

Student C:  
Reaction Paper – Genovese and Dower

I'm going to highlight what I found most interesting about the texts and then discuss four common aspects of the texts.

Genovese's is not a standard narrative of slavery. The slaves are not dehumanized and helpless, which is often an unintended side effect of trying to show the slave as a victim (which they were). They were smart, human, active actors creating their own histories (it is the world the slaves made, after all). Equally importantly, the masters are part of Genovese's history, too. Genovese increases the complexity of the story to a degree unfamiliar to me. In the slave-South, there were the slaves, the white male masters, the white female masters, rich whites without slaves, and poor whites.

In Dower, the power of his argument is clear. I think this is largely owed to Dowers' tackling the subject with a wide variety of forms of evidence, and by relating it to why these issues are important today. Of course, race in the Pacific War is important in and of itself. However, by tracing the threads of this problem into the present (as he does in all of the assigned essays, as well as several others in the book), it brings the topic into even starker light.

How central is race?

The centrality of races is different in the two texts. Genovese makes clear that slavery contained an undeniable racial component, but was it about race? Yes, and no. He suggests that slavery was not about racism of whites towards blacks. There were a whole list of other condescension, like paternalism, abuses, like mob violence, and a definite racial component (there were no white slaves). However, contrary to the popular narrative of American slavery, Genovese argues that racism was not as overwhelming a component.

Genovese's setting up his argument in this way makes it all the more convincing, once the reader overcomes the initial hesitance (but of course it was about racism). By focusing on the political economy of slavery, that twisted and self-contradictory system that Genovese describes and then debunks so well, he is able to make the argument that slavery was wrong for a whole host of reasons other than simply because it was racist.

In Dower, race takes a central place. I have several possible explanations for this. It could be that US/Japanese relations in the Pacific War revolved most centrally around race. This seems, of course, a simplification, and Dower mentions other threads running through the Pacific War. Alternatively, I'm comparing several 30 to 40 page essays with a more than 800 page book. It could be that the essay versus book forms of history requires a highlighting and concentrating on central themes that can be more nuanced in longer texts. This compression may mean that in an essay on race in the Pacific War, it may seem that race was the most primary factor. In an essay about economic rivalries during the Pacific War, it may seem that economics was the turning point.

What types of evidence?

There are differences in the use of evidence between the two works. Dower must find incredibly strong quotes that serve as evidence for entire themes, whereas Genovese has the narrative space to use smaller pieces of evidence to build up a chronology, or to paint a detailed picture, from which he can draw themes. Dower must state the themes up front.

Both authors struggle with types of evidence, which is a recurrent theme in our readings. How, for instance, should Genovese treat the journal entries of white masters who wrote down things he remembered a slave saying? Can Genovese treat this as a quote of a slave? Might it tell more about the master than the slave? He suggests that it very well might, in the introduction, where he informs us that he has omitted "[sic]" most of the time. We as readers can use our own judgment as to whether we think a slave spoke in a certain way. Similarly to Thompson's suggestion that statistics and narrative evidence reveal very different things about the living conditions of the English working class (the former show it go up, the latter show it go down), Genovese notes how statistics and narrative accounts of the lives of slaves show similar discontinuities.

Dower introduces a new type of evidence to the reading, that of the picture. I am not sure how to respond to pictures-as-evidence at this point. It seems to me that a picture is prone to many more possible interpretations than words. However, we have seen how such "factual" data such as statistics can mask what is really going on. Whatever the case, Dower definitely uses the picture well, and to great emotional effect, especially in "Japanese Artists and the Atomic Bomb."

Which point of view?

One of the most jarring things about Genovese is how he switches between the point of view of the slaves and the masters so effectively. When he is talking about the masters, he does so as convincingly as he talks about the slaves. We always know that his end point is to illuminate a contradiction in the masters' logic, or to show a place where slaves exploited their masters, but it is disconcerting none the less. Having the contradictions of the masters' logic revealed in their own words is incredibly powerful, and the switches show how effective the manipulation of historical point of view can be in an argument. The device also has limitations: it may have led to some readers putting down the book in disgust – how could one even think to discuss slavery from the masters' side? Also, the device has a way of making it sound as if groups speak with a unified voice. Genovese is careful, as a result, to note that different slaves felt differently, and different masters behaved differently. However, it is easy to lapse into believing that there was more unity than there might have been.

Dower also uses differing points of view in his essay. He discusses US racism towards Japanese and Japanese racism towards the US. In doing so, he identifies important differences (especially the difference between "other" versus "self" types of racism). He concentrates more on US attitudes towards Japan, however. This, again, may be a structural constraint of the essay form.

Anachronism: race or racism?

If they didn't call it racism then, but we feel that it is racism today, what do we call it? For Genovese, the answer seems to be that he can call it racism only when his historical actors call it racism. This leads to a whole host of complications, especially given that the dominant narrative of slavery is one of racism. Similarly, some of Dower's historical actors identify racism. Others identify only race. Some identify neither: the title of a Newsweek article may share, upon historical investigations, resonances with a racial discourse, but the journalist likely didn't say the article was about race. Can we conclude that it is? And that it is racist?

There is a distinction in both texts between race and racism. Dower and Genovese are careful about the distinction. How do, or how can, we infer, racism? Today, it seems clear to us that slavery and US/Japanese relations contained racism. It may have been clear to some observers who commented on it at the time, and if so, we have an evidentiary basis. Otherwise, was it raciISM? Or just about race?