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# *Classic Book Notes #2*

March 2025
*Originally March 2020*

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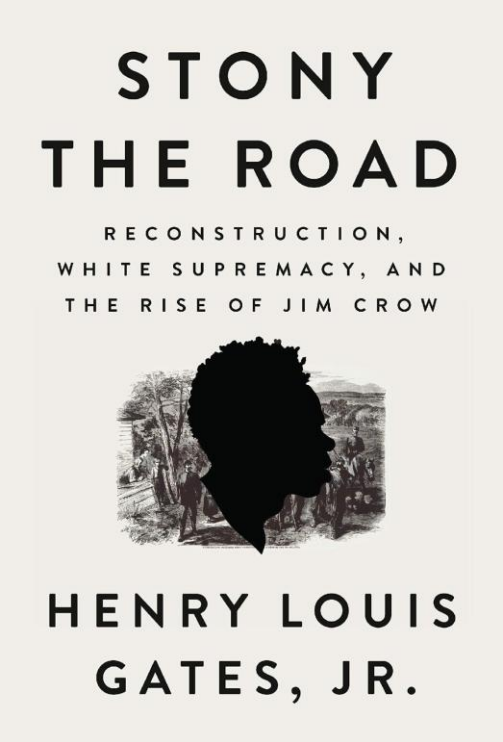
## *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*

*Following is a Book Notes Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It was first published as Book Notes #2 from March 2020.*




In this second installment of **Book Notes:** ***Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*** , as I organized my thoughts about Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s superb ***Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy and the Rise of Jim Crow,*** I found myself meditating on the nature of leadership. In particular, I thought about how we tend to undervalue its importance until in a time of crisis when confronted by its absence; or, at best, with its muddled presence, we discover its vital, its crucial necessity. Everyday watching the news one witnesses almost textbook examples of how to do it badly and how to do it well – from the solipsistic, confused gyrations of our national leadership to the strong, assured, realistic presence of multiple governors to the calm, measured, decisive yet empathetic leadership of our own County Executive one sees how not and how to be a leader.

What has this to do with ***Stony the Road***? Building on his work with esteemed historian Eric Foner on the PBS documentary "Reconstruction: America After the Civil War" (information about which can be found here), Gates analyzes America's conflicted racial attitudes as they evolved – some might say, devolved – from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

In thinking about Reconstruction, I ask myself a question neither Gates nor Foner asks: Could leadership have made a difference? Asking "counterfactual" questions annoys most professional historians, for, of course, we cannot change history. But, as John Lewis Gaddis remarks somewhere in ***The Landscape of***

***History,*** counterfactual questions, as long as we constantly remind ourselves that we are engaging in a mental exercise, can sometimes shed new light on old issues.

So, my counterfactual question is: "How might history be different if Abraham Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens had lived?" Or, thinking about America since 1968: "How might it have been different if Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had lived?" We'll never know, but it's clear that if Andrew Johnson, a virulent racist and southern sympathizer were not President, then Reconstruction might, just might, have succeeded and we would not now a hundred and fifty-five years later be dealing with the backwash of an aborted Reconstruction, southern Redemption, the rise of Jim Crow, and an America that is decidedly not post-racial.

That America is decidedly not post-racial, if anyone needed to be reminded, Gates notes by the simple device of his dedication. ***Stony the Road*** is dedicated to "The Mother Emanuel Nine" when, as Gates recounts, a white supremacist seeking to start a race war "…murdered the Reverend Clementa Pinckney and…eight other innocents in Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015…" (p.xxii) The question immediately arises: "How did we get to here?"

***Stony the Road*** explores the path to here from the aborted Reconstruction to Mother Emanuel by analyzing the legal, economic, and cultural tools a resurgent white supremacy employed to subvert the 1863's emancipation and the second American Revolution embedded in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. More importantly, Gates examines African-Americans' counter-resistance to the attempt to deny them their rights as American citizens from Frederick Douglass to Ida B. Wells to W.E.B. DuBois to Alain Locke and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

What was that path?

