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Cultural trauma and collective memory

What has been lost is the continuity of the past . . . What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation.

Hannah Arendt

It is memory that counts, that controls the rich mastery of the story, impels it along . . .

Jorge Semprun

Introduction

In this book the formation of an African American identity will be explored through the theory of cultural trauma (Alexander *et al.* 2001). The “trauma” in question is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people. There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process. As cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory. The notion of a unique African American identity emerged in the post-Civil War period, after slavery had been abolished.¹ The trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced by many of the subjects of this study, but came to be central to their attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance. In this sense, slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a “primal scene” which could, potentially, unite all “African Americans” in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa. Slavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community depending on the level of abstraction and point of view being put

forward. It is this discourse on the collective and its representation that is the focus of this book.

That slavery was traumatic may seem obvious, and, for those who experienced it directly, certainly it must have been. In a recent attempt to trace the effects of slavery on contemporary African American behavior patterns, Orlando Patterson (1998:40) writes, “another feature of slave childhood was the added psychological trauma of witnessing the daily degradation of their parents at the hands of slaveholders . . . to the trauma of observing their parents’ humiliation was later added that of being sexually exploited by Euro-Americans on and off the estate, as the children grew older.” While this may be an appropriate use of the concept of trauma, it is not what I have in mind here. The notion of an African American identity was articulated in the later decades of the nineteenth century by a generation of black intellectuals for whom slavery was a thing of the past, not the present. It was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that grounded African American identity and permitted its institutionalization in organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909. If slavery was traumatic for this generation of intellectuals, it was so in retrospect, mediated through recollection and reflection, and, for some, tinged with some strategic, practical, and political interest.

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all. While it may be necessary to establish some event as the significant “cause,” its traumatic meaning must be established and accepted, a process which requires time, as well as mediation and representation. Arthur Neal (1998) defines a “national trauma” according to its “enduring effects,” and as relating to events “which cannot be easily dismissed, which will be played over again and again in individual consciousness,” becoming “ingrained in collective memory.” In this account, a national trauma must be understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse. Here, mass-mediated representations play a decisive role. This is also the case in what we have called cultural trauma. Neil Smelser (in Alexander *et al.* 2001) offers a more formal definition of cultural trauma that is worth repeating: “a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society’s existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions.”

In the current case, the phrase “or group’s identity” could be added to the last sentence. It is the collective memory of slavery that defines an individual as a “race member,” as Maya Angelou (1976) puts it.

In Cathy Caruth’s (1995:17; Caruth 1996) psychoanalytic theory of trauma, it is not the experience itself that produces traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it. In her account there is always a time lapse, a period of “latency” in which forgetting is characteristic, between an event and the experience of trauma. As reflective process, trauma links past to present through representations and imagination. In psychological accounts, this can lead to a distorted identity-formation, where “certain subject-positions may become especially prominent or even overwhelming, for example, those of victim or perpetrator . . . wherein one is possessed by the past and tends to repeat it compulsively as if it were fully present” (LaCapra 1994:12).

Allowing for the centrality of mediation and imaginative reconstruction, one should perhaps speak not of traumatic events, but rather of traumatic affects (Sztompka in Alexander *et al.* 2001). While trauma refers necessarily to something experienced in psychoanalytic accounts, calling this experience “traumatic” requires interpretation. National or cultural trauma (the difference is minimal at the theoretical level) is also rooted in an event or series of events, but not necessarily in their direct experience. Such experience is usually mediated, through newspapers, radio, or television, for example, which involves a spatial as well as temporal distance between the event and its experience. Mass-mediated experience always involves selective construction and representation, since what is seen is the result of the actions and decisions of professionals as to what is significant and how it should be presented. Thus, national or cultural trauma always engages a “meaning struggle,” a grappling with an event that involves identifying the “nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility” (Alexander *et al.* 2001). Alexander calls this the “trauma process,” when the collective experience of massive disruption, and social crises, becomes a crisis of meaning and identity. In this trauma process “carrier groups” are central in articulating the claims, and representing the interests and desires, of the affected to a wider public. In this case, intellectuals, in the term’s widest sense (Eyerman 1994), play a significant role. Intellectual here will refer to a socially constructed, historically conditioned role rather than to a structurally determined position or a personality type. Although bound up with particular individuals, the notion will refer more to what they do than to who they are. Generally speaking, intellectuals mediate between the cultural and political spheres that characterize modern societies, not so much representing and giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but rather articulating ideas to and for others. Intellectuals are mediators and

