s; "Decoration Day," speech at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Rochester, New York, May 1883; and "Address Delivered on the 26th Anniversary of Abolition in the District of Columbia" April 16, 1888, Washington, D.C., all in Frederick Douglass Papers, (LC), reel 15.

10. See Moses, *Crummell*, pp. 226-28; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, New York, 1991, pp. 238-304; and David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*, Baton Rouge, 1989, pp. 189-248.

11. See David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century*, Chapel Hill, 1990; T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American*

for the 1913 celebration. In the end, the states appropriated some \$1,750,000 to provide free transportation to veterans from every corner of the country. The state of Pennsylvania alone spent at least \$450,000, and the federal government, through Congress and the War Department, appropriated approximately \$450,000 to build the "Great Camp" for the "Great Reunion" as it became known. 53,407 veterans attended the reunion, and again as many spectators were estimated to have descended upon the town of Gettysburg for the July 1-4 festival of reconciliation. 155 reporters from the national and international press covered the event, which was headline in most newspapers during the week of the reunion.¹²

If social memory on the broadest scale is best constructed and transmitted by ritual commemoration, as anthropologist Paul Connerton and others have argued, then the memory of the Civil War as it stood in the general American culture in the early twentieth century never saw a more fully orchestrated, nor highly organized expression than at Gettysburg in July, 1913. The Great Camp, covering 250 acres, serving 688,000 "cooked meals," prepared by 2,170 cooks, laborers, and bakers using 130,048 pounds of flour, must have warmed the heart of even the most compulsive advocates of Taylorism. The 47 miles of "avenues" on the battlefield, lighted by 500 electric arc lights provided a perfect model of military mobilization and mass production. And those 32 "bubbling ice water fountains" throughout the veterans' quarters offered a delightful, if hardly conscious, experience with incorporation. The theme of the reunion (as one would expect) from the earliest days of its conception, was nationalism, patriotism, and harmony - the great "Peace Jubilee," as the planning commission had announced as early as 1910.¹³ Fifty years after Pickett's Charge (and the Emancipation Proclamation), Douglass' question received a full-throated answer.

The reunion was to be a source of lessons transmitted between generations, as several thousand Boy Scouts of America served the old veterans as aides-de-camps, causing scenes much celebrated in the press. Like any event fraught with so much symbolism, the reunion also became a "site" for contentious politics; suffragists lobbied the veterans' camp, asking that they shout "votes for women" rather than the refurbished "rebel yell," a scene much derided by some of the press. Most of all, the reunion was a grand opportunity for America's political officialdom, as well as purveyors of popular opinion, to declare the meaning and memory of the Civil War in the ever sovereign present. One does have to wonder if there had ever been an assembly quite like this in the history of the modern world: can we imagine another event commemorated by more than 50,900 actual participants in so grand a manner? Lafayette's tour of America in 1827, the United States Centennial in 1876, and the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 come to mind as comparisons. But for the transmission of a public, social memory of an epoch, such a platform had rarely existed

Culture, 1880-1920, New York, 1981, pp. 97-138; Wallace E. Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans' and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783-1900*, Cambridge, MA., 1955; and Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, New York, 1991.

12. *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg: Report of the Pennsylvania Commission*. December 31, 1913, Harrisburg, 1915, pp. 39-41.

13. *Ibid.*, 6, pp. 39-41. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, New York, 1989; and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, New York, 1982.

as that given the state governors and the President of the United States on July 3 and 4, 1913.¹⁴

On the third day of the reunion the governors of the various states spoke. All, understandably, asserted the theme of sectional harmony and national cohesion. But perhaps William Hodges Mann, Governor of Virginia, struck the most meaningful chord of memory on that occasion.

We are not here to discuss the Genesis of the war, - said Mann, - but men who have tried each other in the storm and smoke of battle are here to discuss this great fight, which if it didn't establish a new standard of manhood came up to the highest standard that was ever set. We came here, I say, not to discuss what caused the war of 1861-65, but to talk over the events of the battle here as man to man...

The following day, 4th of July, in the great finale of the reunion, the Blue and the Gray gathered to hear what turned out to be a short address by Woodrow Wilson, just recently inaugurated, the first Southern President since the Civil War. "We are debtors to those fifty crowded years," announced Wilson; "they have made us all heirs to a mighty heritage." What have the fifty years meant, Wilson asked? The answer struck that mystic chord of memory that most white Americans, North and South, probably desired to hear:

They have meant peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation. How wholesome and healing the peace has been! 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 - except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other's eyes. How complete the Union has become and how dear to all of us, how unquestioned, how benign and majestic as state after state has been added to this, our great family of free men!¹⁵

That great "hosanna" that Douglass had anticipated forty years before had certainly come to fruition. "Thank God for Gettysburg, hosanna!" declared the *Louisville Courier Journal*.

