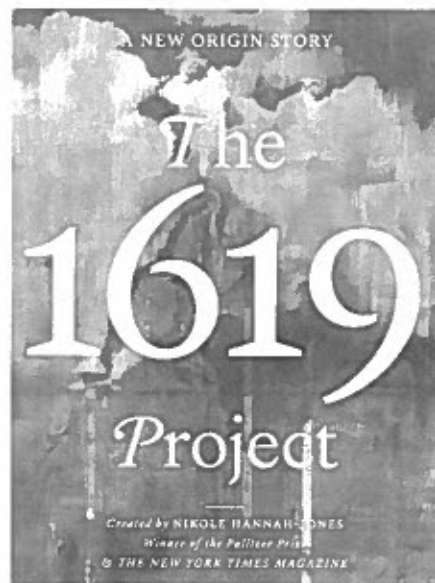




# 1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



## 1619 Project A New Origin Part 2 Race & Fear

May 12, 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.

**June 9, 2022**

1619 Project: New Origin Story  
Part 3: Sugar & Capital

**July 14, 2022**

1619 Project: New Origin Story  
Part 4: Dispossession & Citizenship

Please check our 1619 Discussion homepage at:  
<https://heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project/>

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Contact: John Piche' at [jpiche@heightslibrary.org](mailto:jpiche@heightslibrary.org)

**Dorothy Roberts** (Race chapter) is a professor of law, sociology, and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her scholarship and activism are centered on the interplay of gender, race, and class in legal and social-justice issues. The award-winning author of *Killing the Black Body* and *Shattered Bonds*, she is an expert on reproductive justice, bioethics, and child welfare.

**Leslie Alexander** (Fear chapter) is a professor of history and African American studies at Arizona State University. She is the author of *African of American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* and *Fear of a Black Republic: How Haitian Independence Inspired the Birth of Black Nationalism* (forth coming in 2022), for which she was awarded the Ford Senior Fellowship. Her current research explores the history of policing during the end of slavery.

**Michelle Alexander** (Fear chapter) is a civil rights lawyer, a legal scholar, and the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, which shifted the national discourse on the U.S. criminal justice system. She is a former associate professor of law at Stanford Law School and Ohio State University. Her writing has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation* and other outlets. She is currently a visiting professor of social justice at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

**Shelby Steele** is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Shelby Steele is an author, columnist, documentary film maker, and a Robert J. and Marion E. Oster Senior Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. He specializes in the study of race relations, multiculturalism, and affirmative action.

"RACE"  
BY  
DOROTHY  
ROBERTS

On a summer day in 2019, Ashley Ramkishun and Samuel Sarfo thought they were making a routine trip to the clerk's office in Arlington County, Virginia, to apply for a marriage license. They didn't expect that the computerized Marriage Register form they were directed to fill out would include a box titled "Race," with an asterisk indicating it was required information. Under "Race" was the instruction to "Select One," with a drop-down list of seven categories to choose from—American Indian/Alaskan Native, African American/Black, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Pacific Islander, and Other.<sup>1</sup> Sarfo, who was thirty-two years old at the time and working at a bank, is a Black man who grew up in Ghana and immigrated to the United States as a teenager. Ramkishun was twenty-six years old and had recently graduated from law school. Her parents are of Indian descent and came to the United States from Guyana, a nation on the Caribbean coast of South America.

When the couple asked if there was a way to apply without identifying a race, they were told that their only option was to select "Other." "I didn't want to pick 'Other,'" Ramkishun would recall. "I've been having to pick 'Other' all my life. None of it defines who I am."<sup>2</sup> Because she and her fiancé refused to click on a race category, the computer system couldn't process their license application. They could not get married without specifying their race.

This would have been true in any of Virginia's ninety-five counties, all of which required applicants to identify their race in order to obtain a marriage license. In Rockbridge County, for example, applicants were required to choose a racial identification from a list of 230 terms that includes "Mulatto," "Quadronee," "Nubian," and "Aryan."<sup>3</sup> And Virginia was not alone. Soon after they'd attempted to wed in Arlington County, Ramkishun landed a job in the state at-

torney's office in Miami and the pair moved to Florida. Once there, they again applied for a marriage license. To their surprise, the application in Miami-Dade County also included the race question. After Ramkishun called county officials to complain, however, the couple was able to print out the form and complete it without identifying themselves by race. Ramkishun and Sarfo wed in December 2019.

By that time, they had also decided to join two other couples in Virginia who had been denied marriage licenses for refusing to racially identify and filed a lawsuit challenging the state's requirement in federal court. In late 2019, Judge Rossie D. Alston, Jr., handed down a decision: there was no compelling reason to maintain the racial-identification law, which burdened the plaintiffs' fundamental right to marry and therefore violated the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

In deciding for the plaintiffs, Judge Alston traced the racial-classifications requirement to a Virginia law passed in 1924 entitled "An Act to Preserve Racial Integrity." This law required local and state registrars to keep certificates of "racial composition" for everyone born in the state and to require accurate "statements as to color of both man and woman" on applications for marriage licenses.<sup>5</sup> It also strictly prohibited interracial marriages.