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translators between spheres of activity and differently situated social groups, including the situatedness in time and space. Intellectuals in this sense can be film directors and singers of songs, as well as college professors. In addition, social movements produce “movement intellectuals” who may lack the formal education usually associated with the term intellectual, but whose role in articulating the aims and values of a movement allow one to call them by that name.

Like physical or psychic trauma, the articulating discourse surrounding cultural trauma is a process of mediation involving alternative strategies and alternative voices. It is a process that aims to reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity through collective representation, as a way of repairing the tear in the social fabric. A traumatic tear evokes the need to “narrate new foundations” (Hale 1998:6) which includes reinterpreting the past as a means toward reconciling present/future needs. There may be several or many possible responses or paths to resolving cultural trauma that emerge in a specific historical context, but all of them in some way or other involve identity and memory. To anticipate, the appellation “African American,” which may seem more or less obvious and natural today, was one of several paths or reactions to the failure of reconstruction to fully integrate former slaves and their offspring as American citizens and to the new consensus concerning the past in the dominant culture in which slavery was depicted as benign and civilizing. The idea of returning to Africa had been a constant theme amongst blacks almost from the first landing of slaves on the American continent.² Another alternative, later in its development, also involved emigration, but to Kansas and the North, to Canada or the free states, rather than to Africa. Such a move in the later decades of the 1800s would not necessarily exclude a new identity as, say, an African American, but would not necessarily include it either; it would, however, involve an openness to new forms of identification and the attempt to leave others behind.³

Developing what W. E. B. Du Bois would describe as a “double consciousness,” both African and American, offered another possibility, one that implied loyalty to a nation but not necessarily to its dominant culture or way of life. In 1897, Du Bois posed the question “What, after all, am I? Am I an American or a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American?” (Du Bois [1897] 1999:16–17). Being an aspect of the process of cultural trauma, however this dilemma is resolved, interpretation and representation of the past and the constitution of collective memory are central. The meaning of slavery was a focal point of reference. A similar process was under way amongst whites, and black attempts to negotiate cultural trauma were intimately intertwined with this national project. By the mid-1880s the Civil War had become the “civilized war,” “a space both

for sectional reconciliation and for the creation of modern southern whiteness” (Hale 1998:67ff.). As the nation was re-membered through a new narration of the war, blacks were at once made invisible and punished. Reconstruction, and blacks in general, were made the objects of hate, the Other, against which the two sides in the war could reunite and reconcile. The memory of slavery was recast as benign and civilizing, a white man’s project around which North and South could reconcile.

Collective memory

The history of the study of memory is a tale of the search for a faculty, a quest for the way in which the mind-brain codes, stores and retrieves information. Only with the recent interest in language and in cultural aspects of thinking has there emerged the wider view of remembering as something that people do together, reminding themselves of and commemorating experiences which they have jointly undertaken. (Radley 1990)

