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Reflection Roundtable: White Supremacy in Oregon History

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Citation Details

Reflection Roundtable: White Supremacy in Oregon History. Oregon Historical Society Panel Discussion with Darrell Millner, Carmen Thompson, and Adrienne Nelson, Moderator. Reflection on Hatfield Lecture by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. October 29 2020

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White Supremacy in Oregon History

Mark O. Hatfield Lecture Series Post-Lecture Discussion

PUBLIC HISTORY ROUNDTABLE

*with Karen Gibson, Darrell Millner, and Carmen P. Thompson
moderated by Adrienne Nelson*

This roundtable conversation was hosted virtually on Thursday, October 29, 2020, as a follow-up to a lecture two days prior. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

ELIZA CANTY-JONES: Good evening. Thanks so much for joining us this evening for a really special presentation. We hope everyone was able to log on Tuesday night, or watch the recording since then, to see Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., speak. We're looking forward to the reflection from our local scholars here in Oregon. Thank you very much to all of the sponsors of the Hatfield Lecture Series, who have made this program possible.

We want to take a moment, always, to reflect on the fact that wherever we are in Oregon and in the United States, we're on Indigenous land. Here in Portland, we're on the traditional homelands of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Tumwater, Watlala bands of the Chinook, the Tualatin Kalapuya, and many other Indigenous nations

of the Columbia River. We encourage folks to take time to learn about the history of the Indigenous peoples whose land we're on, to think about the history of the theft of that land, and to recognize the resilience and survivance of the Indigenous peoples who continue to thrive here in Oregon and across the United States today.

I'm excited about tonight's program and so grateful for all of our speakers. I'm going to introduce all four of them, and then I'll turn it over to Justice Nelson to facilitate the conversation. We invite folks to put your questions or comments, using either the Q&A or the chat feature on Zoom, and if we have an opportunity, we'll pass your questions to our speakers.

Dr. Karen Gibson is emeritus Associate Professor in the Toulon School of



PARTICIPANTS in the public history roundtable that followed the October 27, 2020, Mark O. Hatfield lecture featuring Henry Louis Gates, Jr., are pictured here: Dr. Darrell Millner (top left), Dr. Karen Gibson (top right), Dr. Carmen P. Thompson (bottom left), and Justice Adrienne Nelson (bottom right).

Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University. She holds a B.A. in English literature and creative writing from San Francisco State University, an M.S. in public management and policy from Carnegie Mellon University, and a Ph.D in city and regional planning from the University of California at Berkeley. She has published on racial economic inequality, urban redevelopment, and police-community relations in books and journals, such as *Feminist Economics*, *Transforming Anthropology*, the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, and most preeminently, the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*.

Joining us also is Dr. Darrell Millner, who is currently an emeritus Professor of Black Studies in the Black Studies Department at Portland State University. His most recent scholarly

activity includes serving as co-guest editor of the *Oregon Historical Quarterly's* Winter 2019 special issue on White supremacy and resistance.

Dr. Carmen P. Thompson is an independent scholar and historian of race and the Black experience. Dr. Thompson earned her Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, and her master's degree in African American Studies from Columbia University in New York, where she was the recipient of the Zora Neale Hurston Award for Excellence in Writing by the Institute for Research and African American Studies for her master's thesis. Dr. Thompson is a member of the editorial board of the Oregon Historical Society's peer-reviewed journal, the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, where she has co-edited and authored articles in the

journal's regionally acclaimed special issue on White supremacy in Oregon. Her research interests include the history of slavery and the slave trade in the new world and pre-colonial West Africa, early African American history, race and ethnicity in early America, and the Great Migration. Currently, Dr. Thompson is writing a much anticipated and groundbreaking book on the history of White supremacy in America, entitled *The Making of American Whiteness*, which examines the origins of Whiteness here in the United States.

Our facilitator this evening is Justice Adrienne Nelson, who was appointed to the Oregon Supreme Court on January 2, 2018, making her the first African American to sit on the state's highest court and on any appellate state court. Her election to a six-year term in November 2018 made her the first African American woman elected statewide in Oregon. In 2006, she was appointed as a trial judge on the Multnomah County circuit court in Portland, Oregon, making her the second African American female judge in the State of Oregon. Justice Nelson is a sought-after speaker on a variety of topics including diversity, inclusion, equity, community engagement, leadership, and professional development. Throughout her career Justice Nelson has been involved in many national, state, local, and specialty bar associations, often serving in a leadership capacity. She is currently the chair of the Oregon Supreme Court council on inclusion and fairness, the American Bar Association diversity and inclusion center, and the diversity and inclusion Advisory Council. In the community, she sits on

the Oregon Historical Society Board of Trustees, the Literary Arts board, the Reed College Board of Trustees, and the Oregon Community Foundation Portland Leadership Council, where she chairs the connection to the black communities committee. She also sits on the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars advisory board which she formerly chaired. In addition to all this, she serves as a mentor to many people.

