

In an illuminating discussion of the origins of the field that was originally termed Afro-American or black studies, Julius Lester reminds us that the nascent enterprise

was not invited into the curricula of colleges and universities because it was thought to have something new and vital to offer the humanistic body of knowledge. . . . It fought its way in through demonstrations in the sixties and seventies. Black studies was born because a man named [Martin Luther] King was assassinated. (Quoted in Cole 2004, 22)

The field of black studies originated in the rhetorically and physically confrontational late 1960s; its driving concern has been black American anguish stemming from the incontrovertible fact that “a race of people [was] brought into this country . . . to be slaves [and] . . . begins in a group experience of suffering and agony, of struggle and survival” (Lester, quoted in Cole 2004, 24). Having risen from ashes strewn across the United States during riotous black inner-city responses to King’s assassination and increasingly ineffectual Great Society initiatives, black studies, an outgrowth of an urge for mainstream institutional respect, recognition, and representation, has been associated with the most radical accounts of the black American condition. As a result, King’s generative place within a field created in response to his death is often overlooked, even when scholars explore issues that propelled King’s agitation for black American freedom, which he explained in masterfully delivered speeches and well-crafted articles and books that illuminate his religious, philosophical, political, and sociocultural beliefs.

Perspectives such as Lester’s¹ compel us to consider if and how the views of King, whom August Meier insists operated “not only as an organ of communication with the Establishment and majority white public opinion, but as something of a bridge between the activist and more traditional or ‘conservative’ civil rights groups” (1992, 218), are embodied in the field’s investigative emphases and institutional practices. Such investigations are possible despite the fact that, as Fabio Rojas asserts in *From Black Power to Black Studies*, students and professors working to establish centers of black scholarship viewed their efforts as sharp departures from King’s integrationist endeavors:

The push for black studies revolved around black intellectuals, student groups, and the debates within the civil rights movement concerning black power and cultural nationalism. Viewing the civil rights movement as a limited and underwhelming effort, nationalists

adopted a more radical position, demanding the creation of institutions specifically dedicated to serving the African American community. (2007, 5)

Notwithstanding the urgency of such demands, the programs that were ultimately the most impactful—those with longevity, records of significant scholarly productivity, and a modicum of institutional power—“serve[d] the entire university” of which they were a part, offering “courses taken by both black and white students” taught by faculty using methodological assumptions that propelled disciplines such as history, sociology, English, art, and political science, many of whom produced analyses that engaged the most sophisticated findings of these disciplines. The entity that Rojas designates as “academic black studies,” then, is, in actuality, a field with “extremely porous boundaries” (2007, 100).

In ways that demonstrate his analytical acuity and political practicality, King vividly describes urban riots as wrenching expressions of black pain. Recognizing that fire-this-time machinations undermined his negotiating ability on behalf of the black American freedom struggle, King calculated the political costs of rioting and vengeance-driven forms of black militancy. Ultimately, he concludes, racial violence and its threat were illogical, ineffectual, and counterproductive:

A violent revolution on the part of American blacks would find no sympathy and support from the white population and very little from the majority of the Negroes themselves. This is no time for romantic illusions and empty philosophical debates about freedom. This is the time for action. What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program that will bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible. So far, this has only been offered by the nonviolent movement. (1986f, 249)

Condemning rioting both tactically and philosophically, King deems the isolationist stance of the younger blacks unlikely to increase their sociopolitical, economic, or cultural power in a white-dominated United States. While recognizing Black Power as an invigorating “reaction to the psychological indoctrination that led to the creation of the perfect slave” (1986g, 580), he considers Black Power “a nihilistic philosophy” premised on the belief “that American society is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within” (580). Its adherents, in King’s view,

were convinced “of the inability of the Negro to win and . . . the infinitude of the ghetto” (584–585). Recognizing that lifting “the Negro out of the economic depression caused by centuries of deprivation” (586) requires more than frustration-fueled bravado, he implores blacks to join his disciplined mass force that had already secured significant black American sociopolitical and economic progress.

King’s writings test his commitments against influential scholarly, religious, and sociopolitical arguments. These writings, which social historian David Steigerwald insists “blended the spirit of the preacher with the thoughtful, reasoned analysis of the scholar,” reveal the efforts of an intellectual who “returned to his roots with a Ph.D. from an illustrious program at a major northern university steeped in the major theological doctrines of his day and well schooled in Western philosophy” (1995, 41). King measured his ideas of social advancement against sometimes diametrically opposed perspectives, including the era’s preeminent theorist of black identity, Frantz Fanon. Recognizing the civil rights leader as a scholar of the psychodynamics of American race relations encourages us to consider his ruminations as serious commentary on formulations that were being deemed more persuasive and usable assessments of black American racial pain than King’s by figures whose insights would go on to propel black studies.

