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Review of Branding Texas: Performing Culture in the Lone Star State by Leigh Clemons

Paula Marks
St. Edward's University

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Leigh Clemons identifies Texas cultural identity as composed of “a complex set of performances” reinforcing ideas about the state’s distinctiveness and its inhabitants’ lives and values. She examines a number of cultural and historical depictions of Texas people and events, not surprisingly finding that the privileged cultural identity is that born of the Texas Revolution, with forceful Anglo males at center stage and other, less powerful groups on the periphery challenging the dominant narrative.

Clemons begins with “archival spaces of Texan cultural memory,” including the Alamo and other Revolutionary battlefields. Here she examines how the old triumphalist narratives of Anglo-centered history continue to be manifest. She then moves on to ways in which dramas, pageants, and films about the Revolution have promoted a Texan identity, especially in keeping Texans of Mexican descent excluded and in keeping women peripheral. There is scant recognition in Clemons’s analysis of effective changes in the social and cultural climate over time. For example, the work states that “young school-children learn” Anglo-centered ideas from the 1936 pageant Texas Was Mine, raising the question of whether such a terribly dated drama would be used in Texas schools today. However, the author convincingly shows the long shelf life in popular culture of a myth that privileges one group over others.

Clemons goes on to look at television and theatrical depictions of Texans and Texas life, particularly Texan small-town life. Her thoughtful exploration of how small towns are depicted would benefit from a recognition that Texas has been largely urban for most of the last century (an idea acknowledged in the conclusion) and that Texas small-town life and values historically relate to Southern (and to a certain extent Western) small-town life and values. Perhaps the strongest aspect of this chapter is the discussion of the television show King of the Hill, which is indeed a fascinating study of a traditional white Texas male adjusting to life in the twenty-first century.

Clemons concludes with a chapter on the marketing of Texan cultural identity, particularly political marketing, including the ways in which George W. Bush made use of a traditional Texan identity while president.

Clemons does bring a valuable perspective to the stories a culture tells itself, or at least the stories that a dominant group disseminates in celebrating itself and justifying and holding onto its power. I can see this book being useful for anyone seeking to better understand how public dramas, museums, historic sites, and media stories convey messages at odds with the realities of people’s lives and at odds with social justice.

Paula Marks
St. Edward’s University
Austin, Texas