Reviews

Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet, eds., *Questions of Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

Within the current global cultural climate, where political "way-of-life" rhetoric and "clash of civilization" theses co-mingle with an explosion of interest in family genealogy, heritage sites, memorial museums, and all manner of history making, there are serious stakes involved in the way scholars continue to engage with notions of cultural memory, legitimacy and authority. In *Questions of Tradition,* the authors of a dynamic new collection of essays suggest that a critical aspect of this project lies with broadening current definitions and understandings of the term "tradition" — a concept that they rightfully contend is long overdue for reassessment and critical consideration.

At the core of this book is a persuasive argument for tradition as a more fluid, constructive, and adaptive category, one that Edward Said has described not only as "a weapon in the service of state-directed manipulation of cultural memories" but also a means to "empower the people that cultural memory possesses" (144-5). A vital element of this reappraisal involves confronting what the editors, Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet, characterize as "the taint of traditionalism" (x). Together with the preponderance of the ideological (read: anti-modern) usage of the term, discussion around tradition has been made difficult outside the limited and deconstructive framework of "pseudo-traditionality" and a kind of implied disassociation from the past. The result, according to the editors, is that "tradition in its wider sense has remained undervalued, underutilized, and certainly undertheorized" (x).

The timely and critical reappraisal set out in *Questions of Tradition*, while seemingly ambitious in scope, avoids the pitfall of seeking an all encompassing definition of tradition. Instead, the volume of essays originating first with a conference held at Rutgers University in 1997 under the same title (sponsored by *The Journal of the History of Ideas* and the International Society for Intellectual History), and then continued as a year-long thematic lecture series at the University of British Columbia's Green College, draws from a cross-disciplinary pool of contributors who the editors have chosen specifically for their varied approaches to the topic. The book itself is divided into two sections. Part One is described in the Preface as covering tradition as understood and studied in anthropology, art history, and museum curating, while Part Two takes up the disciplines of intellectual history, philosophy, and political science. Each section is then capped with a review essay which attempts to draw together the individual essays while placing the authors' concerns in a wider frame.

While this project is meant to explore how different disciplines construc-

tively think and write about notions of tradition, one unintended downside to the book's approach is that the contributions and review essay from Part One seem relegated to a more loosely constructed cultural argument while the more "serious" weight of politics, history, and theory seems favoured in the essays and review of Part Two. This is indeed unfortunate since all of the essays feature a mutual and forceful engagement with a wide range of interrelated issues and could usefully be compared and contrasted with one another. Perhaps the reliance on case studies and focus on different methodological and disciplinary approaches is partly to blame for this perception, but there is a way in which the overarching themes of the two parts of the book could stand to come into sharper focus.

Notably, one commonality across the volume is that the authors of nearly each of the eleven essays cite or allude to Eric Hobsbawm's highly influential book *The Invention of Traditions* (1983). At times, it even seems that Hobsbawn (and to a lesser extend Pierre Nora) is seen as *the* foil to a broader understanding of tradition as a constructive category of knowledge. Still, there is a careful effort to recognize Hobsbawm's critical impact on the way we think about tacit knowledge and the role of historian as myth-buster. The continued popularity of Hobsbawm's scholarship and commitment to a politically engaged and more radical style of history writing stands as a testament to the rhetorical strength of his arguments, the social and political context out of which he writes, and the power of a persuasive hypothesis to remain largely uncontested for over two decades. These facts do not go unnoticed in a number of the essays. Still, a consequence of Hobsbawm's legacy and impact, as many of the authors go on to point out, is that almost *all* notions of tradition have subsequently been rendered suspect and fictitious, seeming to serve only questionable political ends and engendering what Phillips calls a "politics of disenchantment" (8).

In short, the book argues that Hobsbawm's take on tradition has, ironically enough, become something of its own tradition in academic circles and especially among historians. Such characterizations have spread and therefore made it difficult for scholars within many other disciplines to raise a discussion of individual traditions or traditionalism without running up against problems of perceived conservatism or an implied resistance to modernity. So while the fact of invented traditions seems clear enough, the "why" of invented traditions remains ambiguously *un*clear. Are *all* traditions suspect? And if not, where do invented traditions begin and the more "genuine" traditions suggested by Hobsbawm end? Are such distinctions problematic and at what point do they become conceptually flawed?