In “Where Do We Go From Here?” King disputes the claims of Fanon, whose *The Wretched of the Earth* offers a blueprint for U.S. “proponents of Black Power who argued passionately about the validity of violence and riots.” Rejecting Fanon’s assertion “that violence is a psychologically healthy and tactically sound method for the oppressed,” King claims that black rioters manifest “a desire for self-destruction, a suicidal longing,” and insists that “nowhere have the riots won any concrete improvement such as have the organized protest demonstration” (1986g, 591). And in the following formulation of black Americans’ peculiar challenges, he questions the efficacy of both Fanon’s view of cathartic violence and Black Power’s embrace of sociopolitical marginality:

The Negro’s greatest dilemma is that in order to be healthy he must accept his ambivalence. The Negro is the child of two cultures—Africa and America. The problem is that in the search for wholeness all too many Negroes seek to embrace only one side of their natures. Some, seeking to reject their heritage, are ashamed of their color, ashamed of black art and music, and determine what is beautiful and good by the standards of white society. They end up frustrated and without cultural roots. Others seek to reject everything American and to identify totally with Africa, even to the point of wearing

African clothes. But this approach leads also to frustration because the American Negro is not an African. The old Hegelian synthesis still offers the best answer to many of life's dilemmas. The American Negro is neither totally African nor totally Western. He is Afro-American, a true hybrid, a combination of two cultures. (1986g, 588)

King situates black ontological ambivalence within Hegelian dialectics, echoing what Rojas identifies as the “only . . . nearly undisputed canonical” text in black studies (Rojas 2007, 201), W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, in his contention that black U.S. identity is essentially interstitial, an amalgam of African and American ideals. Identifying the black American psyche as fundamentally bifurcated—“an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 1989, 45)—Du Bois's much-discussed theory of double consciousness emphasizes synthesis:

The history of the American Negro is the history of . . . this longing . . . to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (45–46)

The black self figured here, the victim of an internal war, is fearful of being “torn asunder” (46) by the psychic strife that results from living in a democratic nation whose doors remain “closed roughly.” According to King, however, who urged his followers to accede to being—in Du Bois's words—“cursed and spit upon” to dramatize racial hatred, black American integration (in at least two senses of the word) is possible only when we locate “that creative minority of the concerned from the oft-times apathetic [white] majority, and together mov[e] . . . toward that colorless power that we all need for security and justice” (1986g, 589).

In light of these formulations, which emphasize the warring impulses endemic to being both what King calls “heirs of a past of rope, fire and murder” and inheritors of “the destiny of America” (1986g, 588), I propose “traumatized black subjectivity” as a way to conceptualize post-civil rights

performances of identity that reflect both the complexities of the black American present and its relationship to the “past of rope, fire and murder.” This concept encourages attentiveness to a pain-filled history, certainly, as well as to the largely still-deferred American Dream despite its availability to a supremely talented, industrious, or exceptionally lucky few. More than four decades after King’s death, our era is marked, on the one hand, by unprecedented access to the most mainstream institutions and, on the other, by the bewildering celebration by hip-hop culture of what King terms “the infinitude of the ghetto.” Our conditions and struggles have morphed to such an extent that few of us may still believe, as King did, that awareness of the sources and nature of black pain could compel “the whole of American society [to] take . . . a new turn toward greater economic [and other forms of] justice” (1986g, 586). Other factors are now at work than those that were apparent when King expressed these views, some of which can be investigated fruitfully in the context of notions of racial trauma.

I reference trauma here because of my sense that black American identities were and continue to be formed in response to what Lester termed, in a passage cited at the beginning of this Introduction, a “group experience of suffering and agony, of struggle and survival.” I employ extant theories of trauma to examine black American identity as a cultural formation, analyzing black American conditions and behaviors as part of already rich conversations about such concepts as memory, space, class, gender, race, and nation. Trauma studies have flourished during the last two decades, even if scholars have been generally inattentive to black American suffering. Indeed, the psychic upheavals resulting from slavery and Jim Crow are parenthetical asides and afterthoughts in works such as *Trauma and Recovery*, where Judith Herman waits until the afterword to address “the legacy of [U.S.] slavery” (1992, 243). Nonetheless, her insights can be used to enhance our discussions of black American suffering and the implications of its historical denial. For example, when Herman insists that “without some form of public acknowledgment and restitution, all social relationships remain contaminated by the corrupt dynamics of denial and secrecy” (243), she confirms the perspectives of reparations advocates concerning the benefits of seeking atonement for the national government’s sanctioning of slavery and Jim Crow. Additionally, her reading of reactions to the Rodney King verdict² indicates how and why unhealed black American trauma manifests itself as and through violence:

The unhealed racial divisions of our country create an ongoing potential for violence. The worst civil disturbance of the past few years, the Los Angeles riots, were provoked by the failure of the justice

system to hold armed white police officers accountable for the severe beating of an unarmed man. Within the African-American community, it was widely understood that such abuses were political crimes, carried out as part of a systematic pattern of racial oppression. The issue at trial was whether the larger society would condone the most flagrant of these human rights abuses. The responsibility to bear witness fell to the jury in the criminal trial. In their refusal to see the crime that was documented before their eyes, we can recognize the familiar defenses of denial, distancing, and dissociation [that often accompany traumatic events]. . . . [And] it was this betrayal, not simply the violence of the police, that unleashed a communal outbreak of murderous rage. (243–244)

Herman's analysis of "prolonged, repeated trauma" (74) and her association of this condition with "forms of tyranny" suffered by "hostages, political prisoners, battered women, and slaves," all of whom "remarked upon the captor's . . . desire for total control over another person" (75, 76), encourages fruitful consideration of black American pain alongside, for example, the Holocaust and 9/11.

