

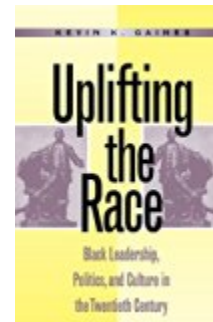
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kevin K. Gaines. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xxx + 312 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2239-5.

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Uplifting the Race is both a provocative and frustrating study that explores the variations and inconsistencies in the evolution of “racial uplift” ideology from emancipation through the twentieth century. In the first half of the book, Gaines analyzes the black elite preoccupation with racial uplift ideology and the tensions it produced among black intellectuals. Gaines argues that during the nineteenth-century racial uplift ideology was part of a “liberation theology” that stressed a group struggle for freedom and social advancement.

Jim Crow segregation, New South economic development, and social changes brought on by industrialization, immigration, migration, and anti-black violence in the post-Reconstruction era, coupled with cultural manifestations of white supremacy, caused the black elite to abandon the concept of racial uplift as a collective struggle for inalienable human rights. Instead, the black elite redefined the notion of uplift to stress class differentiation as evidence of race progress. Personal desire for white recognition of their humanity and social status led black intellectuals to embrace popular binary views of race and evolutionism. To “uplift the race” became a personal duty to reform the character and manage the behavior of the masses. Black elites ushered in a politics of class division that supported racist beliefs by internalizing white notions of black cultural depravity, anxiety over urban migration, and anti-labor sentiment.

This class-bound, restrictive construction of racial uplift ideology made it impossible for black elites to develop compassion for the masses or recognize and act upon systemic barriers to racial advancement. Furthermore, the reformulated concept of uplift embraced narrow Victorian gender rules with their emphasis on the

sanctity of the patriarchal family and limited roles for women. Through an emphasis on the patriarchal family, elite blacks attempted to affirm their respectability and contradict the notion that minstrel stereotypes applied to the “better class” of African-Americans. The adoption of the patriarchal ideal also engendered tension between black male and female intellectuals as its application by black men marginalized the importance of black women’s work and economic independence. Black women’s autonomy clashed with the imperatives of male leadership.

The second half of Gaines’ work examines the variations and limitations of uplift ideology as well as the complex divisions within the group along class, color, and gender lines through a series of six biographical essays. These essays serve to highlight the diversity among black intellectuals. The subjects include the well-known W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Anna Julia Cooper, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson as well as the little known Hubert H. Harrison and William H. Ferris. In analyzing the writings and work of his subjects, Gaines provides insightful, informative, thought-provoking illustrations of the various cultural manifestations of elite uplift ideology and the tensions it engendered among his subjects.

Uplifting the Race offers a close analysis of the racial, class, color, and gender dimensions of a very complex subject, yet it is also a frustrating study. It is a difficult read that employs complicated language and a fragmented organizational structure. At times Gaines’ analysis lacks any clear sense of flow and seems to be wandering from one unrelated point to another. Nevertheless, scholars of African-American history and race relations

will find an array of issues in this work that will stimulate lively discussion.

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