God bless us every one, alike the Blue and the Gray, the Gray and the Blue! The world ne're witnessed such a sight as this. Beholding, can we say 'happy is the nation that hath no history'?

The deep causes and consequences of the Civil War - the role of slavery and the challenge of racial equality - in those fifty "crowded years," had been actively suppressed and subtly displaced by the celebration of what Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. had aptly termed the "soldier's faith," the celebration of the veterans' manly valor and devotion.¹⁶ Oh what a glorious fight they had come to commemorate; and in the end, everyone was right, no one was wrong, and something so tragic and transforming

14. For the Boy Scouts and the suffragists at the reunion, see *Washington Post*, June 25, 30, 1913; *New York Times*, July 1, 1913; and *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg*, pp. 49-51. On the notion of "sites" of memory, see Nora, "Between Memory and History", *op. cit.*

15. *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg*, p. 144, pp. 174-76.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 176; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 4, 1913; Oliver Wendell Holmes, "A Soldier's Faith," an address delivered on Memorial Day, May 30, 1895, at a meeting called by the graduating class of Harvard University, in *Speeches of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Boston, 1934, pp. 56-66.

as the Civil War had been rendered a mutual victory of the Blue and the Gray by what Governor Mann called the "splendid movement of reconciliation". And Wilson's great gift for mixing idealism with ambiguity was in perfect form. He gave his own, somewhat preacherly, restrained endorsement of the valor of the past. Then, putting on his Progressive's hat he spoke to the present. "The day of our country's life has but broadened into morning," he declared. "Do not put uniforms by. Put the harness of the present on."

These ceremonies at Gettysburg represented a public avowal of the deeply laid mythology of the Civil War (some scholars prefer the term "tradition") that had captured popular consciousness by the early twentieth century.¹⁷ The war was remembered as primarily a tragedy that led to greater unity and national cohesion, and as a soldier's call to sacrifice in order to save a troubled, but essentially good Union, not as the terrifying crisis of a nation deeply divided over slavery, race, competing definitions of labor, liberty, political economy, and the future of the West (issues, some of which were hardly resolved in 1913).

A sampling of press reports and editorials demonstrates just how much this version of Civil War history had become what some theorists have called "structural amnesia" or social "habit memory."¹⁸ The issues of slavery and secession, rejoiced the conservative *Washington Post*, were "no longer discussed argumentatively. They are scarcely mentioned at all, except in connection with the great war to which they led, and by which they were disposed of for all time." To the extent slavery involved a "moral principle," said the *Post*

no particular part of the people was responsible unless, indeed, the burden of responsibility should be shouldered by the North for its introduction.

Echoing many of the governors (North and South) who spoke at the reunion, the "greater victory," declared the *Post*, was that won by the national crusade to reunite the veterans, and not that of the Army of the Potomac in 1863. The *New York Times* hired Helen D. Longstreet widow of the Confederate General James Longstreet, (who had been much maligned by the Lost Cause devotees for his caution at Gettysburg and his Republicanism after the war) to write daily columns about the reunion. She entertained the *Times* readers with her dialogues with Southern veterans about the value of Confederate defeat and the beauty of "Old glory." She also challenged readers to remember the sufferings of women during the Civil War and to consider an inter-sectional tribute to them as the theme of the next reunion. The nation's historical

17. See Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 78. Foster avoids the term "myth" in favor of "tradition." Also see Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History*, Chapel Hill, 1991. Nolan comfortably uses the term myth. Distinctions between these slippery terms are important, but myth seems to be an appropriate terminology in this instance. On the idea of myth for historians, there are many good sources, but see Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, New York, 1985, pp.1-48; Warren L. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1973, pp. 7-26; and Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, especially pp. 431-71.