Both the hesitation of trauma scholars to engage black American pain and the potential benefits of its investigation are evident in an interview included in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* by Dominick LaCapra, a noted theorist of Holocaust historiography. Concerned about the avoidance by trauma scholars of the subject of U.S. racism, his Israel interrogator, Amos Goldberg, asks LaCapra to address whether "the overemphasis on the Holocaust in the popular culture, the politics, and the economics of America is some kind of denial of the traumas with which America is directly involved" (2001, 171). After acknowledging that "traumas (such as that of the African Americans and the Native Americans) are still relevant there, and America may be blinded to its present by emphasizing the traumas of others in the past" (171), LaCapra says of U.S. trauma studies' race problem:

Contemporary problems related to the heritage of slavery and the treatment of American Indians can . . . be obscured by a focus on the Holocaust. . . . [W]hy, on the Mall in Washington, [do] we have a Holocaust museum but no museum dedicated to slavery or to the American Indians[?] After all, they were our victims, and we were part of the force that tried to combat those who victimized the Jews in Europe. . . . The obvious answer is that people do indeed attempt to obscure or displace certain problems by focusing on other problems.

This can happen; the point is to recognize it and try to resist it.
(171–172)

Given the magnitude of the Holocaust, rather than condemn the field's Eurocentric biases—a tactic that black studies used to its advantage, especially in its institutional infancy—we would do well to heed LaCapra's advice "to avoid a displacement of competitive victimology onto competitive theory," (2001, 174) as he characterizes the possible recriminations of such a critique. Hoping to apply largely Holocaust-based formulations of trauma in a black studies context, I seek what "is significant for research into other areas, including . . . issues such as slavery" (174). Recognizing that while plantations and death camps were quite different sites of subjugation, trauma studies has the potential to assist black studies, in part because "slavery, like the Holocaust . . . , presents . . . problems of traumatization, severe oppression, a divided heritage, the question of a founding trauma, [and] the forging of identities in the present" (174). In the following section, I consider the fruitfulness of the formulations of trauma studies for an investigation of black American collective pain.

Judith Herman characterizes traumatic events as "extraordinary" in that

they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. . . . They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. . . . [T]he common denominator of psychological trauma is a feeling of "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation." (1992, 33)

Because "traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own," they create in its sufferers a type of "fragmentation, tear[ing] apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion" (Herman 1992, 34). Even "after the danger is past," Herman writes,

traumatized people . . . cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally

safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma. (37)

How might we extrapolate from Judith Herman's formulations an understanding of black Americans' attempts to grapple with their ancestors' mistreatment and their own sense of an incompatibility between their national and racial heritages? Our efforts can be enhanced by LaCapra's discussion of traumatic memory, which forces its sufferers to feel that "when the past is uncontrollably relived . . . , there were no difference between it and the present. Whether or not the past is reenacted or repeated in its precise literality, one feels as if one were back there reliving the event, and the distance between here and there, then and now, collapses" (2001, 89). Explorations of the role played by traumatizing events in the constitution of black American identities may enrich black studies in ways that are similar to Herman's efforts vis-à-vis the diagnosis and treatment of sexually and psychologically abused women and LaCapra's interrogation of "the problem of historical understanding" (1994, 1). Such emphases may enable us to examine more cogently "the Negro's greatest dilemma": constituting black American identity in response to the slow-changing face of racial oppression and nagging feeling that black Americans are constantly reliving the nightmarish conditions and irrepressible pain that marked slavery and Jim Crow.

Because contemporary black American identities were forged in response to psychic, physical, and spiritual pain associated with slavery and Jim Crow, overidentification with the victims of these regimes may be unavoidable, and psychic distance a luxury of the naïve and the strategically misinformed. LaCapra supplies a grammar of traumatic responses in the context of which the politics and performances of post-civil rights black identities can be evaluated. Indeed, the protagonists of the chapters that follow understand post-civil rights era challenges (and, hence, themselves) as inextricably bound—in their own estimations or in those of people who shaped their social, cultural, and political existence—to murderous antebellum and Jim Crow dilemmas.

In *Philadelphia Freedoms*, I position one particular traumatic incident—King's assassination—as compelling generations of black Americans to feel as if we are "back there reliving the event," as if "the distance between here and there, then and now, collapses." A violent repudiation of the nation's evolving racial politics and policies, King's assassination caused black American cultural trauma whose familiarity—the white cultural logic of slavery, Jim Crow, and countless acts of white brutality; its perpetrators'

obvious intention to halt hard-won racial reformation—situates post-civil rights black American identities as inherently interstitial. These identities are already formed and perpetually in process: between the status of “surrogate victim” of racial barbarity and the distanced observer of its still-evident deformations, compelled to remember (and, sometimes, to see recent events as motivated by the very evil that produced our centuries-long dehumanization), yet striving to prevent active remembrance from sullyng our access to contemporary freedoms.