In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the act's interracial marriage ban in its celebrated *Loving v. Virginia* decision, but it left intact the racial-classification system itself. According to the Court's reasoning, the prohibition on interracial marriage violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause not because it employed racial classifications but because it used them to enforce racial separation.<sup>6</sup> The opinion failed to overturn the racial-identification scheme—including the marriage license requirement, which is why Sarfo and Ramkishun encountered it in the Arlington County clerk's office in 2019.

Despite the decision in favor of Sarfo and Ramkishun, the practice of dividing people into racial categories permeates our society. It has become so routine to identify people by race that most of us don't think twice about it. We check off racial boxes on the U.S. Census form, college applications, public school records, mortgage applications, and medical charts. It's common for people to say they know race exists because they can "see" it. Research by social psychologists who study how people racially categorize others has suggested that paying attention to race is an automatic process that occurs almost instantaneously when a person encounters a face.<sup>7</sup> Social psychologist Destiny Peery uses computer-generated faces deliberately made to appear "racially ambiguous" to investigate the multiple types of information people

compute to arrive at a racial determination.<sup>8</sup> Even people who are born blind have reported that they were taught how to “see” race—by touching other people’s hair, smelling them, or listening to their speech.<sup>9</sup> Race seems to be natural and inherited.

Where does this thinking come from? As the justices unanimously found in their *Loving* decision, the 1924 Racial Integrity Act originated as “an incident to slavery” and its racial classifications served as nothing more than “measures designed to maintain White Supremacy.” The chief promoter of that act, Walter Ashby Plecker, Virginia’s state registrar of vital statistics from 1912 to 1946, was a doctor with deep ties to both eugenicists and white supremacists. Plecker turned his office into the state’s most powerful tool for implementing the belief in an innate racial hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> Plecker wrote in his preface to the Racial Integrity Act that the state must use “radical measures” to prevent the “intermarriage of the white race with mixed stock.”

He was especially worried that growing numbers of “near white people” were surreptitiously gaining white privileges despite their “intermixture of colored blood.” Plecker’s administrative apparatus, composed of midwives and doctors who reported births, undertakers who reported deaths, and marriage license clerks, ensured that the racial identities of all Virginians were accurately recorded, and that the prohibition against intermarriage was strictly enforced. The Racial Integrity Act made it a crime for a “white person” to marry anyone other than another “white person,” defined as having “no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian,” and prevented officials from issuing marriage licenses until they were satisfied that the applicants’ statements as to their race were correct. A misstatement on the license application was punishable as a felony. The goal was, according to the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1967 *Loving* decision, a “comprehensive statutory scheme aimed at prohibiting and punishing interracial marriages.”<sup>11</sup>

The bedrock of this statutory scheme was a network of laws passed in the colonial era governing sex and race. These laws, which created the racial-classification systems we still live with today, were primarily concerned with policing interracial sex. They maintained a clear line between who was Black and who was white, who was enslaved and who was free, by banning interracial intercourse and enforcing a rule of matrilineal descent: if a mother was Black and enslaved, so was her child. Though these laws were partly aimed at preventing miscegenation, they also incentivized the rape of Black women by their white enslavers, who could profit from their sexual assaults by enslaving any resulting children.

Over the next two hundred years, white authorities intent on maintaining

and justifying slavery solidified a racial-classification system backed by sexual regulation. The founders of the new nation incorporated the colonial categorization of races and made exclusion of Africans and Native tribes from the democracy foundational to the U.S. Constitution. Even after slavery ended and into the twentieth century, laws like the Racial Integrity Act continued to define and enforce racial lines, sometimes even more meticulously than during the slavery era. But this system, which grew partly out of colonial anxiety about interracial sex, did and still does more than maintain racial categories. The laws that invented race also created a regime intent on policing Black women’s sexuality and controlling Black women’s bodies. Many generations later, we are still living with its legacy of entangled racial injustice and sexual violence.

In the early days of colonial America, the vast majority of people compelled to work for landowners were vagrant children, convicts, and indentured laborers imported from Europe. The wealthy settlers who benefited from their unfree labor did not at first distinguish between the status of European, African, and Indigenous servants.<sup>12</sup> But as the slave trade mushroomed, Africans began to be subjected to a distinct kind of servitude: they alone were considered the actual property of their enslavers.<sup>13</sup> Colonial legislatures enforced the distinction between Black and white people through a series of new laws passed in the mid-1600s that established a legal regime that differentiated the political status of Europeans and Africans. It was particularly concerned with sex because sex between Black and white people produced children who confounded the strict distinctions between those two categories.

The first officially recorded condemnation of interracial sex was the public whipping of Hugh Davis, a white man, ordered by the Virginia General Assembly in 1630 for “abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a Negress.”<sup>14</sup> A decade later, when another white man, Robert Sweet, impregnated a Black woman, the Black woman was flogged, while Sweet was ordered to do penance in church.<sup>15</sup> There was also the question of how to regard the children of these sexual interactions. It was critical to the emerging racial order to identify their status. Should they be classified as white and free, like their fathers, or Black and enslaved, like their mothers? Today, most Americans would quickly identify these children born to Black women as Black—as if they were applying a universal rule of biological inheritance. But in the 1600s, the racial-classification rules had not yet been established.

