



# Cultural Trauma

Slavery and the  
Formation of  
African American  
Identity

**Ron Eyerman**

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In this book, Ron Eyerman explores the formation of the African American identity through the theory of cultural trauma. The trauma in question is slavery, not as an institution or as personal experience, but as collective memory: a pervasive remembrance that grounded a people's sense of itself. Combining a broad narrative sweep with more detailed studies of important events and individuals, Eyerman reaches from emancipation through the Harlem Renaissance, the Depression, the New Deal, and the Second World War to the civil rights movement and beyond. He offers insights into the intellectual and generational conflicts of identity-formation which have a truly universal significance, as well as providing a new and compelling account of the birth of African American identity. Anyone interested in questions of assimilation, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism will find this book indispensable.

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# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page viii
1. Cultural trauma and collective memory	1
2. Re-membering and forgetting	23
3. Out of Africa: the making of a collective identity	58
4. The Harlem Renaissance and the heritage of slavery	89
5. Memory and representation	130
6. Civil rights and black nationalism: the post-war generation	174
<i>Notes</i>	223
<i>List of references</i>	286
<i>Index</i>	299

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> This, in fact, is how Neal (1998) conceives of it in his work on national trauma.<sup>7</sup> 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

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.<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

Temporally, the parameters of collective memory appear a bit more fixed. Research on memory has brought forth the generational basis of remembrance and forgetting as key to adjusting interpretations of the past.<sup>12</sup> Survey-based research such as that carried out by Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott (1989) has investigated whether or not there are particular events which distinguish generations and which shape the actions of individuals through memory. Their study focused on Americans in the post Second World War era and found that those who came of age during the Vietnam War shared a distinctive collective memory of that period, something that distinguished this cohort from others. Other studies of “traumatic events,” such as the Spanish Civil War (Igartua and Paez 1997) have made similar findings. Taking their starting point in Karl Mannheim’s theory of generation, what these studies tend to show is that “attributions of importance to national and world events of the past half century tend to be a function of having experienced an event during adolescence or early adulthood” (Schuman, Belli, and Bischooping 1997:47). In Mannheim’s original formulation, it was proposed that the events experienced during adolescence are those most likely to “stick” in later life and to influence behavior. Also, those passing through the life cycle at the same point in time are likely to recall the same events, allowing one to speak of a generational memory.

In what would generational memory consist, how would it be produced and maintained? Mannheim had a very optimistic and positive account of generational memory, at least concerning its general “function,” before it is filled with the historically determined specifics. The function of generational memory for Mannheim consists in offering “fresh-contact” “with the social and cultural heritage” of a social order, which “facilitates re-evaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won” (Mannheim 1952:360). Here, collective forgetting is as important as collective remembering for a society’s self-reflection; it is in fact the role of youth or the new generation: to provide society with a fresh look at itself. Aside from this general, and generally positive, role, generational memory consists of a record of and a reaction to those “significant” events which an age-cohort directly experiences. As noted, for Mannheim this involves having direct experience. Later investigators have added mediated experiences, both as formative of a generation and also in terms of retention or reproduction of that generation and others. Thus, not all those who lived through the Sixties participated in social movements, but many others saw them on television. Probably those who participated directly would have a stronger sense of belonging to “the sixties generation,” but those who experienced it on television and are of the same age might also feel a strong sense of belongingness. The question is, would those of a different age who saw it on TV have any sense of belongingness, and where would the age-related boundaries fall? In any case, the role of

the mass media in producing and reinforcing generational identity is a much more central question in the current age than it was in Mannheim's.<sup>13</sup>

### **The cycle of (generational) memory**

The notion of cultural trauma implies that direct experience of an event is not a necessary condition for its inclusion in the trauma process. It is through time-delayed and negotiated recollection that cultural trauma is experienced, a process which places representation in a key role. How an event is remembered is intimately entwined with how it is represented. Here the means and media of representation are crucial, for they bridge the gap between individuals and between occurrence and its recollection. Social psychological studies provide grounds for a theory of generational cycles in the reconstruction of collective memory and the role of the media in that process.