The phenomenon’s most extensive exploration to date, Ron Eyerman’s *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, argues that “the formation of an African American identity” is connected directly to post-emancipation reactions to slavery as a “primal scene.” For Eyerman, 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” (2001, 1, 2). Further, he insists that “trauma links past to present through representations and imagination,” suggesting that events like King’s assassination often are not experienced directly, but “through newspapers, radio, or television” and conversations concerning social identities. Since black American identity is forged via “‘a meaning struggle,’ a grappling with an event [or events], identifying the ‘nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility’” (3), cultural trauma must be seen as a psychosocial “process that aims to reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity through collective representation” (4).

Rather than emphasize agency in post-emancipation engagements of the trauma of slavery, I am interested in the apparent inescapability of cultural trauma by subsequent generations, who remain vulnerable, because of their “overidentification” with the anguish of ancestors that they encounter through representations, to a phenomenon that LaCapra terms “retraumatization.” Concerned, like Eyerman, with trauma’s “social dimension,” Kai Erikson, an authority on the social consequences of catastrophic events, insists that the phenomenon “be understood as resulting from a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening, from a persisting condition as well as from an acute event” (1994, 185). American slavery and Jim Crow were not “discrete happening[s]” but clusters of experiences whose complexity, duration, and inescapability helped shape black American behaviors, presuppositions, and attitudes. These oppressive institutions, then, created “assemblies of traumatized persons” who shared with one another and their

prodigy “a mood, an ethos—a group culture” that made them feel as if they “were invited to gather in a quarter set aside for the disfranchised, a ghetto for the unattached” (185, 186).

The attributes of traumatized communities—numbness, estrangement, detachment, ghetto habitation, and marginalization—are manifested by large numbers of black Americans, whose despondency and rage create inter-generational “ghetto[es] for the unattached” that become what Erikson calls “a cushion for pain, . . . a context for intimacy, [and a] . . . repository for binding traditions” (1994, 188).³ Bound by a language and experience of trauma—and by modes of behavior and reasoning forged over time from scraps of African and American cultural practices—membership in “corrosive communities” is in large part determined by our responses to painful events that have placed them on the “fault lines” “divid[ing] the people affected by the event from the people spared. . . . Those not touched try to distance themselves from those touched, almost as if they are escaping something spoiled, something contaminated, something polluted” (189). To see black American culture as corrosive is to recognize race as a site of biological—as well as social, political, religious, economic, and cultural—warfare. The frustrations experienced by black Americans consequently work their way “so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they . . . dominate its imagery and its sense of self, [and] govern the way its members relate to one another.” The shared experience of the ongoing trauma of blackness constitutes “a source of kinship,” creating, in Erikson’s words, “social climates, communal moods, that come to dominate a group’s spirit” (190). The manifestations by black Americans of such a spirit are what I refer to here as “traumatized black subjectivity.”

As Maurice Halbwachs insists, “There exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of recollection” (1992, 38). In describing the process of remembering, Halbwachs suggests that certain categories of modern people

are free to choose from the past the period into which we wish to immerse ourselves. Whereas in our present society we occupy a definite position and are subject to the constraints that go with it, memory gives us the illusion of living in the midst of groups which do not imprison us, which impose themselves on us only so far and so long as we accept them. (50)⁴

Invariably, however, to be a self-conscious black American is to confront the weight of prejudices used to justify physical, spiritual, and psychological violence against one's people, to experience confinement as a persistent historical reality, and to understand that there is no previous period in U.S. history in which we can immerse ourselves to escape a collective subjugation. Hence, many black Americans of the post-civil rights era find themselves perpetually in the thralls of "postmemory," a term coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe "the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (1999, 8). Bereft of comparatively significant personal or generational stories, "those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (8) recognize their own belatedness, often experiencing their own lives—demonstrably less besieged than those of their predecessors—as nearly as structurally inhibited, as well as physically and psychically perilous, as those of their forebears. Certainly, black Americans plagued by postmemory do not feel, as Halbwachs suggests, that "the most painful aspects of yesterday's society are forgotten because constraints are felt only so long as they operate and because, by definition, a past constraint has ceased to be operative" (1992, 51). (Indeed, black Americans are anything but immune to dilemmas implicit in King's notion of hybridity, as they are always cognizant of—and perhaps, as our responses to the beating of Rodney King and the death of Trayvon Martin suggest, still traumatized by—the painful presence of the starkly brutal racial past.) What LaCapra describes as the process of working through the traumatic past rarely is fully completed by black Americans, for whom the jagged grain of history remains unsmoothed.

Precisely because of its aggressively social nature, black Americans are unable to manipulate memory as freely as Halbwachs claims modern citizens are generally capable. Specifically, he argues that

the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing the past. But . . . they most frequently distort that past in the act of reconstructing it. . . . [S]ociety can live only if there is a sufficient unity of outlooks among the individuals and groups comprising it. The multiplicity and diversity of human groups result from an increase in needs as well as from the intellectual and organizational faculties of the society. . . . [S]ociety tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals, or that might distance groups from each other. (1992, 182–183)

Emphasizing the impulse to distort and forget aspects of the past that do not jibe with a group's self-definition, Halbwachs describes society as an organism bent on its own survival whose bidding we do because we crave the benefits that accrue from our association with it—the security of belonging, a tangible historical place, ontological presence, and allies—even if that choice requires the radical reconstruction and distortion of the past. Belonging requires, in part, a disremembering of and disregard for differences, enabling people to satisfy the society's "need for continuity" by forging a cohesive whole out of "the multiplicity and diversity of human groups" (183).

