

1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



Topic: Slavery and America Part 5: 1939 - 2019

March 17, 2022

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

Upcoming 1619 programs

All programs on Zoom from 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.

Topics subject to change.

April 14, 2022

1619 Project: New Origin Story

Preface: Origins and Chapter 1: Democracy

May 12, 2022

1619 Project: New Origin Story

Chapter 2: Race

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1939-1944

THE BLACK SOLDIER

CHAD WILLIAMS

ISAAC WOODARD WANTED TO BE A SOLDIER. ONE OF NINE children in a family of sharecroppers, he grew up in rural South Carolina, hoping, like so many other African Americans in the Jim Crow South, for a better life.

His opportunity came. At the age of twenty-three, on October 14, 1942, he traveled to Fort Jackson and enlisted in the U.S. Army. He would become one of approximately 1.2 million Black men and women who served in World War II.

On the eve of American entry into the war, the place of Black soldiers in the nation's military was dire. In the summer of 1940, when Congress began debating a peacetime draft, fewer than five thousand Black soldiers were in the entire U.S. Army. Black World War I veterans Rayford Logan and Charles Hamilton Houston, still scarred by their experiences, testified that Jim Crow in the military had to end. The September 1940 Selective Service Act, the first peacetime draft in American history, prohibited racial discrimination in the administration of the draft, but it did not outlaw segregation.

The NAACP and civil rights activists pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the War Department to reform the military and address racism affecting Black workers. The government responded by appointing Judge William Hastie as a special adviser to Secretary of War Henry Stimson and by promoting Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., to brigadier general, making him the first Black flag officer in the history of the U.S. military. Despite these concessions, the

armed forces remained segregated and the defense industries systematically excluded African Americans. In January 1941, longtime labor organizer A. Philip Randolph proposed a mass march on Washington, threatening to have some one hundred thousand African Americans descend on the nation's capital. On June 25, just days before the march, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination in the defense industries and creating the Fair Employment Practices Commission.

The United States entered World War II following the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. During the surprise bombardment, a Black naval messman, Dorie Miller, manned an antiaircraft gun and shot down at least two Japanese planes. Miller became a powerful symbol of African American patriotic loyalty and commitment to the war effort. But Black people, as represented by the "double V" slogan, were committed not just to victory against fascism abroad but to victory against racism at home as well.

They faced an arduous battle. Approximately 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft, a process rife with discrimination. Of the more than 1 million men inducted into the military through the draft, 75 percent served in the army. When they arrived at training camps, especially those located in the South, Black draftees endured humiliation and abuse. The army rigidly enforced racial segregation, often treating German POWs with more respect than Black servicemen. When Black soldiers went off base, they posed both a real and symbolic threat to Jim Crow and frequently clashed with local whites.

As in World War I, the military consigned the majority of Black troops to labor and service units. Racist ideas that Black men lacked the cognitive ability to be effective combatants and officers continued to pervade the thinking of War Department officials. This belief, however, did not stop the military from putting Black servicemen in harm's way, both abroad and on the home front. In the summer of 1944, Black dockworkers stationed at Port Chicago, California, refused to work following two munition explosions that resulted in 320 deaths, 202 of whom were African American. The navy court-martialed fifty men on charges of mutiny and sentenced them to eight to fifteen years of hard labor.

During the war, the military deployed approximately half a million African American soldiers overseas. Although service units, like the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion and the 490th Port Battalion, were present from D-Day on, the army initially had no intention of using Black soldiers as combatants on the European front. Pressure from civil rights organizations and the Black press eventually forced the army to send the reactivated 92nd "Buffaloes" Division to Italy in the summer of 1944. As in World War I, the division's racist officers lacked faith in the men under their command and derided their allegedly poor performance in combat. The all-Black 93rd Division arrived in the Pacific Theater in early 1944. It finally saw action during the New Guinea campaign. Most Black troops in the Pacific, however, toiled in support capacities. Isaac Woodard, who served as a longshoreman in the 429th Port Battalion, arrived on New Guinea in October 1944, loading and unloading ships.

In spite of discrimination, Black servicemen did make significant contributions and took advantage of limited opportunities. During the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, the army found itself in desperate need of replacement troops. In January 1945, over the objections of his senior officers, Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower called for a limited number of Black volunteers to fight alongside white soldiers. The 761st Tank Battalion distinguished itself on the European front and was in combat until the final days of the war. The navy grudgingly opened its ranks to Black volunteers. Although the majority of the sixty-five thousand Black seamen continued to serve as messmen, the navy did commission the first Black officers in its history, and one ship, the *Mason*, had an all-Black crew. The Marine Corps proved most willing to accept Black servicemen in its forces. While the approximately twenty thousand Black Marines trained at a segregated facility in Montford Point, North Carolina, and never saw combat, they paved the way for future enlistees.

The most significant examples of racial progress in the military occurred in the Air Corps. Bending to pressure, on January 9, 1941, the War Department agreed to the creation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron with headquarters located in Tuskegee, Alabama. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., was part of the first graduating class of cadets and

subsequently took command of the squadron. The War Department's refusal to send them into battle was the last straw for Judge William Hastie, who resigned in protest in January 1943. Manpower needs and pressure from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt ultimately put them in action, first in North Africa and then in Italy. In February 1944, the 99th was joined by the 100th, 301st, and 302nd squadrons, becoming the 332nd Fighter Group. By the end of the war, 992 men became pilots, with 450 serving overseas. Used primarily as bomber escorts, the fighters of the 332nd flew 1,578 missions with over fifteen thousand individual sorties and won numerous commendations.

Black women, too, took advantage of opportunities created by the war. Along with entering the industrial workforce by the thousands, they served in the military, enduring both racism and sexism throughout their experiences. They made up approximately 4 percent of the fifteen thousand enlistees in the Women's Army Corps (WACs); Charity Adams Earley became the first African American female WAC officer. The navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services (WAVES), established by Congress in 1942, was originally all white. But at President Roosevelt's insistence, the WAVES began accepting African American volunteers in 1944, and seventy-two Black women ultimately underwent training.

After the war came to an end on September 2, 1945, African Americans immediately began to wonder if their service and sacrifice had been in vain. The military did not award Medals of Honor to any Black soldiers and largely ignored their contributions to the war effort. As they returned to their homes across the country and especially in the South, their expectations for freedom and increased rights were met with fierce resistance. In the spring and summer of 1946, white supremacists killed several Black veterans and attacked countless others.

On February 12, 1946, Isaac Woodard was almost home. He had distinguished himself during the war, rising to become a sergeant and earning several medals. He returned to the United States on January 15 and received his official discharge on February 12 at Camp Gordon, Georgia. There he got on a Greyhound bus along with other newly

minted veterans and headed for Winnsboro, South Carolina, to be reunited with his wife, Rosa.

During the ride, when Woodard asked the white bus driver to use the restroom, they got into a heated argument. When the bus stopped in Batesburg, South Carolina, the driver called for local police to remove Woodard. Two white officers arrived, forcibly took Woodard off the bus, and viciously beat him with their batons before dragging his unconscious body to jail. When Woodard awoke the next morning, his face battered and covered in dried blood, he could not see. Both his eyes had been destroyed, leaving the twenty-seven-year-old veteran permanently blind.

News of Woodard's blinding shocked Black America. It offered a brutal reminder that while the foreign war might have ended, the domestic war for civil rights raged on. The NAACP, led by Executive Secretary Walter White, used the incident to pressure President Harry Truman to act. In December 1946, Truman established the President's Committee on Civil Rights. And on July 26, 1948, in response to its recommendations and to continued agitation from A. Philip Randolph, Truman issued Executive Order 9981. The order abolished segregation in the armed forces. Black veterans such as Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, and Robert Williams, inspired by their war service, became key leaders in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. World War II transformed African Americans and ultimately changed the course of American history.

1944-1949

THE BLACK LEFT

RUSSELL RICKFORD

THOUGH AFRICAN AMERICANS JOINED IN THE JUBILANT CELEBRATIONS of peace when the Second World War came to an end in 1945, many among them remained skeptical about the U.S. war effort, seeing it as nothing more than a white man's fight.

The more radical thrust of African American demands—which included meaningful global peace, decolonization, and thoroughgoing human rights in their own country—sought not merely greater inclusion of “minorities” in the capitalist apparatus but a basic reorganization of political and economic arrangements. It was the Black left that embodied this expansive agenda. From activist-intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois's 1946 *An Appeal to the World* (a report on U.S. racial oppression submitted to the fledgling United Nations), to socialist crusader Claudia Jones's 1949 essay, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!,” the Black American manifestos of the day imagined liberation as the wholesale redistribution of power and wealth.

But society was moving in a different direction. The early postwar years produced great waves of political and social reaction, delivering a stunning rebuke to just conceptions of peacetime reconversion. The intensification of national hostilities with the Soviet Union reinforced efforts to crush bold prescriptions for reform within the United States. Black activists of all political inclinations were among the targets of the retrograde forces that combined to stymie progressive change. The organs of hyperpatriotism—from the congressional body

known as the House Un-American Activities Committee to local segregationist, antilabor, and anti-Communist groups—harbored special enmity for leftists, whom they attempted to discredit by labeling them “subversives.”

It was in Peekskill, New York, however, that the savagery of racist reaction surfaced most dramatically in 1949. The occasion was a Paul Robeson concert. A star of stage and screen, the fifty-one-year-old Robeson was one of the world's foremost entertainers. He was also a stalwart activist who fought tirelessly for the causes of decolonization, labor, and human rights. Robeson was an antifascist and an internationalist who lent his prodigious talents to trade union struggles across the globe. He had battled lynching and segregation while promoting Black militancy and cultural pride. He was an ally of the Communist Party; an outspoken admirer of the Soviet Union (which he cherished for its anticolonial and antiracist policies); and an opponent of the Cold War who called for peaceful coexistence of the superpowers.

In short, Robeson was everything the far right despised. When he was named headliner of a civil rights benefit concert set to take place in Peekskill in late August 1949, some of his most committed foes resolved to block the performance.

Earlier that spring, news outlets had quoted Robeson (somewhat inaccurately) as proclaiming, at the Paris Peace Conference, that African Americans would refuse to participate in a war against the Soviet Union. The gist of the statement Robeson had actually made was that Black America's true fight lay at home, in the land of Jim Crow.

This overwhelmingly defined the African American worldview after the smoke cleared from World War II. Black people had nurtured their own visions of the war, recasting a struggle against fascism as a crusade against white supremacy. Now they were determined to translate that ideal into a quest for full democracy at home.

On the one hand, that meant preserving the gains—including increased access to industrial jobs and unions—that mass Black mobilization and the exigencies of wartime production had enabled. On the other hand, African Americans believed that the cataclysm of global war heralded a new racial order that they could help construct.

Having helped defeat Adolf Hitler and his ideology of racial hierarchy, Black people increasingly resented Jim Crow and other domestic regimes of second-class citizenship. Indignation became migration as thousands (and eventually millions) of Black Southerners journeyed to northern, western, and eastern cities, expanding an African American exodus that had accelerated during the war, laying the groundwork for the burgeoning and restive Black communities of the postwar years.

War had weakened the colonial empires of Europe; everywhere, it seemed, subject peoples were pressing for self-rule. Black Americans watched this upsurge with a sense of expectation, seeing India's 1947 independence and the nascent freedom campaigns of other "colored" populations as closely aligned with their own efforts to restructure U.S. society.

There were signs that some African American aspirations might be realized. In 1944 and 1948, respectively, the Supreme Court struck down the whites-only primary election system and ruled that racially restrictive housing covenants could not be enforced. By 1948, President Truman had been pressured into desegregating the military and the federal bureaucracy. He had already impaneled a Committee on Civil Rights whose 1947 report, *To Secure These Rights*, offered a stark assessment of structural racism nationwide. In 1947 as well, Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major league baseball, and the Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights outfit, organized the Journey of Reconciliation, a campaign to test compliance with a new law banning segregation on interstate buses.

But any departure from the tenets of militarism and Negro acquiescence enraged ultranationalists and bigots. In 1946 a South Carolina policeman beat veteran Isaac Woodard so badly it ruptured his eyes and left him blind. In 1947 Georgia sharecropper Rosa Lee Ingram was sentenced to death, along with her two sons, after all three family members repelled the vicious assault of a white man. And in the same year, the Trenton Six were wrongfully convicted of murder by an all-white jury in New Jersey.

And then there was Robeson. Amid the outcry about his alleged Paris declaration, several of his concerts were canceled. In the West-

chester County town of Peekskill, as the date of his performance approached, some residents felt justified in engineering a campaign of aggression against the singer. The American Legion and the Chamber of Commerce denounced the upcoming recital as "un-American" and called for it to be vigorously contested. "The time for tolerant silence that signifies approval is running out," an area newspaper asserted.

These provocations had the desired effect. When the day of the concert arrived, such a menacing swarm of anti-Robeson demonstrators appeared at the outdoor performance site that the event was called off. That evening roving bands of self-styled patriots attacked concertgoers trapped on the show ground. A cross was burned. Anti-Black and anti-Semitic epithets were hurled. "Lynch Robeson!" the mob chanted. As Robeson supporters attempted to exit the grounds, they were brutally stoned or beaten, and many of their vehicles were overturned. Police stood by amid the mayhem, sneering at victims or hoisting their billy clubs and joining in the ambush.

Robeson was defiant. Buoyed by a massive rally in Manhattan's Harlem neighborhood, where well-wishers marched in his defense, the singer vowed to return to the Peekskill area. The concert was rescheduled for the following weekend. This time Robeson was able to perform, his rich baritone echoing in the hills. To ensure his safety and that of the concertgoers, a large contingent of Black and white trade unionists formed a perimeter around the grounds. There they stood, shoulder to shoulder, throughout the concert. But when it ended and attendees began to leave, throngs of right-wing protesters, including supporters of veterans groups, again unleashed a torrent of violence. Assailants bludgeoned audience members or fanned out along a roadside to shower departing cars with rocks, shattering windshields and bloodying the asphalt.