***Stony the Road*** moves from a pre-Civil War discussion in its first section "Anti-Slavery/Anti-Slave" of how it was possible to be both anti-slavery and anti-slave, quoting Frederick Douglass, Gates notes, "Opposing slavery and hating its victims has become a very common form of abolitionism" (p. 11). In short, anti-black attitudes existed alongside anti-slavery sentiments leading to ***Stony the Road's*** second section, "The Old Negro". In "The Old Negro" Gates explores 19th and early 20th century racial science and scientific racism; the misguided efforts of well-meaning whites who defined the "Negro Problem" as one "…white Americans were morally obligated, in the most paternalistic way, to step in and solve… *for* the Negro, not *with* him," (p. 80) implying Negroes were incapable of solving their own problem, thus affirming the prevailing pseudo-scientific ethos. Gates concludes this section with a lengthy and brilliant analysis of Plantation

Literature, in which white artists, notably Joel Chandler Harris, "depicted black people in much the same way as those trafficking in pseudoscience (and later "Sambo art") did – infantile, easily led, insensate, yet dangerously brutal…" (p.91).

Gates's next section, "Framing Blackness: Sambo Art and the Visual Rhetoric of White Supremacy," however, might be ***Stony the Road's*** most valuable contribution. In this section, Gates explores the interpenetrating depictions of Negroes in legal rulings undercutting the 13th , 14th , and 15th Amendments; the multiple narrative forms "ranging from…racial and social science, through depictions of black people in fiction and folklore, political rhetoric, and journalism" (p. 130) to; for lack of a better phrase, high art, popular art, and commercial arts "massive number of Sambo images, intended to naturalize the visual image of the black person as subhuman, and thereby subliminally reinforce the perverted logic of the separate and unequal terms of Jim Crow itself" (p. 130). Ranging from the horror of "The Dogwood Tree" (1908), a postcard celebrating the lynching of five black men in Sabine County, Texas (p. 135) to a toothless Uncle Remus/Sambo caricature in an 1888 Chase & Sanborn's Boston Roasted Coffees advertisement (p. 134) to 1864's "The Miscegnation Ball" (p. 136) to 1947's benignly emasculated "Uncle Ben's Converted Rice" box cover (p. 169), all these images coalesce to create a pervasive image of the Negro as either a helpless, infantile burden, or a shuffling, irresponsible submissive or a brutal threat to white womanhood.

As someone offended by these metaphors, it is impossible in words alone to convey the power of these negative images – the quiet, insidious way they seep into the public consciousness so that the image supplants reality and becomes reality itself. The cumulative impact, as noted by W.E.B. DuBois in *Darkwater* (1920), was to "…unconsciously train millions of honest, modern men into the belief that black folk are sub-human…a mass of despicable men, inhuman; at best, laughable; at worst, the meat of mobs and fury" (p. 125). Gates's subtle analysis of these images' power alone makes this section a must read for every thinking American. He takes his analysis of the power of images to re-construct reality to an even higher level in his study of Thomas Dixon's ***The Clansmen*** and the classic film D.W. Griffith made of it -- ***The Birth of a Nation.*** Dixon's novel was an unapologetic celebration of the Ku Klux Klan; ***The Birth of a Nation*** took that to the masses in a film portraying black legislators of the Reconstruction Era as slobbering buffoons, freed black men as vengeful rapists against whom the gallant Klan must protect fragile white womanhood through the deterrent of lynch law. The racist sentiment of the era found its apotheosis when ***The Birth of a Nation*** was shown at Woodrow Wilson's White House in 1915.

As David Blight said, "The lasting significance of ***The Birth of a Nation*** is that by using powerful imagery, buttressed by enormous advertising and political endorsement, it etched a story of Reconstruction that has lasted long in America's

historical consciousness" (p. 156). As a result, for most Americans down to today, their image and understanding of Reconstruction is ***The Birth of a Nation's*** depiction of it as a failure because of the misguided northern attempt to empower incompetent and inferior black people at the expense of disenfranchised white southerners. This failure necessitated the "redemption" of the south and the re-establishment of its pre-War culture, or as near to it as circumstance permitted, by reasserting white supremacy, re-establishing white dominant state governments and the near re-enslaving of black Americans through share-cropping, peonage and the renting out of imprisoned blacks through convict leasing and the chain gang system. This entire period, from roughly the Compromise of 1877 to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century is known as "The Redemption" – arguably the least known, least understood, yet one of the most important periods in American history.

