

THE PRICE OF INTEGRATION: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Colored People* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994). 232 pp. \$24.95.

Julius Lester, *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* (New York: Arcade, 1994). 228 pp. \$19.95.

More than a generation after the summer of 1964, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we are beginning to see and feel the effects of those intense struggles for civil rights and full citizenship that black people waged and obtained. For those who remember the intense days of the Sixties, the passage of time may not seem so long ago but, as teachers, we have new generations of students who, when we present the material of those days to them, stare back at us in either disbelief or boredom. Like the study of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, through media saturation, both laudable and inexcusable, has reduced the desire for students, black and white, to truly understand the full meaning of the period. I have to earnestly stress that the Civil Rights Movement was a *revolutionary* period that continues to affect their lives in ways that I, when their age, would never have thought imaginable. And that may yet be another significant part of the problem in teaching about the Civil Rights-Black Power Movements: We are still working out the consequences and the legacies handed down to us by those movements. It has been well documented in historical scholarship how the Civil Rights Movement gave birth to a renewal of the Women's Movement; how the concentration on the rights of minorities has reshaped the way that America looks at groups; and how African Americans have benefitted from the passage of laws that have improved their political and economic status as well as the way that they have been perceived in the larger society.

That is not to say that all is well and that racism is dead or even dying. In fact, more so now than in 1968 at the time of the Kerner Commission Report, American society has evolved into two societies: but not necessarily one white and one black with the one having an equal advantage while the other clearly does not. Now the situation is not so clear in terms of black and white. For one of the prices of integration has been an enlargement of the black middle class such that the growth has seen more black professionals than at any other time in Afro-American history. Another price of integration has been a clear movement of that black middle class to the suburbs of the nation's urban areas, and recently back South. At the same time that this happened there has been left behind a mass of people whose quality of life, which was always on the edge, is even more grim than ever.

In the days of segregation there existed in the urban areas of our nation gangs, drugs, and a propensity towards violence. However, the presence of institutions in the community that showed the youth of poor and working-class parents that there were avenues out of the ghetto tended to mask or, to put it more bluntly, keep a lid on the cruel life lurking just below. Black churches, black teachers in the schools (especially in the Jim

Crow South), and various small businesses that produced a black middle class worked hard not only to uplift themselves from the stagnation of segregation but also to provide uplift for the masses of blacks. In more ways than can be recounted here, segregated black communities provided the glue that bound a people together almost regardless of class.

Since the Eighties, African American intellectuals have been advancing thoughts and analyses that have tried to address the continued, indeed, worsening, immiseration of the so-called black underclass. At the same time, these intellectuals have tried to grapple with the implications of their own success, whether in the academy, various professions such as law, or politics. In many ways from the late Eighties to the present, despite the pull of the nation to the right ideologically, there has been surfacing a rich and variegated neo-Black Renaissance. Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr., is one of the more prominent black intellectuals, and his memoir of coming of age in the Fifties and Sixties is a solid example of the ambivalence of some observers about the fruits of integration. Gates provides us with good insight into what growing up "behind the veil" was about for a young black male in the last days before segregation's demise. In these days of annoying clatter about the "authentic black voice," I feel confident in saying that most Afro-Americans of Gates's generation are going to find familiar many of the cultural and social items covered. Whether talking about Afro-American hair or Amos n' Andy on television ("What was special about Amos n' Andy was that their world was *all* colored just like ours."), Nat King Cole and the pride that black people felt when seeing a Negro on television, or even the social etiquette required to be around white people, these vignettes can go a long way towards helping students understand what life was like in the not too distant past.

However, what seems to be lacking from Gates's autobiography is the emotional turmoil that went with growing up in that period. For example, becoming a black militant in the late Sixties was a very painful process; going from being a Negro or colored person to Black was full of angst and not a little bit disconcerting after having been raised in an almost all-black environment that protected one from the worst ravages of white racism. Nonetheless Gates went through that phase and still retained his integrationism. As he states in his prefatory letter to his daughters explaining why he is writing this book: "Even so, I rebel at the notion that I can't be part of other groups, that I can't construct identities through elective affinities, that race must be the most important thing about me."

While Gates stops short of really exploring the emotional aspect of growing up in the midst of integration, his intention seems to be to wonder if something has not been lost in the demise of segregation. The question that confronts Gates and other black intellectuals might be put as follows: Has the glue that held the black community together been so diluted as to splinter the common bonds that held black people together? Take religion as an example. In Gates's view, "what the church did provide was a sense of community, moments of intimacy, of belonging to a culture." One could also add that it was a decisive political force, as any casual glance at black leadership in the Civil Rights Movement will attest. But today there are far too many young blacks who are "unchurched." Masses of poor blacks take spiritual solace in the survival of the fittest ethics as portrayed in gansta rap and hip-hop culture. And while there are references to the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X in this mainly urban landscape, these citations are to the Nation's

earlier Fifties and Sixties beliefs of complete separation of the races. And the Malcolm X referred to is the Nation's Malcolm who was a mouthpiece for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. The later Malcolm moved closer to integration and became a mainstream Moslem.