Observers around the world viewed the Peekskill riots as a portent. As the Cold War deepened, the United States was lurching to the right, and the most regressive social elements felt emboldened. Seeing Peekskill as a call to arms, jingoists nationwide soon adopted a chilling new slogan: "Wake up, America! Peekskill did!"

A future generation, in retrospect, might have recognized the

symptoms of creeping fascism that marked the Peekskill affair: hatred wrapped in the banner of patriotism; collusion of business interests, nativists, and racists; incitement by high officials and the media; and exaltation of violence as a redemptive force. African Americans remembered Peekskill as the acceleration of the powerful currents of tyranny that they would have to confront even more assiduously in years to come.

1949-1954

THE ROAD TO BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

SHERRILYN IFILL

IN 1948 U.S. OFFICIALS VIGOROUSLY PROSECUTED GERMAN war criminals in Nuremberg for enforcing anti-Semitic policies, practices, and laws that advanced a theory of ethnic and religious inferiority of Jews. At the same time, state officials across the American South were enforcing segregationist policies, practices, and laws that advanced a theory of white supremacy and the racial inferiority of African Americans, undisturbed by the federal government.

In the small town of Hearne, Texas, starting in the fall of 1947, the contrast between the U.S. fight against Nazism abroad and its embrace of a rigid racial caste system at home was dramatized in a battle over segregated schools. The standoff between African American parents in Hearne and the local white school superintendent drew the attention of Thurgood Marshall. Just eight years earlier the brilliant and determined young African American lawyer from Baltimore had founded the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF). Marshall became the LDF's first president and its director-counsel in 1940. Seventy-three years later, I became the LDF's seventh president and director-counsel.

The story of LDF's brilliant strategy to successfully challenge the constitutionality of racial segregation has been documented and chronicled in multiple books and articles. The strategy culminated in *Brown v. Board of Education*, a monumental 1954 landmark legal deci-

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sion that literally changed the course of twentieth-century America. The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, decided that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" and deprive Black children of the constitutional right to equal protection of the laws. The decision cracked the load-bearing wall of legal segregation. Within ten years, the principles vindicated in *Brown* were successfully deployed to challenge segregation laws in the United States.

The rather unknown story that unfolded in Hearne, Texas, captures the historical significance of *Brown*. Black parents were powerfully affected by the contrast between the U.S. stance against Nazis on the global stage and the embrace of Jim Crow at home. Their postwar ambitions for their children ran headlong into the determination of Southern whites to reinforce segregation. In communities around the South, Black parents sought and received the assistance of local NAACP lawyers to challenge the absence of school facilities for their children, or substandard educational facilities and investment in Black schools.

In Hearne the challenge was initiated by C. G. Jennings, the stepfather of thirteen-year-old twins, Doris Raye and Doris Faye Jennings. In August 1947, he tried to register his daughters at the white high school. His request was refused, and he engaged local counsel.

A few weeks later, in September 1947, African American parents initiated a mass boycott. Maceo Smith, who led the NAACP in Dallas, contacted Marshall about the situation in Hearne.

A year earlier, the Blackshear School, the high school designated for Black students, had burned down. No one expected the Black students to now attend the nearby white school due to a Texas law segregating students. The school superintendent announced that \$300,000 would be devoted to the construction of a new school for Black students, and a \$70,000 bond issue was placed on the ballot. Although Black children outnumbered white students in Hearne, the physical plant of the existing high school for white students was estimated to have a value of \$3.5 million. The building that would be haphazardly renovated into the "new" Black high school was, in fact, the dilapidated barracks that had just recently housed German soldiers during the war.

When Black parents learned about the city's plans, they felt compelled to take matters into their own hands. According to reports in the local African American newspaper, "these buildings were sawed in half, dragged to the school location, and joined together with no apparent regard for physical beauty or concealing their prison camp appearance." The complaint later filed by parents in *Jennings v. Hearne Independent School District* further described the school as "a fire hazard," "overcrowded and . . . unfurnished with modern equipment," and with "inadequate lighting." All in all, the Black parents deemed the building "unsafe for occupancy," and the indignity of educating their children in a prisoner of war barracks was an insult too ugly to be borne.

White officials and local newspapers disparaged the parents' school boycott and the Jennings suit as an attempt by the NAACP to "stir up trouble." On September 28, Thurgood Marshall—who recognized the importance of challenging media distortions to his litigation efforts—fired back at the editorial board of *The Dallas Morning News* with a lengthy letter.

As African American parents in Hearne kept their children home from school, one hundred miles away in Houston, Black schoolteacher Henry Eman Doyle was the sole law student registered at Texas State University for Negroes, a hastily organized three-room "school" created by the State of Texas after Marshall won a case brought on behalf of Heman Sweatt, a Black student who had been barred from registering at the University of Texas Law School. The three-room school, located in the basement of the state capitol, was the state's attempt to comply with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" doctrine that required states to provide a public law school for Black students if they excluded Black students from flagship public law schools.

Marshall took his challenge to federal court, and in 1950 the Supreme Court would find that Texas's crude attempts were in vain, and that at least in the area of law education, separate could not be equal. *Sweatt* is widely regarded as the final case that set the successful stage for the frontal attack on segregation that became *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Meanwhile, some federal judges found the courage to defy South-

ern mores and uphold the constitutional guarantee of equal protection. In South Carolina, federal court judge Julius Waties Waring, the scion of a respected Charleston family with deep Confederate roots, issued a series of decisions in cases tried by Marshall that suggested that federal judges might play a role in protecting civil rights. Waring's searing, powerful dissent in *Briggs v. Elliot*, the South Carolina *Brown* case, became the template for the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*. Here Judge Waring first articulated the concept that "segregation is per se inequality"—a full-on rebuke of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that Chief Justice Warren later paraphrased in *Brown*.

But civil rights lawyers, and the African American parents they represented, were also emboldened after World War II. And it was their energy and uncompromising demands that shifted the landscape. By 1951, African American students were making their own demands. In Prince Edward County, Virginia, sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns led her classmates at Moton High School in a walkout and boycott of their segregated school. Her action prodded Marshall and the LDF lawyers to file *Davis v. Prince Edward County, Virginia*, one of the four *Brown* cases.

Back in Hearne, by the time African American parents began organizing to challenge the dilapidated "new" high school for their children, Marshall already had his hands full with cases, all of which would become landmarks in their own right. This may be in part why the Hearne case is not widely known. It was one of a cadre of small, unsuccessful cases extending back to Marshall's late 1930s schoolteacher-pay-equality cases in Maryland and Virginia. But these cases played a powerful role in shaping the thinking of LDF lawyers about what was possible in their litigation challenging Jim Crow. And it powerfully demonstrated the civil rights challenge confronting the United States in those early postwar years. As Thurgood Marshall wrote in his 1948 letter to the editors of *The Dallas Morning News*, "I think that before this country takes up the position that I must demand complete equality of right of citizens of all other countries throughout the world, we must first demonstrate our good faith by showing that in this country our Negro Americans are recognized as full citizens with complete equality."

1954-1959

BLACK ARTS

IMANI PERRY

ON MAY 17, 1954, THE AXIS OF AMERICAN HISTORY SHIFTED when the unanimous Supreme Court opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that separate was in fact not equal, and that legally mandated segregation was unconstitutional. It was front-page news around the world, and the opinion was printed in full in American papers.

Desegregation would prove an arduous process, marked by violence and unapologetic resistance in many corners of white America. Nevertheless, the *Brown* decision had immediate significance because it indicated that finally, after decades of aversion and refusal, the Supreme Court would be on the side of the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision concluded a hard-fought multidecade legal strategy by the NAACP. The victory fueled the coming two decades of African American protest and organizing and America's second Reconstruction.

Brown fueled not only Black activists but also Black artists who explored social conditions and the human imagination necessary to transform them. In prior years, many Black artists had been chastened and chastised by McCarthyism. Black artists were among those blacklisted for holding leftist politics or simply for being outspoken against American racism. Organizations were fractured and shuttered, and careers were destroyed. Black art communities were subject to surveillance, closed doors, and punitive measures.

And so in 1954, Black artists and writers found themselves at

something of a crossroads. McCarthyism was waning. *Brown* was a beginning, and the FBI surveillance of Black activists under the COINTELPRO program had not yet begun. Possibility, however fraught, was refreshed. And these artists claimed new space.

In November 1955, James Baldwin followed two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, with a collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. The book fairly crackled with his refusal to apologize for who he was and where he came from. The essays were both autobiographical and critical. His pen was unflinching.

In the first section, Baldwin took his predecessors to task. He subjected Harriet Beecher Stowe, Richard Wright, and the filmmakers who made *Carmen Jones* to withering critiques for their too-narrow depictions of Black life, thought, and feeling. Baldwin sought to claim the expansiveness he saw in Black history and culture. In the second section of the book, he depicted the conditions of Black life, North and South, including Jim Crow in Princeton, New Jersey. Baldwin placed himself as a global figure, in France and Switzerland. Unfamiliar ground gave him a sense of solidarity with other oppressed peoples and nuanced his and his readers' understanding of race and racism as a global problem.

This drive to expand the terrain of Black humanity in the public sphere was evident in the work of other artists. Elizabeth Catlett, already recognized as an exceptional visual artist who worked largely in prints, began to sculpt in the 1950s. A graduate of Howard University and the child of a Tuskegee professor, Catlett had settled in Mexico to escape the tentacles of McCarthyism. She had been scrutinized and harassed more than most in retaliation against her leftist politics. And she did not break. She sculpted smooth, sensual, and solemn pieces, and her fully rounded Black subjects—both of historic significance and of the folk—grew under her hands. Her landmark 1957 print *Sharecropper* is the image of a Black woman—serious and dignified—beneath a hat shielding her from the sun. *Niña* depicts a Mexican girl in profile, with the brown skin of an Indigenous child and her hair in plaits. In both prints, along with many other works, Catlett wove together key elements of her artistic imagination—

a fight against economic exploitation, sexism, and racism—with unseen yet quintessentially American faces.

Black American artists of the 1950s found common ground and purpose with Black artists abroad. In 1958 the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*, considered one of the most important and widely read novels in the English language. Published two years before Nigerian independence, the novel tells a story of the infiltration and domination of the West at the dawn of colonialism. Achebe's protagonist, Okonkwo, a man with a clear history and place in his Ibo community, confronts the world-destroying forces of the colonial order and the missionaries who served as the moral justification for British incursion. The anticolonial novel had a global impact. It also brought Achebe into contact with Baldwin and the playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

Baldwin's younger but similarly genius friend, a protector and a thinking partner, Lorraine Hansberry transformed American theater in March 1959. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first written by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway. It was a runaway success, and that year Hansberry won the Drama Critics Circle Award. The play tells the story of a Chicago South Side family living in a squalid kitchenette apartment whose patriarch has died, leaving them with a \$10,000 insurance check. The question of what to do with the check is the primary plot device.

Around it, Hansberry crafts a masterful ensemble of characters who dream in the face of a deeply racist society. The title of the play comes from Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem," also colloquially known by its introductory question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Each character lives with that prospect. Walter Lee Younger longs for wealth and status of the sort he sees in the lives of the white men he drives around. His wife, Ruth, is a domestic worker who is contemplating an abortion and is desperate for a home of her own. Beneatha, Walter's younger sister, aspires to be a doctor and is also exploring her identity and the idea of freedom in part by means of a West African suitor, a student in the independence movement. And the elder Lena, Walter and Beneatha's mother, betrays every Mammy

stereotype with the force of her moral guidance and her reminder that freedom is the purpose of life.

At the conclusion to the play, the Younger family moves into a home in a white neighborhood. They aren't wanted there and are almost certain to encounter violent retaliation for claiming a place in the American landscape. The family is heroic in their insistence on facing the mobs, reminding the audience of the question at the heart of the American project: is equality a deliberate fiction or an end for which people will fight?

These works by Baldwin, Catlett, Achebe, Hansberry, and others provide a glimpse of the moment after the *Brown* decision. All these artists were accustomed to loss: the grief of lives cruelly limited by racism, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism. But they insisted that Black life was not mere endurance but a victory of spirit in the form of human complexity, imagination, resistance, breadth, and depth, precisely the resources that were essential for the coming revolutions.

1959-1964

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

CHARLES E. COBB, JR.

A CRITICALLY IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE that intensified in the 1960s was the convergence of young people with people the ages of their parents and grandparents who were willing to share their networks and experiences. In some respects, this has always been true but in my view never more so than during the 1960s.

How did this happen, and why was it important?

On February 1, 1960, four eighteen-year-old students attending North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (now University), in Greensboro, walked into an F. W. Woolworth department store. After purchasing a few school items, they sat down at the lunch counter and tried to order soft drinks and doughnuts. They were denied service, but they refused to leave. They remained seated at the counter until the store closed. The next day more students returned to sit in, and within two months sit-ins involving thousands were unfolding in some thirty Southern cities, largely emanating from historically Black colleges and universities.

There had been similar protests in previous decades, most recently in 1957 at the Royal Ice Cream Parlor in Durham, North Carolina. In 1935 Howard University student Kenneth Clark, the psychologist who would become famous because of his instrumental work in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, was arrested while protesting with fellow students against segregated restaurants in Washington, D.C. In 1943 Howard University law student Pauli Murray led university women in protest against segregated restaurants near her campus. In

1950 Mary Church Terrell led protests against segregation that included a sit-in at Thompson's Restaurant in downtown Washington, D.C. The Montgomery Bus Boycott took place from 1955 to 1956. But the Greensboro sit-ins and those that followed would have far greater impact in battering the walls of segregation.

The sit-ins did two things. They gave rise to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and they revitalized—with Black student energy—the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which in 1960 was largely northern and largely white. More than most, as they evolved, these two organizations pushed forward the old tradition of grassroots community organizing. After all, enslaved Africans had not sat in at plantation manor dining rooms or marched in nonviolent protest on auction blocks. Rather, they had organized escapes, secret schools, rebellions, sabotages, and work slowdowns, and sometimes even assassinations, which was one of the biggest fears of white owners living on plantations and being served their meals by enslaved Black people.

