

Book Review

***Jim Crow Wisdom:
Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940.***

Holloway, Jonathan Scott.

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288 pages.

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The relationship between memory and history is more stable than one might think, given the assumption that there are multiple versions of what might be considered truth, and that lies and omissions are their own sort of historical argument. The collective memories of groups, such as that of the African American community, remain remarkably stable over time, with new stories and ever-evolving methods of dissemination regularly appearing, but with themes that stay constant from generation to generation. As Jonathan Scott Holloway explains in his masterful combination of academic analysis and personal narrative, *Jim Crow Wisdom*, "the traumas of racial humiliation and shame are regularly narrated" in black memory from 1940 to the present, which belies deep class divisions in the black community, a fraught relationship with concepts of "home and belonging," and "a palpable anxiety about telling children the truth about race." The reason for this narrative stability, Holloway explains, is racism's "physical and psychological violence," which has existed in the nation since before there was a nation, and that exists in each black citizen in one form or another after individual experiences with the othering of racial difference (4, 5). That black collective memory, then, is "a memory of the forgotten, a memory of those whose very presence made the rest of the country white, a memory of those who lived lives struggling against a denial of their citizenship so that others would know how to claim their stake in America" (11). It is a memory that is always mindful of future possibilities while keeping close the trauma of race.

Holloway's analysis of that memory incorporates popular

literature, academic literature, film, heritage tourism, and even more unconventional memory narratives like dance, to demonstrate the complex workings of how collective identity is molded through cultural practices and artifacts, and how it is ultimately bound to the personal identity formed by contact with these various media and the common experiences they are designed to reflect. Holloway begins in the academy of the 1940s, responding as it did to the demographic upheaval that was underway as the last push of the Great Migration made its way out of the South. Social scientists like E. Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, and others sought to define an all-encompassing portrait of what African America was, while hewing to a clearly class-inspired vision of what African America should be. It was a literature that, in a sense, carried with it all of the caricatures of Du Bois, that early twentieth-century pioneer of the black social sciences, and his vision of a "talented tenth" who could carry the race forward into modernity. That class-based thinking, then, also redounded to more popular literature in discussions of personal embarrassment and humiliation in the face of Jim Crow, a ubiquitous experience in black America that those more prominent African Americans sought to avoid, as the approval of the white mainstream was the source of much of their social standing.

For much of black America, however, it was trauma rather than social standing that stood as the arbiter of everyday existence. As black Americans came to understand blackness and its relationship to the body in the 1950s and 1960s through film, popular literature, and dance, they created a definition rooted in that trauma, while still being informed by notions of authenticity and, again, inevitable class distinctions. Most unique in this section of Holloway's book is his discussion of Alvin Ailey and his development of a ballet that "was grounded in a commitment to an authentic African American past" (77). The same concerns conjured by the dance of Ailey can also be seen in the academy, as the disciplines of African American Studies, Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, Diaspora Studies, and the like are specifically born of trauma and house many of the black scholars in the university. Holloway examines the development of black studies and the personal narratives of black academics to demonstrate that both "have been negotiated over the very charged questions of what could be known, who could know it, and who is allowed to bear witness" (105).

The accomplished academic that he is, it makes sense that Holloway uses that particular discussion to segue into a far more personal chapter about his own family and academic career,

emphasizing the shame created by Jim Crow and the corresponding vagueness with which personal tales of its negotiation are relayed. Holloway's personal narrative runs throughout *Jim Crow Wisdom*, giving the book its uniqueness and validating its arguments about the relationship between collective memory and personal narratives by actually intertwining one throughout a researched, academic text. It is a wholly successful conceit that not only makes for effective argumentation, but also for more engaged reading.

A final chapter sees the development of new social history in the academy of the late-1960s and early-1970s as giving way to a broader popular interest in the black experience, with a particular emphasis on the traumas that created the group's status as an underclass. Academic work, then, led to popular histories, television shows, autobiographies, and documentaries, all delving into that past. City and state governments worked to preserve pivotal sites in the narrative of that trauma so that they could be preserved and publicly interpreted, developing the industry of heritage tourism. Those sites, then, serve as "a declaration that memory and horror shape the narrative that gives meaning to the African American present" (213).

It is a past and a present that remain fundamentally disjointed, as all connections based on trauma must be, but Holloway's effort to come to terms with the connections between lived and collective memory do much to better draw their contours and, if not to align them, to better understand the reasons for their disjuncture. *Jim Crow Wisdom* is both an academic work and a personal narrative of the evolution of racial trauma and its relationship to memory. It is both a work of cultural and intellectual history and a self-effacing memoir. It is both a work of bravery and one of insight. Such is as it should be. As Holloway explains, "When it comes to so many aspects of the African American past, literal and figurative memories always and never align" (229).