The Virginia House of Burgesses—the first elected legislature in the colonies—met to debate the question. According to the patriarchal mandates of British inheritance and kinship law, the children should have had the status of their white fathers. Yet the colonists could see the political and economic disadvantages of classifying children born to Black women as white: such a decision would expand the pool of human beings who were entitled to the privileges of whiteness, and it would decrease the pool of human beings who could be enslaved. In the end, in 1662, the colonists passed a statute that maintained the racial hierarchy:

Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly*, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.<sup>16</sup>

Enslaved Black women gave birth to enslavable children even if the fathers were white. In discarding English legal tradition, the colonists adopted the Roman principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*—“the offspring follows the belly”—used to determine the ownership of animals. As a litter of pigs belonged to the owner of the sow, the children born to Black women were the property of the mother’s enslaver.

The law allowed white men to profit from their sexual assaults on Black women. Freed from the worry that their mixed-race offspring had any legal claim to freedom, white men could rape enslaved women with total impunity, maintaining their domination while increasing their wealth. Their control over Black women’s bodies was key to creating a permanent labor supply.<sup>17</sup> The white enslaver crafted a “convenient game,” wrote Lydia Maria Child, a Massachusetts abolitionist, that “enables him to fill his purse by means of his own vices.”<sup>18</sup>

The law also helped to invent the meaning of race. Although they clearly determined the status of Black women’s children for political and economic reasons, the Virginia legislators pretended slave status was a natural identity passed down through procreation. They constructed a racial-classification scheme but made it seem like an inherited condition. Though they imposed slavery by power, they cast Black women’s wombs as the producers of their children’s subjugated condition.

In 1663, a year after Virginia passed the law enslaving the children of enslaved women, the Maryland Colony enacted a similar statute. Enslavement

soon became a heritable condition across colonial America.<sup>19</sup> This stark distinction in political status necessitated stricter enforcement of the boundaries between racial categories.

Virginia’s racialized legal regime also included a 1691 criminal law prohibiting Negro, mulatto, and Indian men from marrying or “accompanying” a white woman.<sup>20</sup> By requiring that white women gave birth only to white children, the law preserved white men’s exclusive sexual access to white women, as well as white racial purity. Mulatto children born to white women were not subject to the 1662 statute, which applied only to enslaved Black women, and therefore were born free—posing a threat to white male dominance. In 1705, the colony reinforced its disdain for interracial relationships by making it a crime for a white person to marry a Black person, punishable by six months in prison.<sup>21</sup>

This anti-miscegenation law was accompanied by a set of measures designed to codify the superior status of white people and the subordination of Black people.<sup>22</sup> The law gave white indentured laborers “freedom dues”—a payment in cash, land, or supplies received when they completed their contract term—while enslaved Black people were entitled to no freedom at all.<sup>23</sup> The legislature enacted a set of “slave codes,” which declared that an enslaver who killed a person he enslaved while “correcting” the victim would not be prosecuted for a felony.<sup>24</sup> The same statute, by contrast, prohibited masters from inflicting “immoderate correction” on white indentured laborers and allowed those laborers to file complaints against masters who violated this restriction.<sup>25</sup> The codes also prohibited Black or mulatto individuals from holding public office, testifying in court, or otherwise swearing under oath.<sup>26</sup> This legal distinction in status based on race alone turned racial classification into a caste system. Through these laws, colonial landowners constructed race as a system of power in which anyone categorized as Black could be dominated by anyone categorized as white.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, the British North American colonies were governed by a complex and rigid racial-classification system that determined whether a person was entitled to freedom or subjected to enslavement. To reinforce the power and purity of people identified as white, it was necessary to regulate sex, which was often done through violence. Black men accused of even attempting to have sex with a white woman were subjected to barbaric punishments. And Black women, because they were considered human chattel, had no legal right to bodily autonomy. Courts did not recog-



nize the rape of enslaved women and girls by *any* man as a crime. The very notion of rape didn't apply to Black women and girls, because they were considered incapable of consenting or not consenting to sex.<sup>27</sup>

None of this changed with the founding of the nation, whose framers preserved the slavery regime in the new Constitution and state laws. Sally Hemings, born in 1773, was the daughter of her mother's enslaver—John Wayles, the father of Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha. Jefferson acquired Hemings when she was a child as part of his inheritance from Wayles. While Hemings and Jefferson were living in Paris, where Jefferson was serving as the foreign minister to France and Hemings as a lady's maid to Jefferson's daughters, Jefferson made Hemings his concubine. According to historian Annette Gordon-Reed, it is likely that by the time Hemings was sixteen, she was either pregnant or about to become pregnant with Jefferson's child. Hemings lived with Jefferson at Monticello for more than thirty years, giving birth to seven children. Because Hemings was enslaved, her children were deemed Jefferson's property. Four of Hemings's children lived to be adults, and Jefferson then arranged to free them.<sup>28</sup>

The law continued to regard Black women and their children this way for many decades. In the 1850s, a Mississippi jury convicted an enslaved man named George for raping an enslaved girl under the age of ten. Judge E. G. Henry of Madison County sentenced George to death by hanging. George's enslaver appealed the decision to the state's High Court of Errors and Appeals. John D. Freeman, the lawyer representing George, argued that because the victim was enslaved, George had committed no legally recognizable offense. "The crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves," Freeman noted. "Our laws recognize no marital rights as between slaves; their sexual intercourse is left to be regulated by their owners. The regulations of law, as to the white race, on the subject of sexual intercourse, do not and cannot, for obvious reasons, apply to slaves."<sup>29</sup> The high court agreed and threw out the indictment. "Masters and slaves cannot be governed by the same system of laws; so different are their positions, rights and duties," the court reasoned.