Ella Baker, someone who should be much better known, was critical in the organizing that emerged from the sit-ins. Her activism brought together generations of Black struggle. The 1960 surge in youth activism drew her immediate attention. Recognizing that the activist leaders did not know one another, she decided they needed to meet and exchange ideas. On Easter weekend in 1960, she brought them together for a student leadership conference, held at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. She had received \$800 for this purpose from Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who was also very conscious of this new wave of young activism. King wanted to see the formation of a student wing to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization he had formed after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Baker was the SCLC's temporary executive director and one of the South's most respected political organizers. As the NAACP director of branches in the 1940s, she had organized chapters throughout the region.

Almost from the opening of the conference, she suggested to the student leaders that they might want to consider forming their own

organization. She had long been uncomfortable with the male supremacist attitude found among many in the SCLC leadership and was on the way out of the organization.

More important than her discontent over how the SCLC responded to her suggestions and ideas because she was a woman, she was also disappointed at the SCLC's lack of commitment to community organizing, notwithstanding Septima Clark's Citizenship School program. Leadership was top-down. As Reverend King said following his selection as pastor of Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama, "Authority flows from the pulpit to the pew, not from the pew to the pulpit."

"You have begun something that is bigger than a hamburger," Ella Baker told the conference in her opening address. To make real change, she stressed, you must organize from the bottom up, empowering those at the bottom. Years later, elaborating on leadership, she would say,

In government service and political life I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. . . . There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing he is the movement . . . and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.

The emphasis on community organizing does not diminish the importance of legal strategies such as those that led to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision or the lobbying of Congress. Other currents, such as the effects of World War II, certainly shaped the civil rights struggle in this era as well.

Ella Baker was the most important influence on SNCC's movement into the organizing that powered Black struggle in the South. In less than a year, a small core of students left their college campuses

to work as full-time organizers in the Black Belt South. In many instances, they traveled in the network Baker had built as NAACP director of branches. A similar process was under way with CORE, especially in Louisiana and North Carolina. And in the rural counties of the Black Belt, these young "field secretaries" quickly learned that to most who lived there, restaurant desegregation was unimportant. In the Black Belt, gaining power to control their lives meant gaining the vote, which seemed to offer the best path toward change and empowerment.

The rampant violence that organizers from SNCC and CORE encountered as they attempted to mobilize and organize for voting rights is still largely untold. It was not the kind of violence wielded against the marches in Selma or Birmingham but rather assassinations and bombings in out-of-the-way places that never commanded press attention. It included beatings on the steps of county courthouses.

And this violence was protected by local and state authority. The reluctance of the federal government to provide any protection is also an important and too often ignored part of this story. The civil rights movement is in many ways best described as a slow process during which organizers learned to dig in and win enough trust with people to challenge a system—and *system* must be emphasized here—that had been in place virtually since the Civil War.

The Black Belt communities, however, were not entirely or even mostly submissive to white terror. There was strength beneath the surface. As the civil rights movement reached these rural communities where Black people were concentrated, residents on plantations and in small towns chose carefully, reading the political climate surrounding their lives with the same care they used to anticipate weather or crops. Not until the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act did Black people in significant numbers begin to show up at county courthouses to register to vote. Still, even at less visible levels, they gave support, sometimes only verbal. They fed organizers in their homes and protected them, sometimes with weapons. They opened church doors. World War II and Korean War veterans were especially supportive of the movement. Having been told that they were fight-

ing for freedom and democracy overseas, they were unwilling to accept anything less at home.

We are now in another era of intense activism, shaped by young movements such as Black Lives Matter. The political work and grassroots organizing of civil rights activists of the 1950s and '60s paved the way.

1964-1969

BLACK POWER

PENIEL JOSEPH

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED BLACK POWER THROUGH MALCOLM X. As a junior high school student in New York City during the 1980s, I saw his image while watching the extraordinary *Eyes on the Prize* television documentary.

Malcolm's bold critique of white supremacy, Western colonialism, and anti-Black racial violence embodied the Black Power movement. All this seemed to contrast with the passionate call for Black citizenship through nonviolent suffering extolled by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., another figure covered extensively in the documentary.

Contemporary social justice movements, ranging from Black Lives Matter (BLM) to efforts to end mass incarceration, stand on the shoulders of Black Power activists who led a sprawling, intersectional, multigenerational human rights movement whose universal call for justice has been obscured by its basis in the particular struggle of Black people.

Malcolm X represents Black Power's most crucial avatar. On August 20, 1964, Malcolm appeared at the Organization of African Unity's Cairo conference, where he lobbied African heads of state to publicly denounce America's mistreatment of Blacks as a human rights violation. The most vocal opponent of white supremacy of his generation, Malcolm defined Black Power as a radical movement for political, economic, and cultural self-determination, one rooted in anticolonial, antiracist, and anti-imperial politics. Malcolm challenged the Black community—most pointedly King and other civil rights

activists—to reimagine the struggle for Black citizenship as part of a global pan-African and human rights struggle.

Although Black Power would burst onto the national stage with Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power!" in the evening humidity of Greenwood, Mississippi, two years later, Malcolm gave the movement its shape, texture, and framework. He did so through his unrelenting pursuit of Black dignity both as a member of the Nation of Islam and as an independent organizer of the Muslim Mosque Incorporated and the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

After Malcolm's February 21, 1965, assassination in New York City, Black Power's visibility grew exponentially. Thousands of Black students, activists, and ordinary citizens drawn to Malcolm's call for political self-determination created study groups, Black student unions, and independent political parties with the goal of achieving citizenship through political power, racial solidarity, and cultural transformation. Historical events accelerated the already-fertile political context. The signing of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) on August 6, 1965, marked the high point of the heroic period of the modern civil rights movement. And yet landmark legislation proved ineffective in the face of the depth and breadth of racial injustice in America. Less than a week after the VRA was signed into law, Watts, Los Angeles, exploded in violence after police assaulted a Black man accused of theft, exposing the face of police brutality, segregation, racial violence, and poverty.

Urban rebellions in major American cities inspired protest, political organizing, and poetry. The Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS), founded in 1965 by the activist-poet Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), culled aspects of Malcolm's call for pride, dignity, and self-love into a cultural movement that was determined to reimagine Black history and culture as an antiracist political weapon capable of defeating injustice and nourishing wounded Black souls. The Black Arts movement introduced the world to the brilliant writings of Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Larry Neal, and Haki Madhubuti, extraordinary artists who redefined the contours of Black identity for subsequent generations.

On June 16, 1966, Stokely Carmichael, a community organizer and

chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, emerged as the brash, telegenic face of Black Power. Trinidadian born, raised in the Bronx, and sanctified in the early civil rights struggles that found him celebrating his twentieth birthday on a Mississippi prison farm, Carmichael underwent a remarkable transformation from a civil rights militant who deeply admired King and the social-democratic peace activist Bayard Rustin, into the best-known radical activist of his generation. Following his release from the prison in Greenwood, Mississippi, for trying to put up a tent during a three-week civil rights march through the Magnolia State, Carmichael unleashed the speech that changed his life and the movement. "This is the twenty-seventh time that I've been arrested," Carmichael told a crowd of six hundred. "I ain't going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!"

Black Power scandalized the nation, with whites interpreting the cry as a call for retribution and Blacks instantly embracing the slogan as an opportunity for political self-determination. Carmichael emerged as a major leader, intellectual, and celebrity: the Black Power movement's rock star. Black Power increased his personal access to, and political disagreements with, Martin Luther King, Jr.

In October 1966, at the University of California in Berkeley, Carmichael linked Black Power, the Vietnam War, and the struggles against white supremacy and imperialism to a larger and global freedom movement that electrified the New Left. He offered a blueprint for Black radicals to internationalize the movement and set the stage for the emergence of some of the era's most important political groups, most notably the Black Panthers. Black Power activists paid a steep cost for openly advocating an antiracist political revolution in America and around the world. Local, state, federal, and international surveillance and police agencies that once stalked Malcolm and Martin now shadowed Stokely and the wider movement, deploying counterintelligence measures that monitored, harassed, imprisoned, and at times led to the deaths of scores of activists.

Malcolm's death, Stokely's rise, and Vietnam radicalized Martin Luther King, Jr. King imbibed aspects of Black Power while rejecting

any hints of violence. King's most robust antiwar speeches followed Carmichael's lead at Berkeley, and on April 15, 1967, at the largest antiwar demonstration, at the time, in American history, they shared the stage outside the United Nations. Black Power forced King, the prince of peace, to acknowledge that his own nation was "the biggest purveyor of violence in the world." The sentiment poisoned King's relationship with President Lyndon Johnson and galvanized racist opposition against civil rights and Black Power activism.

The Black Panthers mixed revolutionary Black nationalism, socialism, and Marxism into a daring blend of revolutionary politics that, over time, galvanized millions of activists around the world. The group's ten-point program called for an end to police brutality, poverty, failing schools, and racism. Panther leaders including Kathleen Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Elaine Brown became icons of an interpretation of Black Power that viewed revolution as based more on class than race. In 1968 Carmichael emerged as the "honorary prime minister" of the Black Panther Party as part of his efforts to help free imprisoned minister of defense Huey P. Newton. The Panther-SNCC alliance proved to be short-lived, riven by political and ideological differences. A little more than a year later, Carmichael resigned his affiliation with the group. By this time, Carmichael had married the South African singer Miriam Makeba and relocated to Conakry, Guinea, where he studied under former Ghanaian prime minister Kwame Nkrumah and Guinea's own Sékou Touré. Always ready for revolution, Carmichael (who would adopt the name Kwame Ture in honor of both political leaders) now considered pan-Africanism to be the highest stage of Black Power and vowed to spread that political message from the continent itself.

By 1969, Black Power had redefined the contours of the Black freedom struggle. Black Power radicalism influenced and helped shape Black Panthers in California and New Haven serving poor Black children free breakfast, welfare rights organizers in New Orleans, college and high school students in New York City, and Black feminists such as Angela Davis, Frances Beal, and members of the Third World Women's Alliance. Mainstream politics noticed: President Richard Nixon supported "Black capitalism" while Black Power

and Urban League head Whitney Young belatedly championed the phrase after initially denouncing it. "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!" by soul singer James Brown became a catchphrase that popularized one aspect of a movement that Malcolm X had helped birth only a few years before.

Black Power survived its heyday to be institutionalized in American popular and political culture in the rise of Black elected officials, the development of Black studies programs in higher education, the spread of Black History Month, and the deeply ingrained and globally Black political consciousness that informs contemporary Black-led social movements. Black Power sought universality, however imperfectly, from the lived experiences of Black people. BLM activists have done the same by linking an expansive definition of freedom and global citizenship to movements to end mass incarceration, racial violence, sexism, environmental racism, public school and residential segregation, and inequality in every facet of American life. In doing so, they have built on both Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s notions of Black dignity and Black citizenship. They have radically expanded these political frameworks by centering the most marginalized Black identities as the beating heart of a new, more inclusive struggle. It is a holistic struggle for human rights that seeks universal justice through the lens of Black people's historic oppression and struggle for self-determination, culminating in the long-overdue quest for Black power.

1969-1974

PROPERTY

KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR

THE SUMMER OF 1968 SAW THE MOST FAR-REACHING AND historic changes to housing policy in American history. In the days after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, Congress finally passed a federal fair housing law to ban all forms of racist discrimination in the rental or sale of housing. Then in June the Supreme Court ruled in the landmark case *Jones v. Mayer* that all racist discrimination in housing must immediately end.

In a departure from most legal decisions regarding racist discrimination, the Court rooted its actions in the Thirteenth Amendment, which banned slavery, as opposed to the Fourteenth Amendment, which called for equal treatment. It argued that residential segregation was redolent of slavery in its collective exclusion of African Americans from the benefits of freedom, including the right to move about in whichever way they saw fit.

In August 1968, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law one of his last major bills aimed at curing the so-called urban crisis. Many envisioned the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 as a tool to produce an unprecedented 26 million units of new and rehabilitated housing within ten years. In addition to the creation of millions of units of housing, the centerpiece of the legislation was a new low-income homeownership program, administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The legislation did not specify that it was targeting African Americans, but the acute urban housing crisis had been a catalyst for the urban uprisings.

The homeownership program had been partly inspired by an earlier effort in 1967 among life insurance executives who formed a consortium to create a billion-dollar mortgage pool that was intended to finance Black businesses, apartment developments, and single-family housing in areas that would, under normal circumstances, have been redlined. They called their organization the Joint Committee on Urban Problems. By the fall of 1969, they had pledged another \$1 billion to continue to create more housing opportunities for African Americans in the "urban core."

The changes in U.S. housing policy during the late 1960s and early '70s seemed to open to Black Americans the possibility of meaningful citizenship and real access to the riches of the country's economy. This historic shift in policy had been made possible by the end of federal redlining by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). In the two decades after World War II, the FHA had become well known for championing suburban development around the white nuclear family. Now the FHA was poised to use its power and influence to develop Black communities within American cities. This shift from exclusion to inclusion of African Americans also fit with President Richard Nixon's stated goal to develop Black capitalism in the cities.

Beneath the rosy talk about urban "redevelopment," Black capitalism, and homeownership, however, the commitment to inequality, exploitation, and residential segregation continued. While new forms of finance capital were allowed into the cities to fund new initiatives, African Americans did not have the mobility to leave. Exclusionary zoning in suburbs and the commitment to racist business practices by bankers and real estate brokers kept Black buyers and renters confined to urban spaces or to new but still segregated suburban spaces. The predominant role of real estate and banks in the production of the new and rehabilitated housing, as well as the low-income homeownership program, invariably tied the racist business practices of these businesses to federal housing policy.

Where the FHA had once excluded African Americans from participating in the conventional real estate market, it now made Black buyers vulnerable to new exploitative and predatory practices. These

public-private partnerships provided methods for the extractive relationship between African Americans and capital.