We are very grateful to all of you and appreciate the time you're taking for this conversation tonight.

ADRIENNE NELSON: I want to give personal thanks to Dr. Millner, Dr. Thompson, and Dr. Gibson for giving us your Thursday evening to have this hopefully informative conversation about Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s, lecture two days ago.

I'd like to just get each of your general impressions of what he discussed as well as what he chose to focus on and how that ties in with your perspective of the world and maybe the work that you've done, or are currently doing.

CARMEN THOMPSON: I really enjoyed the lecture. I think the focus on Reconstruction is much needed, and it is very timely in the moment that we're in. Particularly his idea about [Reconstruction's] failure and its successes and its relevance to today, I think, is very important.

We've heard this saying before — that we're still fighting the Civil War. I would argue, based off his work and my own research, that we actually are still fighting Reconstruction. Dr. Gates

talked in his book, and in the lecture, about the ways in which Reconstruction was about incorporating the formerly enslaved back into society and giving them rights, and then, obviously, incorporating the Confederate states back into the Union. When we look at Reconstruction and its failure, I think the focus, as it relates today, is to understand the ways in which Reconstruction is still being fought today by not allowing Black people a place in society. Reconstruction failed because of all the ways in which White racism sought to keep African American people and formerly enslaved people from having political power.

You can look at all the different ways — police brutality, voter suppression, of course Jim Crow, the civil rights legislation — I would argue that that legacy is continuing today, in various forms, trying to keep Black people in a “slave-type position,” keeping them in the subordinate place in society. So, if Reconstruction is about incorporating formerly enslaved African Americans back into society, then the failure of Reconstruction is the failure to do that and the resistance by White society of incorporating Black people in society as equal and allowing them power. We can see, from the end of Reconstruction all the way through today, the ways in which trying to push and keep Black people in a subordinate position is continually happening and evolving into new and various forms.

Since the end of Reconstruction — we can talk about the date, 1877, or whenever that is — all the way to the present, there have been ways in

which laws and policies and systemic racism have kept Black people, in particular, in a low-class position in American society.

DARRELL MILLNER: I’m very happy to see that a scholar of the stature of Henry Louis Gates is getting the opportunity to bring this particular chapter of both Black history and American history to our attention. I’ve always felt that Reconstruction has been the most important lost chapter in American history, because what we have tended to do, in terms of how we look at this particular time period, both in terms of history education and education in general — it has just disappeared from our attention, from our view. And that’s very unfortunate, because I don’t think you can understand anything that has happened since the Civil War without a focus on, and a clear understanding of, the dynamics of the Reconstruction period. There are many things we need to correct about the way that we view Reconstruction, and there are many things that we can trace to the Reconstruction period in terms of the race relations that we are dealing with still today, in the twenty-first century. So, I’m very pleased that Dr. Gates has had this opportunity, and I’m very happy to see how well he’s used this opportunity.

KAREN GIBSON: I think Reconstruction is a fascinating period. I remember when I first learned about it, when I was in grad school trying to understand contemporary racial inequality, and having to go over to the history department

and take Black history to understand it, because I wasn't getting it in my public policy curriculum. To see the rapidity with which Black people assumed power right after slavery was astonishing to me, and I can see why White people were astonished and responded in the way that they did. Because they did not want any images of Black success. And I'm going to get upset, because it just reminds me of what Kushner — the self-appointed arbiter of Black success — just said the other day.¹

So, it was an astonishing period to me — the leadership that arose, on behalf of not just Black people, but all people; for example, the legislation passed around public education.

The rights that Black legislators fought for were for the benefit of all, and particularly us, because we were denied education. We were denied literacy, so that was very important, but so were a lot of White people.

Gates refers to [W.E.B.] Du Bois a lot. Du Bois's book, *Black Reconstruction in America*, published in 1935, I highly recommend to everyone. In Du Bois's book, one of the things I found interesting is that he also focuses on the poverty of Whites in the South.

