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Review of *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, by Ron Eyerman

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*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. By Ron Eyerman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. viii+302. \$65.00 (cloth); \$23.00 (paper).

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The skeleton lurking in the U.S. closet, behind our July Fourth orations and other ritual celebrations of the nation's democratic heritage, is the discomfiting history of U.S. slavery. Also very much part of the nation's heritage, it seldom figures in sociological conceptions of U.S. national identity despite the country's legacy of racial inequality and tensions—a legacy that still colors every institutional sphere of U.S. life. In *Cultural Trauma*, Ron Eyerman, a Swedish sociologist, highlights the constructed collective memories of slavery as the central analytical concern but, unfortunately, neglects to examine that collective memory in reference to all Americans. Except for brief allusions to the ways in which whites reconfigured the meaning of the Civil War in the late 19th century, Eyerman focuses on only African-Americans.

In the introduction to chapter 1, he sketches a theory of slavery as an African-American cultural trauma that seems to open an exciting new perspective on black American identity. It is not the experience of slavery but the memory of slavery, its reconfiguration in the minds of later generations of blacks, that constitutes what Eyerman terms the cultural trauma. He argues that “African American” is a historically formed identity that is rooted in the collective memory of slavery. “By the 1880s, as the dreams of full citizenship and cultural integration were quashed, the meaning of slavery emerged as the site of an identity conflict, articulated most clearly by the newly expanded and resourceful ranks of formally educated blacks” (p. 16). The conflict eventually, according to Eyerman, settled into two competing narrative reconfigurations of that collective memory—a progressive narrative embraced by groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League, and a tragic narrative adopted by black political and cultural nationalists.

Following the first chapter, which is really an introduction, the book consists of five chapters that are organized in loosely delineated historical periods: from the 1860s to the turn of the century (chap. 2), from the turn of the century through World War I (chap. 3), from the postwar migration to the end of the Harlem Renaissance (chap. 4), from the Great Depression through World War II (chap. 5), and from the 1950s to the present (chap. 6).

Though introduced as an account of the ways in which reconfigured black collective memories of slavery shaped black social identity, the book actually constitutes a social and cultural history of black America focused primarily on major social movements as the bearers of those collective memories. The most interesting and valuable part of this history appears

in chapter 2, which describes the predicament African-Americans faced in seeking to fashion an identity after the failure of reconstruction. If most of the book's social and cultural history is familiar, Eyerman's interpretations of that history seem, in some instances, questionable. His account of black American culture in the 1920s is a case in point. His uncritical acceptance of the Harlem Renaissance doctrine as an accurate explanation of the black literary and artistic works in the 1920s, his failure to understand the antagonisms between the Garvey movement and the New Negro movement, his disregard of the salient role of white American patronage, and his failure to understand the enormous influence of Carl Van Vechten and the primitivist ideology on black cultural life in the 1920s, to cite only a few examples, reveal a superficial comprehension of the complex interplay of social forces that produced that efflorescence of black artistic creativity.

Aside from these problems of historical analysis, the book's theory of cultural trauma is not very persuasive. Because it is poorly integrated into the primary historical materials of the text, the concept of cultural trauma operates less as a theoretical explanation than a theoretical theme—interpretative commentary inserted at irregular intervals without systematic logical development. Also problematic is the way the book conceives the configured collective memories of slavery. The linkage of black social identity to these configured memories is certainly an interesting idea, but the notion that those memories can be reduced to two narratives is not only simplistic—it lacks empirical support. Why were these narratives not conceptualized as ideological perspectives? Had the author used the concept of ideology to theoretically frame the different manifestations of collective memory, he would have been obliged to encompass a richer, more complex range of African-American worldviews (e.g., Marxist, black nationalist, black liberal, primitivist, black conservative, black feminist, and hip hop) and to pose empirical questions about their collective memories of slavery. This would have provided a much stronger case for representing configured collective memories of slavery as the basis, or at least as a significant dimension, of black American identity. An excellent example of a study that uses the concept of ideology to explore the issue of black identity is Michael Dawson's recently published book, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Also problematic was the study's failure to compare white and black Americans in reference to their reconfigured memories of slavery: focusing on only African-Americans greatly limited the book's implications for understanding present-day U.S. race relations. The lack of a monument or museum commemorating slavery in Washington, D.C., for example, can hardly be explained except by examining the ways white Americans have repressed memories of slavery in the United States. Beyond this white American and African-American comparison, the study would have been stronger, and more theoretically incisive, if it had drawn on com-

parative materials, contrasting reconfigured collective memories of other group cultural traumas: the Jewish Holocaust in Germany, the Armenian massacre in Turkey, the Native American defeat and subjugation in the United States, the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, and the Japanese experience of the atomic bomb assaults in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such comparisons would have called attention to a range of analytical issues, such as the role of the affected group's political power, cultural capital, wealth, and size, which determine the form and influence of its cultural trauma in the larger public arena.

The book's final shortcoming is its lack of a concluding theoretical chapter that could have tied together the dangling threads of its historical narrative and set forth and summarized its theory in a systematic argument. These shortcomings notwithstanding, *Cultural Trauma* introduces an exciting new theoretical idea, which should stimulate others—particularly in the fields of race relations, social movements, and the sociology of culture—to use the concepts of configured collective memory and cultural trauma in future studies of not only African-American but also of other group identities.

*Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School.* By Pamela Perry. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002. Pp. xi+268. \$18.95.

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In *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School*, author Pamela Perry contributes to the growing literature on white identities and how they are shaped and expressed. Perry draws on approximately two years of participant observation (1994–96) at two California high schools. At “Clavey,” whites constitute 12% of the population; African-American students, 54%; Asians, 23%; and Hispanics, Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans, the remaining 12%. Located in a neighboring area is “Valley Groves High School,” a school of 1,600 students where whites are 83% of the student population; Hispanics, 7%; Asians, 5%; and Filipinos and African-Americans, 4%. Both schools have a large middle-class student population, though there is more class range at Clavey than at Valley Groves. In addition to participant observation, Perry also conducted 60 interviews with white, African-American, Asian, and Latino young people. Of those interviews, 36 were with white students: 14 at Valley Groves, 22 at Clavey.

Perry makes several arguments. First, she argues that “proximate association” is a primary determinant of white students' explicit ability to define a white racial/cultural identity and the shape(s) that identity will take. White students at Valley Groves, whose primary way of defining