



Deborah Gray White. *Lost in the USA: American Identity from the Promise Keepers to the Million Mom March.* Women, Gender, and Sexuality in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-04090-0.

Reviewed by Michael Dennis (Acadia University)

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Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Recent Mass Marches in the US

The 1963 march for Jobs and Freedom has become so iconic that in public memory it seems to represent both the high point and the end point for mass demonstrations in Washington, DC. Deborah Gray White has written a book to remind us that, in an era of globalization, deindustrialization, and corporate downsizing, this tactic did not disappear. If anything, she argues, it became a principal form of expressing collective anxieties about social and cultural change at the turn of the century. Troubled by economic instability, upheaval in gender roles, the disintegration of normative family structures, and the persistence of racial inequality in the years following the civil rights movement, Americans took to the mall in Washington in what White describes as a “new-age search for order” (p. 7). Instead of trying to impose organizational efficiency on a society in flux, these Americans marched in search of identities that promised to deliver a sense of personal control in a period of seemingly unprecedented change.

While White uses identity as the lens to analyze the Promise Keepers, the Million Man March, and other prominent Washington demonstrations, she grounds the discussion in a consideration of economic and social conditions. She situates the

churning of the New Economy at the center of the “tailspin”: the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs to corporate-led globalization, the accelerating automation and computerization of almost every sector in the economy, the decline of union density, the decline of real wages since 1973, and the influx of women into the workforce, most of whom became the rank and file of a new “postindustrial proletariat” (p. 19). Each factor tore away at the economic security that white middle- and working-class Americans enjoyed, and to which African American and other racial minorities had only recently achieved or still aspired toward. These changes in the conditions of production also undermined the patriarchal structures of American society, eroding the stability of a male-dominated family and the sexist logic of the family wage. Together with the impact of the women’s liberation movement and the rise of a conservative agenda that attacked the institutions of working-class self-defense, these developments produced the mass demonstrations of the 1990s. Rather than express an impulse for particularism, however, the mass meetings reflected the desire for social cohesion. As White explains, Americans “gathered with the hope of finding stability in a world where a new economic order had combined with a series of

rights movements to make, among other things, class mobility uncertain, gender roles confusing, and ‘community,’ however previously conceived, precarious” (p. 20).

According to White, one of the issues that most troubled Americans was the question of gender. Through the evangelically inspired, nondenominational Promise Keepers, white middle-class men and at least some African Americans strove to re-imagine masculinity in an era that challenged male autonomy and control. Buffeted by corporate downsizing, the women’s movement, and the reconfiguration of the family under the pressure of market forces, middle-class men responded to Promise Keepers’ call to transcend the culture of hyper male competition through “communalism and brotherhood” (p. 37). Through its revivalist arena meetings and in a 1997 rally in Washington, the organization gave license to men to abandon conventional notions of masculinity in favor of compassion, sensitivity, and fraternity. It was believed that these rituals of noncompetitive male bonding would then translate into improved behavior in the domestic sphere in the form of greater support and selflessness toward the women in their lives. Far from a message of collective solidarity, what the Promise Keepers encouraged was “personal responsibility” through leadership “in families and communities.” Instead of contesting the “structures that had changed their lives,” the Promise Keepers “helped men develop new relationship skill sets” (p. 43). White’s even-handedness is admirable, although this comes at the expense of considering just how much this message of “leadership” and “personal responsibility” elided the sources of this pervasive insecurity and subtly legitimized the restoration of male dominance. Similarly, against the backdrop of historic levels of violence visited upon African American males—White notes that as many as five thousand young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine were murdered in 1988—as well as persistently high levels of unemployment, poverty, and incarceration, black men gathered at the Million Man March in 1995 to address the crisis.

Yet rather than any coherent program for political action, the march encouraged black men to apologize for their alleged delinquency toward

their families. Like the Promise Keepers, they were seeking a revitalized version of masculinity, one that would permit a closer relationship to their spouses and children but also “keep their manhood intact” and even “feel manlier for doing so” (p. 50). White is very sensitive to how race has historically conditioned the experience of gender in the American experience. As she puts it, “white men did not separate their gender from their race” (p. 57). Slavery, segregation, and lynching undermined the claims that black men made to the shared heritage of masculine family leadership, creating an enduring sensitivity about any threats to male independence and family leadership.

Having privileged identity over other categories of analysis, White finds herself trapped by its limited perspective. The author ostensibly endorses the highly individualized version of racial uplift, which has been a constituent though problematic strain in black political thought. White seems to approve the evidence that the march was unlike the 1963 demonstration in its emphasis on “the tradition of self-help racial uplift and activism” (p. 61). The author acknowledges that the “ideology of black self-help was an impediment to cross-racial male bonding,” mitigating the efforts of the Promise Keepers to establish cross-racial connections, but at least in her discussion of the Million Man March, she does not explore the extent to which it also militated against fostering an agenda of political action that could address the concrete problems that brought them to the rally in the first place (p. 62). Nor does White wish to interrogate the ideological hegemony that conditioned Americans to turn to identity, self-help, and individual responsibility instead of examining structural inequality. This leaves the author marveling at the irony of their “individualistic approach to problems [that] even they recognized demanded communal solutions” (p. 70). Is it really ironic, however, considering the ideological bludgeoning to which average Americans were subjected in the era of the “end of history,” turbo-capitalism, post-racialism, market triumphalism,

and the apotheosis of global competitiveness? What is commendable, however, is White’s ability to see past what might seem like the incipient racism of the Promise Keepers to the evidence that they did, indeed, make a commitment to crossing racial boundaries. In a welcome change of tone from many contemporary academic reflections on the subject, she concludes that “black and white men have more in common than has been assumed and that the possibilities for racial reconciliation are hardly preposterous” (p. 69). More disconcerting is the author’s tendency to address class as simply another identity marker rather than a structural relationship based on exploitation and unremunerated labor.

