

Evans, William McKee. *Open Wound: The Long View of Race in America*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009.

Open Wound: The Long View of Race in America begins with a tantalizing promise—to integrate the ever-proliferating and disparate studies on race into a novel and compelling synthesis. “What is needed now,” Evans tells us, “is a long view of how American racial institutions and ideas began and how and why, over time, they have changed” (1). Evans maintains that important changes in America’s racial system occurred at three specific historical junctures: the Revolutionary War, which spurred Northern states to phase out slavery; the Civil War and Reconstruction, which resulted in emancipation and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments; and the Cold War, which encouraged the defeat of legal segregation as the race problem became America’s Achilles’ heel in a global PR battle with the Soviet Union. Each of these crises opened “a window of opportunity,” according to Evans, for “idealists who challenged the defenders of the racial status quo” (2–3). Although all three of these crises stimulated significant advances in the way that “whites treated blacks,” none of them resulted in the achievement of full racial equality (3).

In a trenchant 1995 essay on race and the writing of history, Thomas Holt identifies four main paradigms that have shaped the study of racism: *idealism* (racism as a consequence of misguided ideas), *materialism* (racism as a function of economic drives), *psychological* (racism as an outgrowth of attitudes, habits, and irrational urges) and *cultural* (racism as a product of a social formation that is culturally and historically specific). While Evans includes a deft analysis of mid-nineteenth-century cultural production (with an emphasis on minstrel shows and the reception of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), he effectively embraces a materialism framework in which racism emerges as a result of labor markets and economic self-interest. For example, the Atlantic slave traders responsible for “the creation of a racially stratified society,” Evans tells us, “acted from practical business concerns” (32), as did the plantation owners whose “consuming passion was a defense of the property that made them the richest class of comparable size anywhere in the nation” (88). Unlike say, Winthrop Jordan, who famously argued in *White Over Black* (1968) that Africans were prepped in the eyes of whites for slavery and debasement as a result of perceived differences such as their dark skin color, heathenism, and “strange” customs, Evans contends that enslavement itself precipitated anti-black racism. Following scholars like Ira Berlin and Barbara Fields, Evans claims that it was the “legal and economic condition” of African slaves that set them apart rather than their physical appearance or cultural practices (34). Racial ideas, Evans suggests, were only invented later in order to justify existing inequalities.

Open Wound is divided into four parts, spanning four centuries from the Jamestown settlement in 1607 to the rise of a “color-blind” Supreme Court in the 1990s. Part 1, “The Colonial Period,” locates the origins of the American racial system in the development of the Atlantic slave trade and the advent of the Southern plantation system. In the 1700s, Evan maintains, English settlers, especially in the plantation colonies, adopted a new system of social classification. Rather than the old country divide between “gentlemen” and “commoners” (or “the people of quality” versus “the multitude”), the critical mark separating the haves from the have-nots became color: “slavery was black; freedom and opportunity white” (24). Part 2, “The Antebellum Republic,” describes the hardening of

this racial regime with the emergence of a new kind of white solidarity which was based on a myth of shared equality vis-à-vis blacks. This color-conscious solidarity, Evans says, was consolidated by the exclusion of blacks from urban job markets and by the enormous popularity of minstrel shows, which garnered “support for slavery by ridiculing black freedom” (128).

Part 3, “The Racial System Challenged and Revised,” discusses the period from the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century. Evans argues that an alliance of the Southern plantation elite and Northern financiers overwhelmed fledgling interracial Reconstruction governments by a relentless pursuit of “the revival and expansion of a Southern economy based on the export of raw materials produced with cheap labor” (173). Part 4, “The Racial System in a Rising Superpower,” tracks the saga of race in the twentieth century, concentrating on the blossoming of civil rights struggles. Evans posits that in the last several decades, class may have become more important than race to African Americans. Since the 1960s, he says, “a black American with money could do virtually anything that a white American could and many things that a white without money could not do” (235).

Hegemony is a major theme of *Open Wound* and Evans’ preferred explanatory device for what he refers to as “periods of near stability” (3). Evans defines hegemony as “the idea that a governing class achieves firm control, or ‘legitimacy’ by popularizing a consensus ideology, which advances its own agenda” (3). Simply put, “[p]eople with power have the means to mold the way a society views the world” (3). The central hegemonic power in Evans’s account is the Slave Power of the antebellum American republic, which was comprised of Southern planters and their Northern business partners. This King Cotton hegemony, according to Evans, united white men of every station against blacks of every hue. Slave Power hegemony depended on “control over the economic infrastructure of Southern society,” including commodity exchange, credit, and property, as well as on the goodwill earned by providing all white men with barbecue and liquor on muster and election days (85).

Although Evans informs us that hegemony requires an ideology (“beliefs shared by those who lead and those who follow”), he is all but silent on what these beliefs actually entailed except to remind us periodically that black was equated with slavery and white with freedom (48). With only two brief sections on racial ideology—“The Racial Message [of Minstrelsy]” and “Imperialism and ‘Scientific Racism’”—we are left with only the most cursory review of the intellectual architecture of white supremacy. This reader wishes that Evans had devoted more attention to the immense project of racial categorization and ranking, from Samuel Morton’s *Crania Americana* (1839) to Robert Yerkes’s World War I era Army IQ tests. Evans’s analysis would also have been much improved had he incorporated more of the many excellent cultural and intellectual histories of race published in the last decade or so.¹

In Barack Obama’s famous speech on race, delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, he asserted his firm conviction “that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds.” While Obama does not make an appearance in Evans’s book, Evans might have used this “wound” metaphor to greater effect. Indeed, the word “wound” only appears once in the whole book, in the first sentence of the first page: “In 1776, the Continental Congress launched a new nation, but a nation with an open wound. From the outset the nation had a system of mutually reinforcing ideas, practices, and institutions

that disadvantage people of color." The metaphor of an "open wound" is a promising one, which Evans might have expanded on to link together some of the different parts of his book. How, for instance, has the nature of this wound changed over time? And to what extent has it healed, closed, or scarred over?

Whether or not *Open Wound* lives up to its book jacket billing as a "boldly interpretive narrative," Evans's book is surely a positive contribution to the historiography on race. With so many superb African American history monographs honing in on a specific era, a singular event, a particular organization, or a distinctive individual, one can only applaud Evans's effort to offer a "long view" of race in America. Regarding Evans's own point of view, there is an intriguing tension between his explanation of racism (which tends to be economic) and his explanation of racial change (which tends to be social-psychological). Echoing the thesis of *An American Dilemma*, the crucible of race in *Open Wound* is a profound gap between the nation's ideals and the nation's practices (8). Evans tells us, for instance, that at the turn of the twentieth century, the Reconstruction amendments "were sleeping giants waiting for another heroic generation to awaken them" (185). In short, when it comes to racial progress, Evans's account is basically a morality tale, pitting the righteous "idealists" and "dissidents" (the "Quakers, abolitionists, and Freedom Riders") against the retrograde defenders of the status quo. "[H]istorically," Evans says, "it has been the 'impractical' concept of a universal human family that has rallied the forces for democratic change" (248). If "business concerns" originally led to the advent of racism, Evans seems to say, it will only be overcome by changes in the hearts and minds of women and men.

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NOTE

1. See Hale; Jacobson, especially chapter 4; Singh.

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