So that slave regime of plantation agriculture and cotton that enriched places like New York City and the financiers of cotton in New York City, impoverished Whites in the South. That's one of the reasons they did not want it. How can you compete with slave labor? In other words, the uplift that Blacks were bringing was for a lot more people than just Black people at the time. It reminded me of the Black Panthers' free lunches during the 60s,

which ended up becoming implemented as a program — free breakfast for all. It's very interesting that the notion of social good and public policy for social well-being, social welfare, is partly what is still fought against today by politicians.

I agree that Black Reconstruction is a very, very important era, and we're still trying to make this democracy a real democracy. That's what it was about.

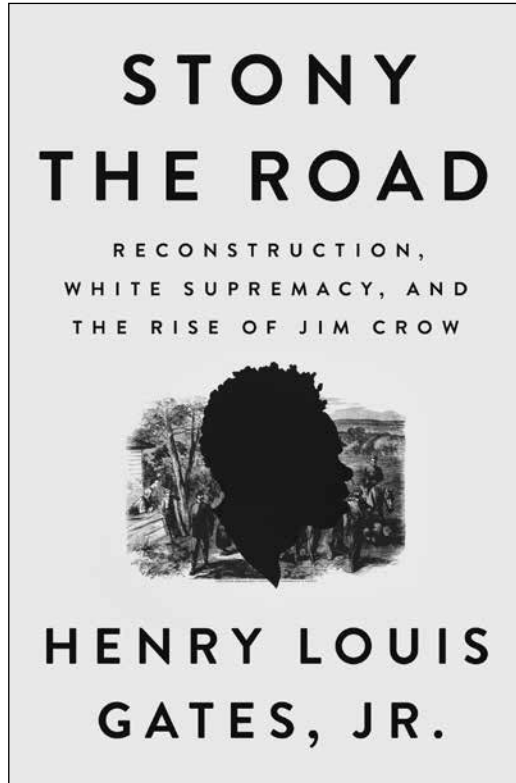
ADRIENNE NELSON: Yes, we are. Each one of you touched on the importance of education, and one of the questions that was posed to Dr. Gates at the end of his lecture was [about] how to supplement your education, because so many people weren't taught about Black contribution or even the Reconstruction period. So, there was a mention from the Know Your City advocacy, as well as others, to incorporate cultural curriculum into Oregon public schools. How important is it for people to be educated about Reconstruction? And how do we do it? Because we have generations that have not been educated, and now we have the current generation that is going to have it incorporated. But how do we get this information out so that it can replace the myth, or lost information, or omitted information people have?

CARMEN THOMPSON: What I'll say is, being a historian, is the history profession has probably done the most damage to people actually understanding Black history. I had to go to graduate school. First, I did go to

Portland State [University], and that was my first introduction to Black studies. Our general curriculum is not designed to teach Black history the way it is taught in Black Studies; it is designed as misinformation. It's not providing you the history of not only the Black experience, but the experience of any other racial group, or anybody other than, you know, the old great-White-men kind of scenario.

I had to go to Black Studies. In Black Studies, I began to get a picture of the contributions of African American history, Black history, what was happening to Black people around the world. So, what you have to do is understand that the general curriculum that's in the schools, and colleges and universities, is actually designed to perpetuate the myth of Black inferiority, or the lack of contributions of Black people. Black Studies is designed to counter that myth. So, my recommendation, besides reading widely, is to take a Black Studies course, and if those courses aren't offered, reach out to colleges' Black Studies departments and getting books to read, reading widely and, unfortunately, kind of going outside of our standard educational curriculum for this information.

It would be nice if it was more incorporated into our schools. That will take scholars and activists and teachers



ON OCTOBER 27, 2020, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., gave a lecture to Oregon Historical Society attendees of the Mark O. Hatfield Lecture Series. His book, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and The Rise of Jim Crow* was published in 2019.

educating themselves about Black history and the contributions of African Americans. Because the scholarship is there, at the colleges and universities, in the Black Studies department. But if you look at a general History department across the United States, long-standing scholars, even like Gates, like [W.E.B.] Du Bois, like John Blassingame, and women like Deborah Gray White, [and William Manning] Marable, and other scholars — all of these people's works are not part of the standard U.S. History

survey course. So, you won't get this information, the great majority of the time, unless you take a Black Studies course. It's unfortunate. It takes some changes in the curriculum at the elementary and secondary school level, and even at the college level, you have to enter into Black Studies courses and go from there.

