

Everyday Resistance

By Samuel Davis

A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration. By Steven Hahn. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 624 pp.

Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class. By Robin D. G. Kelley. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1996. 384 pp.

The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America. By Khalil Gibran Muhammad. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 392 pp.

This historiographical essay explores the many ways that Blacks have fought restrictions and stigmatizations of themselves, the reasons as to why they are deemed necessary to be controlled, and the greater implications of both. In *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Steven Hahn posits that as both slaves and Freedmen, African Americans forged themselves to be political actors through their struggles for equality, despite being denied freedom by chattel slavery and by the violent intimidation tactics to exclude them from the formal political process during Reconstruction. As Hahn states, “I have tried to identify constituent elements of slave politics and suggest how they alter our comprehension of what happened after slavery” (3). He continues, “by its nature, the slave’s defiance challenges the fictions of domination and submission around which slavery was constructed, and is hereby imbued with a political resonance” (3).

Historian Khalil Muhammad, author of *The Condemnation of Blackness*, delves into the subject of Black criminality and its influence on the making of modern urban America. Muhammad says that “notions about blacks as criminals materialized in national debates about the fundamental racial and cultural differences between African Americans and native born whites and European immigrants. These debates also informed questions about appropriate levels of African American access to the social and economic infrastructure of the nation” (4). He traces the history of racial criminalization that stigmatizes crime as Black and how this idea led to more aggressive policing of African Americans but also contributed to public policy that further marginalized them. He goes on to state that “African American criminality became one of the most widely accepted bases for justifying prejudicial thinking, discriminatory treatment, and/or acceptance of racial violence as an instrument of public safety” (4). Robin Kelley’s collection of essays, *Race Rebels*, outlines the myriad ways working-class African Americans resist White supremacy. Kelley argues, “we need to break away from traditional notions of politics” (4). By doing so, the history of Black resistance becomes more diverse and multifaceted, and the act of resistance takes precedence over the institution through which struggle is performed. Kelley’s research draws upon other scholarly works, like E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* and David Montgomery’s *Workers’ Control in America*. Central to Kelley’s discourse is the fact that “too often politics is defined by *how* people participate rather than *why*... Yet the *how* seems far less important than the *why*, since many of the so-called real political institutions have not always proved effective for, or even accessible to, oppressed people” (9).

Collectively, these historians highlight hegemonic White power and the agency of African Americans through the multiple and inventive ways they resist stigmatizations and repression and struggle for autonomy. Kelley denotes how members of the Black working class resisted by arguing that “one’s ability to move represented a crucial step toward empowerment and self-determination; employers and landlords understood this, which explains why so much energy was expended limiting labor mobility and redefining migration as ‘shiftless,’ ‘indolent,’ or a childlike penchant to wander” (25). It is this quest for autonomy that is threatening and dangerous, necessitating the need to control African Americans. White supremacy in the South had to be complete and total, and any threat to its power no matter how small was of great importance. As Hahn posits, in the years following the Civil War, communities and kinship relations were extremely important in organizing Black political life.

Historically, autonomous, Black self-determination, that is self-determination independent of White control and direction, has always been criminalized, dating back to antebellum years, and it has entailed a White, paternalistic control to guard against Black agency that endangers White supremacy. Slavery was an institution not only consisting of economic strength but also possessing foundations in racial separatism and Black inferiority, buttressing White supremacy and the racial hierarchy. The mere possibility that African Americans could use the law to exert not only their rights but also perhaps a measure of equality in standing with Whites was in complete opposition to the principles upon which southern society was built. Although the books presented in this essay vary in subject matter, the stigmatization of Blackness and Black agency in the struggle to claim the right of self-determination is a common thread.

Stepping out of slavery and into freedom was no easy task for African Americans in the Reconstruction era, no matter the undertaking. However, they were ready to take hold of freedom, a goal for which they had struggled for centuries. They used whatever means with which they were familiar to shape a new world for themselves. As Hahn states,

[newly emancipated] African Americans built their new political communities—as they had done under slavery—from many of the basic materials of everyday life: from the ties and obligations of kinship, from the experiences and struggles of labor, from the tradition and skills of leadership, and from the spiritual energies and resources of religion (166).

Both free Blacks and those recently manumitted from slavery worked together to create networks and communities that would allow them to take full advantage of their new legal rights. Many worked to establish schools for education and organized through Union Leagues to elect local Black officials to public offices. Union Leagues became a major focal point for organizing and employing Black political strength as well as developing strategies and educating other Blacks on how best to use suffrage to achieve their goals. As Hahn notes, “The Union League spread rapidly through the plantation belt because of its association with the military defeat of the Confederacy, the abolition of slavery, the Republican party, and the expansion of civil and political rights for African Americans” (182). At that time, significant Black organization was due to the Republican Party and paramilitary groups trained to protect Blacks from White violence, largely facilitated not only through kinship relations and communication networks that had their roots in slavery but also through African-American churches. However, none of these actions to assert Black independence was without consequence. Indeed, Muhammad informs us that

The vicious backlash against black southerners who were attempting to assert their freedom in every arena of life during and after Reconstruction gradually unfolded as a tale of national progress, of the triumph of a stronger race over a weaker race. Nearly every manner of anti-black terror, oppression, and exploitation, from lynching to convict leasing to political disenfranchisement, brought forth new intellectual efforts of racial justification. The very health of the nation depended on legitimate and unprejudiced policies of subjugation when workable in light of African Americans' newly granted constitutional rights, and malign neglect otherwise (30).

