

OBSERVATIONS ON ONE OF AMERICA'S ORIGINAL SINS

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In the May 7th edition of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, Leonard Pitts' column discussed a new book called Dying of Whiteness by Jonathan Metzl. The basic thesis of Metzl's book, according to Pitts, is that "...white conservative voters, driven by fear of, and antipathy toward, black and brown 'others,' support policies against their own self interest, policies that diminish their lives and even kill them." Metzl tells the story of a terminally ill 41 year old white man who is so opposed to the Affordable Care Act that he won't use it to seek the treatment he needs. He said he'd rather die than support "Obamacare."

To most, if not all, Democratic voters, this seems like an insane position, and we wrestle with explanations for that kind of behavior every election cycle. But Leonard Pitts understands why the dying man feels the way he does and says it's quite predictable.

"From the beginning, white fear has been a great, unspoken driver of this nation's sins against difference," according to Pitts who is African American.

No one explains Pitts' thesis more eloquently than Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In his recent PBS series, Gates describes in detail how the promise of freedom was extinguished in just a few short years after the post-Civil War Reconstruction period ended in 1877. The series brings to life the people and events from the end of the Civil War to the early 20th century Jim Crow era and the Harlem Renaissance. The title of the companion book for the PBS program, Stony the Road, is taken from what many call the anthem of the African American community, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Even without Gates' frequent mentions of the current situation in America, it is easy to see how, as the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Background: It was the Republicans, mostly from northern or midwestern states, and especially President Lincoln from Illinois, who won the Civil War in 1865 and ended slavery. The southern states were represented by conservative Democrats. It wasn't until many decades later that the two major political parties switched roles.

The whole purpose of the Reconstruction period was to "reconstruct" a country that had been divided by war but not go back to the way things were. The question was how to readmit those states which had seceded and what process to use to end slavery and give blacks the rights of citizens. To this end, Congress passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments

to the U.S. Constitution. These amendments conferred citizenship on all African Americans, extending rights such as due process to them and gave black males 21 and older the right to vote.

Gates describes how newly freed slaves went about reuniting their families that had been separated during slavery, building communities for mutual support, establishing schools, businesses and, most important of all, electing black men to local, state and national positions of power. Both the book and the TV program offer many photographs of distinguished black men in positions of political power. When the states that had seceded were forced to hold constitutional conventions to basically apply to be readmitted to the union, they were required to include all registered black voters. White southerners were forced to accept conditions they hated, and ending slavery did not end the racial divide. Consider that a white supremacist ideology had evolved over generations that justified enslaving fellow human beings, and that mindset was not going to disappear based on political decisions made in the nation's capital. In many former Confederate states, vigilante groups organized and used weapons such as lynching, rape, mutilation, beatings, and arson to terrify black families and force them to abandon any hope of participating in the electoral process. Supporting themselves also became a distant dream, and many of them had to resort to the "convict leasing" system whereby they (mostly men) were jailed on trumped up charges and then "leased" out to plantation owners or other white owned businesses. For some, share cropping helped their families survive, but they were never out of debt enough to start their own farms. (Note: Gates is not shy about drawing parallels with today's efforts to suppress minority voting and the mass incarceration of black men which enriches the private prison system.)

Historians disagree on when the Era of Reconstruction actually ended, but they all agree that it was painfully short given how long slavery had existed in the United States. A bargain was struck during the presidential election of 1876 giving the White House to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes in exchange for withdrawal of the federal troops that still remained in the South that made possible the Freedman's Bureau programs designed to give newly freed slaves education and job training.

Gates, page 28: "...Colonel Pat Donan, the editor of a Lexington, Missouri, newspaper declared, 'No simian-souled, sooty skinned, kink-curved, blubber-lipped, prehensile-heeled, Ethiopian gorilla shall pollute the ballot box with his leprous vote.'"

Period of "Redemption"

As pressure from Congress to establish blacks as co-equal political decision makers with whites in the South dissipated, plantation owners and other powerful leaders began to "redeem" their ante-bellum way of life, sometimes replicating their actual positions of authority but also

adding an almost religious interpretation of the past. This “honoring our culture” mystique continues even today, for example in the arguments over removal of statues that symbolize an honorable and heroic past.

Of the many attempts to “prove” the inferiority of Africans and their descendants, eugenics became one of the most popular methods in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. British biologist, Francis Galton, first used the term eugenics in 1883 from the Greek “well-born.”

The assumption was that Africans were not as evolved as European whites, and, therefore the two races should not intermarry and produce less intelligent offspring. In 1909, a Democratic senator from Florida introduced a resolution to ban interracial marriages and gave as his reasoning what he claimed were the differences in brain size. His “scientific findings” concluded the gorilla brain weighed 20 ounces, the “negro” brain 35 ounces and the European brain 45 ounces. Even an august institution such as Harvard University became caught up in the eugenics movement. Faculty and administrators produced many of the journal articles, organized supportive organizations and lobbied Congress to enact eugenics laws.