Very quickly, brokers and bankers wielded the new homeownership programs to enrich themselves while leaving poor Black families homeless with shattered credit. Speculators and real estate brokers took hold of dilapidated urban properties, performed cosmetic repairs, then flipped the properties to Black families, often headed by Black women. The terms of the programs had allowed mortgage bankers to be repaid in full if the owners went into foreclosure, and because mortgage payments were tied to the income of the owner—not to the value of the house—appraisers working for the FHA were easily enticed to take bribes to inflate the value of the city houses. Mortgage bankers who made their money on originating mortgages and other fees were quick to foreclose, recoup their investment, and begin the practice all over again. Everyone got paid except the poor and working-class Black families who were preyed upon. And within a few years, nearly seventy thousand homes had fallen into foreclosure and tens of thousands more were in default, meaning they were only a few payments away from foreclosure.

As news of the fraud and corruption in these programs peaked in 1972, headlines rarely got the story right. The real story was that the real estate industry and mortgage bankers were fleecing African Americans with an assist from an utterly passive federal government. The government's failure to seriously enforce its own fair housing laws—as demonstrated by the paltry funding appropriated to fight racist housing discrimination—had left Black buyers and renters vulnerable to the racism of the real estate industry. Instead, members of Congress, the media, and the private sector itself pinned the crisis in the programs on the disproportionately Black program participants. Everyone involved described Black mothers, in particular, as "unsophisticated buyers," even as white businessmen, a U.S. senator, and multiple agents working within the FHA were indicted for conspiracy and fraud.

In 1973 Richard Nixon used the scandal surrounding the HUD homeownership programs as an excuse to impose a moratorium on all

subsidized housing programs. Nixon dismissed HUD as the nation's "largest slumlord" and argued that HUD's crisis was proof that local government, as opposed to the federal government, should make its own decisions regarding housing. It was an argument fueled on "common sense" that confirmed the suspicion and hostility with which federal programs were held.

Nixon and his replacement, Gerald Ford, used the failures of the 1968 HUD Act to hoist their new approach to low-income housing and urban development: the Housing and Community Development Act (HCDA), passed in August 1974. The HCDA deployed "block grants," instead of direct federal appropriations, to fund federal programs. Block grants were "blocks" of money sent to localities, which would decide how the money was spent. While this fed into the folksy notion that locals knew better, it ignored that for decades African Americans had called on the federal government to protect them from the unchecked, abject racism in local governments.

The legislation also acquiesced to the segregative impulses that had guided much federal decision making regarding housing policies. Ford decided to focus on "existing" housing instead of new building for low-income housing, willfully conceding the status quo. All too often "existing" or used housing was in cities, while new construction was affordable only in outlying and mostly white suburban localities. Six years after the experiment initiated by the HUD Act, the federal approach to housing returned to its roots of local control and segregated housing.

This history is critical to understanding why some communities came to be designated as prime or subprime in the color-blind discourse of 1990s and 2000s. The foreclosures hastened by reckless federal policies unleashed by the 1968 HUD Act, along with a lackadaisical routine to address housing discrimination, legitimized the devaluation of Black homes and Black communities. These became the pretext, in a post-civil rights world, for treating Black housing consumers differently: from higher or adjustable interest rates to higher risk fees to the subprime designation.

The crisis from the 1970s also rehearsed earlier arguments that African Americans lacked sophistication and basic impulse control

when it came to purchasing property. Instead, they wanted more than they could handle and nearly crashed the economy as a result. Then as now, it was a deft way of turning the discussion away from the corporate underpinnings of public policy—in this case, housing policy. It was then and it is now a failure to grapple with the central contradiction of public policies that rely on private sector institutions to fulfill them. The reliance on the private sector to address the social provision of housing has resulted in public policies that reflect the racism embedded in the U.S. housing market.

This has continued to hasten housing insecurity within African American communities—from new lows in Black homeownership to the overrepresentation of African Americans among the rent-burdened. The continued American reliance upon the private sector as the main source of housing production has meant a continuation of the inequality that systematically disadvantages African Americans in search of home.

1974-1979

COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE

BARBARA SMITH

IN 1974 THE CITY OF BOSTON WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF A RACE war. A federal judge had ruled that public schools must finally desegregate and establish a busing plan to make it happen. Boston's particular brand of virulent racism was well known to members of the Black community. But across the nation, many were surprised by supposedly liberal white Bostonians' violent opposition to integration, which rivaled anything that had occurred in the Deep South more than a decade earlier.

In the mid-1970s, Black Power and Black Nationalism were dominant political ideologies. Within these movements, roles for Black women were frequently even more circumscribed than they had been during the civil rights era. Since 1969, the Nixon administration had implemented numerous strategies calculated to roll back hard-won gains in civil rights. Organizations were dealing with the repercussions of the FBI's decades of surveillance and its murderous disruption of the Black liberation struggle. During the mid-1970s, the federal government began investigating lesbian feminist communities and impaneled grand juries to locate women radicals who had gone underground to elude capture.

In this atmosphere of racial turmoil and right-wing backlash, a handful of Black women came together in 1974 to form the group that became the Combahee River Collective. We were sick of the violence. We were sick of being voiceless. We were sick of being exploited. We were sick of being told to walk three or seven paces behind. We were

sick of being invisible. We were sick of it all. We wanted and needed Black feminism. Since there were few indications that such existed, we decided to build it for ourselves.

The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist organization that worked in Boston from 1974 through 1980. Originally a chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization, the collective decided in 1975 to become independent. We named ourselves after the Combahee River, where Harriet Tubman led a military raid during the Civil War that freed more than 750 enslaved people. During the second half of the 1970s, the collective engaged in action on multiple fronts including study, political analysis, protests, campaigns, cultural production, and coalition work around a range of issues, all with the objective of defining and building Black feminism.

Combahee was never just about talk. Most of us had been politically active well before Combahee, including in the movement to end the war in Vietnam, the Black Panthers, Black student organizing, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Institute of the Black World, Marxist Leninist organizing, support for Eritrean independence, and more.

Not long after its founding, Combahee supported campaigns to free Joan Little and Ella Ellison, Black women who had been unfairly prosecuted by the criminal injustice system. When Dr. Kenneth Edelin, a Black physician, was convicted of manslaughter in 1975 for performing a legal abortion at Boston City Hospital, we joined in the effort to get his conviction overturned.

In 1977 Combahee initiated a series of seven political retreats held over three years in locations around the East Coast, where Black feminists who did not live in Boston could meet, strategize, and work together. Among those who regularly participated were the writers Cheryl Clarke, Akasha (Gloria) Hull, and Audre Lorde.

We accomplished all this and much more while going to our day jobs, going to school, and struggling to get by financially. Combahee never had an airy, spacious office. We never had an office at all. We had no executive director or staff. We did not have funders. If we needed money, usually for photocopying, we would take up a collection. What we did have was each other and a vision.

After we stopped meeting at the Cambridge Women's Center, we met in each other's apartments. As serious as we were about the work, our meetings were full of laughter. *Saturday Night Live* premiered in the fall of 1975, and we often began with recaps of the latest episode. We always shared food, most of it homemade. Demita Frazier talked with us about vegetarianism, alternative healing, and spirituality. In the summer, we met by the Charles River and took day trips to local beaches. One of our most memorable outings was to Amandla, a concert held in 1979 to benefit the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, featuring Bob Marley and Patti LaBelle.

Most people know about us because of our Combahee River Collective Statement. In 1977 my sister Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, and I wrote the statement for Zillah Eisenstein's *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. With a clear anticapitalist perspective, the statement captured the voices and concerns of Black women and articulated the concept of simultaneous, interlocking oppressions, laying the groundwork for intersectionality. By explicitly challenging homophobia, the statement was groundbreaking, although some, particularly members of our Black community, viewed it as incendiary.

Few are aware that the widely used and often-maligned concept of "identity politics" originated in the statement. Attacked by both the right and the left, identity politics has been consistently misunderstood. What we meant was that Black women had a right to determine their own political agendas based upon who they were and the multiple systems of oppression that targeted them. Although narrow interpretations of identity politics have been used to justify separatism, Combahee believed in coalitions and was open to working with anyone with whom we shared political values and goals.

On January 29, 1979, the bodies of two teenaged Black women were found dumped in Roxbury. During the next four months, twelve Black women were murdered, all but one in Black neighborhoods. When Combahee began, a race war was raging. Now we faced a war on Black women. The collective's Black feminist analysis and relationships with diverse segments of the community put us in a unique position to provide leadership in a time of crisis.

We produced a pamphlet titled *Six Black Women: Why Did They Die* about the pervasive reality of violence against women and made a particular effort to circulate it in the Black and Latino/a community. The murders were initially framed as racially motivated, despite the fact that all the victims were women and some of them had been raped. The pamphlet insisted that the murders had to be understood in the context of both sexual and racial violence in order to organize effectively and to increase Black women's safety. We eventually distributed forty thousand copies and were a major force in building coalitions among communities that had not previously worked together, especially people of color and antiracist white feminists. The fact that we did this bridge building as out Black lesbians was unprecedented. All that the collective had stood for and built since 1974 culminated in our response to the Roxbury murders.

Almost half a century ago we could not have known that in the twenty-first century, the paradigm-shifting Black Lives Matter movement would arise and use Black feminist analysis to address injustices not primarily rooted in gender or sexuality. We could not know that the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, which was centrally involved in unseating the governor of Puerto Rico in 2019, would draw inspiration from Combahee.

In many ways, the equivalent of political lightning struck in 1974 to bring together in one improbable place the women who created Combahee. I am grateful to have been there for the creation.

1979-1984

THE WAR ON DRUGS

JAMES FORMAN, JR.

IN THE SPRING OF 1983, AT A CRUCIAL MOMENT IN THE HISTORY of American drug policy, Harlem congressman Charles Rangel gaveled to order the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. In Washington, D.C., heroin's resurgence had led residents to deluge city officials with letters demanding relief from the growing number of addicts congregating on corners and sleeping on park benches. In Los Angeles, phencyclidine, more commonly known as angel dust or PCP, seemed to be taking over; the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the city's leading Black newspaper, complained that the city had become "the PCP capital of the world." In New York and Miami, entrepreneurs were discovering that baking powder, cocaine, and a stove were all they needed to create the inexpensive and potent new product that would soon come to be called crack.

President Ronald Reagan, for his part, had already seized on illegal drug use as a political issue. "We're making no excuses for drugs—hard, soft, or otherwise," Reagan said in a radio address to the nation in October 1982. "Drugs are bad, and we're going after them." Repeating what would become one of his signature phrases, Reagan claimed that "we've taken down the surrender flag and run up the battle flag. And we're going to win the war on drugs."

Decades later, we know what that war has helped produce: ruined lives, hollowed-out communities, and mass incarceration. But could the war have been fought differently?

Dozens of witnesses appeared before Rangel's committee with an

answer to that question. Almost to a person, they agreed: if America was going to meet its drug crisis, it needed to make a robust commitment to drug treatment. According to the head of the National Institute for Drug Abuse, people who participated in adequately funded programs reduced their drug use, committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to find and keep a job.

Treatment didn't always work, of course—some programs weren't very good, while others limped along on shoestring budgets, and even the best ones failed sometimes. Addiction is a terrible disease, witnesses explained, and addicts often needed multiple chances before finding success. But treatment worked better than any of the alternatives and at lower cost. Since you could put eight people in a drug program for the cost of a single prison bed, treatment was what one New York official called "the cheapest game in town."

The biggest problem with drug treatment was that there wasn't enough of it. When a national association surveyed states about their treatment capacity, 94 percent said that they couldn't meet their citizens' needs. In one twenty-four-hour period, nine heroin overdose victims were brought unconscious to Boston City Hospital; emergency personnel saved them all, but because every program in the city was full, officials couldn't offer treatment to any of them.

It was a powerful case. But not for the first—or last—time, politics, ideology, fear, and racism would prove more powerful. Ignoring the call to fund more treatment, research, and prevention, the Reagan administration did the opposite and shifted funds toward law enforcement. Where the Nixon administration had devoted two-thirds of the federal drug budget to treatment and one-third to law enforcement, Reagan reversed that ratio to what it has remained since: two-thirds law enforcement, one-third treatment. A New Jersey official, describing the massive waiting lists for programs in his state, complained to Rangel's committee that this reallocation of funding constituted "simple abandonment by the Federal Government of the prevention and treatment field."

By cutting treatment in the midst of a drug crisis, the Reagan administration established the template that would define drug policy in America for decades to come. The consequences have been grave

and lasting. Most immediately, cutting funding for treatment denied help to people in pain. After all, behind every statistic presented in the testimony before Rangel's committee were people, most of them poor, struggling to keep their families and lives together in the face of dependency and addiction.

But drug warriors of the era succeeded in presenting drug users in a different light. Defining addiction as an individual choice and personal failure, they contended that society bore no responsibility for the consequences. If a person became dependent on or addicted to drugs, it was because they were weak, selfish, irresponsible, or depraved. Female drug users were especially frequent targets of denunciation. For example, when asked about the challenge of caring for pregnant women addicted to crack, D.C.'s health commissioner blamed the women. "The response of a rational person would be to come in and find out whether they are pregnant, but we aren't talking about rational people," he said. "We are talking about women who simply do not care. The maternal instinct is being destroyed."

Claims that pregnant users didn't care about their children shifted attention away from the core issue: the fact that the government was failing to treat its neediest citizens. Washington, D.C., for example, had the resources to assist only one in ten of the city's addicts. Just 13 percent of New York City's drug treatment programs accepted pregnant women addicted to cocaine, while the city's residential treatment facilities had space for only 2 percent of its heroin and cocaine addicts.

The refusal to fund drug treatment programs also helped pave the way for an unprecedented experiment in prison building. With drug markets proliferating, overdose deaths rising, and treatment centers closing, the American impulse toward harsh justice found full expression. Almost nothing was out of bounds. Legislators in Delaware contemplated bringing back the whipping post for drug sellers. Federal officials proposed they receive the death penalty.

Though whipping posts never became law, the same vengeful impulse found an outlet in extreme prison sentences. The federal government led the way with the now-infamous hundred-to-one crack-cocaine ratio, under which a person possessing just 5 grams (about 1½ teaspoons) of crack faced the same mandatory sentence as

somebody possessing 500 grams (2½ cups) of powder. While racially neutral on its face, the crack/powder distinction combined with discriminatory policing and prosecution strategies to produce flagrant racial disparities in arrest and incarceration rates. Even though most crack users were white, Black people were seven times more likely to go to federal prison for crack offenses.