After analyzing various examples, Pennebaker and Banasik (1997) found that approximately every twenty to thirty years individuals look back and reconstruct a "traumatic" past. In applying this account to their study of the remembrance of the Spanish Civil War, Igartua and Paez (1997:83–84) list four factors that underlie and help explain this generational cycle:

1. The existence of the necessary psychological distance that remembering a collective or individual traumatic event requires. Time may soothe and lessen the pain that remembering a traumatic event produces.
2. The necessary accumulation of social resources in order to undergo the commemoration activities. These resources can usually be obtained during one's middle age. The events are commemorated when the generation which suffered them has the money and power to commemorate them.
3. The most important events in one's life take place when one is 12–25 years old. When these people grow older they may remember the events that happened during this period.
4. The sociopolitical repression will cease to act after 20–30 years because those directly responsible for the repression, war, and so on, have either socially or physically disappeared.

If we leave aside their assumption that an event can be traumatic in itself, this framework is useful in the analysis of collective memory. Igartua and Paez emphasize the difference between a generation shaped by the direct experience of an event and those that follow, for whom memory is mediated in a different way. They point to the issue of power and access to the means of representation, which are essential for public commemoration and the framing of collective memory. They also place special emphasis on the role of art and of representation generally in this process.

A discussion of representation seems appropriate here, as this is an issue which will arise throughout this book. Representation can be analyzed along several dimensions, as re-presenting, i.e., as the presentation through words or

visual images of something else, where considerations of form are at least as important as content; this can be considered an aesthetic dimension. That the form may itself have a content has been pointed out by White (1987). Representation can refer to a political process concerning how a group of people can and should be represented in a political body, like a parliament, or another public arena or forum, from the mass media to a museum. Representation has a moral dimension, which can involve both aesthetic and political aspects, when questions like “how should a people be represented?” are raised. There is a cognitive dimension, where representation becomes the prerogative of the arts and sciences, and of professionals, such as museum curators, historians who develop procedures and criteria of and for representation, claiming special privileges regarding the materials presented. As in representativeness, representation can refer to types and exemplars, as in Emerson’s *Representative Men* (1851) or Du Bois’ “talented tenth,” where individuals are said to be types which express the “best” of a race or a civilization.

The complex and problematic issues of representation have been of central concern to black Americans from the earliest periods of the slave trade to the present. In what can be properly called “the struggle for representation” (Klotman and Cutler 1999), black Americans have fought for the right to be seen and heard as equals in social conditions which sought to deny this. This struggle for representation occurred in literary, visual, and more traditional political forms. It encompassed a fight to be seen as well as heard and involved the question of who would define what was seen and heard. The first written accounts “from inside the culture” were the slave narratives, from Briton Hammon’s *Narrative* (1760) to Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) (Klotman and Cutler 1999:xiv). The abolitionist movement and the associated free black press were important mediators and facilitators of this representation, something which affected the mode of presentation, as we will see in the following chapters.

Painting and other forms of visual representation “from the inside” were later to emerge. What have now come to be called the historically black colleges and universities, inaugurated during the Southern “reconstruction” after the civil war, were important in the production, conservation and display of artifacts by black artists. These schools and their collections were central to the education of future artists as well, along with other black scholars and intellectuals. Music, especially as related to work and religion, was one of the few means of cultural expression publicly available to blacks and its importance as a means of representation as well as of expression has been duly acknowledged, not least by black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois, in their attempts to find grounds for the narration of black collective identity in the trauma following the end of reconstruction. What Du Bois would call the “sorrow songs” of the slaves embodied and passed along, across generations and geographical space, the

memories of slavery and hopes of liberation. The first film documentary by a black American appeared in 1910, bearing the title *A Day at Tuskegee*; it offered a representation of the “new Negro” and was commissioned by Booker T. Washington. Commercial black film makers and music producers began to play an increasingly important role from the 1920s onwards, as the urban migrations and better living conditions created a sophisticated audience for “race” movies and recorded music.

Even if these representations were made from the inside, by blacks themselves, the issue of whose voice, whose image was not thereby resolved. The black “community” was always diverse, even as it was unified by enforced subordination and oppression. Internal discussions concerning “proper” representation, as well as the means and paths of liberation, were many and divergent. This was especially so in the urban public sphere that emerged with the Great Migration in the first quarter of the twentieth century. After emancipation and the urban migrations, the possibility that a single issue could define and unite the black “community” and focus any and all representation was undercut. Thus, “since there is no single, unchanging black community, the ‘burden of representation’ involves varying viewpoints, differing degrees of objectivity and subjectivity, and competing facts and fictions” (Klotman and Cutler 1999: xxv). Here different voices and visions clamored to be seen and heard, even as representation was still intimately entwined with subordination and the desire for liberation. This created a situation where representation was a responsibility and “burden”; it could not easily or merely be a form of personal expression, as a black artist was always “black” in the eyes of the dominant culture.

Resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual stories meld through forms and processes of collective representation. Collective identity refers to a process of “we” formation, a process both historically rooted and rooted in history.<sup>14</sup> While this reconstructed common and collective past may have its origins in direct experience, its recollection is mediated through narratives that are modified with the passage of time, filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations, which represent the past in the present. Whether or not they directly experienced slavery or even had ancestors who did, blacks in the United States were identified with and came to identify themselves through the memory and representation of slavery. This came about not as an isolated or internally controlled process, but in relation and response to the dominant culture. The historical memory of the civil war was reconstructed in the decades that followed and blackness came to be associated with slavery and subordination. A common national history was ascribed and inscribed as memory, as well as indigenously passed on, as groups emerged out of protective necessity and/or collective solidarity. In this sense, slavery is traumatic for those who share a common fate, not

necessarily a common experience. Cultural trauma articulates a membership group as it identifies an event or an experience, a primal scene, that solidifies individual/collective identity. This event, now identified with the formation of the group, must be recollected by later generations who have had no experience of the “original” event, yet continue to be identified by it and to identify themselves through it. Because of its distance from the event and because its social circumstances have altered with time, each succeeding generation reinterprets and represents the collective memory around that event according to its needs and means. This process of reconstruction is limited, however, by the resources available and the constraints history places on memory.

The generational shifts noted by Pennebaker and others can be said to structure temporally the formation of collective memory, providing a link between collective (group) memory and public (collective) memory. Groups of course, are public, but a particular group’s memory may not necessarily be publicly, that is officially, acknowledged or commemorated. If a collective memory is rooted in a potentially traumatic event, which by definition is both painful and open to varying sorts of evaluation, it may take a generation to move from group memory to public memory; sometimes it may take even longer, sometimes it may never happen at all. The case of American slavery is an example. As Ira Berlin notes in his introduction to *Remembering Slavery* (1998), slavery is remembered differently in the United States depending upon which time period and which racial group and regional location one starts from. He writes:

Northerners who fought and won the (civil) war at great cost incorporated the abolitionists’ perspective into their understanding of American nationality: slavery was evil, a great blot that had to be excised to realize the full promise of the Declaration of Independence. At first, even some white Southerners – former slave-holders among them – accepted this view, conceding that slavery had burdened the South as it had burdened the nation and declaring themselves glad to be rid of it. But during the late nineteenth century, after attempts to reconstruct the nation on the basis of equality collapsed and demands for sectional reconciliation mounted, the portrayal of slavery changed. White Northerners and white Southerners began to depict slavery as a benign and even benevolent institution, echoing themes from the planters’ defense of the antebellum order . . . Such views, popularized in the stories of Joel Chandler Harris and the songs of Stephen Foster, became pervasive during the first third of the twentieth century. (Berlin 1998:xiii–xiv)

There was a long history of visual representation to draw upon as well. In his account of the “visual encoding of hierarchy and exclusion,” Albert Boime (1990:16), shows how “a sign system had been put into place” (15) which supplemented written and oral justifications for slavery. Especially in the nineteenth century, white artists produced paintings that reinforced beliefs about the

“happy slave,” contented in his/her servitude. This was filtered through popular culture in minstrelsy, where black-faced white actors parodied black dialect and behavior in staged performances. American culture was permeated with words, sounds, and images which “took-for-granted” that slavery was both justified and necessary, beneficial to all concerned, at the same time as there existed a counter-current which “remembered” the opposite.

