

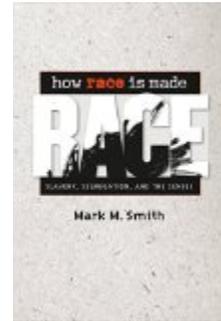
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark M. Smith. *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 208 S. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3002-4.

Shane White, Graham White. *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. xxii + 242 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8070-5026-2.

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## Making Sense of Race and Slavery

If historians of slavery, race, and the South are familiar with the burgeoning subfield of sensory history, it is largely because of the efforts of the three authors under consideration here. Their names have become synonymous with the employment of innovative methodology to illuminate the history of slavery and of African Americans.[1] These books thus follow up on and further explore familiar themes, but themes which would not be so familiar to most of us without these historians' distinguished careers. The books under consideration are engaging and generally persuasive in their own right, and raise important questions when considered together.

To begin with, these two books appear to be aimed at different audiences. Shane White and Graham White's *Sounds of Slavery* is apparently aimed at an undergraduate and general readership, for it does not engage with the relevant historiography in the text (a sure death-knell for such an audience's interest) or even in the notes. Indeed, while it brims with insightful analysis on isolated points along the way, the book seems to offer no overall interpretation of any sort. Scholars may object to a book whose overall point is unclear, as may teachers who want to expose their students to books driven by argument. Yet there are many teachers, students, and general readers who will surely appreciate White and White's imaginative reconstruction of the texture of the past, and their appropriate emphasis on "the 'pastness' of

past sounds"—their attempt "to recover some of the shock value that those sounds would have had for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whites who heard them" and had not yet heard a Gershwin or a Clapton mediate them (p. xix). Moreover, both in teaching and for more personal usage, the accompanying CD featuring eighteen tracks of recordings mostly from the 1930s—not sounds from the slaves themselves, of course, but "about as close as we are ever going to get" (p. xxii)—is a gem.

Smith's *How Race Is Made*, on the other hand, is clearly addressed to a scholarly audience. It is brief enough, its argument clear enough, and its prose so elegant and mercifully free of jargon that it might work well in an upper-division classroom. But Smith intends this book to be "an exploratory essay" (p. 4) largely for fellow scholars' consideration. Especially in the introduction, but interspersed throughout, he vigorously engages with existing scholarship on the makings of race in the U.S. South, as well as literature from history and other disciplines on the senses. Indeed, his notes provide an excellent guide to the historiography of sensory history as well as of American race relations.

Rather than a more general consideration of the senses like Smith offers, White and White focus their attention on sound. In explaining this choice, they make a persuasive case for what sound tells us that cultural

expressions that struck other senses—textiles, foodways, etc.—do not tell us about African American culture and its reception by white observers. These historians who have pointed our attention to such phenomena as slaves' dress and hair styles are well aware of the other distinctive features of African American culture, but here they insist that "to a large extent African American slave culture was made to be heard" (p. 95; also see p. 189). Moreover, much of what struck whites and blacks alike as "distinctive about black culture was to be found in the realm of sound" (p. ix).