White terror and violence became the political tool that disgruntled ex-Confederates and Southern Democrats used to counteract the Freedmen's exercise of their new political power.

"Ku Klux" threats and violence were visited upon White Republicans and African Americans alike in an attempt to restore order, White supremacy, and home rule as many southern states progressed through Reconstruction. Blacks were seen as incompetent not only to hold offices, but also to vote. This sudden tide of Black independence and autonomy was not easily squelched through reactionary White violence alone. Legal measures were taken to curtail the actions and political strivings of African Americans through vagrancy laws and discriminatory voting restrictions, as well as through an uneven enforcement of the law that undergirded White supremacy and invalidated Black rights. Hahn specifically points to measures like "vagrancy ordinances, apprenticeship laws, anti-enticement statutes, stiff licensing fees, heavy taxes, the eradication of common-use rights on unenclosed land, and the multiplication of designated 'crimes' against property[, which] constructed a distinct status of black subservience and a legal apparatus that denied freed people access to economic independence" (235). This was a failure of Reconstruction. Although African Americans were given the right to vote, they still fell under the rule and consequently exploitation by southern property owners, because Reconstruction took no steps to initiate land reform or to distribute land to former slaves. Because African Americans were denied economic independence, they became vulnerable citizens, and laws like vagrancy ordinances or the outlawing of deadfalls led to a rise in increasing numbers of Blacks in jail. In order for these developments to be justified and White control to be deemed necessary, Blacks had to be situated in a such way that espoused their depravity, not along racial lines, but along their inherent immorality. Muhammad argues that the link between race and crime had real tangible value, because "Southerners used crime to justify disfranchisement, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation; northerners used it to justify municipal neglect, joblessness, and residential segregation" (153). Thus, the association between Blackness and criminality was used to legitimize segregation, paternalistic White control, and the marginalization of African Americans.

The idea that Blacks were criminal in nature gave rise to weak legal support in claims against White employers, convict leasing in Alabama and throughout the South, increased aggressive policing in the North, and White employers' justification to pay low wages to African-American workers, if they decided to pay at all. In *Race Rebels* Kelley argues that there were many instances where the established racial hierarchy for working-class African Americans were contested—one of which was their choice of clothing. African Americans often subtly changed their uniforms or refused to wear them altogether as a show of independence and autonomy. Still, clothing was a real signifier with great importance. Kelley states, "understandably, clothing could serve as a badge of oppression or a sign of transgression. The

obvious and most extreme cases involved returning black veterans who were beaten and lynched for wearing their military uniforms in public” (51). Even something as seemingly innocuous as a uniform carried political weight. According to Hahn, White terror had “to punish whites and blacks who challenged or threatened a variety of racially defined hierarches” (272). At each turn, however, Blacks resisted their oppression through theft, work slowdowns or stoppage, leaving both the job and/or the state, as well as through formal political institutions, such as appeals to local governance and organization like Union Leagues, the NAACP, and the Communist Party. The African-American struggle for self-determination has been met repeatedly with increasing violence and legal restriction that seem just as inventive and creative in their methods as those undertaken by African Americans to resist. As Kelley surmises, “whether or not battles were won or lost, the mere threat of resistance elicited responses from the powerful which, in turn, shaped the nature of struggle. Repression and resistance are inextricably linked and African American resistance did make a difference” (33).

These historians, though using different subjects, elucidate a cyclical nature of both Black agency and the struggle for self-determination and White backlash, which works to curtail African- Americans rights and independence. From the outset, Blacks have been American commodities, dating back to the antebellum period. The cycle of Black advance and White aggression to erode those advances illustrates an attempt to marginalize African Americans and continually lock them in as commodities. Their bodies and their labor were and continue to be essential to the economic empowerment of wealthy elites and some middle-class White Americans. Muhammad illustrates this point, stating that “professional and entrepreneurial blacks were frequent targets of mob violence in the South, especially when their commercial activities weakened the grip of white business owners who systematically exploited blacks” (59). There were advantages to stigmatizing Blacks, even for those who did not benefit financially from the marginalization of African Americans. In his discussions of the battles between working-class Blacks and Whites, Kelley writes, “white workers employed racist terror and intimidation to help secure both a comparatively privileged job and what W. E. B. Du Bois and David Roediger call a ‘psychological wage.’ A sense of superiority and security was gained by being white and *not* being black. And in some cases white workers obtained very real material benefits by institutionalizing their strength through white-controlled unions, which used their power to enforce ceilings on black mobility and wages” (30). Essentially Black self-determination had to be criminalized because their marginalization had real fiscal and mental value for the White majority. Autonomous, Black self-determination threatens the very same racial hierarchy today as it did in the postbellum South. The numerous ways that White terror has morphed and has continuously changed to stem the tide of Black advance speak to African-American creativity, the hegemonic power structure, and the back and forth dance in which they are constantly engaged.

The stigmas associated with Blackness justify the perpetuation of institutional racism and the inequalities that it produces. By reading the works of these historians, film scholars, and sports scholars, not as singular, but rather related elements and different pieces to the same puzzle, the relationship between stigmatization, resistance, and commodification becomes clear. Outside the institution of slavery, stigmatization functions as a means to justify social control and inhibit Black self-determination to create Black bodies and labor as commodities for profit.