

Legacies: A History Journal for Dallas and North Central Texas

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Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, 299 pp., \$60 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

Dallas's racial politics have always seemed a bit unusual. Why can't minority coalitions be formed? In a city that likes to point out that it did not have the civil rights struggles of other major Southern cities, why do we have a school board and a city council divided by race? While Michael Phillips' new book, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001*, certainly doesn't answer all of these questions, it does provide context for Dallas's ongoing struggle with racial equality and political control.

Race is a flexible category. Over the past 150 years, those in power have periodically both given and taken the privileges of whiteness to those on the borderline — Jews, Mexican Americans and recent immigrants. Indeed, "the uncertain promise of whiteness made to Mexican Americans, Jews and working class Anglos proved a powerful tool of division, effectively blocking coalitions for social justice." (7-8) The politically powerful have long emphasized racial differences. If class ever became a unifying factor, the political balance of the city would shift.

In Phillips' narrative, many familiar episodes of Dallas history are recast and retold through the lens of race: the 1860 fire that destroyed much of downtown, the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and even the Texas Centennial in 1936 were all efforts to solidify elite white control against various perceived threats. Phillips also addresses the historiography of the city, countering the idea of the Origin Myth — that this city was created out of nothing, just the vision of a small group of businessmen. This Origin Myth shaped the consciousness of the city, and not always to the general public's benefit. For instance, Phillips argues that in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, when the city of Dallas was largely blamed for Kennedy's death, "elites were victims of their own mythology . . . They had willed Kennedy's murder just as surely as they had earlier summoned into existence the 'city with no reason for being.'" (159)

Although at times Phillips stresses his whiteness theory too much, he does provide important contextual background for issues that still face the city today. Unfortunately, a lack of connection to larger political trends in the United States during many key turning points makes Dallas seem more unique than it is. Although the presence of a large Mexican-American population is certainly a key difference from other Southern cities, a comparison of the brokering of political power between elites whites, Jews, and recent immigrants in other cities, such as Chicago or Los Angeles, would have been helpful.

Many may balk at Phillips' theory that the idea of whiteness has so definitively shaped Dallas political history. His case and evidence are convincing though at times a bit forced. Phillips does an able job of addressing the triumphs and challenges of all of Dallas's minorities — not just African Americans. In so doing, he might have ruffled a few historical feathers, but he has given our city a far more interesting history.

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