Husbands were legally entitled to force sex on their wives, and the marital rape exemption lasted in all fifty states until the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> White women who claimed they were assaulted by white men who were not their husbands had to clear a host of evidentiary hurdles, such as proving that they had resisted, had reported the attack quickly, were severely injured, were not having sex outside of marriage, and had corroborating evidence. These legal impediments were insurmountable for Black women. The vast majority of enslaved

women had no right to testify in court at all against white men charged with felonies. The only legal recourse existed when an enslaved woman was raped by a man other than her enslaver. In that case, the enslaver could sue the abuser for trespass to chattel, a civil violation of the enslaver's property rights.<sup>31</sup> White men settled disputes between them arising from sexual abuse of enslaved women by enslaved men outside of court.<sup>32</sup>

We don't know exactly how frequently white enslavers raped enslaved women and girls. An analysis by historian Thelma Jennings of 514 narratives of formerly enslaved people found that 12 percent of the female authors referred to experiences of coerced sex by white men. Of those women, 35 percent had fathers who were white men or had given birth to children fathered by white men.<sup>33</sup> Jennings noted that the numbers were likely far larger, given the reluctance of recently freed Black women to discuss such private matters with their white interviewers. Census records show that in 1850, roughly 11 percent of the enslaved population was classified as mulatto.<sup>34</sup>

New evidence of white men's sexual violence against enslaved women is emerging from the genome. A 2020 study sampling the DNA of fifty thousand people—thirty thousand with African ancestry—reinforced the historical record. Spurred by Joanna Mountain, the senior director of research at 23andMe, scientists used DNA in the company's direct-to-consumer database to trace the ancestry of customers whose grandparents were born in one of the regions touched by the transatlantic slave trade. The researchers found that although a majority of the more than 12 million enslaved people who arrived in the Americas were men, enslaved women contributed more to the current gene pool. The genetic contribution of European men to the ancestry of African Americans is three times greater than that of European women. This means that enslaved men were more likely to die before they were able to have children and that enslaved women were often raped by white men and forced to bear their children.<sup>35</sup>

Since Black women had no right to deny sex to their enslavers, they had no right to defend themselves against forced sex. Enslaved women who successfully fought off enslavers who tried to assault them were sold away from their families, gruesomely maimed, or executed.<sup>36</sup> In 1850, within a year of his wife's death, a white Missouri farmer named Robert Newsom purchased a fourteen-year-old girl named Celia for the purpose of having sex with her.<sup>37</sup> He raped Celia for the first time on the journey home from the sale. Newsom put Celia up in a tiny cabin on his farm and there continued to rape her repeatedly over the course of five years. Celia gave birth to at least one child resulting from Newsom's assaults. In the summer of 1855, Celia begged Newsom to stop

because she was sick and pregnant and warned him that she would resist his advances. She began to keep a large stick in the corner of her cabin to protect herself. When Newsom ignored her pleas and came to her cabin on the night of June 23, 1855, Celia clubbed him twice over the head with the stick, killing him.

Celia confessed to Jefferson Jones, who was sent by white citizens to interview her in her prison cell to find out if she had any accomplices. She was tried for first-degree murder before a jury composed entirely of white men, and Jones testified for the prosecution. Celia argued that she should be found not guilty under the state law of self-defense. An 1854 Missouri statute provided that women could defend themselves against “every person who shall take *any woman*, unlawfully, against her will, with intent to compel her by force, menace or duress . . . to be defiled” (emphasis added). But the presiding judge instructed the jury that the law didn’t apply to Celia, for Celia didn’t fall within the category of “any woman.” Instead, the judge considered Celia the chattel property of Newsom and therefore without any legal right to protect herself against him.<sup>38</sup> The jury found Celia guilty of murdering Newsom. The judge delayed her execution so she could give birth to her third child, which would become the property of the Newsom family. But the baby was stillborn; Celia’s other two children were sold. Celia was hanged on December 21, 1855.

**With the end** of slavery, racial classification no longer determined whether people were enslaved or free, but the ideas that denied Black women’s bodily autonomy for nearly 250 years still held great force. The legal system that countenanced sexual violence against Black women and girls had required a moral excuse for its barbarism—especially in a nation that espoused ideals of female chastity and male civility. That justification came in the form of a particular kind of mythology that developed during the slavery period that disparaged Black women’s sexuality. Whether free or enslaved, Black women were portrayed as sexually licentious, always consenting, and therefore unappealable.

This thinking had been in place even before the African slave trade began. During the 1600s, English travelers to West and Central Africa sometimes praised African women’s beauty, but they also explained the need to control Africans by mythologizing the voracious sexual appetites of African people.<sup>39</sup> White writers constructed the image of a Black woman governed by her sexual desires, identified by historian Deborah Gray White as the “Jezebel” after the biblical wife of King Ahab. As early as 1736, the *South Carolina Gazette*

described “African Ladies” as women “of ‘strong robust constitution’ who were ‘not easily jaded out’ but able to serve their lovers ‘by Night as well as Day.’”<sup>40</sup> The lascivious Black temptress was a convenient icon: if Black women were inherently promiscuous, they could not be violated. In his 1835 pamphlet *The Morals of Slavery*, the celebrated South Carolina intellectual William Gilmore Simms wrote that Black women lacked the “consciousness of degradation” possessed by even the most disreputable white prostitutes in the North. Contributing to the Jezebel stereotype was the practice of selling mulatto women for the purpose of forcing them into sex work and concubinage for the sexual gratification of white men.<sup>41</sup> Some white Southerners saw the sexual availability of enslaved women as one of slavery’s bonuses, because it protected the honor of white women from white male exploitation.<sup>42</sup>