However, constructing the past as a site of expansive racial pain is essential to efforts to forge an aggrieved black community, a collectivity that requires a reckoning with their implications for our contemporary place in the larger U.S. bent on seeing that pain reduced to sheer irrelevance. Hence, at times, it is deeply disconcerting for black Americans to participate in a national culture that aggressively downplays the significance of slavery and Jim Crow precisely because these epochs—and the lingering pain they signify—"distance groups from each other." As a consequence, many blacks struggling with the psychic strife of postmemory are compelled to ponder: How precisely do we embrace *both* metanarratives of U.S. exceptionalism—its compelling stories of democratic self-making, its glorious discourse of unparalleled opportunity, its seductive rhetoric of manifest destiny—and countermemories emphasizing our people's baleful treatment on its hallowed shores? What, for blacks, are the psychic benefits of American citizenship? How do we take pride in subversive tea party revolts, Jeffersonian rhetorical flights, and U.S. democracy's celebrated victories when our story had to be erased and our pain—our very humanity—discounted and denied in the service of national unity? To forge a sense of national belonging, must we strategically forget, misremember, or reinvent the past as we wish it had been?

A profound sense of traumatized subjectivity limits black Americans' ability to forget our historical degradation and to rely, as Halbwachs suggests is possible, on "reason or intelligence that chooses among the store of recollections, eliminates some of them, and arranges the others according to an order conforming with our ideas of the moment" (Halbwachs 1992, 183). Indeed, black Americans' "ideas of the moment" seem never to stray far from the subject of our historical oppression, and we resent our still-marginal place in a nation bent on "eras[ing] from its memory all that might . . . distance groups from each other," particularly those "ancient representations"—slave ships and heavy chains; Harriet Tubman's underground journeys to and from Southern killing fields; whipped, raped, charred, castrated, and lynched bodies; Emmett Till's shocking funereal face;⁵ flesh-piercing fire hoses and

ferocious dogs; Rodney King's surreptitiously filmed lynching—that “assume collective form” (Halbwachs 1992, 183) and, hence, help define the contours of contemporary black American identities.

One representative effort to forge national consent by condemning attempts to think through the contemporary implications of “ancient representations” is Arthur Schlesinger's 1992 book, *The Disuniting of America*. Worried that the United States is in danger of becoming “not a nation of individuals at all but a nation of groups” and that ethnicity is seen as “the defining experience for most Americans,” Schlesinger insists that such thinking “reverses the historic theory of America as one people—the theory that has thus far managed to keep American society whole” (16). Trumpeting the notion of *E pluribus unum* as one of the nation's singular accomplishments, he nonetheless acknowledges racism as “the glaring contradiction of American ideals and the still crippling disease of American life” (14). Despite his awareness of racism's “crippling” effects, Schlesinger professes to being taken aback by the “cult of ethnicity [that] has arisen . . . [to] denounce the idea of a melting pot, to challenge the concept of ‘one people,’ and to protect, promote, and perpetuate separate ethnic and racial communities” (15).

Bemoaning our failure following the civil rights movement to forge what Halbwachs calls “a sufficient unity of outlooks” among the staggering “multiplicity and diversity of human groups” (1992, 183), Schlesinger insists that the United States has been weakened by ethnic groups who fail to see making sense of and taking pride in cultural and historical differences as psychologically healthy alternatives to the strategic forgetfulness demanded of the dispossessed by the nation's forces of conservation. According to the famed historian, developing national pride is essential for black Americans who need to embrace the “American creed”: “the cluster of ideas, institutions, and habit” that all U.S. citizens share, including “the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings, of inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and opportunity” (1992, 27). Developing faith in this creed is a challenge for the dispossessed, Schlesinger admits, largely because the nation's “noble ideals had been pronounced as if for all Americans, yet in practice they applied only to white people” (38). But because he privileges the rhetoric of national unity over a consideration of the psychological impact of racially motivated scorn and violent rebuke, he insists that all of its citizens must establish psychic allegiance to the United States and unquestioned faith in its creed, or risk being denied “the means of improvement and achievement and . . . the opportunities of national life” (94).

Schlesinger's perspectives notwithstanding, is it possible to imagine self-respecting notions of black American identity that wholeheartedly embrace

narratives of national allegiance, given that the United States' governing ideal, "we the people," explicitly excludes those blacks for whom the indignities of slavery and Jim Crow continue to resonate? Such questions haunt the lives of self-aware black residents of history-saturated sites of national commemoration such as Philadelphia. Both longtime Philadelphians and visitors of African descent to the First City continually bump up against the legacies of Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, and numerous other white men who forged the nation's still-invigorating concept of freedom in response to oppressive British colonial rule while insisting that black men and women remain enslaved. The hybrid nature of black American identity as King describes it requires that we luxuriate in the nation's accomplishments and abhor the United States' baleful treatment of our forebears simultaneously. Hence, a profoundly disconcerting sense of national belonging is experienced with alarming regularity by black Philadelphians confronting the nation's investment in both New World freedom and old-fashioned slavery.

