



Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century

By Kevin K. Gaines

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Amidst the violent racism prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century, African American cultural elites, struggling to articulate a positive black identity, developed a middle-class ideology of racial uplift. Insisting that they were truly representative of the race's potential, black elites espoused an ethos of self-help and service to the black masses and distinguished themselves from the black majority as agents of civilization; hence the phrase 'uplifting the race.'

A central assumption of racial uplift ideology was that African Americans' material and moral progress would diminish white racism. But Kevin Gaines argues that, in its emphasis on class distinctions and patriarchal authority, racial uplift ideology was tied to pejorative notions of racial pathology and thus was limited as a force against white prejudice.

Drawing on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Hubert H. Harrison, and others, Gaines focuses on the intersections between race and gender in both racial uplift ideology and black nationalist thought, showing that the meaning of uplift was intensely contested even among those who shared its aims. Ultimately, elite conceptions of the ideology retreated from more democratic visions of uplift as social advancement, leaving a legacy that narrows our conceptions of rights, citizenship, and social justice.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Around the turn of the century, between the dying hopes of Reconstruction and the ardent desires of the civil rights movement was uplift, an ideology whereby African American elites believed they could earn respect--and rights--by adopting bourgeois mores. In his first three chapters, Gaines, a scholar of history and African American studies at Princeton, outlines some of the problems and concerns of uplift ideology, and while much of it is intriguing, his biggest beef often seems to be that uplift was not ahead of its time, being neither feminist enough nor sufficiently concerned with the needs of the lower classes. In the six remaining chapters, Gaines offers illustrations through profiles of African Americans. There's Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose dialect poems appealed to whites by continuing stereotypes; W.E.B. Du Bois, whose *The Philadelphia Negro* tried to reconcile the ideology of self-help with the realities of racism. There are "race men and women" who demean the lower classes, and African American men who ignore the plight of women while suffragists ignore the plight of African Americans. In the early chapters, Gaines sexualizes too much without enough substantiation ("the mammy stereotype... provided whites with a forgiving image of maternal black womanhood that released them from a guilty awareness of black women as victims of rape by white men"). But by the end, readers will be left with a much more subtle understanding of the sad paradox of uplift, of African Americans trying to belong to a society that was defined in part by their exclusion.

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Review

A bold and exciting work.

"Journal of Southern History"

Readers will be left with a much more subtle understanding of the sad paradox of uplift.

"Publishers Weekly"

Gaines's book is a refreshing demonstration of what can be yielded from a serious and scholarly contemplation of our American past.

"American Quarterly"

"An immensely insightful and informative work, richly documented and provocative in its arguments and conclusions.

Colin A. Palmer, City University of New York"

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An immensely insightful and informative work, richly documented and provocative in its arguments and conclusions.--Colin A. Palmer, City University of New York

A detailed and engaging book which explores a neglected aspect of US foreign policy. . . . The emotional resonance articulated in the epilogue regarding diasporan African' quest to celebrate their African heritage in addition to formulating a political relationship with Ghana makes a fitting end to this insightful book.--*Modern African Studies*

A bold and exciting work.--*Journal of Southern History*

A challenging exploration of an important strand of African American thought--the ideology of racial uplift.-
-*Journal of American History*

Readers will be left with a much more subtle understanding of the sad paradox of uplift, of African Americans trying to belong to a society that was defined in part by their exclusion.--*Publishers Weekly*

Gaines addresses the black elite's preoccupation with uplift ideology throughout the 20th century and the tension that particular doctrine caused among African American intellectuals.--*Choice*

This work represents the promise of what the new scholarship on the African American intellectual and social experience in the United States might bring. Gaines's book is a refreshing demonstration of what can be yielded from a serious and scholarly contemplation of our American past, and it opens new doors of inquiry into the fields of African American intellectual history, gender studies, cultural studies, and political history.--*American Quarterly*

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