Memory is usually conceived as individually based, something that goes on “inside the heads” of individual human beings. “Memory has three meanings: the mental *capacity* to retrieve stored information and to perform learned mental operations, such as long division; the semantic, imagistic, or sensory *content* of recollections; and the *location* where these recollections are stored” (Young 1995). Theories of identity-formation or socialization tend to conceptualize memory as part of the development of the self or personality and to locate that process within an individual, with the aim of understanding human actions and their emotional basis. In such accounts, the past becomes present through the embodied reactions of individuals as they carry out their daily lives. In this way, memory helps to account for human behavior. Notions of collective identity built on this model, such as those within the collective behavior school, theorize a “loss of self” and the formation of new, collectively based, identities as the outcome of participation in forms of collective behavior like social movements. Here memory, as far as it relates to the individual participant’s biography, tends to be downplayed, because it is thought to act as a barrier to forms of collective behavior that transcend the normal routines of daily life. The barrier of memory once crossed, the new collective identity is created *sui generis*, with the collective rather than the individual as its basis. The question of whether this collective may develop a memory has, as far as we know, rarely been addressed by this school.⁴

Alongside these individual-focused accounts of memory have existed concerns with collective identity and with “how societies remember” (Connerton 1989), with roots in Durkheim’s notion of collective consciousness. Here collective memory is defined as recollections of a shared past “that are retained by members of a group, large or small, that experienced it” (Schuman and Scott

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1989:361–62), and passed on either in an ongoing process of what might be called public commemoration, in which officially sanctioned rituals are engaged to establish a shared past, or through discourses more specific to a particular group or collective. This socially constructed, historically rooted collective memory functions to create social solidarity in the present. As developed by followers of Durkheim such as Maurice Halbwachs (1992), memory is collective in that it is supra-individual, and individual memory is conceived in relation to a group, be this geographical, positional, ideological, political, or generationally based. In Halbwachs' classical account, memory is always group memory, both because the individual is derivative of some collectivity, family, and community, and also because a group is solidified and becomes aware of itself through continuous reflection upon and recreation of a distinctive, shared memory. Individual identity is said to be negotiated within this collectively shared past. Thus, while there is always a unique, biographical memory to draw upon, it is described as always rooted in a collective history. This collective memory provides the individual with a cognitive map within which to orient present behavior. From this perspective, collective memory is a social necessity; neither an individual nor a society can do without it. As Bernhard Giesen (in Alexander *et al.* 2001) points out, collective memory provides both individual and society with a temporal map, unifying a nation or community through time as well as space. Collective memory specifies the temporal parameters of past and future, where we came from and where we are going, and also why we are here now. Within the narrative provided by this collective memory individual identities are shaped as experiential frameworks formed out of, as they are embedded within, narratives of past, present and future.⁵

The shift in emphasis in the social sciences and humanities toward language-based, text-oriented analysis has brought new developments to the study of memory. In the field of comparative literature, for example, more attention is being paid to the importance of collective memory in the formation of ethnic identity, and the role of literary works in this reflective process. With the cultural turn focusing on cognitive framing, language, and the emphasis on language and inter-textuality, memory is located not inside the heads of individual actors, but rather “within the discourse of people talking together about the past” (Radley, 1990:46). This is a development which has its roots in linguistic and textual analysis which often is called “post-structuralism,” and in feminist theory and practice. In the 1970s feminists developed techniques of “consciousness-raising” which attempted to make the personal political, to theorize the development of the self within a political as well as a symbolically structured social context. Armed with theories of socialization that combined Marx and Freud (and sometimes G. H. Mead), feminists developed

techniques for liberating individuals from the distorted identity-formation of male dominated society. Like the collective behavior school mentioned above, with whom they shared many theoretical assumptions, some feminists viewed individual memory as a barrier to collective political action. “Memory work” was one technique developed by feminists after the women’s movement moved into the academy, as a way of recalling faded or repressed images of domination.

A more recent development concerns the idea of collective memory itself. The editors of a volume concerning developments in literary theory (Singh *et al.* 1994) define collective memory as “the combined discourses of self: sexual, racial, historical, regional, ethnic, cultural, national, familial, which intersect in an individual.” These form a net of language, a meta narrative, which a community shares and within which individual biographies are oriented. Here Foucault and post-structuralism unite with the Durkheimian tradition referred to above. Collective memory is conceived as the outcome of interaction, a conversational process within which individuals locate themselves. This dialogic process is one of negotiation for both individuals and the collective itself. It is never arbitrary.