The real questions here are: What is integration really all about? Is it about black people assimilating and disappearing into American society? Gates states that "Only later did I come to realize that for many of the colored people in Piedmont . . . integration was experienced as loss. The warmth and nurturance of the womb-like colored world was slowly and inevitably disappearing." Or is it about America finally realizing that the essential value of African Americans to American history is the creolization of American society? Or in the end, is Gates displaying the guilt of middle class black intellectuals who have made it and cannot seem to find a way to pass on the fruits of integration to the masses of African Americans who have seemingly decided that any attempt to integrate into American society is basically "whitening up"?

Some of these questions are taken up in Julius Lester's novel *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*. Using the character John Calvin Marshall as a stand-in for Martin Luther King, Jr., Lester has given himself some latitude in which to explore those questions as well as to mount a fascinating revision of the history of the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement. At the same time, this novel works emotionally as the reader clearly relives the stresses and strains of what it meant to give one's life to "the Movement." Teachers using this book will find that it will surely provoke discussions about the nature of social change, as this early passage by Marshall indicates:

. . . once set in motion, social change, regardless of its noble intent and pure righteousness, cannot be controlled. You think you are changing "this" and you are. But you did not anticipate "that" changing also. By the time recognition of the unanticipated consequences comes, it is too late to do anything—except hope you survive.

Likewise teachers will be able to initiate discussion by using examples of the rigors that young people, black and white, put themselves through in order to bring about empowerment for black people as citizens and the costs that such commitments had on those involved. A pertinent passage by one of the characters, Lisa, underscores this:

Blacks did not hate whites then. We were black and white together, as we sang "We Shall Overcome." White southerners were right. The civil rights movement *was* about mixing the races. How could it have been otherwise? If keeping the races separate was the problem, mixing them had to be the solution.

But something happened and blacks became racist. I'm not supposed to say that, am I? But I can't rationalize and call the current black antipathy to whites 'antiracism racism,' or some such

doublespeak. Being black does not confer automatic immunity from being racist.

One important thing about this book is that it starts from the vantage point of the Nineties and through several key characters unfolds the story. Above all of these characters is John Calvin Marshall, who figures intimately in their lives. He attempts, as in a Greek chorus, to provide some coherence and understanding to what has transpired. Within this setting of fictional events woven into the cloth of real history, Lester has set forth a revision of the Civil Rights Movement. Teachers can use that interpretation in order to get their students to raise questions about the meaning, value, and ultimately success or failure of integration.

The Sixties has often been called a time of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. By invoking those symbols and incorporating them into his characters to show how they played out against and within the Civil Rights-Black Power movements, Lester has come closest to writing just about the clearest and most meaningful history of the period. On those grounds this is going to be a tough book for many blacks to take, as Lester is unsparing in his condemnation of the most extreme attitudes taken by the nationalists and the militants in the later years of the Movement. It is here that the revisionist interpretation is also critically important.

There are currently two schools of scholars regarding the Civil Rights Movement. The most dominant sees the Civil Rights Movement as a "Freedom" or "Liberation" struggle that heavily emphasizes grassroots participation of black people. The scholars writing in this school tend to be politically liberal-left. The second school cannot be affixed with any ideological label other than that they would like to see a revival of the early days of the Civil Rights Movement notion of a "beloved community." Lester, though he was strongly militant himself during his tenure in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) in the Sixties, is in the forefront of this school. The interpretative force of this revision in many ways sees a moral fervor or strand in those early days of the Movement that is very important for the nation as a whole today. At a time when the country is witnessing tension-filled discussions regarding "identity politics," "culture wars," and the merits of Afrocentrism and the need for African values within AfroAmerica, this revisionist school may well point the way out of the gloomy miasma that is before us. One of the more hopeful features of this school of thought is that it shows true integration at work with blacks and whites free to talk and criticize and be willing to work through some pressing and difficult problems.

These two books come highly recommended, as they take our students back into a world that still has important and relevant lessons to teach us. Our students especially need to see why the Civil Rights Movements were an important epoch in American and African American history. They, who will be the leaders in the twenty-first century, will need all the historical knowledge there is about this period as the changes in America are going to be immense and challenging. These two books are excellent examples, among many, that will help guide them.