World War I and the 1920's

The U.S. Army used an intelligence test designed by Harvard psychology professor Robert Yerkes which determined the average mental age of white Americans at 13. Without questioning the validity of the test or the way it was used, interested parties claimed the results proved that continued interbreeding of the “feeble minded” with the general population would bring an end to the “white race.” Interracial marriage was banned by law, but a scale was also developed to separate Europeans from each other. “The fair Nordic populations planted firmly at the top of the scale and darker-complexioned Italians near the bottom.” (p. 78) Blacks were divided into three groups based on darkness of complexion.

All of this “scientific” study convinced the U.S. Congress to pass the National Origins Act of 1924, and in 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Virginia sterilization law. In his writing for the majority (8 to 1) decision, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote: “It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind....Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” (p. 79)

It was out of this incredibly ignorant period the idea of Jim Crow was born. Based on bad science and a prejudiced public perception of blacks, writers and scholars began to discuss the “Negro problem.” Based on false information, the stereotype of the unintelligent and lazy black person spread across the country, including in northern and western areas. This false impression supported the widespread use of segregation laws and customs. The Supreme

Court decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) codified that “separate but equal” institutions for the races were legal, that’s how black citizens had to live for the next six decades.

From Encyclopedia Britannica: “Jim Crow was the name of a minstrel routine (actually Jump Jim Crow) performed beginning in 1828 by its author, **Thomas Dartmouth** (“Daddy”) Rice, and by many imitators, including actor **Joseph Jefferson**. The term came to be a derogatory epithet for African Americans. Eventually, the term Jim Crow became short hand for laws requiring the segregation of the races, primarily in the South.” Currently, the term is most often used to describe the early 20th century to the 1950’s and the Brown vs. Board of Education decision.

One of the most effective methods for convincing white Americans that blacks were naturally inferior was popular culture, especially through visual representations and entertainment. Gates presents dozens of examples of the most extreme, and by today’s thinking, horrifying “artistic” efforts to turn violence against blacks into entertaining images. One of the most shocking is a series of printed postcards from southern vacation spots depicting “nigger babies” being eaten by alligators. White vacationers mailed these back home to friends. And, of course, we all recognize Uncle Ben on boxes of rice and Aunt Jemima pancake mix and syrup.

Gates describes briefly the period of the Great Migration northward, the Harlem Renaissance and the beginnings of the mid 20th century civil rights movement. He concludes that America is locked in a continuous battle between Reconstruction and Redemption.

It is not hard to see what is happening in America today, with a white nationalist, wealthy president supported by enthusiastic crowds of mostly white working class voters as another chapter in the history of Reconstruction and Redemption.

After the progressive changes brought about by the civil rights, women’s and Native American movements of the 1960s and 1970’s as well as more enlightened policies around environmental and other issues, it is not surprising that it was time for a backlash by the 1980’s. It was time for rich white folks to “redeem” what they believe is their rightful place in society. Beginning with President Reagan’s “welfare queen” comments and right through to today’s mass incarceration of black men for minor offenses, the political party with the support of billionaires and corporations finally succeeded in putting someone in the White House who represents them and their goals.

And to make it even more obvious, the goal of the current administration is to undo, sometimes violently, all the progress made by the first African American president and his cabinet members. Donald Trump did not originate the “birther movement,” but he used it to his advantage, separating himself from establishment Republicans by directly trying to humiliate President Obama. To this day, there are still pockets of uninformed voters who believe Barack Obama is a Muslim born in Kenya.

It is hard to decide which policies of the Trump administration are the most dangerous, but foreign policy and damaging decisions about the environment would be near the top of the list. Pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, canceling the agreement with Iran about its nuclear program, belittling and threatening to withdraw from NATO, ignoring Russian interference in our election process, destruction of the Clean Air standards by promoting coal fired power plants, allowing mining in national parks and oil exploration in the Arctic region are not just about investment opportunities for the super rich; they are directly aimed at slapping down the hopes and successes of a black president.

President Trump chooses to treat darker skinned refugees and other immigrants seeking asylum not only with disdain but with inhumane treatment not seen since the incarceration of Japanese

Americans during World War II. At the same time, he admits he'd like to see more people from Norway moving to the United States. No explanation needed there.

Back to Professor Metzl's book, DYING OF WHITENESS. He lays out a very convincing argument that white Americans who still harbor negative feelings toward darker skinned people, and especially African Americans, may not even realize that they are voting for candidates and policies that hurt everyone. The three topics Metzl explores are gun ownership/violence, rejection of the Affordable Care Act and life threatening tax cuts. He uses Missouri, Tennessee and Kansas as the three examples. While it may be impossible to change the thinking of masses of people who need to feel superior to someone, what we can do is have a reasonable discussion about how our nation will never fulfill its promise of a just society until we acknowledge the damage done to some of our neighbors over the centuries.

There is currently a discussion about reparations for the ancestors of slaves in the U.S. HR 40 has been languishing in Congress' never-never land for 30 years. It would set up a commission to discuss the many options for coming to grips with how European Americans have benefited from blocking African Americans from prospering and accumulating wealth for their children and grandchildren. Such a commission will never be appointed while the Senate majority leader is from Kentucky and says he doesn't see how today's white folks can be blamed for something our ancestors did.

The night before he died, Martin Luther King Jr. said he could see the promised land and that he might not get there with the rest of us. What a tribute to him and an opportunity for white Americans to acknowledge the debt owed to our black neighbors if we start the next progressive leap forward by acknowledging our sins of the past.