This caricature of the hypersexual Black woman persisted even after slavery was abolished. White scholars and politicians linked sexual stereotypes of Black women to claims that Black mothers procreated recklessly, passing socially damaging traits to their children. In *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*, published after the Civil War in 1889, prominent historian Philip A. Bruce set the stage by presenting Black women’s sexual impurity as evidence that free Black people were regressing to a naturally immoral state. Bruce argued that Black women raised their daughters to follow their own licentious lifestyle, failing to “teach them, systematically, those moral lessons that they peculiarly need as members of the female sex.”<sup>43</sup>

These ideas persisted into the twentieth century and drove government programs that attempted to regulate Black women’s reproductive lives. State and federally funded family-planning programs engaged in massive campaigns to sterilize Black women. For example, between 1933 and 1976, the Eugenics Board of North Carolina approved the involuntary sterilizations of more than 7,500 people—affecting Black people at a disproportionate rate—on the grounds that they were “mentally defective.”<sup>44</sup> In 1973, a federal district judge presided over a case of two Black sisters from Montgomery, Alabama, who were sterilized at ages twelve and fourteen when government-paid nurses pushed their illiterate mother into signing a consent form with an X.<sup>45</sup> The judge, Gerhard Gesell, in ruling against this practice, noted that “over the last few years, an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 low-income persons have been sterilized annually under federally funded programs.”<sup>46</sup>

In addition to coercive family-planning programs, major social policies implemented throughout the second half the twentieth century were fueled by notions of Black women’s dangerous maternity resulting from an unbridled sexuality. Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report *The Negro Family: The*

*Case for National Action* furthered the theory that Black mothers were responsible for the disintegration of the Black family and the consequent failure of Black people to succeed in America. But hundreds of years of state-imposed hardship and unequal treatment made such success nearly impossible for most Black people: in addition to monumental losses inflicted by enslavement, Black families had been severely disadvantaged by racist housing policies, employment discrimination, inferior schools, exclusionary banking practices, and unjust law enforcement. They were also deliberately prevented from benefiting from the radical government-assistance programs of the New Deal that promoted the well-being of white families. Yet many white sociologists blamed unwed Black mothers for creating a dysfunctional family structure by displacing Black men as the heads of households and transmitting a depraved lifestyle to their children.

By attributing this urban crisis to Black family pathology instead of structural racism, Moynihan's analysis promoted policies that tied poverty-relief programs to harsh crime-control interventions in Black neighborhoods. The 1968 crime act, for example, dramatically expanded federal funding for local police operations and led to a policy shift toward massive incarceration and surveillance.<sup>47</sup> During the Reagan era, the media and politicians promoted the image of the Black welfare queen—a woman who had babies just to get a government check. Now that a white elite no longer profited from the children Black women bore, they painted Black women's procreation as stealing money from white taxpayers. This mythology was powerful enough to successfully fuel a bipartisan campaign in the 1990s to abolish the federal entitlement to welfare.

During the crack epidemic, the media reported stories of Black women who traded sex for crack cocaine. They were described as lacking maternal instincts and incapable of caring for their babies. This caricature reinforced the idea that Black women were innately dissolute when it came to sexuality and mothering. Numerous Black women were arrested for drug use during pregnancy on the grounds they would give birth to "crack babies," who were predicted to cause major social problems—in sharp contrast to the largely empathetic response to the toll the opioid epidemic is currently taking on white families.<sup>48</sup> Medical research has since definitively discredited the "crack baby" myth. A study that tracked more than one hundred babies born between 1989 and 1992 for two decades found that children exposed to crack cocaine in utero fared no worse than children with the same socioeconomic background whose mothers didn't use drugs.<sup>49</sup> The hardships these Black

children faced were caused primarily by the structural legacies of slavery, poverty, and other social inequities, not their mothers' stigmatized behavior.

**Today, the idea** of Black female hypersexuality still circulates in our society, often extending even to children. On a Saturday evening in April 2008, an eleven-year-old Black girl named Danielle Hicks-Best sneaked out of her house in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C., after her parents put her in a time-out for coming home late from the playground.<sup>50</sup> After she encountered a group of young men from the neighborhood, she walked with one of them to a basement apartment a few blocks away. Two other young men who were already there locked the door and raped her repeatedly throughout the night. Several weeks later, Danielle was sexually assaulted again by some of the same men. After both assaults, Danielle was questioned for hours by D.C. police officers. Medical exams after each incident confirmed that she had been raped.

Yet none of the men involved in raping Danielle was charged. Instead, in June 2008, a prosecutor charged Danielle with filing a false police report and issued a warrant for her arrest. Danielle was declared a ward of the state and spent two years confined to residential mental-health facilities. The prosecutor argued that details of the stories Danielle told the police during questioning were inconsistent. An email exchange between police officers told more: "All sex was consensual [*sic*]. Parents are unable to accept the fact of this child's promiscuous behavior caused this situation."