To many white auditors, "distinctive" was too kind a term. Whether field hollers or sermons preached and hymns sung in black church gatherings, the sounds slaves made struck white ears as harsh and discordant. The shock came from content as well as tone; slave sermons and songs seemed pointless and wandering, loose thoughts strung together in no particular order. White and White locate this disconnect between the sounds' producers and their white auditors in "black cultural preference[s]," many of which they argue found their roots in West Africa (p. 63). For instance, "slave singing was not harmonic, in the Western sense, with soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts, but rather, in many cases, heterophonic," meaning that the singers "sang in response to, and in 'conversation' with, one or more of the other singers" (p. 63). Furthermore, "in the slaves' African homelands," singers aimed not first and foremost to please the ear, but rather "to express life in all its aspects through the medium of sound" (p. 30). Thus when telling a tale of dislocation or confusion, a seemingly indiscriminate chronology might work better than a neat narrative structure (p. 71). And while black ministers did not follow a prepared text for their sermons, they were not exactly shooting from the hip either; they were drawing on "a vast repertoire of biblical texts and phrases" stored in their memories and "which, imaginatively placed in new contexts, would provoke in [their] hearers the shock of recognition" (p. 143). Far from sharing many whites' sense that this was an inferior culture, the gap between slaves' and masters' culture was to most slaves "both reassuring and a matter of some pride" (p. 96). Indeed, one former slave insisted that his WPA interviewer in the 1930s render his dialect accurately: "Be sho' and put it 'becase' insteder 'because,' 'cause us didn' say 'because,' 'us said becuse' ... Us said 'dem' and 'dese' and 'dese' and 'wid' and 'hab' and 'an' and 'uster' and 'gwine' and 'gwinter' and all like dat" (p. 96; see also 48).

In the hand of White and White, the material in this book and CD constitutes a wonderful evocation of

the distinctiveness of black culture in the era of slavery. As such the subtitle of the book, with its emphasis on "African American History," involves truth in advertising. But I wonder about the title itself. For this book does not treat the full range of "the Sounds of Slavery." For one thing, it privileges slaves' agency by far over their suffering. Four pages early on (pp. 3-7) analyze the effects on slaves of the sounds of the horns and bugles that started the day's work, the sickening sound of a whipping, and so forth. But the rest of the book deals with sounds enslaved African Americans made (with the sometime exception of field hollers) on their own account, in their own space at the end of the working day or on Sundays. Thus, the book wades, by implication, into the old structure-vs.-agency debate in slavery historiography, and I do not in this critique mean to revisit that tired debate. This book also has the genuine merit of depicting American slaves in their fullest humanity, illustrating their resilience in the face of what Frederick Douglass called "the soul-killing power of slavery" (p. xix). (By the way, Douglass holds up the slave songs, which the authors take to be evidence of the buoyancy of this culture, as evidence of that brutal power.) But with such a preponderant emphasis on slaves' autonomous culture, it is hard for this book to make the comprehensive claims implied in the title.

Another way in which the title does not fully fit is in its relative inattention to white people. After the brief summary offered above, this may seem a strange criticism, for the book does revolve in many ways around white people's responses to black culture. But after page 7, white people produce none of the sounds in this book, so that many of the most truly discordant "sounds of slavery"—such as stump speeches denouncing Yankee agitators as the sectional crisis heated up—are absent.

Furthermore, the authors inquire insufficiently into the purposes and identities of the white auditors in question, all too often sure that describing them as "white" is good enough. At times they offer brief modifiers—Yankee traveler, English visitor, etc.—without pursuing the vastly differing agendas such observers brought to the experience of hearing slaves' sounds. They posit "a degree of uniformity in whites' reactions to African and African American" culture (p. 35) that their own evidence does not support. Indeed, their sources repeatedly show that while most whites were repulsed by what they heard from slaves, plenty of them arrived at some level of appreciation for the strange sounds. This phenomenon cries out for serious attention to the eye of the beholders, so to speak, but the authors do not deliver.

The most egregious example is the authors' running dichotomy between "black churches" in which emotion ruled supreme and the much more staid "white churches" of the day (e.g. pp. 100-101). This involves an extraordinary stereotyping of "white religious practices" (p. 104), lumping the most pentecostal revival preachers and congregations together with their high-church counterparts. To be sure, the churches to which masters steered their slaves fit this general description, and may have given many slaves a skewed vision of "white" religion. But, especially for the era in question, the notion that "white" religion equaled Episcopalian equanimity does not hold water.[2] It certainly does not square, for instance, with one observer's disgust at a noisy church meeting of slaves that he could only compare to "a Mormon pow-wow" (p. 172).