Against the attempt to reconstruct slavery to fit particular interests, stood the recollections of former slaves, those passed down orally, in story and song, as well as written slave narratives, being hailed today by many as the origins of a distinctive African American aesthetic. These voices, though significant and strong after emancipation, took second place, at least to begin with, to the optimistic hope for integration. It was the future orientation, not a reflected-upon common past, that unified blacks after the civil war. As the former slaves began to die out the voice of direct experience began to disappear. Already in 1867 a group of interested collectors could write about the songs they were about to publish, “The public has well-nigh forgotten these genuine slave songs, and with them the creative power from which they sprang . . .”<sup>15</sup> By the 1880s, as 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. Through various media and forms of representation black artists and writers reconstituted slavery as the primal scene of black identity. In this emergent identity, slavery, not as an institution or experience but as a point of origin in a common past, would ground the formation of a black “community.” This was not the only source of the revived memories of slavery however. In face of repressive, often violent reaction from Southern whites, many blacks fled the South as reconstruction ended. One of their prime motivations for migrating was the fear that slavery would be reinstated (Painter 1976). In the trauma of rejection, slavery was remembered as its memory re-membered a group. Slavery defined, in other words, group membership and a membership group. It was in this context that the recollection of slavery was articulated as cultural trauma.<sup>16</sup>

As stated previously, the idea of an African American was one result of this identity struggle. It is important to keep in mind that the notion “African American” is not itself a natural category, but an historically formed collective identity which first of all required articulation and then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate. It was here, in this identity-formation, that the memory of slavery would be central, not so much as individual experience, but as collective memory. It was slavery, whether or not one had experienced it, that defined one’s identity as an African American, it was why you, an African, were here, in America. It was within this identity that direct experience, the identification “former slave” or “daughter of slaves” became functionalized

and made generally available as a collective and common memory to unite all blacks in the United States. This was a self-imposed categorization, as opposed to, and meant to counter, those of the dominant white society. In this sense, the memory of slavery by African Americans was what Foucault would call a “counter-memory.”<sup>17</sup>

This clearly marks a difference between black and white in social and historical understanding. It was in the context of re-narrating the meaning of the civil war that “whites” and “blacks” were articulated as distinctive social groups with a complex, yet common history. Whites, regardless of whether chance had placed them in the North or the South, shared a European cultural heritage, what would soon be identified as part of Western civilization, while blacks belonged to Africa and the “uncivilized.” While some whites might have condemned slavery as an evil institution and bemoaned its effects on the body politic of American society, blacks viewed slavery as a social condition, a lived experience, producing a distinctive way of life, a culture, a community, and thus an identity, which affected not only the past and the present, but also future possibilities. A distinct gap emerged between the collective memory of a reconstructed minority group and the equally reconstructed dominant group in post-reconstruction America; the one which controlled the resources and had the power to fashion public memory. Even here, however, differences between regions, North and South, winners and losers of what some have called the first modern war, created conflicting modes of public commemoration and thus public memories. While both sides avoided slavery as a mode of experience, except of course for the North’s celebration of its role as liberator and the South’s paternalistic romanticism, to focus on the civil war itself as a traumatic event in the nation’s history, each side offered a different interpretation and developed different ceremonies and rituals to officially and publicly commemorate that event.

There were some dissenting voices, especially amongst liberals and radicals in the North. Savage (1994) cites one very influential Northern point of view, that of William Dean Howells, America’s foremost literary critic writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1866, who believed that commemoration following the war should focus not on soldiers and battles, but on the ideals and ideas over which the war was fought. Howells, in what must have been a minority view, thought “ideas of warfare itself – organized violence and destruction – unfit for representation” (Savage 1994:127). As an alternative he pointed to “The Freedman,” a sculpture of a freed black slave done in 1863, as “the full expression of one idea that should be commemorated” (cited in Savage 1984:128). Needless to say, this suggestion went unfulfilled. Instead, each side, North and South, built monuments to its soldiers and their battlefields. In his analysis of these monuments, Savage writes, “issues such as slavery were at best subsidiary

in the program of local commemoration, lumped in with stories of Christian bravery and other deed of heroism . . .” (131). This was also the context in which “whiteness” and “blackness” were reconstructed as overarching categories, transcending regional differences. With slavery out of the picture, there could be reconciliation between the opposing sides, each being allowed to mark their own heroes, thus sweeping aside one of the main contentions of the war. Finally, “commemoration and reconciliation, two social processes that were diametrically opposed in the aftermath of the Civil War, eventually converged upon a shared, if disguised, racial politics” (132).