How could police blame an eleven-year-old girl for being sexually abused by adult men? Why would state officials respond to a traumatized child by tearing her from her family and criminalizing her? A study by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality showed that adults tend to view Black girls between ages five and fourteen as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers and treat them as if they are grown-ups. This phenomenon is so common that the term "adulthoodification" is used to describe it.<sup>51</sup> Black girls are perceived as needing less protection and nurturing than white girls, and as having advanced knowledge about adult topics like sex.<sup>52</sup>

More than a century after slavery ended, the legal system that refused to protect a young enslaved girl who was raped by a man named George still fails to protect Black women and girls from sexual violence. With wide discretion to pursue criminal cases, prosecutors are far less likely to bring charges against men accused of raping Black women than men accused of raping



white women.<sup>53</sup> A review of prosecutorial decisions in sexual-assault cases in Kansas City and Philadelphia discovered that prosecutors were 4.5 times more likely to file charges in rapes by strangers involving white victims than Black victims.<sup>54</sup> For cases that go before a jury, if the plaintiff is Black, the accused has a better chance of being acquitted and, if convicted, receiving a lighter sentence. It is not surprising then that according to Blackburn Center, which provides services to survivors of sexual violence in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, for every fifteen Black women who are raped, only one reports the assault.<sup>55</sup> Many Black women and girls see the criminal legal system as offering little recourse for the sexual violence they experience.

Indeed, the police themselves often inflict violence on Black women. As Andrea J. Ritchie, an attorney and organizer, notes in her book *Invisible No More*, she has found during twenty-five years of research that “police violence against women of color takes place disproportionately, and with alarming frequency, in the context of responses to domestic and sexual violence.”<sup>56</sup> In other cases, police have preyed on vulnerable Black women.<sup>57</sup> In one notorious case, in December 2013, an Oklahoma City police officer named Daniel Holtzclaw began stopping Black women in low-income neighborhoods and sexually assaulting them. He forced one woman he arrested to perform oral sex on him while she was handcuffed to a hospital bed. He assaulted others in his patrol car, their homes, and deserted locations. Holtzclaw deliberately targeted women he thought would not report him—sex workers or women with a substance-use problem.<sup>58</sup> He often threatened to arrest women with outstanding tickets or warrants if they didn’t perform sex acts on him.<sup>59</sup>

Holtzclaw went undetected until the early morning of June 18, 2014, when he pulled over Jannie Ligons, a fifty-seven-year-old Black grandmother on her way home from a friend’s house.<sup>60</sup> After ordering her to sit in the backseat of his patrol car, Holtzclaw, his gun in sight, forced her to expose her breasts, pull down her pants, and perform oral sex on him. Ligons immediately reported the assault to the police, launching the internal investigation that exposed Holtzclaw’s criminal behavior. Thirteen Black women eventually agreed to testify at the trial for felony sexual battery and rape the following year. Although he was convicted of eighteen of thirty-six counts and sentenced to 263 years in prison, we are left to wonder how many similar assaults of Black women and girls go unaccounted for. An Associated Press state-by-state review prompted by the Holtzclaw case turned up nearly one thousand officers across the country who lost their badges between 2009 and 2014 for sexual misconduct.<sup>61</sup>

Like Jannie Ligons, who reported Holtzclaw’s assault to the police in the twenty-first century, and Celia, who fought back against her enslaver’s sexual assaults in the nineteenth, Black women have long resisted domination of their bodies. Despite the law’s denial of their humanity, enslaved women devised numerous ways to claim some control over their lives. They escaped from enslavers, endured severe punishments, pretended to be sick, used abortifacients, and cared for their children in order to hold on to as much sexual and reproductive autonomy as possible.<sup>62</sup> Today, Black women continue to work collectively to imagine and build ways to liberate their sexuality.

One of those women is Loretta J. Ross, the co-founder of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, an Atlanta-based organization established in 1997 as a network of sixteen organizations representing women of color. Ross’s activism emerged from personal experiences of sexual and reproductive violence. A survivor of rape by a stranger at age eleven, Ross was sexually abused by a distant relative when she was fourteen and gave birth to a son. She nevertheless graduated from high school as an honors student and was admitted to Radcliffe College. But she lost her scholarship because she had a child. Ross went to Howard University instead and, as a first-year student in 1970, became involved in anti-apartheid activism and anti-gentrification organizing. Then, at age twenty-three, Ross endured another shattering violation. A white doctor failed to treat an infection caused by the Dalkon Shield, the dangerous intrauterine device marketed in the early 1970s. Ross had to be hospitalized and ended up unconscious for a day. While she was still comatose, doctors performed an emergency hysterectomy, sterilizing her.<sup>63</sup> “I’ve been working in the women’s movement pretty much ever since then,” Ross says. “It sounds like a horror, but it opened up the rest of my life.”<sup>64</sup>

The 1970s was a period of foment for Black women activists addressing sexual violence. Among the most influential was a group of Black lesbian writers and activists who came together in Boston in 1974 to develop a feminism that reflected the distinctive experiences of Black women. In 1977, the group released a pioneering statement, quoting Angela Y. Davis: “Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways.” This political activism embraced the view that “interlocking” systems of oppression determine “the conditions of our lives.”<sup>65</sup>

In 1972, Ross started working as a volunteer at a rape crisis center in Washington, D.C., the first in the country; she became executive director in 1979.