To take another instance, White and White note that during the 1850s, "it was quite common for whites to go out of their way to watch and listen to slaves," and that "a small minority of whites began to appreciate and then gradually to love this new sound" (p. 18; see also p. 51). From its context this reader inferred that this passage refers to Southern whites, but I had to infer that.

More importantly, one is left to wonder *why* these Southern whites voiced such an appreciation for black culture specifically in the 1850s. White and White offer nothing to answer this question beyond "decades of living together" (p. 18). Beyond the question of how much familiarity bred beyond contempt in Southern race relations, could it be that in this crisis decade, defensive slaveholders were eager to pose as paternalists who truly understood and loved "their people"? Mark Smith suggests as much, and it is a plausible suggestion. But White and White make no real moves (besides a hesitant step on page 55) towards grappling with these whites' agenda. Finally, more scrutiny of white people's varying purposes might help explain the relative lack of descriptions of "slave noise" in the colonial period (p. 151; see also p. 25). For during most of the colonial period, white people were naturally less curious about an institution that was not peculiar, whereas in the early republic more visitors with more agendas—not to mention planters now desperately posing as paternalists—arrived on the scene and heard more of what they wanted to hear.

While *The Sounds of Slavery* makes manifest the authors' admiration for the emotive quality of enslaved African Americans' culture, Smith's *How Race Is Made* condemns racist white Southern culture for irrationality. This is a jarring and ironic contrast when these two

books are placed together. In Smith's tale, white Southerners act from powerful emotions stirred by sensation, and African Americans are to be praised for their commonsensical approach to matters of race and the senses; whereas Shane White and Graham White continually imply that the culture of white Southerners—indeed of all whites—was barren because it was overly intellectual! Especially in Smith's case—as when he cautions that the visceral nature of Southern culture applied only "when it came to race" (p. 4)—these strikingly different emphases are hedged about by qualifications. But the contrast remains and is worth pondering and discussing.

Smith came to consider the role of the senses and the emotions they stir by considering the question of "why the belief in 'race' proved so enduring if the idea of 'race' was so unstable" (p. 5). The idea of the color line in Southern society was and is so riddled with logical contradictions that something more primal must be at work, he reasoned. Furthermore, as proved by the phenomenon of "black" people able to "pass" as "white," the sense of sight alone—tied as it is in post-Enlightenment Western culture to rationality—was insufficient to mark and police the boundary between white and black. It was because the idea of race was so tied to the other senses—hearing, touch, taste, and (especially, the weight of his treatment seems to imply) smell—that it proved so enduring. Indeed, even Southern liberals in the civil rights era, who fully appreciated the illogic of race, found it extraordinarily difficult to escape the South's sensory history, which "lodged like emotional shrapnel in the gut" (pp. 122-123). In short, Smith argues, "the association between the senses and emotion, between race-thinking and gut-feeling, was, in many ways, a central theme of southern history" (p. 2).

This is an admittedly ambitious argument, aiming to illuminate not only Southern history but also the process of constructing race that is so enduring a theme in the very human condition. And Smith advances it in a persuasive and thought-provoking manner. His evidence ranges from the late colonial period through the 1950s, although it is much richer and more compelling for the era of segregation—during which Southern whites were particularly voluble in expressing their visceral disgust for African Americans—than for that of slavery. Like the Whites' book it glitters with small gems of insight along the way, but unlike that book it leaves its strongest impression in relation to its overall argument. For it is a methodological manifesto that demands and merits careful consideration.

Among the questions it raised for this reader is what proportion of the construction of racial categories can truly be explained by the senses? Smith's assertion that reason alone can never explain the persistence of racism is very well taken. But neither, it seems to me, can the senses alone explain it. One vital element missing in this formulation is *imagination*. If much of Southern whites' loathing for blacks came from the senses, much of their fear came from a fevered imagination of the horrors black people were innately capable of and predisposed towards. Furthermore, imagination may provide a more useful avenue to understanding racism that developed at a distance from actual black people: the racial beliefs of Northerners or upcountry Southerners, for instance, who had more limited interaction with black people. In this situation of observing the other from a distance, indeed, the imagination seems free to run particularly wild.