DARRELL MILLNER: As far as my feelings about where education stands today, I tend to be an optimistic person. Sometimes that surprises even me, given the kind of material that I have to work in and deal with on a regular basis. But the thing that I've noticed about education and these issues that Dr. Gates raised and the things that we're talking about tonight — people are attracted to them. People are glad to get this information, once it becomes available to them. There's a tremendous hunger that people have to try and understand how we got from the Civil War to the civil rights movement, how we can explain the dynamics of race that we see operating around us today. Previous education systems simply have not addressed that in any kind of serious, honest, and accurate way. What I encounter in my classes, and in settings in which I'm talking to people about these issues, is a tremendous thirst and hunger for information that allows them to make sense out of American history — to make sense out of the realities that we're still dealing with today. You can only find that kind of pathway to understanding when you replace all the missing history that has been, unfortunately, left out of the way we have told the story of our evolution

and how we have become the nation that we are.

This might seem unrealistic, but I'm optimistic about where we can go in the next generation, especially for younger students. They want to know what happened in the Reconstruction period, once they get a taste, like Dr. Gates gave them in his lecture on Tuesday. I think we just have to take advantage of that thirst and that hunger that they have. I think people are open to it once they see the ways in which this history helps us explain the true history of American society, of American life, and they're eager to get it.

As unfortunate as it might be to find ourselves in this situation, I think we have an opportunity to really make a significant impact on not just Black Americans, but all Americans, because Black history is American history. You really can't understand American history without understanding the issues of race and the roles that Blacks and other people of color have played in it. I see in this generation, especially the young people, a tremendous appreciation for the opportunities that this new information that's being provided to them will make in their lives and in the future of race in the next generations.

KAREN GIBSON: Yeah, I'm glad that you're optimistic, Darrell. That's good. I know you were involved many, many decades ago [with] the Black Studies curriculum for the public-school system. I'm not sure whatever happened to that curriculum.

DARRELL MILLNER: I think people are going to find their way back to that,

and it's a process of change. We have to appreciate the difficult problem that we're dealing with and understand that it takes time to really address the problem like this and for it to find its way into the kind of mainstream thinking and be available to people in ways that are going to be significant. I think we were just a little ahead of our time when we started dealing with those issues, back in the 1970s and 1980s. I can see how that experience is going to be valuable to this generation.

KAREN GIBSON: One thing that I'm optimistic about is that a lot more people are interested in the topic today. We do have a segregation of knowledge, as well as segregation; so knowledge is segregated — the history is segregated. Again, when I went to grad school to study public policy, and the faculty in the public policy [courses] did not know the answers to why cities were the way they were today.

We don't even teach contemporary history, much less Reconstruction. I get so disappointed. When I was teaching Urban Studies, Housing and Urban Development, Urban Poverty, and I would get a lot of undergrads at Portland State [University] who had no idea about the civil unrest that occurred during the 1960s, all the cities that were exploding as I grew up. You know, from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, there were rebellions and violence and destruction and anger and resistance in cities across the country, and people don't even know about this. This is not even taught in high school today. A lot of it, some of it, is due to the fact that the teachers themselves never learn it. So,

we have a long, long way to go in terms of catching up with a whole curriculum that all of us should be learning. Educational policy people [and] historians have been trying this, but it is a power issue, right? [Consider] the reaction to the 1619 Project of *The New York Times*; it's been made political. [Donald] Trump wants [to] bash that type of learning.

So, there's a control over the narrative, just like Gates talked about — that the Whites were reclaiming in the Redeemer phase of putting down Reconstruction. [They were saying] we're trying to reclaim the narrative; we don't want to see Black success; we want to paint the picture of Black ignorance, Black inferiority. It's a power struggle. The knowledge is about a power struggle.

CARMEN THOMPSON: I want to add to what Karen said about the narrative that Dr. Gates talked about in his lecture, that crafting of the Redeemer image. History books and what is taught in school is part of that narrative, right? So, part of the way in which you keep Black people in a subordinate position is by how they are depicted in school. When I was teaching, I always started my classes [by saying]: "Name the top five African American people that you learned about in high school." They always gave [the names] Tubman, King, you know, the same ones. Then I said, "name the Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Native Americans." By the time I got to Native Americans, it's like, okay, Pocahontas or somebody. It's the same story. You have a classroom of students that come

SUGGESTED READING ON WHITE SUPREMACY AND RESISTANCE

by Dr. Carmen P. Thompson

- John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972)
- Herbert Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position," in *Race Relations: Problems and Theory*, ed. Jutsuichi Masuoka and Preston Valien (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 217–27
- Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001)
- Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43:6 (1991): 1241–99
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935)
- David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- J.D. Fage, "Slaves and Society in Western Africa," *Journal of African History* 21:3 (1980): 289–310
- Rebecca Ginsburg, "Escaping through a Black Landscape," in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes for North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010)
- Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998)
- Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106:8 (June 1993): 1709–1791
- Joseph Inikori, ed., *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982)

- Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999)
- Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005)
- Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)
- Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1998)
- Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974)
- David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991)
- Walter Rucker, "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices and Slave Resistance and Rebellion," *Journal of Black Studies* 32:1 (2001): 85–104
- P. Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," *The Massachusetts Review* 9 (Summer 1968): 417–37
- Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985)
- George Yancy, ed., *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

from all different backgrounds, and the only thing they can tell you about African Americans is Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman. They can't talk about Native Americans outside the context of war. They know nothing about Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans. I always ask them the question "Why? Why is it that we come from all backgrounds, and we all have the same basic information?" It's because what's in those textbooks, as Karen said, is about power; it's about controlling the knowledge. If you control the knowledge, you control society and what people think.

It's up to us. Until we get into our schools, we have to go outside of that. We have to read widely. We have to go into the Black Studies department or even have our teachers be in some of these institutes where they have [programs like a] teaching-the-teachers summer institute. We have to realize that our educational system and curriculum is designed to keep people ignorant — talking about Reconstruction, and that era — about the contributions of African Americans. They want it to be a certain narrative about slavery and about Black people, and about all other groups of people, too.

It's up to us to do our own work. I would always tell my students, "You have to do your own work. If you just take your standard U.S. history course in college and you never do any more reading than that, you're in trouble. You're just not going to know — not only about the Black experience, but any other experience." It's because our textbooks are power. They're about the

narrative. Our history books — that's power. There's only so many publishers out there who publish the books. People fight — as we see with the Trump administration taking critical race theory out, talking about the way in which you talk about slavery, that enslaved people were happy, or they were just workers. They frame and craft how it is that we think about Black people and their contributions. If you just go take what you had in high school, or take what you have in the standard U.S. history courses in college, you'll go through your whole entire life not knowing that.

So, it's up to us to go outside of our curriculum right now and, then, try to do the work, like what Darrell has already laid out for us, and bring these things back into the schools, challenging Portland Public Schools and our school districts. But there's resistance within our educational system to the revamping of the curriculum, because other groups of people are resistant to the framing of the Black experience, in particular, in a certain way, because it makes White society and other groups of people look bad, and they don't want that narrative out there. You're fighting against the politics of controlling the narrative about American society, American history, and the Black experience in particular.

DARRELL MILLNER: I agree with Carmen 100 percent in her description of how we got to this historic point. And one of the things I liked about Dr. Gates's presentation was his point about history repeating itself, because many times we hear that phrase being

used, but we don't also add a very important part of that reality: history never repeats itself exactly. We see patterns from the past. We think we see things that have happened in the past. We can connect them to the present that we live in, but the history of the 1870s and 80s is not going to be repeated in the same way that it occurred in its original version. Because people who, at that time, had absolute control of access to and distribution of information don't have the same degree of absolute control today. In that earlier generation, if all you were able to learn of American history was what you learned in the textbooks and in the classrooms of the day, that's not true today. We have alternative sources of information today — especially young people have access to them and use them and share information that would never be shareable in that earlier generation. We're dealing with many of the same forces, many of the same situations and circumstances, but we have options, and we have weapons available to us today that never existed in the past. We have the internet. We have ways of communicating information to the public that simply didn't exist in the Reconstruction period.

So, I look at the time that we're going through now, and I can see reasons to be optimistic. There is no way the old stories about American history can compete with the new sources of information that we have today. If you set Henry Louis Gates's version of Reconstruction against the high school textbook from the 1950s, no one is going to choose the high

school textbook from the 1950s to establish their understanding of that earlier time period. I think we have to be aware and not be pessimistic about the situation we find ourselves in today, if we are willing to take advantage of the new weapons and the new opportunities that we have to offer alternative explanations of American history and American race. I think that we have a market for those new ideas and that alternative information today that will — more so than any generation of American life that has come before us — be the force that shapes race in future generations.

KAREN GIBSON: I just want to add quickly to that. The idea that there's other resources is one of the wonderful things that Dr. Gates does in his documentaries. He showed twenty minutes of the film in his presentation. Films add immeasurably to the understanding, because of the visuals that you can get, the voices of the people who were there at the time, the photos of what was going on. That method of storytelling can be very powerful. Today, we understand visual learning and methods of teaching that involve [film]. Dr. Millner teaches film classes. Those are easy to circulate, I would think. It's a powerful way of understanding.