Prompted by historian Gary Nash's sumptuous study of contested memories of Philadelphia's history, I position myself alongside "individuals and groups outside of the circle of cultural arbiters try[ing] to gain a claim on the past by resisting 'official' truth and telling different stories" (2002, 12). Insisting that "people have seen their history through a variety of different lenses—depending on . . . what experiences, ideas, and values they bring to the act of looking back" (12)—Nash encourages interpretations of the past that "see the world clearly in both short and long perspectives." Such interpretations enable readers

to see the past as it was experienced differently by Philadelphians of various stations in life; to see how our understanding of bygone eras depends partly on what historical materials were collected, preserved, and exhibited; to look at artifacts, documents, and paintings from different angles of vision. (13)

Nash's notion of bifocal investigation, inspired by one of favorite son Ben Franklin's First City accomplishments, resonates with Du Bois's theory that black Americans are gifted with "second sight in this American world" of stark racial marginalization and "unreconciled strivings" (Du Bois 1989, 45). Because black Philadelphians and other U.S. citizens struggle to embrace "short and long perspectives" on white hegemony, the central concern of black American history is the nation's persistent thwarting of blacks' efforts to satisfy what Du Bois calls "this longing . . . to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (45) and King describes as a pain-filled attempt to

“accept his ambivalence” (1986g, 588). Up to and including King’s messianic efforts, the push for access to “the doors of Opportunity” whose entrance would enable blacks to be “both a Negro and an American” led to us “being cursed and spit upon by his [and her] fellows” both literally and metaphorically. Largely because of King, racially motivated acts of cursing and spitting on blacks came to be seen as the aberrant behavior of white racists. But the memory of the state-sanctioning of broken bones, shattered lives, gashed psyches, and murder lingers, informing blacks’ often-conflicted ideas of our national place.

Influential blacks have referenced Philadelphia’s symbolic significance in highlighting constitutional commitments to freedom that still had not been extended to their people. Note, for example, Frederick Douglass’s 1870 proclamation in Philadelphia following the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which guaranteed that black Americans would enjoy the same constitutional rights as whites: “I am no longer a black man . . . but a citizen.” However, instead of joining Douglass in the celebration of this legislation, some whites launched “a sickening attack on the day’s festive procession,” transforming this moment of celebration into another painful episode in “black Philadelphians’ long historical travail—their Philadelphia history” of having to “face . . . violence when they claimed equal right to public spaces” (Nash 2002, 259). Nearly two decades later, Douglass insisted that while they wanted to put “the nightmare of life in chains . . . behind them,” “colored people of this country are bound to keep the past in lively memory till justice shall be done them” (quoted in Nash 2002, 313). Douglass’s later remarks suggest the “lively” bifocal nature of black Philadelphia memory, which enables the discernment of “contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes” that “now streak” “the Philadelphia story” (319).

If the histories of fabled locations such as Philadelphia are always strategic inventions, we would do well, in this era of expansive possibility, to embrace the challenges inherent in the observation that history is befuddling in its incompleteness. If we can never know or tell the whole truth about the past, we can certainly be honest about, and make keen intellectual use of, the predilections that inspire our choices of which erased or marginalized events to highlight from our self-consciously demarcated vantage points. And we can acknowledge that efforts to highlight underexplored dimensions of metropolitan and national events are motivated by a desire to remake the past in an image that is amenable to a view of history as contested terrain.

Philadelphia Freedoms, which takes as its subject an eclectic mix of events and texts from each of the last four decades of the twentieth century, explores contestations over the meanings of black identity that occurred at a time

when freedom seemed finally to be discernible on—to borrow a phrase from Andrea Lee’s *Sarah Phillips*—“the endlessly beckoning horizon” ([1984] 1993, 15). Mirroring the messiness of traumatic cultural memory, on the one hand, and, on the other, the continued urgency felt by black Philadelphians in particular and black Americans generally “to keep the past in lively memory till justice shall be done,” I acknowledge the veracity of Halbwachs’s claim that we are

incapable of mentally reproducing all the events in their detail, the diverse parts of the tale in proportion to the whole, and the whole series of traits, indications, descriptions, propositions, and reflections that progressively inscribe a figure or a landscape in the mind of the reader, which allow him to penetrate to the heart of the matter. (1992, 46)

Cognizant at such moments that “a gap continues to exist between the vague recollection of today and the impression . . . which we know was vivid, precise, and strong,” we also cannot fully “recall the mental state in which we found ourselves” when we first encountered books, films, and songs. Hoping “to relive the memory,” eventually we come to understand that what remains from past encounters are decontextualized parts, textual scraps, imagistic snatches and flashes, to which we can bring coherence only by “forc[ing] them to enter into the framework of the present” (Halbwachs 1992, 46).