Without the means to influence public memory, blacks were left to form and maintain their own collective memory, with slavery as an ever-shifting, reconstructed reference point. Slavery has meant different things for different generations of black Americans, but it was always there as a referent. It was not until the 1950s, even the 1960s, that slavery moved outside group memory to challenge the borders, the rituals, and sites of public memory. The phenomenon of erecting monuments has become popular for African Americans only recently, because while the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation granted enslaved blacks the imaginary juridical space of constitutional rights, it was not until the civil rights movement a century later that the physical spaces of the nation – schools, hotels, and public institutions – were made accessible. Today “Black Heritage,” as it is termed, has ballooned into a multimillion dollar tourist industry. Cities, historical societies, and citizens groups have identified locales where key events in the struggle for equality occurred and have undertaken preservation measures for the homes of eminent figures and the buildings of important institutions (Barton 2001:13). Again it was a social movement, the civil rights movement, that reopened the sore and helped transform the cultural trauma of a group into a national trauma. Since then and only since then has slavery become part of America’s collective memory, not merely that of one of its constituent members. At the beginning of this century the meaning, commemoration and representation of slavery continues to evoke emotionally charged response. Reviewing the most recent American historical literature on North American slavery, George Fredrickson (2000:61) writes “One hundred and thirty-five years after its abolition, slavery is still the skeleton in the American closet. Among the African-American descendents of its victims there is a difference of opinion about whether the memory of it should be suppressed as unpleasant and dispiriting or commemorated in the ways that Jews remember the Holocaust. There is no national museum of slavery and any attempt to establish one would be controversial.” While black Americans may be divided in their opinions regarding the commemoration of slavery, most white Americans, Fredrickson continues, see no reason to accept responsibility for slavery or its effects on American blacks.

Along with the narrative frameworks that as “internalized moral force” (Alexander and Smith 2001), give meaning as well as order to collective memory, the notion of emancipation has been a constituent aspect of black American tradition. After the failure of reconstruction to realize the promises implied in the Emancipation Proclamation, American blacks have sought their own paths to liberation. Three distinct models can be identified. The first follows the ideals upon which Lincoln’s famous speech was based, Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy and human dignity and the rights to full citizenship as guaranteed by law, the principles which inspired the French and American revolutions. It is this model which was most tightly coupled with the progressive narrative and underpinned the struggle for civil rights which began directly after the end of reconstruction in the efforts to integrate public transport and to pass anti-lynching legislation, as well as for more formal political rights to participation which were removed in the political purges in the late 1870s. This struggle for individual autonomy was, in the context of cultural trauma, necessarily a collective struggle, as “blacks” were ascribed an identity of difference, especially in the South. This model of emancipation was institutionalized in the NAACP and other organizations.

A second model of emancipation was inspired by the anti-colonial and nationalistic movements, like the Irish, Jewish Zionism, and later, national liberation movements in Africa. These movements provided models of cultural and political nationalism, as a means of overcoming marginality and subordination. A third model was emigration, collective leave-taking, a form of political nationalism that coupled emancipation with possession territory, a nation/racial home. This latter was most clearly linked with the tragic, redemptive narrative.

To each of these models of emancipation were attached various strategies for their realization. The full citizenship model called for a long-term struggle of legal confrontation, gathering evidence, accumulating “cases” and changing laws. Tactics varied, from indirect to direct, aggressive confrontation, but they always involved using and challenging the laws of the land, with the aim of acquiring full and equal guarantees for blacks. The national or racial liberation model implied a strategy of racial identification, solidarity and withdrawal, similar to the labor movement. It called upon blacks to recognize themselves as a group in the positive sense and not merely as victims of white discrimination and ascription. Programs of self-help, from producer and consumer cooperatives, to the founding of racial zones based on a varying combinations of economic, political, and religious principles were central to this strategy. Tactics varied from moral persuasion to physical threat and the use of force, both within to enforce solidarity and without, in confronting the dominant “white” society. The model of emigration was the most clear-cut, to unify and remove the “race” from its exile and to return to a homeland, although the location of the latter

varied. These strategies were important in the cultural praxis, or the process of collective identity-formation of the social movements which formed their basis.