I used to teach a class called "Living for the City: The Black Urban Experience through Documentary Film."² I learned so much about Black history by showing those films; for example, even more modern-era histories of urban renewal in Miami

or San Francisco. You could see the migration, you could see Black community formation, just like here in Portland. And, then, you can see the bulldozers come and the freeways come, and there's nothing like seeing a visual of a neighborhood completely flattened — the businesses that were there in the neighborhood, so that the whole life of the community is destroyed. Reading that in words is not quite as powerful as seeing the images. So, we should use film a lot more, I think.

ADRIENNE NELSON: This is such a rich conversation. I hate to take you to another place. I'm not going to do a hard left or hard right, but I'm going to do a little curve, okay?

So, talking about narrative. Dr. Gates mentioned the interview that Bryan Stevenson did with *Vox* magazine, where he mentioned that the North may have won the Civil War, but the South won the narrative.³ You've each expressed about the narrative, and I want dig deeper into that, especially as we think about imagery and messaging in social media today. Now, I'm not a big user of social media, on purpose, but I would like to hear your perspective on how to counter the media narrative and imagery. I was struck by Dr. Gates's placement of images for each of his [book] sections to help tell that story so people could see how the narrative was more successful than even words — that imagery. How can we dismantle it, because we know it exists. How do we dismantle that narrative today in the present and moving forward?

CARMEN THOMPSON: We have to tell our own stories. You see people like Tyler Perry and — the audience can help me out with the Black women filmmakers, television writers [of] *Grey's Anatomy*; I can't think of the sister's name [Shonda Rhimes]. We have to tell our own stories, because again, mainstream media is not going to tell the Black experience. It's going to perpetuate the narrative that continues in American society of the racial stereotypes about Black people, about White people, and about every other group of persons. If you look at mainstream TV, you see it's not multi-racial. You only see Black people within a certain context, unless that story is being told by African Americans or, sometimes, on cable. You're getting more and more diversity, but as you get Black people behind the camera, and as you get Black writers, authors, artists, telling the stories — then you will see. That's one way to counter it.

At the same time, when you look at the regular network television, and if you look at the news personnel who's on the screen [and] the stories that they tell on our local news stations — who are the people telling the stories? The stories that they choose to tell, how they choose to frame stories about Black people and other people of color — that's not going to change until we kind of push that by demanding that they frame and cast stories about African American people by getting more African American and Black people and other people of color behind the cameras. For the Black experience particularly, it's telling our own stories, getting more



IN THE PUBLIC HISTORY ROUNDTABLE, Dr. Millner, Dr. Gibson, and Dr. Thompson discussed the importance of providing students access to educational information beyond standard U.S. history courses — histories that include Black peoples’ experiences beyond Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman. Resources such as Dr. Millner’s Oregon Encyclopedia essay “Blacks in Oregon” help change that narrative.

writers and people behind the camera and kind of forcing the issue into the mainstream media with our own shows and programming. As they grow and develop and catch hold, that will help counter that narrative. But we have to still understand that our society is organized in a way that has certain stereotypes and images about Black people and about other people of color that are perpetuated in our media. So, we have to work to counter that by telling our own stories.

DARRELL MILLNER: I would just add that one of the most important contributions that Dr. Gates’s lecture and his video made was to not only highlight the nature of that narrative that emerged after the Civil War —

defining the qualities and characters of the Black experience — but he connected that narrative to public policy. It’s the public policy part of our racial history that many people don’t fully understand. I encounter this very often when I do presentations or even with the students in my class. They say things like, “Well, everybody’s racist, everybody’s prejudiced. I know Black people that do this, and I’ve seen Black people be racist in this way. So, everybody’s prejudiced, everybody’s racist.” But that doesn’t really capture the reality of American history that we’ve passed through.

It’s not that everyone is prejudiced. It’s that racism is a matter of public policy. It’s not a matter of private prejudice. It’s the connection between the

narrative that serves to justify that public policy that really has the larger impact on the course that racial behavior takes in this country. That's what people really are saying when they say that racism is systematic. It's a matter of public policy. It's just not a matter of personal prejudice that a person might not like another individual of this or that color; it's that those particular relationships are put in place in the public sphere by the policy decisions and by the functions and the actions of our institutions. That is really the defining difference between being personally prejudiced and participating in a racist society. I think Dr. Gates was able to draw attention to the relationship between the narrative — the way that Black people are defined — and the way that they interact with our public institutions, which is really the key. If we want to make changes in American racial behavior, we have to address those institutions in terms of changing the way that they relate to the Black experience and other colored experiences.

