

Ron Eyerman

Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity

Cambridge University Press, 2002, 302 pp.

\$US 23.00 (paper) (0-521-00437-3), \$US 65.00 hardcover (0-521-80828-6)

Ron Eyerman has written an extremely fascinating, intellectually exciting book showing how the cultural trauma of slavery has influenced African-American identity, from the period of slavery itself until the present.

According to Eyerman, slavery is a cultural marker: few African-Americans can avoid its impact on their identities. The social condition of slavery, which all blacks in the U.S. either endured or feared until 1863 (given the tenuous nature of “freedom” for nineteenth-century blacks) has been transformed into a symbolic condition affecting all the descendants of slaves. To show this, Eyerman uses the concept of generations, a concept he first elaborated with Bryan Turner, relying on the earlier work of Karl Mannheim. According to Eyerman, generations can be defined by their collective memory of significant events.

Slavery, then, is a site of memory for African-Americans, a memory requiring constant reflection and re-interpretation. It is a primal scene, an historic event present in every African-American’s consciousness. Different generations “have different perspectives on the past because of both emotional and temporal distance, altered circumstance and needs” (p. 33), but all generations of African-Americans need to interpret, and come to terms with, their collective traumatic past and their relationship to that past. Slavery is a habitus, in Bourdieu’s sense, something “lived and living, ... inherited and transmitted ...” (p. 188). Cultural trauma is evident in the group, public memory of slavery and its aftermath.

Eyerman, who has earlier written on the sociology of popular music, shows how each generation of African-Americans has interpreted itself through literature, the popular press, music and art. The evolution of African-American scholarship, especially the discipline of sociology, is also an exercise in self-interpretation. Three themes, according to Eyerman, are evident in how African-Americans have represented themselves: integrationist, redemptive, and progressive. The integrationist theme stressed mechanisms to persuade white society to accept the ex-slave. In the post-Reconstructionist period, this was exemplified by Booker T. Washington’s insistence that the “talented tenth” of Negro society show itself worthy of acceptance. Later, Martin Luther King’s civil libertarian approach used the American ideology of democracy as a path to acceptance. The progressive narrative started with the belief that slavery had been a necessary stage to “civilize” slaves, to bring them via modernity and Christianity out of the heathen, primitive Africa from which they had been stolen. The redemptive narrative was linked to Christianity for many decades, but in the 1940s found a new life in the message of the Nation of Islam. Authenticity was also a recurring problem, as in each generation artists and intellectuals sought means to identify and validate their African-ness. The question of how to “perform” blackness was always present: what picture should African-Americans present to whites, whether whites “slumming” in Harlem in the 1920s or whites supportive of civil rights in the 1960s, and what pictures should African-Americans present to themselves?

One could read this book merely as very learned account of how African-American cultural expression has evolved, changed, and revolved back to its origins over the generations. Even a reader disagreeing with the premise of collective trauma would find this book fascinating for the history of African-

American cultural protest that it presents. Eyerman leads the reader chronologically through the post-Reconstructionist period, through the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and early 30s, through the influence of the early civil rights movements of the 1940s and 50s on such later activists as Martin Luther King. He continues with the rise of both black nationalism and the Nation of Islam. He also vividly shows the continuity in African-American history. For example, A. Philip Randolph, the trade unionist who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, influenced a later generation of civil rights activists.

Various questions recur among African-Americans seeking to interpret themselves. One is how to “name” the group, and thus oneself. Is one a Negro, a coloured, a black, or an African-American? Each generation, according to Eyerman, had to go through its own collective re-naming exercise. For many, this also became an individual exercise in re-naming, an attempt to stress one’s African heritage rather than the memory of the white owners (and rapists) of one’s ancestors. Another theme is how African-Americans have dealt with their double identity, and how the veil through which African-Americans look at the world, to use W. E. B. Du Bois’ early image, has encountered the Foucauldian gaze of the white. A third theme is the relationship of African-Americans to Africa. In the early period, heavily influenced both by Christian and by European evolutionary beliefs, many African-Americans saw themselves as bringers of civilization to Africa. Later Africa in its revolutionary, post-independence phase inspired much of the 1960s rhetoric that referred to blacks as colonized people, as in the writings of Eldridge Cleaver. The Garveyist dream of pan-African unity was resurrected in the discourse of diaspora, the notion that all biological descendants of Africans, no matter how far removed in time and space, were part of a common community.

As it happens, I read this book while a visiting professor at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, a town steeped in Revolutionary and Civil War history. The professorship I held at Mary Washington was named after the late James Farmer, a leader of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, who ended his career as a professor at the College. At one of the main intersections of historic Fredericksburg are pictures of young Negroes (as they then were) staging a sit-in at the segregated Woolworth’s lunch counter in 1960. Across the river is a historic home, Chatham, a slave plantation occupied by Union troops during the Civil War. At this plantation there was a slave rebellion in 1805; one white man was killed and several slaves were later executed. In 1857 the slaves’ owner died, leaving the slaves their freedom, but only if they were willing to go to Liberia, which few chose to do. There was no better place to read Eyerman’s superb account of the collective trauma of African-Americans.

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For many years a scholar of African and international human rights, Prof. Howard-Hassmann’s current research is on the question of whether the Western world owes reparations to the continent of Africa for slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization.

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February 2003

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