Prominent voices in the Black community sometimes joined in the calls for more severe penalties for drug sellers. Editors at the *Los Angeles Sentinel* called for drug dealers to be “tarred and feathered, burned at the stake, castrated, and any other horrendous thing which can be imagined.” Maxine Waters, then in the California state legislature, led a successful effort to increase penalties for the sale of PCP. Johnnie Cochran, Los Angeles County’s first Black assistant district attorney, said that those who sold PCP “should be dealt with swiftly, surely and in those instances where the facts warrant it—harshly.”

To be sure, African Americans who fell prey to the punitive impulse often combined their call for tougher penalties with another set of demands—they asked the government to address the underlying inequalities that led to drug use or, at a minimum, provide treatment for addicts and heavy users. Representative Rangel, for example, asked the Reagan administration for “more prosecutors, more judges, more agents, and more prisons,” yet he also pressed it to address “the Nation’s chronically underfunded treatment and prevention programs.” But the strategy of asking for both prisons and treatment proved to be a failure. Instead of both, Rangel—and the Black community—got only the prisons.

Rising levels of abuse, addiction, and drug-related violence should have been a sign that something was wrong with America. It should have led the nation to focus on the myriad ways in which 350 years of white supremacy had produced persistent Black suffering and disadvantage. It should have caused politicians to interrogate the cumulative impact of convict leasing, lynching, redlining, school segregation, and drinking water poisoned with lead. Instead of asking, “What kind of people are *they* that would use and sell drugs?” the nation should have been asking a question that, to this day, demands an answer: “What kind of people are *we* that build prisons while closing treatment centers?”

1984-1989

THE HIP-HOP GENERATION

BAKARI KITWANA

I VOTED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A NATIONAL ELECTION IN 1988. Although I was eligible to vote in 1984, I felt I had no stake in U.S. presidential politics. It was not an uncommon view for young Black men in those days. But something changed for me and many others of my generation between Jesse Jackson’s run for president in 1984 and his subsequent campaign in 1988.

In 1986 seventeen-year-old Rakim of the hip-hop duo Eric B and Rakim began “dropping science” in his rhymes, taking the art form to new lyrical heights and depths. He drew inspiration from the teachings of the Five Percent Nation, whose philosophy of Black empowerment resonated with young Black leaders in the New York City region during the early 1980s.

“I found it almost divine the way the Five Percent Nation affected the evolution of hip-hop,” Rakim recalls in his memoir, *Sweat the Technique: Revelations on Creativity from the Lyrical Genius*. “We [were] equipped with a language and information intricate to our studies that empowered us. So it was right up our alley to want to express ourselves through rapping. We felt we had something to say that was unique to our time.”

Less than a year later, albums would follow from Eric B and Rakim, Public Enemy, and Boogie Down Productions that similarly tapped into core messages of the 1960s and ’70s—referencing book titles, honing in on aspects of Black history, and sampling speeches of Black men such as Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, Kwame Touré, and

the music of James Brown. Collectively, they pioneered the subgenre that would come to be known as “conscious hip-hop,” a style of music that, along with Jesse Jackson’s campaigns for president, signaled the convergence of civil rights/Black Power-era politics with an emerging hip-hop political voice in a way that made Blackness cool for a new generation.

To be sure, Jackson’s presidential campaigns were the culmination of late 1960s and early ’70s activism that had led to the Gary, Indiana, Black Political Convention of 1972. The convention ushered in the greatest wave of Black elected officials that the country had seen since Reconstruction, including the historic election of Harold Washington as Chicago’s first Black mayor—right in Jackson’s backyard.

Part of this was the result of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, since Blacks won the right to vote, Black voter participation had remained at essentially the same level for three presidential election cycles until it surged to 55.8 percent during Jackson’s historic run in 1984.

A protégé of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackson was charismatic and bold, and gave voice to a vision that went far beyond anything U.S. presidential candidates had previously articulated. Jackson demanded the totality of freedom and inclusion that Black leaders had demanded of the United States for generations.

What Jackson advocated for the nation (“America is not a blanket but a quilt”) was also in sync with hip-hop’s own emerging philosophy (from DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa to KRS-one—“peace, love, unity and having fun” and universal humanism).

The early 1980s was also marked by Louis Farrakhan’s rise to the leadership of the new Nation of Islam (NOI). In 1985 I was among a group of Black students who chartered a bus to take students to attend Farrakhan’s national coming-out in New York City when he was rebuilding the NOI in alignment with what he saw as the original vision of founder Elijah Muhammad. Many young people joined the Nation, including more college students and college graduates than at any point in its history. That October a 25,000-strong audience filled Madison Square Garden to hear a message of Black economic self-sufficiency and empowerment.

Farrakhan had been an avid supporter of Jesse Jackson during the 1984 campaign. To many of us, Farrakhan appealed to the more radical vision of Black political thought that we embraced at the time. When he and Jackson stood together during the campaign, they helped us imagine new possibilities beyond the historic integration versus separation divide.

Other influential voices inspired our search for a new Black political center that made sense for our time. Reaching out from college campuses to the grass roots were individuals like Julian Bond, Maulana Karenga, Sonia Sanchez, Kwame Touré, Naim Akbar, Bobby Seale, Haki Madhubuti, and Nikki Giovanni.

The 1986–87 school year jump-started a series of National Black Student Unity Conferences: the first featured keynotes by Jackson and Farrakhan and topped seven hundred attendees. Conferences would follow in 1987–88 at Howard University and at Columbia University the following school year.

All these developments, including Jackson’s presidential campaign, helped shape our political consciousness. But the most significant development that captivated our generation was the emergence on the national scene of hip-hop with conscious messages of resistance.

Hip-hop in those days was not yet fully embraced as mainstream culture. It was still largely an underground phenomenon and a lived folk culture that we saw as our own. Wherever hip-hop showed up, we saw it as the source of our own entry. But even more, this convergence of Black Power generation politics with hip-hop’s emerging political impulse gave our generation agency.

In 1987, on the heels of their debut, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Public Enemy sampled Malcolm X’s speech “Message to the Grassroots” on their single “Bring the Noise,” which would become the lead single for their second album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988). Malcolm’s haunting words at the start of the song hung in the air and captured the tone of the moment: “Too Black, too strong.”

Similar to *It Takes a Nation of Millions*, KRS-one’s *By All Means Necessary* sent Black youth scrambling for books he referenced, such as *Message to the Blackman in America* by Elijah Muhammad, *The Au-*

tobiography of Malcolm X, and *How to Eat to Live*, also by Elijah Muhammad. His album laid the groundwork for the Stop the Violence movement. 1988 also saw the release of Eric B and Rakim's *Follow the Leader* on July 25, one week after Jackson's second address to the Democratic National Convention. Talib Kweli recently called *Follow the Leader* "the most important hip-hop record ever."

1989 mirrored 1988 as a year of essential conscious hip-hop music. Few can remember the year 1989 and not recall Chuck D's words "1989, the year, another summer." Those words capture that singular moment in time when nearly everyone in hip-hop was fighting the power: Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*; *The Cress Theory of Color Confrontation* reprinted inside the jacket of Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*; Queen Latifah's album *All Hail the Queen*; and Reginald Hudlin's film *House Party* (all of which placed front and center hip-hop's Afrocentric aesthetic such as crowns, African prints, Africa-shaped leather medallion necklaces, and African hairstyles epitomized by Kid and Play).

The hip-hop generation shaped American history for decades to follow. The Million Man March in 1995, for example, was heavily supported by the hip-hop community. The 2004 National Hip-Hop Political Convention—inspired by the Gary, Indiana, convention of 1972—brought over four thousand young Black people to Newark, New Jersey. Black youth political participation witnessed a surge during the elections of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012. These young Black voters were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. At the core of each of these moments is what it has meant for the hip-hop generation to come into its own.

1989-1994

ANITA HILL

SALAMISHAH TILLET

EVERY EVENING WHEN MY FAMILY ENTERS OUR COMFORTABLE three-bedroom townhouse in downtown Newark, a large, limited-series, fire-truck-red-framed poster greets us. Originally made by the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, the poster is a reproduction of a full-page ad taken out on November 17, 1991, in eight of our nation's largest newspapers, including *The New York Times*.

On that Sunday morning, the ad headline, "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves," appeared one month after law professor Anita Hill testified before Congress with allegations that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her while he was her supervisor at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 1981 to 1982.

Before I received my own copy as a gift, I'd seen the poster only two other places. The first was in the foyer of Gloria Steinem's home, hanging high like mine, in spaces traditionally reserved for photographs of presidents, prime ministers, or religious symbols. The second time was in the hallway of Spelman College's famed Women's Research and Resource Center, founded by Beverly Guy-Sheftall in 1981. During both visits, I'd lose myself in a trance parsing through and memorizing the names of the more than sixteen hundred Black women who—organized by feminist scholars Barbara Ransby, Deborah King, and Elsa Barkley Brown—made history by declaring their unwavering public support for Hill.

"We were all Anita Hill at that moment," Barbara Ransby told *The Washington Post* in an interview in 2018 about the ad's origins. "Elsa set up a bank account," she recalled. "Someone had a husband who worked at an ad agency in New York. We collected lots and lots of small checks." Combining word of mouth and a 1-800 number, they raised the \$50,000 necessary for the ad campaign. "Now we tweet or text," Ransby opined.

I was sixteen years old when I saw Anita Hill for the first time. In my memory, I sat glued to the television, trying to interpolate every detail of Hill's statement into my newly forming Black feminist consciousness. But the truth is, I didn't watch it live. At the actual time of her testimony, I was finishing my senior year at my predominantly white private high school in Livingston, New Jersey, and spent the hours between English class and soccer practice arguing about the merits of her allegations.

I knew many of my white classmates looked at Hill as an oddity because most of the Black women with whom they were in regular contact were their nannies at home or our school's cafeteria staff. In their suburban enclaves, Yale Law School-educated Black women did not exist. That Hill dared to stand before the all-white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee was even more confounding.

The summer before Anita Hill testified, in her now-iconic teal linen skirt suit, with her left hand slightly hidden behind her back, her right hand held high to be sworn in, I had undergone my own political conversion. I spent the summer in Boston with my dad, first street canvassing for the National Environmental Law Center, then volunteering for the NAACP. But I also read three books that changed my life: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley. Because of these narratives, I learned to see how my racial and gender identities were interlinked. That if my Blackness overdetermined my past and future opportunities, my experiences as a girl heightened my vulnerability and my likelihood to be a victim of misogyny and violence.

So by the time Hill came forward, I had already had a primer into a debate that had been happening among Black people since slavery.

Reflecting on the impact of the hearings, Toni Morrison would later write, "In matters of race and gender, it is now possible and necessary, as it seemed never to have been before, to speak about these matters without the barriers, the silences, the embarrassing gaps in discourse."

Before Thomas's nomination, Thurgood Marshall was the only African American to be appointed to the Supreme Court. When Marshall announced his plan to retire in June 1991, President George H. W. Bush saw it as an opportunity to increase his support among two disparate, and increasingly dispirited, political blocs: the anti-abortion, anti-affirmative-action white American base of his own Republican Party; and right-leaning, Reagan-voting African Americans. In Clarence Thomas, a forty-three-year-old African American Republican from Pinpoint, Georgia, with only two years of experience as a federal judge, Bush found the ideal candidate to help him appeal to both these constituencies.

The dissent was immediate. The NAACP, the AFL-CIO, and the National Organization for Women (NOW) released statements vowing to fight Thomas's nomination. NOW was concerned with his stance on abortion; the AFL-CIO opposed his conservative positions. But it was the board of directors of the NAACP, the nation's largest racial justice organization, whose position stands out in a 49-1 vote. "While we appreciate the fact that Judge Thomas came up in the school of hard knocks and pulled himself up by his own bootstraps," NAACP chairman William F. Gibson said in a press conference, "our concern is for the millions of blacks who have no access to bootstraps, theirs or others."

Despite this stance, Thomas polled well among African American voters. And more important for Republicans, his nomination initially found little resistance during the Senate Judiciary Committee's confirmation hearings that September. After a few days of testimony, the committee, chaired by Senator Joe Biden (D-Del.), split its vote, moving the process to the Senate floor without a clear majority in Thomas's favor. After learning of Hill's allegations in late August, a small group of Democratic senators led by Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) urged Biden to take up Hill's case. After weeks of going back and forth with Democratic staffers and senators over how best to

protect her privacy, Hill held a press conference on October 7, 1991, and said she was willing to testify.

In those few days leading up to her appearance, we learned a few facts about her. Like Thomas, she was born into a family of Southern farmers, had graduated from Yale Law School, and was a registered Republican. At the time, Republicans erased many of the same aspects of Hill's biography that they extolled as virtues in Thomas's. Framing Thomas as a rural, working-class African American who worked his way into the upper echelon of academia and the federal government, they used his life story to discredit Hill, eventually leading to a wide-scale character assault on her. Arlen Specter (R-Penn.) accused Hill of "flat-out perjury." Republicans drew on centuries of sexist images of women as delusional, and racist ideas of Black women as hypersexual. Conservative John Doggett, a Texas businessman and lawyer, testified that Hill was an erotomaniac who fantasized about dating him.

In response, Hill revealed in great detail the extent of Thomas's harassment. "He talked about pornographic materials depicting individuals with large penises or large breasts, involved in various sex acts," she quietly recounted to the all-white, all-male Senate panel. "On several occasions, Thomas told me graphically of his own sexual prowess."

In trying to refute Hill's claims before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Thomas called the hearing "a high-tech lynching for uppity Blacks." He conjured up one of the most violent acts of America's racial history to shore up his support among white liberals and conservatives alike. Not only was he successful, he also introduced a new racial and gendered trope that was well known among African Americans but less familiar to white Americans: the Black woman as race traitor. "Having made Anita Hill into a villain, he proceeded—wittingly or not—to erase her and return to a simpler and more conventional cast," historian Nell Irvin Painter wrote.