So, it's not just the narrative. It's the connection between the narrative and what the narrative is used to justify: the public policies that define what race will be for most Americans.

KAREN GIBSON: To follow onto that, one of the things about the narrative and its relationship to policy is about economic policy. There's a quote from Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, where he says:

The espousal of the doctrine of Negro inferiority by the South was primarily because of economic motives and the inter-connected political urge neces-

*sary to support slave industry; but to the watching world, it sounded like the carefully thought out result of experience and reason; and because of this, it was singularly disastrous for modern civilization, in science and religion, in art and government, as well as in industry. The South could say that the Negro, even when brought into modern civilization, could not be civilized.*⁴

So, that narrative continues to be used [to justify oppression]. One of the ways that it crosses into another dimension, from that era of Reconstruction into the modern day, is that now we Black people are urbanized. Just like Native Americans were put on reservations, we were put in, basically, urban reservations, in public housing developments. We were ghettoized, and through that space, through that ghettoization and disinvestment and placing us — people have talked about Blacks in Portland being placed in the most already aged, decrepit housing that existed. My research on urban poverty in Portland and other places [reveals] these places get labeled as inferior. Even Trump, today, drives through Chicago and says, “only Blacks could live like this,” when he goes to poor areas of Chicago. What is he doing right now with the suburban women? Begging them to love him — because he's saved them. He is saving their neighborhoods from those [Black] people.⁵

So, the imposition [of an inferior label] — this power, this narrative — every means is used, not just about people themselves through ugly images of people, but on places and images of places as undesirable places. And the effect, the power of

racism in conjunction with what Dr. Millner says about public policy, [is] it's legal for you to segregate, and then, you do redlining, and then, you do disinvestment, and then, you make sure you confine all the vice activities like gambling, drugs, and prostitution, to the Black neighborhood. You don't let people borrow money because, really, they're not complete citizens. Blacks and Chinese were denied the right to own real estate here, and that was part of the Oregon constitution. You can't make contracts, and you can't sue in court. So basically, you were kept at the status of, really, a piece of property. And in my mind, one of the useful things to think about is how far have Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans — and you can think about how it varies for different groups, the Indigenous peoples — how far have they progressed in terms of full citizenship?

We were profitable as property. We were exploited for our labor. We were the carpenters. We contributed so much, yet I think that some people are still quite unhappy that we are not property.

Today, being an urbanized people, even with education, the Black middle class does not get the same access to lending, has not been able to accumulate the wealth, that their White counterparts do. Research shows that Whites with less money are more likely to get a better interest rate on a mortgage loan. So, we've been denied full citizenship through being ghettoized in urban spaces. The narrative helped create that and the ghettoization has helped perpetuate the narrative. There's a feedback loop.⁶

The last thing I want to say is that when Dr. Gates, at the end of his presentation, said he thought that education, public schooling, should be equal in all districts, I agree. But, again, Black people who are educated still face challenges. What is the method for continued progress? How should we resist? People should be educated. We should all be getting as educated as we can, to become self-sufficient, but we shouldn't just rely on that because the playing field is just unequal. Mortgage loans was the example I gave you; we could come up with many others. No matter how much education you have, there still are structural disadvantages that need to be analyzed and made public. I'm heartened to see that now a lot of people know about redlining, and they talk about it and understand that there are contemporary policies that are still unequal, that contribute to the huge disparity in wealth.

It's not just about education. It's about developing a fair playing field for us, and getting at many of the policies that Dr. Millner talked about, for example, that involve the Federal Reserve. The whole 2008 crash that Blacks and Latinos lost two-thirds of their wealth in home equity, mainly, after that crash. How did that occur? It was because the predatory lenders and the financial wizards have gotten a playing field that favors them, so that they still continue to exploit places. This is by lending in cities across the country, during that time, that ended up resulting in our communities foreclosing on their houses and losing their wealth. You're supposed to try to pull

yourself up by your bootstraps, get the good education, get the good job, buy the house, and everything will be fine? Not necessarily, when you still have nobody guarding. When the wolves [are] at the chicken coop; the wolves are the ones that are still designing all the policies.⁷

That's why, for some people, it's not just about education — it's about reparations. For the people in the audience, [I recommend] William Darity's book about reparations, *From Here to Equality*, where they make an argument about reparations, specifically for African American descendants of slavery.⁸ So, there is something to be said when we fully examine the injustice that has occurred, and that continues to occur, [such as] the person in Albina who couldn't buy a \$16,000 house but could only get access to a \$26,000 car. And look at the property values in Albina now. This has happened across the country. The research shows that we've been ripped off to the tune of billions, and like Gates said, a half a billion is not going to cut it. So, that's where I'll stop.