In ***Stony the Road's*** last section, Gates examines African-Americans attempt through their creation of the "New Negro" to pushback against the virulent racism poured upon them. The "New Negro" was the attempt to counter the destructive images of the "Old Negro" by creating a "culture of respectability" and a "politics of respectability." Gates is particularly astute in describing how this creation of a Negro middle-class exposed fissures within the African-American community itself. First, by W.E.B. DuBois and others rejection of Booker T. Washington's assumption of Frederick Douglass's mantle by substituting the quest for economic power for political power. In his "Atlanta Compromise" speech of 1895 Washington eschewed political power for economic opportunity by saying "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (p. 192), which, as Gates comments, "essentially accepted Jim Crow or de jure segregation in social and political matters, with the hope that this accommodation would appease the radical segregationists and enable the mass of black people…to achieve economic progress through manual labor and the trades" (p. 192). This position was immediately challenged by John Wesley Edward (J.W.E.) Bowen, who, speaking at the same venue as Washington a mere month later "challenged Washington on the matter of education. All forms of education, he believed, not merely vocational, were critical to the future of the New Negro" (p. 193).

In his 1897 essay "The Conservation of the Races" W.E.B. DuBois rejected Washington's limiting black Americans to servile tasks by arguing "…black people had to fix themselves under the leadership of a black intelligentsia united to stop the ravages of consumption…united in serious organizations, to determine by careful conference and thoughtful interchange of opinion the broad lines of policy and action for the American Negro" (p. 195). Of course, DuBois along with Ida B. Wells and others first founded the Niagara League to advance black interests and then, in 1905, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Gates then traces out DuBois's attempt to counter both Washington's position and the destructive images of "Sambo Art" by focusing on images of

African-American middle and upper-middle classes as the essence of bourgeois correctness – the culture of respectability – at the Exhibit of American Negroes at the Paris Exposition in France in April 1900. These elegant images contradict at every turn the poisonous portrayals of "Sambo Art," but as Gates himself notes, when discussing the Harlem Renaissance and the literary rebirth Alain Locke generated, no revolution was ever won by art alone.

***Stony the Road's*** great contribution is Gates's insightful analysis of both narrative and visual images and their power to create a culture. He does this in his analysis of Edward Pollard's ***The Lost Cause*** (1866), the fictional creation of an antebellum south of aristocratic masters, gentle ladies, kind masters and happy slaves; Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories, which found their largest audience in Disney's 1946 ***Song of the South;*** and the entire genre of Plantation Literature depicting benevolent masters and "happy slaves." More importantly, however, is Gates's analysis of popular and commercial art which by the paradox of its omnipresence and apparent banality insidiously creates and reinforces powerful stereotypes, which stereotypes then substitute for reality and determine how one people sees another and, more insidiously, how one might see oneself.

If ***Stony the Road*** has a flaw, it is Gates's frequent lapsing into the jargon of the English department and critical theory. His frequent use of "discourse," "tropes," "topoi," and other specialized terms of literary theory, for the general reader, obfuscates rather than clarifies. To borrow a term from critical theory's lexicon (and admittedly misuse it), the use of jargon signifies the critical specialist's self-referencing – a look-at-me-see-how-smart-I-am tone I am positive Gates does not mean.

That, however, is a mere quibble. ***Stony the Road*** is a powerful analysis of how we got to here, an America still racially conflicted. Its detailed and insightful treatment of the legal history interpreting the 13th, 14 th, and 15th amendments is a valuable primer for the non-specialist; its discussion of Reconstruction – both the early successes of black enfranchisement and the later failures to follow through – is an excellent summary; its examination of "The Redemption" is a valuable primer for those who know little about this important but neglected period of American history; and his sensitive but candid treatment of the debates within the African-American community about how to pushback against the torrent of legal, extra-legal, economic, and social discrimination heaped upon them is extremely insightful. But, perhaps, ***Stony the Road's*** greatest contribution is its depiction of the valiant and dedicated people who would not accept others negative portrayals of them and, in fighting back against that assault, caused America to live up to its avowed values, which fight continues unto today.

***Stony the Road*** is an important book; if one wants to understand 'how we got to now', there is no better primer on America's conflicted attitudes towards race, inclusion, and equality.

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For reading options for ***Stony the Road***, click **here**.

The title ***Stony the Road*** is taken from James Weldon Johnson's poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing", the national anthem to millions of black Americans. As Gates so beautifully explains, its second verse begins with reflections on slavery "Stony the road we trod…" and as it progresses traces out African Americans' path through slavery, southern Redemption into the present. The entire text can be found **here.**

For a lively discussion of ***Stony the Road*** , a national archives interview of Dr. Gates can be heard **here.**

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes contained in today's ***Book Notes*** are from Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, ***Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy and the Rise of Jim Crow.*** (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

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