She joined Black feminists like Davis in thinking about a radical approach to sexual violence that started from the premise that policies to protect Black women and girls must address intimate and institutional violence simultaneously and can't rely on police officers and prisons, which themselves unjustly target Black women. She also, in 1989, joined the National Black Women's Health Project, the first national organization that paid specific attention to Black women's health issues.

In June 1994, Ross was among twelve Black feminist activists attending a pro-choice conference in Chicago who felt that the healthcare agenda presented by representatives from the Clinton administration was too concerned with avoiding Republican opposition and did not adequately address concerns of Black women around sexual and reproductive autonomy. These issues included maternal mortality, evidence-based sex education, and whether women could afford abortions or preventative reproductive healthcare.

Black women not only were less likely to be able to afford an abortion but also were more likely to be deemed sexually reckless, to undergo coerced sterilizations, and to die from pregnancy-related causes. These Black feminists decided to caucus separately and came up with the term "reproductive justice" to describe a new framework that included the human right to have children and to raise them with dignity in a safe, healthy, and supportive environment, along with the right *not* to have a child, which dominated pro-choice advocacy.<sup>66</sup>

Ross believes it is possible to contest sexual violence against Black women while also celebrating Black women's sexuality. When she was the coordinator of SisterSong, she planned large public gatherings, held strategy summits for leaders of organizations, and offered training sessions to activists around the country. She also created "Let's Talk About Sex" conferences where more than a thousand Black women and other women of color come together. "You can't keep people safe from sexual abuse, from STDs and HIV, from sexual domination—from all the things that can go wrong with sex—if you can't talk about sex," Ross explains.<sup>67</sup> Topics at the conferences also include ending the stigmas around sexual pleasure, queer sex, and abortion, and differing visions of sexual and reproductive freedom.<sup>68</sup>

Black women were crucial to the racial-classification system established by white colonists to maintain and manage slavery. The colonial legal apparatus treated them as innately unrapeable and their children as innately enslavable, while the culture justified that barbarity by slandering them as lascivious Jezebels. This destructive thinking has been reinforced by laws, policies, and

myths that, to this day, monitor racial boundaries and Black women's sexuality and childbearing. These ideas circulate in police departments, child welfare agencies, county clerks' offices, medical clinics, and the ubiquitous racial boxes we are required to check. The creative work of Black women activists can help lead us toward liberation from this damaging heritage.

"FEAR"

BY  
LESLIE ALEXANDER  
AND MICHELLE ALEXANDER

**On May 25, 2020**, a Black man named George Floyd was forced to the ground by several Minneapolis police officers; he remained there, pinned for more than nine minutes, as Officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck, killing him slowly even as he begged for his life and called out to his dead mother.<sup>1</sup> Just a short time before, a clerk at a convenience store had called 911, claiming that Floyd had purchased cigarettes with a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Minutes after police arrived on the scene, Floyd was dead.

In the days after the killing, a viral video of the murder sparked widespread outrage, and yet none of the officers responsible for Floyd's death were arrested or faced criminal charges—a pattern that felt, to many in Minneapolis and beyond, painfully familiar. Nationwide, police officers are rarely arrested or charged when they kill, and Black people are significantly more likely to be killed by the police than white people. Public attention to this issue had been growing since 2014, when Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed an unarmed Black teenager named Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, igniting a major uprising in Ferguson and protests from coast to coast. Wilson was never criminally charged for that killing. Two years later, in Falcon Heights, less than ten miles from where Floyd was killed, a thirty-two-year-old Black man named Philando Castile was shot and killed during a traffic stop. No officers were found guilty of any wrongdoing, even though that tragedy was livestreamed on social media and provoked a national outcry. And just two months before Floyd's death, a twenty-six-year-old Black woman named Breonna Taylor was killed in her Louisville, Kentucky, apartment when white plainclothes officers, searching for evidence against a suspected drug dealer, broke into her apartment in the middle of the night with a battering ram and sprayed her home

with bullets. Again, no officers were held accountable for the killing. All of these killings were officially justified, according to law enforcement and public officials, by fear—fear of Black people who were viewed as threats by the police.

When it appeared that—yet again—the police would be allowed to kill a Black person with impunity, the rage and grief in the streets of Minneapolis became combustible. Two days after Floyd's death, Derek Chauvin, the officer who killed him, was still free despite the video circulating around the globe revealing beyond any reasonable doubt that Chauvin had murdered a defenseless Black man whom he was sworn to serve and protect. Peaceful protests evolved into outright rebellion, as residents began throwing bricks, bottles, rocks, and Molotov cocktails at police precincts and cruisers, looting retail stores, and burning buildings to the ground. By the time Officer Chauvin was arrested, on May 29—four days after Floyd was killed—it was too late; the uprisings had already spread, and multiple cities were aflame. Fresh kindling had been laid in the months and years prior. Decades of false political promises, desperate living conditions, simmering racial tensions, mass criminalization in Black communities, and failed efforts at police reform fueled a brief wave of political violence in cities across the country in the days that followed. Protesters recognized that white fear of the racial "other" is not limited to the police or even to our criminal injustice system, but is endemic to our society as a whole.