By the end of his story Anita Hill had lost the only role, that of villain, that his use of stereotype had allowed her. She finally disappeared, as he spun out a drama pitting the lone and per-

secuted figure of Clarence Thomas, the black man, against an army of powerful white assailants. Democratic senators became the lynch mob; Thomas became the innocent lynch victim. As symbol and as actual person, Anita Hill was no longer to be found.

By the mid-twentieth century, the horror of lynching was transformed from a material reality to a political metaphor, one that Thomas not only used to his advantage but also canonized on the national stage. When R. Kelly, Bill Cosby, and Justin Fairfax, the lieutenant governor of Virginia, fended off charges from Black women (and in the case of Cosby, white women, from over several decades as well) who accused them of rape, they compared themselves to lynching victims. It is only now, in this age of #MeToo, that such analogies have started to ring hollow.

In the 1990s, however, the battles were much more internecine. "A conversation, a serious one among black men and women, has begun in a new arena, and the contestants defy the mold," reflected Morrison.

By the end of the hearings, African American support for Thomas was the highest it had been, with 70 percent of African Americans backing his nomination and 50 percent of whites, according to an ABC News-*Washington Post* poll that was conducted the weekend after the hearings closed. The result was that Democrats and Republicans, emboldened by the public response, voted 52-48 to confirm Clarence Thomas as a justice of the Supreme Court.

The morning that the vote was announced, I was late for school. The radio in my family's car, a used beige Jaguar, whose blaring muffler always made me shrink a little out of embarrassment as we climbed the driveway of my school, was turned on. When we reached the front steps, Michael Stipe, the front man for R.E.M., wailed, "It's the End of the World as We Know It," making me pause as I refastened my jacket and looked in the mirror to smooth my hair. Even then, I knew the song was a premonition.

What I didn't know was that a year later, I'd experience this same scene of emotional shock and sartorial realignment as I walked to my

dorm room, the morning after a well-respected African American man, three years my senior, sexually assaulted me. The Hill hearings had betrayed a simple and tragic truth: if I were to come forward against this upwardly mobile, Ivy League-educated Black man, most Black people would not believe me.

But I believed Hill. And Hill's words did change the world, bit by bit and for the better. Sexual harassment cases more than doubled, according to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filings, from 6,127 in 1991 to 15,342 in 1996. During that period, awards to victims under federal laws nearly quadrupled, from \$7.7 million to \$27.8 million. 1992 was dubbed the "Year of the Woman" in politics because more women ran and won their elections. Five women became U.S. senators, including Carol Mosley Braun, the first African American woman ever elected, and twenty-four women won new seats in the House of Representatives.

The hearings also set in motion a breakup between African American voters and the Republican Party that had been looming since the 1960s. Calling it the "Clarence Thomas Effect," Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo suggests that 1992 was the last real moment when African Americans chose racial allegiance over ideology and party. Once Thomas's judicial opinions proved to be as conservative as he had suggested they would be during the hearings, or more so, it became hard for any Black Republican (a notable exception was future secretary of state Colin Powell), much less one running for office, to have significant African American support again.

By 2008, 95 percent of African American voters were voting Democratic in presidential elections. And statewide races didn't look different. Reflecting on his own theory twenty years later, Bobo wrote to me in an email, "One can easily amass a lot of evidence to support [this theory]. A variety of Black republicans who have run for statewide elections don't typically get large and loyal Black following."

In 2018 Anita Hill opened a *Times* op-ed with "There is no way to redo 1991, but there are ways to do better." Two days after Christine Blasey Ford came forward with her allegation that Supreme Court justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her when they both were teenagers, Hill was trying to prevent her history from

repeating itself: in her 1991 case, senators had prevented other women from testifying, like Angela Wright, whom Thomas had also allegedly harassed while he was her supervisor. But history did repeat itself. On September 27, Ford appeared alone to testify to the Senate Judiciary Committee, in a navy skirt suit reminiscent of Hill's, despite the fact that other women were also willing to testify against Kavanaugh.

The next week a full-page ad with sixteen hundred names, in a tiny font, appeared in the *Sunday Times* stating, "We believe Anita Hill. We also believe Christine Blasey Ford." This time the signatories were all men, of various races, who were taking up the charge given to them by Black women almost thirty years earlier. They could not redo 1991, but they did better.

1994-1999

THE CRIME BILL

ANGELA Y. DAVIS

ON SEPTEMBER 13, 1994, THE VIOLENT CRIME CONTROL AND Law Enforcement Act was signed into law by President Bill Clinton. Ironically, this day marked the twenty-third anniversary of the violent suppression of the Attica Prison rebellion in 1971. On the fifth day of the uprising, New York governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered a force made up of 550 New York state police troopers and some two hundred sheriff's deputies, along with National Guard helicopters, to retake the prison. According to historian Heather Ann Thompson,

Ultimately, the human cost of the retaking was staggeringly high: 128 men were shot—some of them multiple times. Less than half an hour after the retaking had commenced, nine hostages were dead and at least one additional hostage was close to death. Twenty-nine prisoners had been fatally shot. Many of the deaths in D Yard—both hostages and prisoners—were caused by the scatter of buckshot, and still others resulted from the devastating impact of unjacketed bullets.

The use of unjacketed bullets, banned by the Geneva Conventions, and wide-arc buckshot was undoubtedly designed to produce as many casualties as possible. The New York commissioner of corrections, Russell Oswald, remarked, "I think I have some feeling now of how Truman must have felt when he decided to drop the A-bomb."

Twenty-three years later, the passage of the Crime Bill—although not as explosively violent, and unfolding over the course of many years rather than in the minutes-long catastrophe created by official gunmen on the grounds of Attica Prison—would cause immense devastation in Black, Brown, and poor communities. The Crime Bill became widely recognized as a major accelerator of what came to be known as mass incarceration. On the occasion of signing the bill, Bill Clinton remarked:

Today the bickering stops, the era of excuses is over, the law-abiding citizens of this country have made their voices heard. Never again should Washington put politics and party above law and order. . . . Gangs and drugs have taken over our streets and undermined our schools. Every day we read about somebody else who has literally gotten away with murder.

These remarks reflect the expansive reach of the discourse on law and order, which since the 1970s tended to conflate "crime" with civil rights protests in the South and with the widespread turmoil generated by racism in the North. The moral panic produced by this discourse increasingly meant that the "law and order" slogan served as a proxy for more explicit calls to suppress Black movements and ultimately also to criminalize indiscriminately broad swaths of the Black population.

By 1994, the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy, produced by global economic shifts, was having a deleterious impact on working-class Black communities. The massive loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector, especially in cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, had the result, according to Joe William Trotter, that "the black urban working class nearly disappeared by the early 1990s." Combined with the disestablishment of welfare state benefits, these economic shifts caused vast numbers of Black people to seek other—sometimes "illegal"—means of survival. It is not accidental that the full force of the crack epidemic was felt during the 1980s and early '90s.

During this period there were few signs of governmental effort to address the circumstances responsible for the rapid impoverishment of working-class Black communities, and the 1994 Crime Bill was emblematic of the turn to carceral “solutions” as a response to the impact of forces of global capitalism. As Cedric Robinson has pointed out, capitalism has always been racial capitalism, and the Crime Bill was a formidable indication that Republicans and Democrats in Washington were united in their acceptance of punitive strategies to stave off the effects of Black impoverishment. Originally written by Senator Joe Biden, who would become vice president during the two terms of Barack Obama, the 356 pages of the bill contained provisions for one hundred thousand new police and over \$12 billion in funding for state prisons, giving precedence to states that had enacted three-strikes laws and truth-in-sentencing. Moreover, the stipulations of the bill, which terminated Pell Grants for prisoners, led to the disestablishment of degree-granting educational programs in prisons. Recreational facilities began to be increasingly removed from prison settings as well.

The passage of the Crime Bill consolidated a political “law and order” environment, which prompted state legislatures to complement its provisions by passing ever more repressive laws affecting imprisoned people. During the same month that the bill was passed, the Mississippi legislature, which met in a special session to address prison overcrowding, instead focused on passing legislation to revoke prisoner access to amenities. According to *The New York Times*,

There was talk of restoring fear to prisons, of caning, of making prisoners “smell like a prisoner,” of burning and frying, of returning executions to the county seat and of making Mississippi “the capital of capital punishment,” as Gov. Kirk Fordice, a Republican, put it.

By the time the Legislature adjourned, reality had come close to the rhetoric. There will be no more private televisions for inmates and no radios, record players, tape or compact disc players, computers or stereos. Weight-lifting equipment, too, will be eliminated.

In sum, prison populations grew increasingly larger and the institutions themselves became more repressive and less likely to encourage people in prison to engage in self-rehabilitative activities—whether studying toward a degree or weight training. This punitive turn was especially apparent in the inclusion of the Violence Against Women Act within the Crime Bill, which proposed criminalization and carceral “solutions” to gender violence and helped to encourage the development of carceral feminism.

In response to this governmental promotion of state violence, antiprison activism intensified throughout the country, and in the fall of 1998 a massive conference drew 3,500 advocates, activists, artists, and scholars under the rubric “Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex.” The ultimate goal of this gathering was to propose new vocabularies and a new discourse that would help to shift the “law and order” rhetoric to one that acknowledged the role played by the multifaceted criminalization of Black, Brown, and poor communities in consolidating the punitive turn. Emphasizing the danger of authorizing incarceration as the primary response to disrupted social relations—economic disorder, illiteracy, the lack of healthcare, harm, etc.—and as the legitimate and immutable foundation of justice, the conference initiated broad conversations on racism and repression within the prison system. Challenging the reverberations of the 1994 Crime Bill and the political climate defined by “law and order” rhetoric, Critical Resistance inaugurated a movement philosophically anchored by the notion of abolition that would popularize radical analyses of the ways imprisonment and policing mask structural racism.

1999-2004

THE BLACK IMMIGRANT

ESTHER ARMAH



KADIATOU DIALLO. HER PEOPLE CALLED HER KADI. SHE got married at thirteen, to an older man who already had one wife. She didn't want to get married, but for her family in Guinea, a predominantly Muslim nation in West Africa, marriage was her purpose. She was sixteen when her firstborn child came into the world. He started his life's journey in Liberia. His life ended on the steps of a Bronx apartment building on February 4, 1999. His body was riddled with bullets from forty-one shots fired from the guns of four New York Police Department officers. He was twenty-four years old.

His name was Amadou Diallo.

An African immigrant, America-bound in search of a future he could not find in Liberia. His path was purposed with dreams of becoming a teacher. He was proud of his American savings account with \$9,000. Happy with his girlfriend. Confident about his promise to his mother, Kadi, that he would enroll in college.

In her 2003 memoir, Kadi describes her son as quiet and soft-spoken, with kind eyes. The NYPD officers believed her kind-eyed son was a serial rapist.

Amadou was part of an African-born population in the United States that from 1980 to 2009 grew from just under 200,000 to almost 1.5 million. In 2019 Africans made up 3.9 percent of 38.5 million immigrants in the United States. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act eased entry for Africans desiring to enter the country. Legal journeys reveal little about emotional ones. Yet the emotional journeys are

the bedrock of so many millions of African immigrants. And they were also the launchpad from which Kadi waved anxiously as her America-bound firstborn child left a war-torn nation in search of the sweet probability of realized purpose. Amadou Diallo was born in Liberia. And it was from West Africa—nations like Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal—that Black immigrants poured into the United States after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act.

Numbers tell only partial stories, however. They are not conveyers of ambition, disappointment, discovery, falling in love, or battling America's racism.

Amadou means "to praise" in Arabic. But he was much more than a name. The killing of this twenty-four-year-old Black man brought a city to its feet, brought New Yorkers to the streets, and incited rage poured into protest, throats hoarse from screaming "41 shots!"

In 1999, the year the NYPD gunned Amadou down, Bill Clinton was the president of the United States. In 2004 George W. Bush was the occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And by 2017, the White House was occupied by a man who described the country Amadou Diallo called home as a "shithole country." In Trump's America, the language of immigration focuses on Brown Spanish-speaking bodies.

Immigrant. The word carries currency. Loaded. Weighed down by a politics of emotionality. Fear reigns and rules. It shrouds policy and reaches into these borders of manufactured fear where the walls are thick with America's rewritten history of immigration, featuring the accents of bigotry and unapologetic open political warfare turning small screens of news shows into horror movies where caged children are vilified and their proponent, America's forty-fifth president, is deified.

Trump leads a Republican Party where politicians invoke floods tossing the sons and daughters of Mexico onto America's shores. The police believed Amadou was a serial rapist. The language of trigger-happy police officers in 1999 would be shared by a president in 2016, when he called border-trampling Mexicans "rapists."

The four police officers who killed Amadou were all acquitted on February 25, 2000. This act would become a pattern, one that would lead to a hashtag, sparking a nationwide and global movement. Ama-

dou's embattled corpse would become bloody fertile ground for later chants of "Black lives matter!" His life mattered, his accent did not.

The Bronx, where Amadou was killed, is the borough that birthed hip-hop. In its corners you hear accents from Caribbean islands that feel like hugs from home and are a welcome respite from a belonging-free political America where immigrants are fodder to be dashed and demonized for political capital.

Those forty-one shots did not have an accent. They were immune to journeys, language, culture, and custom. They did not know Kadi's path, her worry for her firstborn, or the dreams Amadou carried from his home in Liberia. There are nations and grandmas and uncles whose immigrant dreams collide with the American Dream for which they were neither considered nor included. Amadou's Blackness merged into the narrative of African American men as sexual predators and threats, criminalizing his body and justifying the brutality of each of those forty-one shots.

The Nigerian-British singer Sade sang on her track "Immigrant" from her 2000 album *Lovers Rock*,

He didn't know what it was to be Black. . . .

'Til they gave him the change, but didn't wanna touch his hand

Amadou's brutal killing was a lesson in Blackness for African immigrants.

Our accents will not protect us. Not from police brutality. Our accents are remixed to the beat of America's racism. They can identify us and a corner of this continent so many have left or fled but call and claim as home. They can be a balm from the reality that is the United States in 2019 and a president for whom speaking the word *immigrant* constitutes political point-scoring.

