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Freedom Rider
Henry Louis Gates and the Times: Unfit to Print
by Margaret Kimberley

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On December 27, 2005 the New York Times printed an article entitled "Ghanaians' Uneasy Embrace of Slavery's Diaspora." The New York Times rarely delivers on its claim to give its readers "all the news that is fit to print." Even white politicians like John Kerry get biased coverage when they dare to challenge the established order. If a white presidential nominee can't catch a fair break from the Times, then black people are definitely out of luck.

According to the Times, black Americans should just forget about visiting Africa or forging any links with Africans. Like people in poor nations all over the world, many Ghanaians seek to emigrate to the United States. The Times tells us that Ghanaians envy their American cousins for being taken into slavery.

Suppose, for arguments sake, that the statement is an accurate assessment of some Ghanaian opinion. A real newspaper would then ask how much Ghanaians know about the United States, and what if anything they have been taught about African American history or their own history for that matter.

Ghanaians aren't alone in seeking refuge in nations that exploited them. Most of the southwest United States was stolen from Mexico. Mexicans know this but still cross the border in hopes of improving their lives. The United States military killed hundreds of thousands in the Philippines at the turn of the last century. That unforgotten history doesn't prevent Filipinos from waiting years to get green cards that ensure their passage to the country that caused their people so much anguish.

The reality is that Europe and the United States created terrible poverty and instability around the world. So much so, that the people they oppress yearn to live in the oppressor nations in hopes of improving their lives.

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The real point of the New York Times article is to tell black Americans that they should just get over the past, realize they are in the best nation on earth, and stop trying to learn anything about their ancestral home. After all, Africa is poor and its people envy three hundred years of slavery, lynching and Jim Crow.

No other group is dissuaded from learning about its ancestry as much as black people are dissuaded. Even groups whose ancestors immigrated voluntarily came from poor countries. Their homelands weren't just poor, they were often oppressive. There would have been no immigration if that were not the case. Yet the New York Times doesn't tell anyone else to forget about identifying with their place of origin. Only black Americans are told to wise up and be grateful for what the system has meted out to them.

Not content to make light of African Americans attempts to connect to Africa, the times had to add the *piece de resistance*. They had to call Henry Louis Gates.

Gates' area of expertise is African American literature. He is not a historian. He is not a mental health professional. He is not an expert on public affairs. He is not an economist. He knows literature and that is all. Despite his limited base of knowledge, he is continually called upon to opine on subjects he knows little if anything about.

Gates is definitely shrewd. He has gamed a system that confers top dog status on only a few black faces. Journalism schools teach courses like Gates 101 and grade students on their ability to get in touch with Gates when in need of a handy quote about black people.

Several years ago Gates proudly showed the world how little he knew in the PBS documentary series "Wonders of the African World." In the slave trade segment, Gates' only moment of anger was directed at an Ashanti prince. If Gates wants to wax righteously indignant, he should interrogate a member of the Brown family of Brown University. The Brown fortune was made through slavery, as were many others. Gates ought to give a Brown descendant the third degree on camera.

In the Times article Gates gives us this nugget of wisdom. "The myth was our African ancestors were out on a walk one day and some bad white dude threw a net over them. But that wasn't the way it happened. It wouldn't have been possible without the help of Africans." A real historian might have added that there would have been no slave trade without a demand from Europe and America.

From Canada, where slavery was once legal, to the Caribbean, and all the way to the tip of South America, white Americans developed and sustained a voracious need for African free labor. Maybe the Times will tackle that subject some day.

If the Times and their journalistic brethren stopped thinking of the head Negro in charge of all things involving colored people, they might find a useful perspective and write better articles. The New York Times can make local phone calls and find experts on any subject known to humankind. New York City is home to Columbia University, New York University and a 19 campus City University of New York, to name just a few.

Is it possible that some of these institutions have experts on African history? Of course they do, but they will never be heard from as long as a publicity savvy English professor is the only acceptable source of information.

So, if on your next visit to Ghana, you are referred to as "obruni," a word usually reserved for white people, don't worry about it. Take it as an opportunity to learn from another culture and to teach people who may need to learn from you. In any case, obruni has probably come to mean "foreigner who has more cash than I do."

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