Because it is informed by such perspectives, what I offer in the following pages is decidedly not a history of black Philadelphia in the post-civil rights era. Rather, it is an investigation of carefully selected episodes and flashes of pages, lines, and visual memory that I take to be representative of efforts to shape, broaden, or challenge the contours of black American identities in the wake of our first encounters with full citizenship on U.S. shores. Unlike Douglass, who offered stirring First City notions of a raceless American manhood, scores of blacks have responded to their unprecedented access to U.S. educational, business, cultural, and political institutions by emphasizing what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has called our “signifying . . . black difference” (1988, xxii). That choice, while confounding and ill-advised according to figures like Schlesinger, indicates, at the very least, that Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness and King’s notion of hybridity continue to signify the status of black Americans as perpetual outsiders if assimilation—at least psychic occupation of the national center—requires a devaluation of aspects of a culture constructed to protect its adherents from the pain of racial discrimination.

Philadelphia Freedoms does not seek to install an inherently psychoanalytical concept, “traumatized black subjectivity,” as the point of departure and primary object of black studies. It does, however, pursue illuminating connections between this concept and presuppositions that inform scholarship in this expansive field. Specifically, it brings together findings from a variety of modes of black critical inquiry in an effort to construct broadly persuasive examinations of texts and cultural events connected to Philadelphia, and to topics such as place, class, memory, and gender that have enlivened humanistic discourses over the past two decades and, in turn, have the potential to inspire even more cogent work. The City of Brotherly Love serves as a beacon of hope because of its exalted place in the nation’s history, even if, for blacks, it has not always proven to be a site—in Doreen Massey’s words—of “stability, oneness, and security” and its meanings are formed “by the juxtaposition and co-presence there of particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce” (1994, 168–169).

As a native South Philadelphian in exile, as it were, I am compelled by what Lucy Lippard has identified as “the lure of the local.” According to Lippard, this lure

is the pull of place that operated on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting. (1997, 7)

“A place called home” by the nation and its citizens, Philadelphia signifies democratic possibility and, for me, unconditional familial affection. However, it is also, for black Americans—and nostalgic black sons and daughters like me—a terrain of sometimes shockingly undemocratic treatment; Philadelphia has caused pronounced levels of racial insecurity precisely because blacks’ mistreatment has occurred mere blocks from locations where exalted national promises were composed and will echo in perpetuity. The city’s status as home and not-home, as a dreamscape of liberty forever deferred, informs our responses to the symbols, episodes, and recollected fragments that others have held to be uncompromisingly dear before and after the civil rights movement.

The First City’s name derives from *philia*, a Greek word signifying the promotion of well-being when assisting or befriending others. Philadelphia

certainly has not always lived up to its name in its treatment of black Americans. In this study, I explore precisely how that history of non-*philia* behavior resonates in response to efforts to describe or perform post-civil rights black identities in circumstances where Philadelphia's character is central. Because of its place in the nation's zeitgeist, the First City is a critical site of traumatized black subjectivity, a sense of racial being that, to reference the influential theorist of trauma Cathy Caruth, can be described as the "peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those [blacks] who have passed through them." Often, "these repetitions . . . appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control" (Caruth 1996, 2). The texts and events I have chosen to represent both Philadelphia as a fraught site and black subjectivity as a form of traumatic possession encode the pain of belonging and not-belonging simultaneously, of freedom promised but conditional at best and always under threat. They communicate the provisional nature of post-civil rights freedom as well as black Americans' struggle to achieve a secure grasp on its constitutional promise. Seemingly random and unrelated, these moments contain within them both the roots of black American terror and, implicitly, like all narratives of trauma, the means to effect its transcendence.

Like Samuel Otter's *Philadelphia Stories*, which focuses on people for whom "Philadelphia was the place where, in concentrated form, a peculiarly American experiment was being conducted" (2010, 8), this study examines texts and events where the promise of American freedom is placed alongside the First City's status as a site of black American oppression. Hence, it grapples with the United States' dogged refusal to actualize the rhetoric of brotherhood, religious tolerance, and representative government that originated in Philadelphia, pondering what it has meant to traverse such a sacred national place after the successes of the King-led civil rights movement, where the term *place*, which Tim Cresswell insists "has been rejuvenated by the humanistic and radical reactions to spatial analysis," signifies "a meaningful location" (1996, 13, 7).

For black Americans Philadelphia has been a location that has meant—among numerous other things—freedom's haunting denial, along with the emergence of the strife of double consciousness caused by the tension it has produced between the comforts of place and the threat of space. As a symbolic location, then, Philadelphia means provisional freedom and conditional brotherhood, compelling its black citizens both to revere its discourse of democratic freedoms and to recognize that these freedoms may be denied to them at any point. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, "Long residence enables us

to know a place intimately, yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience” (1977, 18). The self-conscious black Philadelphian is at points overwhelmed by experiential and spatial bifurcation that positions him or her as an intimate stranger in a location that is both peaceful and wild, place and space, cause and effect, pause and movement.