In African nations, education was an elevator to status. It required you to put your head down and keep it there in order to ascend. That legacy of colonialism fed an illusion of inclusion, a path where your African exceptionalism, your difference from American-grown Blackness, would guarantee a different outcome. Some believed they would thrive. Unlike them. That meant some African immigrants

taste their difference as sweeter, marking them immune to the racism for which they might sometimes blame Black Americans—not simply for challenging or enduring but actually for attracting. The "you" and "them" by African Americans meant sharpened tongues, ugly names—African booty-scratchers—communicating neither desire nor claim to any corner of this continent.

Immigration in the United States today thrives and flounders due to a politics of emotionality. Immigrants are not born of sixteen-year-old mothers with journeys and dreams and futures. Not one of the forty-one shots recognized the love of Amadou's mother, nor the space of Blackness that he occupied. Not one bullet came wrapped in an Ivy League education. Police encounters do not litigate our peculiar and particular Blacknesses. We—African Americans and immigrants of African nations and of island nations—do that. The back-and-forth between the Blackness born and raised in, shaped by, and rejected in America and that of journeying African immigrants was—and continues to be—a landscape of simmering tensions that sometimes explode. Those tensions serve to separate, when what is necessary now are creative collectives and coalitions. There is no comfort from the emotional litigation of our Blacknesses. Confusion yes. Clarity no. This is what a legacy of untreated trauma looks like. What is required is emotional justice.

We have to reimagine a Blackness that is not marked as singular based on the brutality of bullets and America's limitations. We must expand it to honor our accents, cultures, and customs as we navigate rocky paths to build creative coalitions and continue to a freedom where our peculiar and particular Blackness can be and breathe.

Amadou's future was choked out of him with each of the forty-one bullets. His bones are buried where his extended family resides, on his mother's land, in Hollande Bourou in the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea. His blood still stains the streets of the Bronx. He breathed New York City air as an African immigrant. His death taught us that, in the United States, his breath was Black.

2004-2009

HURRICANE KATRINA

DEBORAH DOUGLAS

ON A MIDDLE-SCHOOL FIELD TRIP TO TENNESSEE'S REELFOOT Lake in 1978, a classmate almost made me disappear. We were just up the road from my new home of Covington, a Delta town where Blow Pops were made, thick and swirly vowels rolled off people's tongues, and a bronze Confederate statue greeted visitors at the square. At eleven years old, I was a Chicago-born Detroit, new and working to fit in, calibrating my ear to accents without sharp angles and other ways of being. I wondered, for example, why the school instantly segregated by race as soon as the first period bell rang. White kids went to higher-level classes, and Black kids went somewhere else. I don't know exactly where because, well, I went with the white kids.

On this occasion, I noticed a group of white students from English huddled together when one of them, a short fella I'll call J., came over. A new friend perhaps? J. proceeded to announce, "Heretell, you think you something." He said it in a dusty drawl, like *suuuuumthin*.

I was perplexed. Was that a question or a statement? Was I supposed to answer? Well, I've always been told I'm a child of God. My activist Detroit teachers, fresh from the revolution, always told me to raise my hand and speak up, which I did. Maybe I *was* something, I didn't know. Who said such a thing, and why would it matter? In my heart, I knew J.'s trouble was *he* thought I was something. Whatever light of intellect, curiosity, and hope emanated from me and Black girls like me needed to be dispatched. This is what I call "depresencing." He was chosen to do it because apparently some people are born

to be seen and others are meant to recede, useful only to validate white supremacy.

On that fall day at a place born when the river ran backward, this would not be the first time I would be asked to shrink and be a little less . . . there. The Black women and girls impacted by Hurricane Katrina, which landed near New Orleans on August 29, 2005, know a great deal about a lack of regard that renders their lived experiences invisible.

The idea of Black women and girls being fully present, inhabiting space and exercising their powers of wit, talent, and dexterity, would be a recurring theme. A lexicon has grown to address the tension between who Black women truly are and aspire to be, and the validity bit part they are repeatedly asked to play, if any at all. Scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" and Moya Bailey's "misogynoir" provide a level of validation and language that feels good to not feel, well, crazy.

The devastating weather event that was Hurricane Katrina can best be described as what historian Barbara Ransby calls the "gendered nature of the disaster."

The category-four hurricane made landfall near New Orleans and proceeded to unleash destruction that ravaged the Gulf Coast, including Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. The levee system that had protected New Orleans from the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borgne was overwhelmed. About 1.2 million people heeded Mayor Ray Nagin's order to evacuate. Most of the city flooded.

Many residents didn't leave because they could not or would not, or they sought shelter at the New Orleans Convention Center or the Louisiana Superdome. While many possess the privilege of picking up and leaving without much thought, studies show (and folks will tell you) that low-income residents, minorities, the elderly, and the disabled are less likely to evacuate. In New Orleans, impoverished residents didn't have the money, the cars, or the network to relocate. Their homes and communities bore the brunt of the devastation.

Media reports showed desperate people on rooftops begging to be rescued from their flooded communities. Survivors languished at the Superdome and convention center without food, water, and proper

sanitary conditions. Residents were further dispossessed when they were referred to as “refugees” rather than “evacuees,” a point made by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, among others.

Hurricane Katrina is easily a metaphor for America’s attitude toward Black women: rejected, neglected, and never protected. But Black women’s persistence and their insistence on survival and restoration are a metaphor for their attitude toward America.

FEMA chief Michael Brown is the poster boy for the way established power approached this natural and man-made disaster. When George W. Bush showered him with praise, saying “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job,” nobody thought like that.

The vacationing Bush embodied this mindset in his own slow response. On his way back to the White House on August 31, he flew over New Orleans, surveying the damage. He didn’t land to take stock of the situation because he said it would draw on law enforcement resources. Failure to engage at a most human level hit a nerve, as New Orleans was a majority-Black city where more than a quarter lived in poverty.

When former first lady Barbara Bush broke her characteristic public silence, she diminished the humanity of survivors. In discussing evacuees in Texas, she told the radio program *Marketplace*, “And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway,” she said, “so this is working very well for them.”

Except it wasn’t working, especially for Black women, many of whom were heads of their households. More women than men lived in poverty before Katrina. Women are prone to gender-based violence when they are vulnerable. The disaster response was simply humiliating. In a 2006 article, Ransby recounted that a middle-aged Black woman on CNN who was “dirty, desperate and crying . . . looked into the camera and said to the viewers, ‘We do not live like this.’ She repeated it over and over again.”

City leaders who banked on remaking a demographically different kind of city did Black women no favors, either. They failed to include in recovery planning the Black women who lived in “the Bricks,” the Big Four public housing complexes. Public housing was demolished and replaced with mixed-income developments.

The city lost more than half of its population after the hurricane,

falling to 230,172 residents in 2006 from 484,674, according to the Data Center. In the metro area, many of these lost residents were African American women and girls, whose numbers dropped to 37 percent from 47 percent, according to a 2010 report by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. Poverty levels fell, but that doesn’t prove poverty dropped for Black girls and women who lived there before Katrina.

The disaster response that stranded thousands or made people feel occupied more than protected by police and military failed to take into account the Black women’s work of holding themselves together. These women were doing what author and commentator Avis Jones-DeWeever described as easing “the hunger and thirst of babies and toddlers left in their care in the sweltering heat and the inhumane conditions associated with post-disaster survival.” In the wake of the storm, women, Black and white, cared for the elderly and infirm, “yet, women’s service and suffering were all but invisible as are their continuing struggles to this day.”

The lexicon must make room for white patriarchy’s specific way of disregarding the humanity of Black women in literal physical spaces like New Orleans during and after Katrina, and in the narratives and policy making that either created a pathway home or left them stranded. Every step of the Katrina response “depresenced” Black women, forced them to bear the weight of natural disaster while carrying the cellular memory of trauma one can imagine will pass through bloodlines like so many others.

Unlike *erasure*, which requires one’s presence to be recognized so it can be obliterated, *depresencing* never acknowledges presence at all. When deployed, people just look right through Black women as if they weren’t there.

As violent and silent as depresencing is, there’s an antidote. The response to Hurricane Katrina was not the first time the U.S. government abandoned Black women, and it would not be the last. Black women resisted by showing up in the story of their lives, by loving, learning, and leading—despite the systemic barriers and humiliations designed to make them small enough to practically disappear. But Black women did not disappear, and they will not disappear because we know something established power does not: we are something.

2009-2014

THE SHELBY RULING

KARINE JEAN-PIERRE

“**E**VERY TIME I VOTE,” OPRAH WINFREY SAID ON A 2004 EPISODE of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* dedicated to voting, “I cast my vote for Otis Moss, Sr., who walked eighteen miles in one day to have the chance to do it. That’s why I vote.”

Oprah invokes the story of Otis Moss, Sr., frequently when she talks about voting. It’s a story she heard in her twenties from his son, Cleveland’s Rev. Otis Moss, and one she says she’ll never forget. It’s one I’ll never forget, either.

Otis Moss, Sr., grew up without the right to vote. His family were sharecroppers in the racist Jim Crow era, in a “democracy” that still denied millions of Black and Brown people the right to vote. But one day that changed. The Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, thanks to the civil rights movement, and for the first time ever, Otis by law had the right to vote. And on the day of the first-ever election where he could actually cast a ballot, where he could actually have his voice counted, he put on his best suit and walked six miles to the nearest polling station. He didn’t have any other form of transportation. But when he got to the polling station and tried to cast his vote, the people working there told him he couldn’t vote at that polling station. He had to go to another one.

Still in his best suit, Otis walked another five or six miles to that other polling station. But by the time he got there, the people working there told him it was too late, the polls had closed. He walked home, another six miles, defeated. In total, Otis Moss, Sr., walked

eighteen miles that day, all for the chance to vote. All for the chance to exercise a right that was legally his.

Otis Moss, Sr., died before the next election. In all his years, not once did he get to vote. Not once did the United States of America, a supposed democracy that depends on free and fair elections, allow him to vote. Not once.

That story, a story of Jim Crow and how laws may change but may not change everything, that’s the story Oprah takes with her when she votes. I want to quickly tell you another story, a story of a man not unlike Otis Moss, Sr.

Eddie Lee Holloway, Jr., was a fifty-eight-year-old Black man who moved to Wisconsin from Illinois. He was ready to vote: he had his expired Illinois photo ID, his birth certificate, and his Social Security card, so he could get the Wisconsin ID he needed to vote. But when he went to the DMV in Milwaukee, they rejected his application. It turned out that on his birth certificate, due to a clerical error, his name was written as “Eddie Junior Holloway,” not “Eddie Holloway Junior.”

Eddie didn’t give up, however. He made seven more trips to different agencies and offices to try to get his paperwork together, all so he could vote. Like Otis, he was determined. He spent over \$200 trying to get everything in order. But even after all these attempts, he still wasn’t able to get the identification he needed to be able to vote in Wisconsin. Eventually, Eddie was so dejected he moved back to Illinois. He was never able to vote in Wisconsin.

Both Eddie and Otis were denied the right to vote even though the law said they were entitled to it. Both men were victims of a centuries-long effort in the United States to deny Black people the right to vote. But Eddie, unlike Otis, wasn’t a sharecropper living under Jim Crow. Eddie was a Black man trying to vote in Wisconsin in the 2016 presidential election. Not in 1946. Not in 1956. In 2016. Since Otis’s attempt to vote, the United States has sent people to the moon, created electric cars, launched the Internet, and elected the first Black president. But if, like Eddie, you’re voting as a Black or Brown person, it can sometimes feel like nothing has changed at all.

Eddie was one of hundreds of thousands of predominantly Black

and Brown victims that year of a new voter ID law in Wisconsin that, according to one study, successfully suppressed 200,000 votes in 2016. Donald Trump won the state by 22,748 votes.

When I reflect on these two stories, I think of how much more similar they are than different. I think of the fact that, a half century later, Black people in this country are still struggling for the right to vote. I think of the fact that white supremacy and voter suppression, though they look different today, are still very much alive—and flourishing.

In 2013 I was in New York City working in city politics when the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision came down, bringing down with it crucial parts of the Voting Rights Act. I had only recently left the Obama administration. Barack Obama had cobbled together a mighty coalition of people young and old, Black and white. The diversity of the coalition that backed him demonstrated the future he sought, one where people of all backgrounds would come together and push our great nation forward. The power of that thought, the audacity of his imagination to dream of what a better, more inclusive country might look like, frightened many who saw their lives dependent on the continuation of a racial hierarchy.

I think many of us were naïve then. We thought things would only get better, not worse. Many thought of the election of Barack Obama, not as the end of racism, but certainly as a turning point. And it was. But for many, President Obama's election was a turning point in a different direction. It spurred a backlash among white supremacists invested in maintaining the status quo.

It can be no coincidence that the carnage of the Voting Rights Act so central to the *Shelby* decision occurred during the presidency of our first-ever Black president. It is no coincidence that in the decade since Obama's election, voter suppression has gained more momentum, velocity, and animosity than it had in the previous three elections combined. Since *Shelby County v. Holder*, voter suppression has taken on more pervasive and pernicious forms than ever before.

Voter purges are on the rise. Between 2006 and 2008, states removed 4 million voters from their rolls, as they are permitted to do under the Constitution in order to maintain the accuracy of their

voter rolls. Between 2014 and 2016, that number jumped to 16 million people. Voter ID laws, like the one that stopped Eddie Holloway, Jr., from voting in the 2016 election, have seeped into state constitutions across the country. Felon disenfranchisement laws and voter access laws run rampant.

It was, technically, a change in the law that spurred these vile additions to voter suppression. But it had much more to do with what had happened five years before *Shelby County v. Holder*, with the election of President Obama. His election signaled that the direction of power in this country was shifting; the growth in voter suppression we've seen over the last decade is a response to that election and to that signal.

Laws alone have never changed this country. The Voting Rights Act would never have happened without the Freedom Rides, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the brave souls who sat at that lunch counter at Woolworth's in 1960. The Voting Rights Act, as historic and critical as it was, was not enough to give Otis Moss, Sr., his vote.