There are identifiable generational aspects in this process of continuity and change in black American responses to the cultural trauma of the failure of emancipation to emancipate black Americans. Although I use the concept of generation in a social rather than biological sense, I have designated specific time-periods in this study, making use of the convenient principle of decades. My use of the concept "generation" however derives from sociological theory (Mannheim 1952; Eyerman and Turner 1998) and requires a set of conditions beyond biological age and time of birth for its application, and is primarily a collective memory which serves to integrate an age-group.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the first "generation" is that formed around the turn of the century shaped by the end of reconstruction. This is the generation which articulates the cultural trauma and begins to formulate the responses, including the recollection of collective memory. The second "generation" is that formed by the first waves of the migration, at the end of the First World War. It is here, in the 1920s, that the two dominant narrative frames took shape and the collective memory was significantly reformulated. The third "generation" took form during and just after the Second World War, shaped by new waves of urban migration in the context of Pax Americana and the consumer society, again reforming the collective memory in a significant way. From this time-spread it should be clear that date of birth is not the central aspect in the articulation of a generation. Rather it is the convergence of social forces and the emergence of social movements which are key to the formation of a collective consciousness which forms a generation in my sense of the term. Generation is not merely synonymous with generational awareness growing out of the shared experience of significant events, but requires as well significant collective action which both articulates this consciousness and also puts it into practice and through which collective memory is reformulated. It is in this context that the past is reinterpreted to provide a map for the present/future.

In addition to the theory of cultural trauma, the theoretical framework for the analysis which guides this work derives from social movement theory, especially the cognitive approach developed by Eyerman and Jamison (1991, 1998). Important here is the idea that the articulation of a collective identity is a central task and even a defining characteristic of social movements, an idea contained in the concept of cognitive praxis. This concept will be used in describing the role of social movements in the reconstruction of collective identity and the transformation of collective memory regarding black Americans. Cognitive praxis refers to that process of identity articulation and formation, a process in which intellectuals, both traditional and movement-produced, are central.

The notion of “frames” and the process of “framing” have been central to the contemporary analysis of social movements. Stemming from Goffman (1974) and also European phenomenology, the concept has several connotations. It refers to the process whereby aspects of reality are highlighted and others hidden or forgotten, as when a “frame” is placed around a painting.<sup>19</sup> Frame also refers to the ordering or structuring of story, something which also highlights events and gives them meaning. I use the concept of “narrative frame” in both these senses. In addition to the cognitive emphasis on framing, the role of social movements in the constitution of a collective subject through collective representation will also be discussed. Representation here can be of several sorts, one of which is the more common political kind of representation where individuals represent, stand or speak for others. Here movement intellectuals and leaders are key actors. Another aspect of representation, however, concerns collective memory and the representation of a shared past. Through the context for dialogue they create, social movements facilitate the interweaving of individual stories and biographies into a collective, unified frame, a collective narrative. Part and parcel of the process of collective identity or will formation is the linking of diverse experiences into a unity, past as well as present. Social movements are central to this process, not only at the individual level, but also at the organizational or meso level of social interaction. Institutions like the black church and cultural artifacts like blues music may have embodied and passed on collective memories from generation to generation, but it was through social movements that even these diverse collective memories attained a more unified focus, linking individuals and collectives into a unified subject, with a common future as well as a common past.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, “Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory,” introduces the themes and concepts used in the study. Chapter 2, “Re-Membering and Forgetting,” applies this framework to the period between 1865 and the early twentieth century, when the process of cultural trauma begins and responses are articulated. Here the first black intellectuals play a significant role in constituting a discourse on collective identity. Chapter 3, “Out of Africa,” discusses the emergence of the idea of a “New Negro,” the significance of W. E. B. Du Bois and the role of popular culture around the turn of the century in articulating a new, racially based, collective identity. Chapter 4, “The Harlem Renaissance and the Heritage of Slavery,” covers the urban migrations that followed the First World War, the emergence of an urban black public sphere and the articulation of two narrative frameworks, one progressive and the other tragic/redemptive, which will “frame” the meaning of past/present and future for black American identity. Chapter 5, “Memory and Representation,” covers the period between the great depression and the end of the Second World War. Here continued migration and concentration of

the black population and rising standards of living alter the two narrative frames developed by the previous generation. Radio offers a new medium for representing as well as communicating to the black “community.” Chapter 6, “Civil Rights and black nationalism: the post-war generation,” covers the emergence of these two movements and the changes they effected in the narrative frames. This chapter covers the period from the 1950s to the present and includes a discussion on how the image and heritage of slavery continues to affect black America.