In 1970, Arthur L. Smith—now known as Temple University’s maverick Africologist, Molefi Asante—claimed in the inaugural “Editor’s Message” of the *Journal of Black Studies* that the inherently “interdisciplinary” field was “born with so much pain and anguish.” He implored scholars to produce work that is sufficiently “dynamic, innovative, and creative” to “add . . . to the factual, analytical, and evaluative” understanding of black life and its representations (Arthur Smith 1970, 3). Scholars have met Smith’s challenge by utilizing a range of theories and methodological approaches in an effort to understand the devastating psychic, economic, cultural, and spiritual consequences of racial oppression. Adding the formulations of trauma studies and theories of space and place to our analytical arsenal can further enrich our discussions of post-civil rights manifestations and representations of the “pain and anguish” of U.S. hybridity as well as the meanings of symbolic locations such as Philadelphia.

At the very least, trauma studies can assist our efforts to demonstrate the conceptual depth, breadth, and weight of the concept of double consciousness, the field’s core formulation. If, as Cathy Caruth argues, truly compelling examinations of traumatic stories require that analysts marshal an array of ways “of knowing and of acting” (1995, ix), we can fruitfully examine the residue of slavery and of black Americans’ displacement in projects addressing traumatic black subjectivity as a state of strange national intimacy arrived at following our nominal achievement of civil, legislative, and political freedom.

Drawing heavily on former Philadelphia 76er Chet Walker’s exploration of its racially charged causes and traumatic implications, Chapter 1 considers the decision to begin the 1967–1968 National Basketball Association semi-final series between the 76ers and the Boston Celtics on the day after King’s April 4, 1968, assassination. I examine this choice in its local context, which includes the institution of repressive law enforcement measures devised to ensure that major riots did not erupt in Philadelphia in the aftermath of King’s murder. Also, I analyze it in the light of national debates about how to respond respectfully to the civil rights leader’s death and whether black athletes should boycott the 1968 Olympics to draw attention to the United States’

racial inequalities. Finally, I situate this decision alongside the intrigue surrounding James Brown's celebrated performance in the Boston Garden on the same night.

Chapter 2 examines rhythm-and-blues songs from the 1970s exploring black fatherhood specifically and black masculinity more generally, including the O'Jays' "Family Reunion," the 1975 release by the successful Philadelphia International Records group. These songs are considered in the context of major social, political, and artistic developments that led some commentators to see the decade as marked by a significant fragmenting of the black body politic. The O'Jays' song, which critiques social movements of the 1960s such as women's liberation, describes what it sees as the devastating impact of this progressive movement on black families. Essentially confirming the findings of the 1965 Moynihan Report, which tied black American socioeconomic progress to the race's capacity to replicate a patriarchal white family structure, the song insists that patriarchy is both divinely sanctioned and "the solution to the world's problems." In light of this report, as well as literary texts and other songs that emphasize the contours of a traumatized black manhood in particular and role of the black father especially, this and other songs' nostalgia for patriarchy is more easily comprehended.

Chapter 3 offers a reading of Andrea Lee's 1984 novel, *Sarah Phillips*, whose focus is the conflicts experienced by a young black female Philadelphia Main Line resident whose parents expose her to both the fruits and the psychic challenges of post-civil rights integration. When the novel is read in the context of, among other works, William Julius Wilson's groundbreaking work *The Declining Significance of Race*, its marginalization by black feminist critics and by theorists of black literary production seems unjustified. This chapter argues, in fact, that in its ambivalence about the meanings of race and class, Lee's novel represents some of its period's central tensions, including how we might understand the black American literary tradition. I address what happens when performances of blackness are not passed down from parent to child as cultural practices because members of elite classes are unwilling to risk contamination by traumatizing blues possibilities, including rape, teenage pregnancy, and gangs.

The final chapter concentrates on the 1998 Philadelphia premiere of *Be-loved*, which was filmed in and around the First City in the summer of 1997, and seeks to explain its commercial and artistic failures. Considering it in a variety of relevant contexts—including Oprah Winfrey's television, book club, and magazine enterprises; contemporary films that investigate almost unimaginable atrocities; and other works by director Jonathan Demme—I argue that the film fails commercially because of the nation's aversion to

depictions of slavery and fails artistically because of its refusal to delve deeply enough into the horrors of that U.S.-peculiar institution to illuminate Sethe's decision to kill her child and, hence, to justify the film's excursion into the painful historical past.

Philadelphia Freedoms concludes with a brief discussion of two early twenty-first-century incidents, centered in the City of Brotherly Love, in which tensions between the traumatic nature of black American identities and the false idealism of national rhetoric are evident. These incidents are (1) the 2002 debate about the commemoration of George Washington's newly unearthed presidential residence, whose subterranean slave quarters complicates our image of the nation's truth-loving First Father, and (2) then-presidential candidate Barack Obama's 2008 speech on race, which was delivered at Philadelphia's Constitution Center. In the speech, Obama uses the city's glorious history of national self-creation to distinguish his patriotic visions of evolving race relations from the embittered views of his pastor, Philadelphia native Jeremiah Wright, whose jeremiads condemning U.S. domestic and foreign policies were used to challenge his parishioner's political and ideological—as well as racial—fitness to hold the nation's highest public office. As these twenty-first-century examples indicate, Philadelphia's symbolic meanings will continue to be examined in our conversations about the contours of black American identity. The First City's—my city's—complicity in the perpetuation of black suffering cannot always be drowned out by even the most melodious national rhetoric.