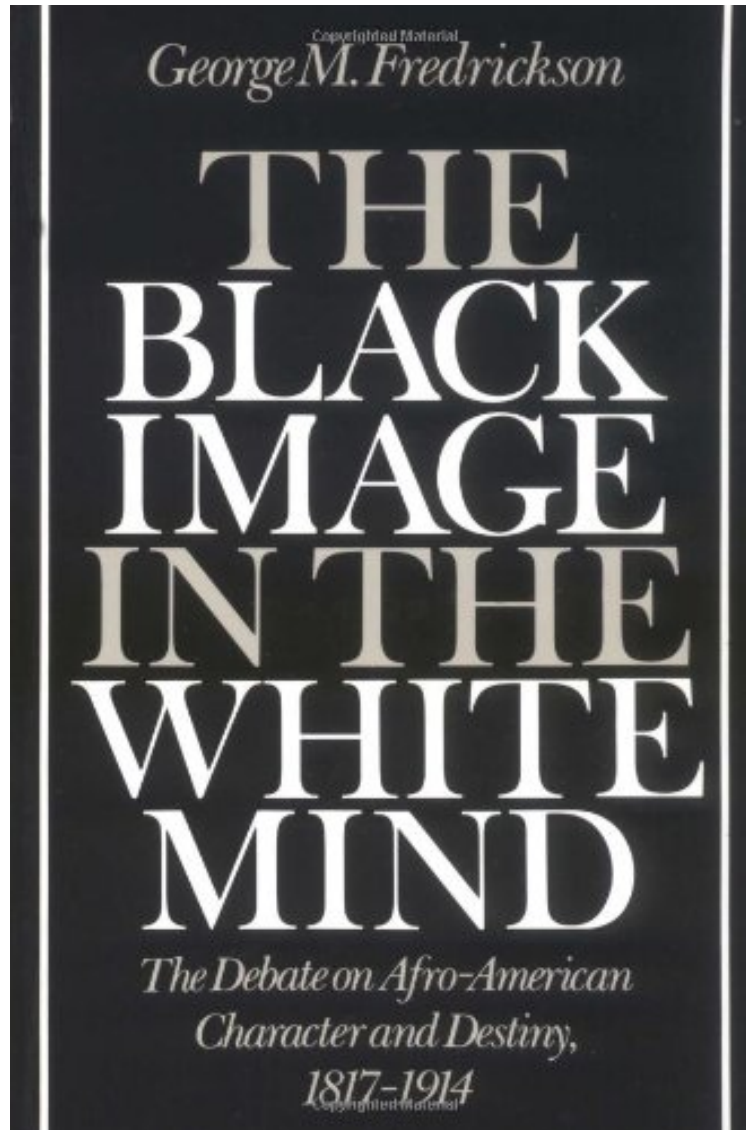


[Free] The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914

The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914

George M. Fredrickson
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learned in reading this book for pleasure. I could not put it down. 10 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

Seminal work on American race history
By Jeffrey Leach
George Fredrickson's book, "The Black Image in the White Mind," is an intellectual history dealing with the rise of formalized racial ideologies in nineteenth century America. The author argues that these anti-black intellectual concepts, far from forming in a vacuum, arose in concert with other significant trends occurring in the American political, economic, and social arena. Moreover, Fredrickson points out the significant role the American North, an area not usually associated with overt racism, played in this emotionally charged discourse. Many of the ideas articulated in the North reinforced as often as they countered the extremely hostile invective circulating in the South. Most importantly, "The Black Image in the White Mind" stresses the underlying themes that all of these theories, regardless of northern or southern orientation, shared between 1817 and 1914: the author convincingly avers that every racial hypothesis assumed the idea of black inferiority, that blacks differed significantly from whites "physically, intellectually, and temperamentally," that animosity between whites and blacks was inevitable, saw miscegenation as a sublime evil, and viewed a biracial society as an impossibility best remedied by the outright removal of African-Americans from United States territory or through various forms of subordination to the dominant white society. It is not surprising this book is still a standard assignment in graduate seminars about race history. Fredrickson begins his analysis with the emergence of the colonization movement in the 1820s and 1830s and concludes with the plight of the American black under the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century. Along the way, the author discusses in detail various racial ideas: scientific racism, romantic racialism, recurring incarnations of Southern white paternalism, white nationalism, Negrophobia, and Accommodationist racism. In the American South, Fredrickson argues that a major tenet of racist thought was *Herrenvolk* democracy, or a type of political theory that gave the dominant white population in the South all the fruits of democracy while denying blacks equivalent rights. *Herrenvolk* democracy informed much of the racial thought in this region during the nineteenth century because it created a hierarchical biracial system justified by slavery and later segregation systems. "The Black Image in the White Mind" proves that white racist thought in the nineteenth century was never a constant, monolithic ideology but a set of basic assumptions capable of adjusting to changing economic, political, or religious circumstances in the larger society. Just when one branch of racist thought died down, another sprang up in an entirely different place and time with just as much virulence as the previous manifestation. Perhaps the most compelling argument in Fredrickson's book is his formulation of romantic racialism. This idea, which posited that blacks were docile, childlike creatures whose attributes allowed them to attain a level of Christianity unavailable to "naturally aggressive" Caucasians, had great appeal among abolitionists in the North who believed slavery was wrong on religious grounds. Moreover, romantic racialism arose as a response to emerging ideas about perceived Anglo-Saxon superiority and the need for a homogeneous white nation. Fredrickson brilliantly develops this idea primarily through a literary analysis of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novels "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Dred." The articulation of romantic racialism explodes any lingering myths regarding abolitionists as rock ribbed anti-racists because it shows that these moral crusaders still argued for forcible removal of blacks from American territory. Fredrickson addresses what is arguably his book's most serious problem in a new introduction to the 1987 reprint. He confesses that he focused more on what white intellectuals thought about blacks than what blacks said or did about their own situation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Admittedly, the title of the book should blunt some criticism directed towards the author on this point: a title like "The Black Image in the White Mind" leaves little doubt as to what viewpoint the author will take. Still, the author does leave significant gaps in certain places of his book that beg for elaboration. For example, at one point the author refers to a correspondence between Salmon P. Chase and black writer and intellectual Frederick Douglass, a correspondence revealing in succinct detail what Chase thought about racial separation. Surely, Douglass responded to Chase's arguments in some way, but what that response might have been does not appear in the book. More problematic is the section on Southern Negrophobia, where the author spends a great amount of time discussing how intellectuals in the South at the turn of the century began arguing that the black was a subhuman beast whose greatest social accomplishments consisted of crimes against whites, specifically white women. Was there an enormous explosion in violent crime at this time in this region? If so, what underlying factors contributed to an expansion of crime in the South? The author's analysis of Negrophobia fails to provide any concrete data about the number of violent offenses in the South. Ultimately, Fredrickson resorts to psychohistory to explain the possible reasons behind Negrophobia, arguing that this scurrilous form of racial hatred arose from "a projection of unacknowledged guilt feelings derived from their [white southerners] own brutality towards blacks." Perhaps this claim does have some merit, but Fredrickson cites no sources to back up this particular argument. By looking at Negrophobia relying solely on the sources, Fredrickson might have discovered more relevant reasons for why specific racial ideologies arose when they did. As it stands now, "The Black Image in the White Mind" offers an intriguing, if incomplete, analysis of American intellectual racism. 19 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent History of Racism
By Customer
Fredrickson defines racism as a reasoned theory that posits the "innate and permanent inferiority of nonwhites" (xvii). He argues that racism in some form has plagued American thought throughout the nation's history, and in this volume he traces the different forms it has taken in the period from 1817 to 1914. He thus arranges his study chronologically, progressing methodically through the nineteenth century.

