GATES EXAMINES PERIOD AFTER RECONSTRUCTION IN NEW BOOK

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At the end of the Civil War, Sidney George Fisher, a White gentleman from Philadelphia, declared, “It seems our fate never to get rid of the Negro question.” Although slavery had been abolished, “the problem – what shall we do with the Negro – seems as far from being settled as ever. In fact it is incapable of any solution that will satisfy both North and South.”
Between 1865 and 1877, the federal government sought to institutionalize for Blacks “a new birth of freedom,” through military occupation of the South, civil rights legislation, and amendments to the United States Constitution.

Resisted in the North as well as the South, the “experiment” was ultimately abandoned. In the “Redeemed” states of the former Confederacy, sharecropping replaced slavery, Blacks were prevented from voting, and subjected to pervasive, demeaning, violent forms of Jim Crow segregation.

**RECONSTRUCTION AND REDEMPTION**

In “Stony the Road,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a university professor at Harvard, prolific author and documentary filmmaker, tells the story of Reconstruction and redemption. A synthesis of scholarly work on race between 1865 and the 1920s, with a focus on literature and visual culture, his book provides a powerful and timely reminder that African Americans have never stopped resisting White supremacy, despite the “unbearably hostile climate it has created.”

Gates documents the myriad ways in which racist ideology infiltrated every aspect of American life.

Well-credentialed scientists “proved” that Blacks were and would remain inferior to Whites, helping justify laws against miscegenation and intermarriage. Proponents of the Civil War as a noble “Lost Cause” insisted that plantation slaves were well-treated and content; during Reconstruction, they maintained, outside agitators unleashed the beasts previously dormant in them.

**INTENTIONAL IMAGES**

Images of ignorant, subhuman Sambos, Gates reveals, were ubiquitous in advertisements, consumer products, Uncle Remus stories, children’s games, greeting cards and sheet music. Postcards with photographs of the bodies of Blacks hanging from trees and Whites attending the lynchings were popular as well.
These images, and, of course, scenes from the box-office blockbuster “Birth of a Nation,” Gates writes, meant that when a White person encountered a real-live Black, the latter was “an already read text.”

As pseudo-scientists, historians, Supreme Court justices, and Ku Klux Klan vigilantes marche in lockstep to keep Blacks in their place, African Americans fought back to reclaim their right and their image in what Gates calls “another kind of civil war, a war that was cultural as well as political, a war that featured the concept of “the New Negro.”

Among the disparate individuals and groups creating a counter-narrative to the claims that Blacks were created unequal were W.E.B. Du Bois and his “Talented Tenth”; writers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance; jazz pioneers; the anti-lynching activists; members of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP.

STILL WORK TO DO

Eventually, politics took precedence, Gates points out, because many Blacks concluded that cultural constructions without political agency were likely to be “empty signifiers.”

Equally important, Gates seems to endorse the view, held, ironically by both advocates of racial equality and unreconstructed Southerners, that “there never was an Old Negro or a New Negro; there were only Negroes.”

As the poet Sterling Brown proudly proclaimed, African Americans are the legatees of a great people. Not only did they “survive the storm of anti-black racism,” they somehow managed to thrive, create vital and vibrant cultures, “despite the obstacles placed upon them on that stoniest of roads.”

A century later, Professor Gates adds, amidst “ugly language spewed and ugly images strew daily across our ever-present screens,” it seems clear that racial justice is incomplete, “frighteningly vulnerable to reversal,” and there is a lot of work to do.
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