DARRELL MILLNER: To bring us back to Dr. Gates's lecture, one of the things that was very important was the way in which he redefined the Reconstruction period. Historians have always talked about the failures of Reconstruction. Reconstruction didn't fail. Reconstruction was destroyed. Reconstruction was actually very successful. All the congressmen, all of the progress that the newly freed Black population made is a remarkable story.

As long as we continue to couch it in terms of American history, and the way that we narrate that past as the failure of Reconstruction, we are going down the wrong street, we are going down the wrong path! Reconstruction was a tremendous success.

What we're trying to do today is recapture some of that ground, some of that success that we had immediately after the Civil War. And we have to understand — and I think Gates does this very well in his lecture and in his video presentation — it was destroyed, not because it was unsuccessful, but because it was successful. It was destroyed by White violence, and in the generation that we're passing through right now we're facing, again, the threat of White violence to suppress the kind of progress that we potentially can make. And those are the kind of connections that I see as being very important when we look back to that particular part of history and understand the lessons that it can have for us today. We can't allow that to happen again.

ADRIENNE NELSON: We've been getting many wonderful comments in the chat. There's a reading list prepared by Dr. Thompson, that's from the OHS blog. And, to answer the questions: Shonda Rhimes and Ava DuVernay are the female filmmaker/directors; and the book [is] *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, authored by William A. Darity, Jr., and A. Kirsten Mullen.

Thank you all for joining us. We should continue to have this conver-

sation. OHS store will have copies of Dr. Gates's book available that will have a special plaque on it if you'd like to buy it. Tristan Irving has done

some wonderful art on our wooden board from the vandalism, so that we could continue to serve the state and be inclusive of all voices in our history.

NOTES

The *Oregon Historical Quarterly* would like to thank Marvin Dawson for his work in making a usable transcription for this publication.

1. See Editorial Board, "Jared Kushner Spews Stereotype to Black Americans: You have to want success," *Baltimore Sun*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-1028-kushner-blacks-20201027-fam4pzlo35aindanktojahpd3q-story.html> (accessed January 13, 2021).

2. For information on the modern civil rights movement, watch the PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987). For information about Ida B. Wells and the Reconstruction era, watch the documentary *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989). For information on African American media and press, watch *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords* (1999). For an understanding of the African American experience and racial economic inequality, watch *A. Phillip Randolph: For Jobs and Freedom* (1996). For information on the history of racism and civil rights in Oregon, watch *Local Color* (1999). For information on the destruction of Greenwood 100 years later, watch *Goin' Back to T-Town* (2021).

3. Ezra Klein, "Bryan Stevenson on how America can heal: A conversation about truth and reconciliation in the US," *Vox*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests> (accessed December 8, 2020).

4. W.E.B. DuBois and H.J. Mack, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (Somerset: Routledge 2012, 1998), 34.

5. Allan Smith, "Cohen calls Trump a racist 'cult leader,' says he disparaged Obama, Black

leaders, Chicago," NBC News, September 7, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/cohen-calls-trump-racist-cult-leader-says-he-disparaged-obama-n1239445> (accessed February 16, 2021). Similarly, Trump has attempted to stir racist fears of those who have long opposed desegregation efforts in places such as Westchester, New York. See Ed Shanahan, "How Trump is Using Westchester to Stir Up Suburban Fears," *New York Times*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/nyregion/trump-westchester-housing.html?searchResultPosition=4> (accessed January 13, 2021).

6. See Jacob S. Rugh and Douglas S. Massey, "Racial Segregation and the American Foreclosure Crisis," *American Sociological Review*, 75:5 (2010): 629–51; and Jacob S. Rugh, Len Albright, and Douglas S. Massey, "Race, Space, and Cumulative Disadvantage: A Case Study of the Subprime Lending Collapse," *Social Problems* 62:2 (2015): 186–218.

7. For information on how disasters and crisis compound these racial disparities, see Michael Neal and Alanna McCargo, *How Economic Crises and Sudden Disasters Increase Racial Disparities in Homeownership*, (Urban Institute, 2020), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102320/how-economic-crises-and-sudden-disasters-increase-racial-disparities-in-homeownership.pdf> (accessed February 16, 2021).

8. William A. Darity, Jr., and A. Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).