From this perspective, the past is a collectively shaped, if not collectively experienced, temporal reference point, which forms an individual, more than it is re-shaped to fit generational or individual needs. This is a necessary addendum, especially where political motivation is concerned. In response to what he calls the “interest theory” of memory construction where the past is thought to be entirely malleable to present needs, Michael Schudson (1989) suggests several ways in which the past is resistant to total manipulation, not least of which is that some parts of the past have been recorded and thus obtain at least a degree of objectivity. Supporting this, Barry Schwartz writes, “given the constraints of a recorded history, the past cannot be literally constructed, it can only be selectively exploited” (Schwartz 1982:398). In this context a distinction between collective memory and history is useful. If, as Halbwachs suggests, collective memory is always group memory, always the negotiated and selective recollections of a specific group, then collective memory is similar to myth.⁶ This, in fact, is how Neal (1998) conceives of it in his work on national trauma.⁷ From Halbwachs’ “presentist” perspective, collective memory is essential to a group’s notion of itself and thus must continually be made over to fit historical circumstance. While this collective memory makes reference to historical events, that is events that are recorded and known to others, the meaning of such events is interpreted from the perspective of the group’s needs and interests, within limits, of course. History, especially as a profession and academic discipline, aims at something wider, more objective and universal

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than group memory. Of course, history is always written from some point of view and can be more or less ethnocentric, but as an academic discipline, even within the constraints of nationally based institutions, its aims and, especially, its rules of evidence, are of a different sort from the collective memory of a group. At the very least, professional historical accounts can be criticized for their ethnocentrism.⁸

A conversation overheard between an historian and a Holocaust victim can perhaps illustrate what I mean. In this conversation the victim was recalling his memories of an infamous Jewish guard in a Polish ghetto. He vividly recalled his personal experience of this man. The historian pointed out that this could not have occurred, as this guard was in another camp at that particular time, and could document that claim. The victim remained skeptical, but perhaps because he was also a scientist, was willing to consider the claim. Later, the historian, who specializes in atrocities like the Holocaust, recounted that he often faced this problem of the difference between memory and documented history.

While the focus on language and ways of speaking has had many liberating aspects for the study of collective memory and identity, there are limitations as well. According to Alan Radley:

this movement . . . still falls short of addressing questions related to remembering in a world of things – both natural, and products of cultural endeavor – where it concentrates upon memory as a product of discourse. The emphasis upon language tends to hide interesting questions which arise once we acknowledge that the sphere of material objects is ordered in ways upon which we rely for a sense of continuity and as markers of temporal change. (Radley 1990)

Viewing memory as symbolic discourse in other words tends to downplay or ignore the impact of material culture on memory and identity-formation. From the point of view of discourse analysis, objects gain meaning only when they are talked about. Radley's point is that the way things are organized, whether the objects of routine everyday experience, like the furniture in a room or the more consciously organized objects in a museum, also evokes memory and a "sense of the past," whether this is articulated through language or not. Food and household items can evoke memory, such as the examples found in the African American cookbook *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* (Darden and Darden 1994:xi), "Aunt Norma's biscuit cutter, Aunt Maude's crocheted afghan, our father's old medicine bottles (representing a medical practice of over sixty years) all evoke powerful and loving memories."⁹ The same can be said of other cultural artifacts, like music and art objects. Listening to a particular piece of music or gazing at a painting can evoke a strong emotional response connected to the past, and be formative of individual and collective memory. Memory can also be embedded in physical geography, as illustrated by Maya

Angelou's vivid description of returning to the small Southern hamlet where she grew up:

The South I returned to . . . was flesh-real and swollen-belly poor. Stamps, Arkansas . . . had subsisted for hundreds of years on the returns of cotton plantations, and until World War I, a creaking lumbermill. The town was halved by railroad tracks, the swift Red River and racial prejudice. Whites lived on the town's small rise (it couldn't be called a hill), while blacks lived in what had been known since slavery as "the Quarters." (Angelou 1974:61)

As Angelou recounts in her biography, the memory of slavery colored almost all of her experience, especially in relations to whites. Barton (2001) reveals how race is materialized in spatial organization and thus recollection.