A related point is that in the single-minded pursuit of sensory history that is natural to such a methodological contribution, Smith at times allows himself to indulge in a fair amount of reductionism. To say, for instance, that "love and hate regulated southern slavery, and *at the center* of that perverse intersection stood an intimate, uneven, sensory exchange between the races" (p. 5; emphasis added) seems a bit of a stretch. Smith goes out on an even longer limb by stating that in the 1850s, the defense of slavery "demanded" more than anything else "a clear, emphatic statement on the relationship between race and the senses" (p. 29). Indeed, Smith seems to suggest, restive slaves and abolitionists attacked nothing quite so much as "the slaveholders' sensorium" (p. 37)! Finally, neither of these enemies posed "the most serious challenge" to slaveholders in the 1850s—the growing number of lighter-skinned free people of color in the South did, for their very existence "threatened to undermine the racial basis of slavery" (p. 39). In short, such statements comprise a simplification of what Southern slave society was all about and an unpersuasive reworking of what was at stake for the South in the sectional crisis.

The issue of free people of color raises another concern, this one related to causation. Light-skinned "black" people did indeed raise "the need to sense race beyond vision" (p. 4). The problem with Smith's treatment of this issue is that this sensory problem seems forever to be "becoming" an issue. It first surfaces in the colonial period (p. 4); then it surfaces again in the late antebellum period (p. 39); then we see "race ... *becoming* a visually unstable category" during "the great age of 'passing'" between 1880-1925, when "race had to be authenticated on a daily

basis between strangers in a modernizing, geographically fluid South" (pp. 68, 7; emphasis added). As authors such as David Waldstreicher and James Oakes have shown, the geographic fluidity that could complicate racial identification was not new to the Jim Crow era.[3] More importantly, Smith makes no attempt to differentiate between the various times in which he suggests sight was becoming inadequate.

Finally, it seems a bit much to say, as Smith does, that rational thought had nothing to do with Southern white racism, which was "immune to logic, impervious to thought" (p. 47). The senses' "ability to make solid what was always" logically "slippery" is, undoubtedly, "annoyingly impressive" (p. 66). But to agree with this is not to exclude reason—especially in the form of calculating pursuit of political and economic interest—from the equation altogether. Sensory perceptions of poor whites are a case in point. For poor whites performed the manual labor and lived in the sort of squalid conditions that made so many black people stink in the nostrils of white people, their worship services (contra Shane White and Graham White) were noisy and disorderly, and the skin, appearance and deportment of these "rednecks" were all coarser than more privileged white folk. But significantly, "there is no evidence that slaveholders and elites considered such behavior" among poor whites "innate" as they did with black people (p. 26). Certainly there is no *public* record of any expression of this sort from Southern politicians, for it is not the essence of political wisdom to declare the voters innately inferior! Moreover, poor whites across Smith's time period eagerly bought into the notion that the qualities of poor black people that so offended white senses were inborn. "They exalted the manliness and scented nobility of the 'sweat of their labor,'" as Smith puts it well, "while telling blacks who performed manual labor that their sweat stank" (p. 8). By definition, much more is going on here than sensory experience. Such notions were illogical, of course, but they were rational in the sense that these poor whites had every interest in reaping "the wages of whiteness" the ideas gave them access to. The uses to which all classes of white people rationally put such irrational prejudices suggest that Smith's most careful formulation is best: "Feeling, not thinking, was segregation's best friend" (p. 115).

#### Notes

[1]. In particular and for starters, I have in mind Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), and the well-

known articles that make up some of its chapters; and Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

[2]. Just dipping one's toes into the literature on religion in the early republic—e.g. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989)—should be enough to con-

vince anyone that “white” religion was no monolith.

[3]. David Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (April 1999): pp. 243-272; and James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Vintage, 1982).

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