Much of the rest of the book bears these same characteristics: strong on the complexity of women’s responses to the Promise Keepers, the ways the impetus to racial unity conditioned black women’s relationship to the Million Man March, the internal political divisions and external homophobic forces that shaped the LGBT marches of 1993 and 2000, and the use of the ideology of maternalism to generate support for the 2000 Million Mom March against the epidemic of gun violence but also handing its opponents rhetorical weapons to wield against it. On this note, White also expertly explores the interracial organizing that set this effort apart from early twentieth-century maternal reform campaigns. At the same time, she dissects the racialized perspective of the predominantly white opponents of the Million Mom March. Inextricably tied to the National Rifle Association, these adversaries of gun control posited that the real threat to society did not come from access to guns but from allegedly violent black males, the very group most victimized by gun violence. In the minds of right-wing gun fanatics, access to weapons provided protection against the dangerous, black urban miasma that periodically threatened to spill beyond its highly policed boundaries. Perhaps the greatest strength of *Lost in the USA: American Identity from the Promise Keepers to the Million Mom March* is White’s capa-

city to historicize these marches, placing them in the context of a long struggle for women's equality, for black self-determination, and for a sense of stability amid the swirling forces of social change.

Yet in choosing to filter the analysis through the prism of identity, White loses sight of the ideological and material circumstances that generated this search for imagined communities. Accepting the terms of White's analysis for a moment—post-modernism producing the search for identity best symbolized by large marches on Washington—what do we make of Solidarity Day, September 18, 1981? In that demonstration, as many as five hundred thousand union supporters and working-class activists converged on Washington to protest President Ronald Reagan's attack on the air traffic controllers' union and the larger Republican assault on workers' rights. Can this also be explained by postmodernity? Certainly all the cultural and social factors that are usually thrown into this analytical hopper were present by then. What, then, was qualitatively different about the Promise Keepers, the Million Man March, and the Solidarity demonstrators who gathered in 1981? More to the point, what transpired between 1981 and the 1990s to convince average Americans not only that working-class activism was fundamentally un-American but also that a radical vision of equality, not to mention economic democracy, had no place in the American experiment? What, in short, made "personal responsibility" legitimate and "class solidarity" anathema? Attentive though White is to the economic conditions that destabilized American society, she is averse to examining the capitalist elephant in the room, not to mention the nation. In *Lost in the USA*, we encounter evidence of historical change but no sense of historical conflict, let alone struggle.

The problem is not that the United States found itself "in an era where personal identity was fractured by faith, race, gender, class, and sexuality," since the nation had never *not* been thus fractured (p. 185). Rather, it found itself emerging from

a decade of intensified class struggle compounded by a renewed atmosphere of homophobia and a building backlash against the feminist movement. In an era of market triumphalism, those who bore the brunt of this largely one-sided class warfare found themselves deprived of the intellectual traditions and political resources that would have permitted them to mount any real opposition. There is good reason, then, to be skeptical of White's conception of identity, particularly in the American context. Take, for example, the question of race. As cultural historian Asad Haider has argued, "race is not an idea or an identity: it is produced by material relations of domination and subordination. To understand what race is we have to start with the social level. We need to directly theorize the material relations of power which constitute groups in a hierarchical relation."^[1] In a period dominated by the ethos of radical individualism and ruthless competition, African Americans acutely felt these "material relations of power." Even so, if working- and middle-class Americans really did seek "to expand beyond their personal race, class, gender, and sexual identities," we still need to answer these questions: why this level of atomization (p. 184)? Moreover, why the turn toward a highly individualized version of identity at all in a period crying out for a collective response to a shared crisis?

By focusing exclusively on the Washington marches, White overlooks the places where an interracial (albeit predominantly white) group of Americans provided tentative answers to that very question. By choosing not to examine the global democracy movement that challenged corporate dominance at the turn of the century, most dramatically in Seattle in 1999, White overlooks the gathering of a mass movement against the very forces at the center of the anomie of the 1990s. In this movement, Americans did indeed ask basic questions about power, wealth, and democracy. They, too, yearned for a sense of community that crossed racial, gender, and sexual boundaries. What they did not, do, however, was lose sight of

the structures of economic and political power that governed their lives and set the terms for what was legitimate and what was out of bounds. If the groups that White features sought to “be more at peace in the home they called America” and “find the American dream,” they did so in the face of political and economic interests that made a mockery of that desire (p. 184).

White has written a provocative and important book that deserves to be read and discussed. It demonstrates not only exceptional scholarship but also exceptional insight, complexity, and historical acuity. It enriches our understanding of a period too often reduced to presidential politics and indiscretions. It should be the starting point for the analysis of a period that has profoundly shaped contemporary America.

Note

[1]. Asad Haider, “Zombie Manifesto,” Verso (blog), September 1, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4002-zombie-manifesto> (this is a response to a negative review of his book *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* [London: Verso, 2018]).

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