



# JAS Bookshelf

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## BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA: REFLECTION

As a student at Georgia Southern University in the mid-2000s, I quickly gravitated toward courses on African American history. Taught by Alfred Young, the courses in African American history before and since 1865 were natural classes for me to take. As a Creative Writing major, and history minor, I found myself dreaming of how to tie together my love of writing – cultivated in college – with an older love of history, instilled in me since I was a child growing up in Augusta, Georgia.

It was this context that I eagerly scanned a list of books Dr. Young offered as options for a book review mandatory for African American history since 1865. Among the selections was a book by W. E. B. Du Bois I had never heard of before: *Black Reconstruction*. I was somewhat familiar with Du Bois – I had already read, and enjoyed, *Souls of Black Folk*, but only vaguely knew about the rest of his life and career. I decided, right then, to read *Black Reconstruction*. Excited about my decision, I went to speak to Dr. Young during his office hours.

“Mr. Greene, are you *sure* about this?” he asked me. I replied I was certain I wanted to read the book, and Dr. Young sent me on my way. After requesting the book from our university library – it was in an off-campus warehouse due to library renovations – I received an email two days later letting me know the book was at the circulation desk, ready for checkout. When I went to the desk to pick up the book ... I found myself speechless. As much as I had enjoyed reading for much of my life, I had never encountered a book as large as *Black Reconstruction*. I knew then what Dr. Young was trying to warn me about. In this case, the folly of youth would not allow me any other recourse than to read the book. In the process, the course of my life and career would be forever changed.

When I read Dr. Du Bois’s note “To the Reader” at the start of the book, I knew this would be a different reading experience from what I was used to. I was certainly aware of how historians battled against biases both within and outside the academy. But Du Bois’s words – “It would be only fair to the reader to say frankly in advance that the attitude of any person toward this story will be distinctly influenced by his theories of the Negro race”<sup>1</sup> – I suddenly realized I now had a language to put into words

<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Library of America, 2021; first published 1935), p. 3. While I used an older version of the text in 2006, the Library of America edition released in 2021 contains all the same sections – and the same power – as the older text.

something I had long known and, indeed, *felt* throughout my academic experience. Experiencing the whiplash of going to public schools in Georgia and being taught that the American Civil War was about slavery, and then that it wasn't, and then by the time I finished high school I thought it had to have been about slavery, despite arguing with friends of mine about it – I now had a language by which I could understand what I thought and felt during those debates. As those debates came during the concurrent debate about Georgia's state flag including the Confederate battle flag, arguing over history acquired a new, and surprisingly urgent, plethora of stakes.

It took me time to work through *Black Reconstruction*. But any book that begins with a brief sketch that argues, "In fine, I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience," I knew it deserved my full time and attention. I had only learned bits and pieces of Reconstruction in my early K-12 education. Often, the period was downplayed or received little attention. Du Bois's campaign against ignorance and racism, playing out in the pages of *Black Reconstruction*, made clear to me how important the story of the era was. Being descended from peoples who survived slavery to experience Reconstruction, I knew it was also my story.

I still wrestle with the ideas presented in *Black Reconstruction*. When I read the book in 2006, I only partially understood the Marxism undergirding many of Du Bois's arguments. But I could grasp the revolutionary potential of understanding a general strike by the enslaved during the American Civil War. It also altered my understanding of that war. I grew up learning of the exploits of United States Colored Troops but had not taken the next step to consider how the enslaved themselves resisted the tyranny of enslavement during the war. I was impressed that Du Bois told such a large, sprawling story. Doing so while centering the black American experience was a revelation for me.

Du Bois's final chapter, "The Propaganda of History," was what convinced me that a life of the mind was not only something worth pursuing, but something worthwhile for society as a whole. "But in propaganda against the Negro since emancipation in this land, we face one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings," Du Bois wrote, "an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion."<sup>2</sup> The whiplash in my history education now made perfect sense. At home, and from some teachers, I learned that the Civil War was about slavery; from other teachers, whom I all respected, I learned it was about "states' rights." At home, I was brought up to see Malcolm X as a hero for black Americans; as a young preteen in eighth grade, I was shocked to be told by a teacher that he was a bad man. The doubts I had about some of what I learned growing up, coupled with a yearning to know much more – now it all made sense.

Since reading *Black Reconstruction*, I have dedicated myself to learning and writing more about the southern experience in its many hues, ideas, and struggles. It was Dr. Du Bois who gave me the tools to understand the history I wanted to know and learn about. It was *Black Reconstruction* that caused me to realize that history always mattered.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 873.