18. Burke, "History as Social Memory", *op. cit.*, p. 106; Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 22-25, 28-31. Connerton's anthropological analysis of commemorative rituals is provocative and useful, but the content and the form, the meaning and the performance, must be examined with equal vigor. On commemorations also see John Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton University Press, forthcoming.

memory, concluded the *Times*, had become so "balanced" that it could never again be "disturbed" by sectional conflict.¹⁹

Such homilies about nationalism and peace, though often well-meaning in their context, masked as much as they revealed. One should not diminish the genuine sentiment of the veterans in 1913; the Civil War had left ghastly scars to be healed in the psyches of individual men, and in the collective memories of Americans in both sections. Monuments and reunions had always, understandably, combined remembrance with healing, and therefore, with forgetting. But it is not stretching the evidence to suggest that white supremacy was a silent master of ceremonies at the Gettysburg reunion. No overt conspiracy need be implied, but commemorative rituals are not merely benign performances; their content and motivation must be explored along with their form. The reunion was a national ritual where the ghost of slavery might, once and for all, be exorcized, and where a conflict among whites might be transmogrified into national mythology. Black newspapers of the era were, understandably, wary and resentful of the celebration of the great "Peace Jubilee." At a time when lynching had developed into a social ritual of its own horrifying kind in the South, and when the American apartheid had become fully entrenched, black opinion leaders found the sectional love-feast at Gettysburg to be more irony than they could bear.

We are wondering, - declared the *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger*, - whether Mr Lincoln had the slightest idea in his mind that the time would ever come when the people of this country would come to the conclusion that by the 'People' he meant only white people.

Black memory of the Civil War seemed at such variance with what had happened at the reunion. The *Afro-American* captured the stakes and the potential results of this test of America's social memory:

Today the South is in the saddle, and with the single exception of slavery, everything it fought for during the days of the Civil War, it has gained by repression of the Negro within its borders. And the North has quietly allowed it to have its own way.²⁰

The *Afro-American* asserted the loyalty of black soldiers during the war and of citizens since and pointed to President Wilson's recent forced segregation of federal government workers. The "blood" of black soldiers and lynched citizens was "crying from the ground" in the South, unheard and strangely unknown at the Blue-Gray reunion. When the assembled at Gettysburg paused to hear Lincoln's lines about that "government of the people," suggested the *Afro-American*, it ought to

recall the fact that at least part of the people of this country are Negroes and at the same time human beings, and civilized human beings at that; struggling towards the light, as God has given them to see the light.

The *Washington Bee* was even more forthright in its criticism of the planned reunion at Gettysburg:

19. *Washington Post*, June 30, 1913. The *Post* also took direct aim at Progressive reformers in the context of the nationalism expressed at Gettysburg, *New York Times*, July 1-4, 1913.

20. *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger*, July 5, 1913. On race relations and the role of the Wilson administration, see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, New York, 1984, pp. 364-395.

The occasion is to be called a Reunion! - complained the *Bee*. - A Reunion of whom? Only the men who fought for the preservation of the Union and the extinction of human slavery. Is it to be an assemblage of those who fought to destroy the Union and perpetuate slavery, and who are now employing every artifice and argument known to deceit and sophistry to propagate a national sentiment in favor of their nefarious contention that emancipation, reconstruction and enfranchisement are a dismal failure.²¹

The *Bee's* editor, W. Calvin Chase, asserted that the Blue-Gray ritual was not a "reunion" at all, but a "Reception" thrown by the victors for the vanquished. But most importantly, he argued that the event was a national declaration of a version of history and a conception of the legacy of the Civil War. The message of the reunion, wrote Chase, was "an insane and servile acknowledgement that the most precious results of the war are a prodigious, unmitigated failure."

Commemorative rituals can inspire decidedly different interpretations; sometimes it depends simply on whether one is on the creating or the receiving end of historical memory. Sometimes it depends simply on whether a construction of social memory is to be used to sustain the social order, or to critique and dislodge it.