At the March on Washington in 1963, John Lewis was just twenty-three years old. Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he said:

To those who have said, "Be patient and wait," we have long said that we cannot be patient. We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to be free now! We are tired. We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. And then you holler, "Be patient." How long can we be patient? We want our freedom and we want it now. . . . We must say: "Wake up America! Wake up!" For we cannot stop, and we will not and cannot be patient.

When it comes to our democracy, and who we determine to have the right to vote—our most sacred of rights—patience is no virtue. We must never be patient when someone else's rights are in the balance. We cannot wait on laws, or elected officials, or anyone else. The only virtue when it comes to the right to vote is impatience.

2014-2019

BLACK LIVES MATTER

ALICIA GARZA

CHANGE DOES NOT OCCUR WITHOUT BACKLASH—AT LEAST, any change worth having—and that backlash is an indicator that the change is so powerful that the opposing forces resist that change with everything they have.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, a small suburb outside St. Louis. His body lay in the street for four hours as angry crowds gathered, demanding to know why an eighteen-year-old boy had been shot and killed by police just steps away from his mother's home. After Brown was shot, he reportedly was still alive, and yet he was denied medical attention. Later that afternoon the crowd erupted and began to march to the Ferguson police station a few blocks away.

What unfolded that fateful day is painful and complex. It is a story that the people who joined in that uprising that day and in the days, weeks, months, and years afterward are most fit to tell. Storytelling is often connected to power and influence, and even today the voices of activists in Ferguson, from their own perspectives and viewpoints, are too hard to come by and often eclipsed by those who want to center themselves within a story that is not their own.

Such has been the case with Black Lives Matter, which I started with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi a little more than a year prior to Brown's death, after the acquittal in 2013 of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager, in Sanford, Florida. Such has been the case with all social movements as we seek to best

understand their origins, their impacts, their failures, and their methods and strategies.

There are lessons that can be drawn from this tapestry of stories that point to a simple truth—Black lives still do not matter in American society. Whether it be the murder of Trayvon Martin by a vigilante, the murder of Michael Brown by a local police officer, the murder of Renesha McBride by a private citizen, the murder of Kayla Moore by police officers, the murder of Mia Henderson, or the mysterious death of Sandra Bland, who was found dead in a jail cell she should not have been in after a routine traffic stop—Black lives, be they poor or middle class, transgender or cisgender, disabled, adult or child, are seen as disposable.

The movement addressing this simple yet painful truth has deep historical roots. It has emerged from previous iterations not only to fight back against the state-sanctioned violence occurring against Black people each and every day. The movement has declared that all Black lives are worth fighting for.

This Black Renaissance understands that it is not only cisgender, heterosexual middle-class Black people who deserve to live full and dignified lives, but also Black people who are subject to discrimination, oppression, and marginalization of many types all at once. It was this Black Renaissance that propelled activists to refuse to allow traditional Black church leaders to speak on their behalf, to tell them to go home in the dead of night and be content with allowing the system to run its course as Michael Brown lay dying in the street. It is this Black Renaissance that declares that the lives of Black transgender women must not end in homicide before they are thirty-five years old. It is this Black Renaissance that refuses to make the coffee and the copies while the men do the real work. It is this Black Renaissance that questions the stated role of policing in this country, and that calls attention to the Black disabled people who are killed at eight times the rate of people who are not disabled. This Black Renaissance has dutifully carried on the tradition of resistance that our ancestors gifted us, and it has continued to push for the changes that they did not complete.

There were more protests in one year, 2014, than at any time during

the last period of civil rights activism. Black Lives Matter—the hashtag, the organization, and the movement—exploded around the world. Making Black lives matter meant fighting back against the oppression of Black people, which also meant investing in loving Blackness in all its forms.

The explosion of this Black Renaissance came with a swift, strong backlash. Soon after Black Lives Matter began making a cultural and systemic impact, refrains of “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter” began to counter it. These Americans denied the existence of racism and branded whoever dared to expose it as people who were “playing the race card,” ostensibly for sympathy or to deny culpability in their own oppression. These Americans framed Black Lives Matter activists as domestic terrorists who posed a threat to the lives of law enforcement.

The 2016 presidential election was the platform upon which this backlash against the Black Renaissance took place. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential nominee, expected the allegiance of Black voters and yet became the subject of numerous protests by Black organizers. The Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, allayed the fears of white voters, promising to restore law and order to the country, to support law enforcement, and, after the first Black president, to “Make America Great Again.”

A few months after Trump was sworn in as the forty-fifth president of the United States—a president who has been accused of groping or otherwise sexually assaulting no fewer than thirty-five women—Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexually assaulting, harassing, or raping over eighty women. Exposure of these allegations prompted a hashtag known as #MeToo, which was the original creation of Tarana Burke more than a decade ago to support survivors of sexual assault to find resilience and hope. Since then, the #MeToo movement has exposed a widespread epidemic of sexual violence, particularly by powerful men like Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, and music mogul R. Kelly.

The #MeToo movement has proven to be a radical upheaval of societal norms that degrade, abuse, and devalue women-identified people. It has also amplified the voices of those who are survivors of

that harm, and it encourages them to celebrate their resilience in the face of such violence. Harvey Weinstein’s career is now over, and he faces multiple lawsuits and court cases, intended to hold him to account for his abusive behavior over decades. Kevin Spacey’s career has also effectively ended, and the popular television show that he once starred in has been canceled. R. Kelly was finally charged with abusing underage girls.

And still the backlash has been swift. Not only have those who have come forward with their stories, daring to be resilient after having survived such horrible traumas, been interrogated, ridiculed, and picked apart; even those who dare to provide platforms for such voices have received death threats as a result of their service. Beyond the retaliation against individuals, a powerful countermovement now misrepresents this movement as harmful to men.

Three years into Trump’s first term, at the four-hundred-year mark of African American history, white nationalism exploded nationally and globally. Although white nationalism is not a new phenomenon, it had formerly been politically fraught to declare sympathies with white nationalism in public. In 2019 alone, more than 250 people in the United States were killed in mass shootings. The overwhelming majority of the shooters were white nationalists.

Today white nationalists openly serve in the White House and in Congress. Trump’s first year in office saw the designation of a new category of terrorist—the Black identity extremist, defined as a Black person who takes pride in their culture and wants to cause harm to law enforcement officials. Though the designation has recently been dropped after being exposed as fiction, the fact still remains that the backlash against the powerful Black Lives Matter movement that rose in 2013 and exploded in 2014 was deemed a threat by the FBI.

Activists valuing and defending the lives of Black people were considered a threat, but not a president who openly bragged about grabbing women “by the pussy,” calls immigrants of color to America “foreign invaders,” called Haiti a “shithole country,” and said that majority-Black Baltimore was a “rat infested city.” Trump personified the backlash against all those Americans saying Black lives mattered.

A looming question faces antiracist social movements in the

United States: Will the backlash become a force powerful enough to prevail? Or will our organizing become stronger and sharper in the face of such backlash, assured that its presence alone has already declared our victory?

Only time—and strategic organizing—will tell the next four hundred years of African America.

AMERICAN ABECEDARIAN

JOSHUA BENNETT

A IS FOR ATOM BOMB. B IS FOR BLACKS BELTING BLUES BEFORE burial, the blood they let to give the flag its glimmer. C is for cocoon & its cognates. Cocaine, coca-cola, the cacophonous wail of drones filling air with wartime. D is for demagogue. E is for elephants & their semblances, every political animal laboring under some less than human name. F is for foxhole. Firefight. Fears we cathect onto men holding best intentions close to the chest as one might guilt or guns & of course G is for guns, g-men, guillotines draped in flame we dream any hellscape holds if it's up to snuff. H is for Horsepower. I is for *I*. I is for individual drive trumps all concern when it comes to this business of living joyously at the edge of wit, watching half a world drown with your hands tied. J is for jeans. K is for Krispy Kreme. L is for loss. L is for loveliness. L is for lean in the cups of boys in white shirts billowing free in Mississippi towns so small, they are visible only when passing through them, like death. M is for metafiction. N is for next: next wife, next car, next life I would spend the bones in this flesh one by one to touch. O is for opulence. Opportunity. Occasional anguish but nothing compared to what I will reach when I peak & P is for Preakness. Poverty & bodies that flee it. Oh body, like a storm of horses. Oh questions we dare not ask for fear of breaking rank or losing funding. Q is for quarantine. R is for repair, Revolution, other conflicts that lack limit in any definitional sense. S is for stars we adore & reflect. T is for tragedy. U is for upper-middle working class when the survey asks. V is for the viola my mother plays in the 1970s

as her hometown collapses without fanfare. W is for Windows 98 in the public school computer lab & every fourth-grader playing Oregon Trail there. X is for xanthan gum, every everyday ingredient you couldn't identify by sight if you tried. Y is for Yellowstone. Y is for the yachts in the docks in our eyes. Z is for zealotry: national pride like an infinite zipline, hyperdrive, the fastest way down.

CONCLUSION

OUR ANCESTORS' WILDEST DREAMS

KEISHA N. BLAIN

THERE'S A SAYING THAT HAS CIRCULATED IN BLACK COMMUNITIES for decades: "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams."

Its origins are unknown. Yet its power is unmistakable. It speaks to all that Black people have overcome that did not seem possible generations before.

I've often wondered what my ancestors dreamed about. I wish my great-great-grandparents who were enslaved somewhere in the Caribbean had left letters detailing all their hopes and dreams for themselves and me. I'll never know for sure their wishes, their desires. But I can say with certainty that they wanted a life of freedom.

When I hear passing stories of my great-grandmother Felicity, a sassy and strong-willed Black woman from Grenada, I imagine that she had a lot of dreams and desires. Did she want to travel abroad? Did she want to obtain an education? Did she want to learn a particular skill?

What were her wildest dreams?

I'll never actually know—no matter how much others might tell me about her.

So I am left to imagine and question. What did a Black woman living in Grenada in the early twentieth century desire? What did

Felicity desire? What did Mary Jane Langdon, the great-grandmother of Malcolm X who lived in Grenada during this period, desire?

Although slavery had been formally abolished in Grenada in 1833, the experiences of Black people on the island were similar to those of Black people who were enslaved in the United States. Black people in the Caribbean could not claim a life of what historian Kim Butler has described as “full freedom.” Grenada, much like other Caribbean islands, had been colonized by the British during the eighteenth century (after previously being colonized by the French a century earlier). A Black woman living under colonialism in the Caribbean—much like a Black woman living under slavery in the United States during this period—could certainly dream. No one could have stopped them from imagining a better future, even if they tried.

But they could stand in the way of those dreams becoming a reality. And they certainly did. By design, slavery and colonialism stripped from Black people the right to live their lives as they wanted: on their own terms. They restricted Black people from having access to and control of their own resources. They stripped Black people of their “full freedom” and attempted to chip away at their personhood. They tried to crush their dreams.

The millions of Black people who shaped American history—whether descendants of enslaved people or of colonized people—all had dreams. Some dreamed of “home”—the place they could truly call their own. Some dreamed of the opportunity to explore and travel. Others dreamed of the opportunity to obtain a quality education. Regardless of the diversity of their individual hopes, they all dreamed of freedom. “Full freedom.”

Are we our ancestors’ wildest dreams? Are Black people in the United States now living the lives our ancestors of the past imagined for us?

I am not so sure.

Today, a little over four hundred years since the arrival of “20 or so odd Negroes” in Jamestown, Virginia, Black people across the nation continue to face many of the same problems our ancestors fought to correct. Despite the many political gains and triumphs over the years, racism and white supremacy persist in all aspects of American life

and culture. As disparities in maternal mortality rates and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 diagnoses and deaths reveal, Black Americans experience poorer healthcare access and lower quality of care than any other racial group. In the educational sector, Black students lag behind their white peers—not for lack of talent and ability but because decades-long structural inequalities have impeded their success. From police violence and mass incarceration to voter suppression and unequal access to housing, the social and economic disparities that shape contemporary Black life are all legacies of slavery and colonialism.

These two distinct yet deeply connected systems of power, oppression, and exploitation sealed the fate of the group of Africans who arrived in Jamestown in 1619. They influenced centuries of laws and policies that determined how Black people could live out their lives. They tried to stifle Black people’s dreams, and when they were unsuccessful, their architects and beneficiaries simply set up barriers and restrictions to make it nearly impossible for them to attain them.

But as the narratives in *Four Hundred Souls* reveal, Black people have never stopped dreaming, or fighting for those dreams to become a reality. Elizabeth Keye, for example, fought to secure her freedom in 1656—becoming one of the first Black people in British North America to successfully sue for freedom and win. During the eighteenth century, American maroons skillfully resisted their enslavement, hiding out in faraway places to maintain some measure of control over their lives. In Boston during the 1830s, Maria Stewart stood boldly to demand the rights and freedom of Black people, becoming the first woman in the United States to speak publicly to a mixed audience of men and women. These stories and many others, highlighted in *Four Hundred Souls*, capture the spirit of determination that guided Black people in the United States—every step of the way.

Together, despite the odds, we have made it this far. The powerful essays and poetry in *Four Hundred Souls* are a testament to how much we have overcome, and how we have managed to do it together, despite our differences and diverse perspectives.

Yet I am not convinced we are our ancestors’ wildest dreams. At least not yet.

I'll never know what ran through my great-grandmother Felicity's mind as she rested quietly in the evenings. But I suspect that her wildest dream for herself and for me mirrors my own. In this dream, Black people have "full freedom"—equal access to all the rights and privileges afforded to others. In this dream, Black people, regardless of gender, religion, sexuality, and class, are living their lives uninhibited by the chains of racism and white supremacy that bind us still.

This dream is not yet a reality. We have much work left to do.

While I remain doubtful that we are our ancestors' wildest dreams, I believe we can be. More than four hundred years since the symbolic birthdate of Black America, we still have the unique opportunity to shape our current dreams into future realities.

The task ahead is not an easy one. But we can help chart out a path that leads us all to a better future—the kind of future that will more closely resemble our ancestors' wildest dreams.