Two of the book's essays that are particularly rigorous in engaging with these specific dilemmas are worth commenting on further. First is Mieke Bal's complex and fascinating discussion of the Zwarte Piet or the "Black Peter" tra-

dition in her home country of Holland. There, Christmas revellers engage in a form of blackface, wearing afro wigs and acting in a comical dim-witted manner as embodiments of a beloved Moorish character. Challenging academics' own implication in the terms of the tradition debate and the "Althusserian idea that critical analysis can stand outside its object of critique" (112), Bal engages in a serious and self-reflexive discussion of how her fond and sometimes inexact childhood memories of Zwarte Piet shaped her own subjectivity as a white woman and Dutch citizen. In turn, Bal argues that "traditions are neither dismissible fictions nor acceptable truths" (141). Drawn into her discussion are painted and photographic re-presentations of Zwarte Piet that suggest a more critical commentary on the tradition, extending Bal's analysis into the realm of art and its ability to probe the ambiguities of tradition.

In the second essay, Michael McKeon asks the compelling question of what "does the work" of tradition after it has lost its authority in modern culture. Through this interrogation, he complicates the tradition versus modernity perception so engrained in today's scholarship. Exposing how the conception of tradition transformed during the time of the English Enlightenment, a moment commonly believed to be predicated on the full repudiation of tradition in toto, McKeon deftly examines the way in which "ideology" came to replace the concept of tradition "in the sense not of a correction but of a modernization" (185) through a number of key examples. Extending his arguments to the realm of modern science and aesthetics, McKeon challenges the terms of the tradition versus modernity divide by suggesting how "modernity has most successfully theorized and extended the idea of tradition in other terms" (196).

Overall, *Questions of Tradition* is an important and substantial book that sketches out the framework for a much needed interdisciplinary reassessment of the discourses surrounding tradition writ large. Undoubtedly, a number of the collection's essays will become key additions to course reading lists across the humanities. And not unlike Hobsbawm's original hypotheses about tradition, which in part inspired this book, the authors intentionally leave many questions unanswered and suggest further work to be done. The book's themes are perhaps best expressed in the enigmatic John Everett Millais painting, *The Boyhood of Raleigh* which was cleverly chosen as the cover artwork for the book but unfortunately not discussed in its pages. Painted in 1870 at the height of the British Empire, Millais's image was approved to be hung in almost every educational institution in the Commonwealth following World War II. When painted, it was an image that seemed to speak to the greatness and traditions of a seafaring nation yet-to-be, experienced through the eyes of the young sixteenth century British explorer Walter Raleigh. But by mid-twentieth century, when Britain was facing the reality of its diminished power in its colonies and around the world, the abstract traditions implied by the painting and alluded to by the sailor pointing off to the horizon beyond the boys' sight, had not only

undergone profound transformation, but would come to elicit far different readings that no longer held the same weight or relevance. Nevertheless, the shared experience of British subjects viewing the image across time and from varied ethnic, social, and political positions performed a kind of exchange or cultural transmission that formed a vital, if even conflicted, part of individual and collective national identity. In the end, it is precisely within these kinds of contexts that the notion of tradition becomes less stable, more ambiguous and less easily determined, and it is to these kinds of theoretical problems and their material fall-out that the editors of *Questions of Tradition* are pointing us.

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William J. Peace, *Leslie A. White: Evolution and Revolution in Anthropology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

David H. Price, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Over the past few years the American Anthropological Association (AAA), the main organ uniting US cultural anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, and physical anthropologists, has been struggling to redefine its position in relation to both an increasingly "culture-conscious" public and new political projects (e.g. multicultural state policies, identity politics, ethnic conflicts, etc.). At the same time, the AAA has had to come to terms with its own past and with the legacies, for better and for worse, of the relationship between US anthropology and US politics at home and overseas. Both William Peace's *Leslie A. White: Evolution and Revolution in Anthropology* and David Price's *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* should be read against the current situation that the AAA, and US and Canadian academics more widely, now face.

Peace's biography of Leslie White (1900-1975), who pioneered a cultural evolutionary approach to anthropology, and was steadfastly marginalized for his theoretical positions, is a welcome contribution to the history of anthropology. White was a strange figure during his own time, almost always at odds with the dominant strain of US cultural anthropology (i.e. Boasian cultural relativism), which he felt was not only ahistorical but also theoretically vacuous. As Peace nicely illustrates, White paid dearly for his theoretical positions, in both his professional and personal lives.