As with the earlier generation in the 1880s, the stakes of social memory in 1913 were roughly the same. An interpretation of national history had become wedded to racial theory; the sections had reconciled, nationalism flourished, some social wounds had healed, and Paul Buck could later confidently write, in his Pulitzer Prize winning *The Road to Reunion* (1937, still the only major synthetic work written on this subject), of the "leaven of forgiveness" that grew in a generation into the "miracle" of reconciliation, and of a "revolution in sentiment" whereby "all people within the country felt the electrifying thrill of a common purpose." Such a reunion had been possible, Buck argued, because Americans had collectively admitted that the "race problem" was "basically insoluble," and had "taken the first step in learning how to live with it". Peace between North and South, Buck wrote, unwittingly answering Douglass' question, had given the South and therefore the nation, a "stability of race relations" upon which the "new patriotism" and "new nationalism" could be built. A segregated society required a segregated historical memory, and a national mythology that could blunt or contain the conflict at the root of that segregation. Buck sidestepped, or perhaps simply missed the irony, in favor of an unblinking celebration of the path to reunion. Just such a celebration is what one finds in the *Atlanta Constitution's* coverage of the Gettysburg reunion in 1913. With mystic hyperbole and what may seem to us strange logic, the *Constitution* declared that "as never before in its history the nation is united in demanding that justice and equal rights be given all of its citizens". No doubt, these sentiments reflected genuinely held beliefs among white Southerners that Jim Crow meant progress, or a positive good for blacks. The *Constitution* gushed about the "drama" and "scale" of the symbolism at the Gettysburg reunion, even its "poetry and its fragrance". But most important was

the thing for which it stands - the world's mightiest republic purged of hate and unworthiness, seared clean of dross by the most fiery ordeal in any nation's history.²² (italics mine)

21. *Washington Bee*, May 24, June 7, 1913.

22. Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion. 1865-1900, op. cit.*, New York, 1937, pp.126, 319,308-09. The term "miracle" was frequently used in reviews of Buck's book as a means of referring to the triumph of sectional reconciliation. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. also used the term on the jacket of the original edition. See Buck's

Such were the fruits of America's segregated mind and its segregated historical consciousness.

Long have theorists and historians argued that myth as history often best serves the ends of social stability and conservatism. That is certainly the case with the development of Civil War mythology in America. But we also know that mythic conceptions or presentations of the past can be innovative as well as conservative, liberating instead of destructive, or the result of sheer romance. Whether we like it or not, history is used this way generation after generation. As professional historians, we would do well to keep in mind C. Vann Woodward's warning that

the twilight zone that lies between living memory and written history is one of the favorite breeding places of mythology.

But great myths have their resilience, not completely controllable as Michael Kammen reminds us. This reality is precisely the one W.E.B. Du Bois recognized and criticized in the final chapter of his monumental *Black Reconstruction in America*, (1935), published just two years before Buck's *Road to Reunion*. Du Bois insisted that history should be an "art using the results of science," and not merely a means of "inflating our national ego" But by focusing on the subject of the Civil War and Reconstruction in the 1930s, he offered a tragic awareness, as well as a trenchant argument, that written history cannot be completely disengaged from social memory. Du Bois echoed the *Atlanta Constitution* editor, admitting that there had been a "searing of the memory" in America, but one of a very different kind. The "searing" Du Bois had in mind was not that of the Civil War itself, but that of a white supremacist historiography and a popular memory of the period that had "obliterated" the black experience and the meaning of emancipation by "libel, innuendo, and silence".²³ The stakes in the development of America's historical memory of the Civil War have never been benign. The answers to Douglass' question have never been benign either. Peace among the whites brought segregation and the necessity of later reckonings. The Civil War has not yet been disengaged from a mythological social memory; but likewise, the American reunion cannot be disengaged from the black experience and the question of race in American memory.

"Scrapbook" collection of reviews, commemorating his Pulitzer Prize, Paul Buck Papers, Harvard University Archives, *Atlanta Constitution*, July 2, 1913.

23. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career Of Jim Crow*, New York, 1955, p. viii; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, New York 1991, p.37; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860- 1880*, New York, 1935, pp. 714, 717, 723, 725. It is worth pointing out here, of course, that 1913 was also the 50th anniversary of emancipation, an event much commemorated in black communities, popular culture, pageants, poetry, song, and literature. The U.S. Congress also held hearings in order to plan an official recognition of emancipation. Du Bois testified before a Senate committee on February 2, 1912. Du Bois wrote and helped produce, under the auspices of the NAACP, a pageant, "The Star of Ethiopia," which was performed in 1913, 1915, and 1916. See Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry, op. cit.*, pp. 132-35; and William H. Wiggins, Jr., *O Freedom!: Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations*, Nashville, 1987, pp. 49-78. Also see David W. Blight, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory." in Melvin Dixon. Genevieve Fabre, and Robert O' Meally, eds., *History and Memory in Afro-American Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1992. In a later paper, I hope to develop a comparative critique of Buck's *Road to Reunion*, Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, all of which were published within two years, 1935-37. These three texts might offer a rich way to assess the nature of popular and scholarly memory of the Civil War by the 1930s.