As a social construct and concept, race has had a profound influence on the spatial development of the American landscape, creating separate, though sometimes parallel, overlapping or even superimposed cultural landscapes for black and white Americans. The spaces forming these landscapes were initially "constructed" by the politics of American slavery, and subsequently "designed" by the customs, traditions and ideology emanating from the Supreme Court's "separate but equal" finding in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, as well as 20th-century "Jim Crow" statutes. (xv)

There is a point to the post-structuralist argument, however, that the actual significance of a response, what it "really" means, is fashioned through language and dialogue and may change depending on the context. Thus, while the arrangement of material artifacts may evoke a "sense of the past" or of something else, what exactly this "sense" is requires articulation through language.

This points further to the issue of representation. How is the past to be represented in the present, to individuals and, more importantly in this context, to and for a collective? If we take the preceding arguments into account, the past is not only recollected, and thus represented through language, it is also recalled, imagined, through association with artifacts, some of which have been arranged and designated for that purpose. If narrative, the "power of telling," is intimately intertwined with language, with the capacity and more importantly perhaps, with the possibility to speak, representation can be called "the power of looking" (Hale 1998:8) and associated with the capacity to see and the possibility to make visible. The question of who can speak and to whom, as well as the issue of who can make visible, are thus central. This point is made in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where according to Barton (2001:1), "the ability to render the world visible and invisible is a concrete form of power, and is part of the social construction of race."

These are matters of great interest to the present study. How was slavery represented, literally and visually, in whose interests and for what purposes? What role if any did former slaves have in this process of collective remembering

through public representation? How slavery was represented in literature, music, the plastic arts and, later, film, is crucial to the formation and reworking of collective memory and collective identity by the generations which followed emancipation.¹⁰ What social movements provide is a context in which individual biographies and thus memories can be connected with others, fashioned into a unified collective biography and thereby transformed into a political force. Social movements reconnect individuals by and through collective representations; they present the collective and represent the individual in a double sense, forging individual into collective memory and representing the individual as part of a collective.

The place of generation in collective memory

If collective memory is always group-based and subject to adjustment according to historically rooted needs, what are the spatial and temporal parameters that mark this process of reinterpretation? As social groups are mobile, so are the borders of its memory and collective identity-formation. The spatial parameters marking these borders vary and have attained more fluidity with the exponential development of mass media. While they may be rooted in relatively specified geographic boundaries, with the aid of mediated representation they may span such restricted space to reach exiles and expatriates. Alternatively, they may reflect non-geographical ethnic and religious foundations that can be diffused over great distances. While both Karl Mannheim and Halbwachs root memory in real communities, those which have face-to-face contact, recent approaches expand this notion to include the “imagined” communities described by Anderson (1991). This has to do in part with the rise to significance of the electronic mass media and the migration of populations, both of which fall under the umbrella term “globalization.” As Igartua and Paez (1997) put it after studying the symbolic reconstruction of the Spanish Civil War, “collective memory does not only exist in the individuals, but that in fact it is located in cultural artefacts. Analyzing the contents of cultural creations, as for example films, one may see how a social group symbolically reconstructs the past in order to confront traumatic events for which it is responsible” (81). This means that the collective memory which forms the basis for collective identity can transcend many spatial limitations when it is recorded or represented by other means. The Armenian-Canadian film maker Atom Egoyan has, in his films, for example, traces of remembrance of the slaughter of Armenians by Turks in 1915 an event which has shaped the collective identity of Armenians ever since. This group is now spread over the globe, but its identity-forming collective memory remains apparently intact, partly due to such media as film as well as the stories passed within the community itself.¹¹