Frederickson begins by showing that the underlying arguments for the colonization movements were based on the recognition of white prejudice in American society. Colonizationists argued that black people would never have the opportunity to integrate into the society because of deeply ingrained racial prejudices. The abolitionists answered this position by arguing that whites should be able to overcome their prejudice and achieve the ideal of Christian brotherhood. Then, as more abolitionists based their attack on moral grounds, proponents of slavery searched for ideological justification for their position and argued for the innate racial inequality and permanent inferiority of the black slaves. From this emerged a Herrenvolk democracy in which the creation of a permanent underclass (slaves in this case) protected the radical equality of the higher class (whites). Scientific theories emerge in the 1840s and 1850s to support the position of the innate inferiority of the slaves and gave rise to the theory of polygenesis which holds that only whites descended from Adam, while God created blacks as an inferior species. Romantic racialism also emerged at the same time moving focus from seeming social and intellectual deficiencies of black people and emphasizing their lightheartedness and willingness to serve, qualities of natural Christians. This position finds its fullest expression in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Thus, in the 1860s the more conservative romantic racialists pushed again for colonization, arguing that these "natural Christians" could only flourish back in their native Africa. The ideal of white America had again become a racially homogeneous society. Frederickson argues that Reconstruction was therefore merely a political tool because the attitudes of racial superiority prevailed among whites. This renewed racial superiority then gave rise to a sense of paternalism in the period from 1877 to 1890. At the end of the nineteenth century Darwinian thinking came together with racial superiority to spawn the idea that black people, as the weaker race would be wiped out in this country. Finally, he concludes with a chapter on the accommodation that flows from progressivism which manifests itself as a return to a paternalism and a sense of treating black people with a modicum of decency as the "white man's burden." Frederickson gives flesh to the above sketch of this argument in his well-documented and carefully nuanced book. The work is an excellent intellectual history of the phenomenon of racism in the United States.

A study of issues of race in 19th century America.

A remarkably dispensible and perceptive treatment of the complex pattern of 19th century American race-thinking. An indispensable study for all students of American culture. Anne C. Loveland, *Civil War History*. A well-researched and highly readable account of the development of intellectualized racist theory and ideology as it evolved from the beginning of the 19th century until the end of World War I. The book is a history of ideas, but also a study of how those ideas were espoused and applied by race-conscious intellectuals, pseudointellectuals, publicists, and politicians. An essential holding for all undergraduate and graduate libraries. *Library Journal*. Trenchant, interesting and well-written this volume should establish itself as indispensable and invaluable reading, as a starting point for anyone interested in America's failure to absorb a large minority of a different color. In his ability to penetrate the surface of racist theory, his very thoughtful analysis and categorization of racist thought, with his consideration of intellectualized racism's influence on policy, Frederickson has provided us with a better understanding of the race problem in America. Robert L. Harris, Jr., *Journal of Negro History*. This important book should be used in southern history, black history, intellectual history, and 19th-century American history. No other book provides an adequate substitute. (C. Vann Woodward, Yale University) From the Publisher: 5 1/4 x 8 trim. LC 86-19022