In fact, just weeks before Floyd was murdered, another viral video had revealed to the nation—and much of the world—that white fear is easily and routinely weaponized by ordinary people with potentially deadly consequences. In this case, the video showed how Ahmaud Arbery, a twenty-five-year-old Black man, was chased by three white vigilantes as he jogged in a predominantly white neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia, and was then shot and killed by one of them. The men claimed they suspected that Arbery had robbed homes in the area, but he had merely been jogging in a place where white men believed that he didn't belong.

For many, that tragedy was reminiscent of yet another killing, the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old Black high school student in Sanford, Florida. Martin had been walking through a gated community carrying nothing more than a package of Skittles and a cold drink when he was stalked and killed by George Zimmerman, a volunteer neighborhood watchman who found Martin's presence in the neighborhood suspicious. His death prompted waves of protests and racial-justice organizing, as well as a slew of viral videos showing police killings, vigilante threats, and attacks upon Black people who were doing nothing more than living their lives, trying to be free. Yet the threats and violence continued unabated. Just hours before George

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Floyd took his last breath, yet another video had gone viral, this one showing a white woman in New York City dialing 911, falsely claiming that a Black man named Christian Cooper was endangering her. The incident began when Cooper, who was bird-watching in Central Park, asked the woman to put a leash on her dog, in accordance with park rules. When she became hostile, Cooper recorded the encounter, which shows him calmly speaking to the woman as she threatens to tell the police that “there’s an African American man threatening my life.”<sup>2</sup>

By the time Floyd was murdered, pervasive police violence and the tragic consequences of white fear of Black people had become undeniable in the eyes of many Americans. In the weeks and months that followed, thousands upon thousands of protesters took to the streets in all fifty states, in large cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and New York, as well as in suburbs, small and medium-sized towns, and rural areas. Protests erupted even in places as far away as Hong Kong, South Africa, Germany, South Korea, and New Zealand. Never before had a Black rebellion been met with such widespread support by people of all colors, classes, and walks of life. After an initial wave of violence, these protests were overwhelmingly peaceful. The demonstrators were determined to make their voices heard and to show a united front against racism and police violence. People gathered by the dozens, the hundreds, or the thousands in parks and city centers or marched to municipal buildings like police departments and city halls while chanting slogans, carrying signs, and demanding justice. Of the more than 7,750 demonstrations that took place in the United States between May 26 and August 22, nearly 95 percent were nonviolent, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Fewer than 220 locations reported any form of “violent demonstrations”; in the tally, that term was defined to include any acts of vandalism (including graffiti and toppling of statues), property destruction, or violence of any kind against individuals.<sup>3</sup>

But the response by police was brutal, encouraged by President Donald Trump, who condemned the protests; blasted the “Black Lives Matter” slogan, calling it a “symbol of hate”; and pledged his allegiance to “law and order.” Images filled television screens and social-media feeds of police officers and federal agents, at times joined by white nationalist organizations like the Proud Boys, attacking peaceful protesters, beating them with batons, using pepper spray and pellets, chasing them down streets and alleys, driving cars into crowds, and forcing people into unmarked vehicles.<sup>4</sup> During mass protests in Wisconsin, a white seventeen-year-old from Illinois named Kyle Rittenhouse, who considered himself a militia member, traveled to the city of

Kenosha to assist the police. In a video, he was seen carrying a military-style rifle and chatting with police officers, who thanked him for his service and gave him water not long before he shot three people, killing two.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the federal government sent more than seventeen thousand members of the National Guard to patrol the streets in twenty-three states and Washington, D.C.<sup>6</sup> When protesters gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, dozens of National Guard officers lined up in rows to defend federal property. They were among the hundreds stationed throughout the city at other sites.

Those same troops were nowhere in sight months later when an overwhelmingly white mob, composed of white nationalists and Trump supporters, stormed the United States Capitol, smashing windows and ransacking offices while lawmakers were in the process of certifying president-elect Joseph Biden’s electoral victory. For months, President Trump had falsely claimed that the 2020 presidential election had been rigged against him, ultimately leading his supporters to converge on the Capitol in an effort to overturn the results. More than a hundred police officers were assaulted during the mayhem; five people died, including one officer. But despite many warnings that the crowd on January 6 could turn violent, the National Guard was not deployed until after the rioting had already begun. Police presence at the Capitol was light, too. Some officers were even seen letting the insurrectionists approach the building and standing aside as the mob poured inside.

The glaring double standard reflects a centuries-old pattern in which Black strivings for liberation have been demonized, criminalized, and subjected to persecution, while white people’s demands for liberty are deemed rational, legitimate, and largely unthreatening. As James Baldwin explained a half century earlier, when “any white man in the world says, ‘Give me liberty or give me death,’ the entire white world applauds. When a Black man says exactly the same thing—word for word—he is judged a criminal and treated like one, and everything possible is done to make an example of this bad [n—] so there won’t be any more like him.”<sup>7</sup>

There has never been a time in United States history when Black rebellions did not spark existential fear among white people, often leading to violent response. Even when resistance has been peaceful or purely symbolic—such as Black fists raised during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympics or a knee taken on the football field during the national anthem nearly fifty years later—any sign of rebellion has frequently resulted in threats or acts of violence perpetrated by white vigilantes, militia groups, and the police, often culminating in the creation or strengthening of systems of racial and social control.

The reflexive impulse to respond to Black people with severe punitiveness

is traceable to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when white people desperately sought to control a large unfree population who refused to submit to their enslavement. The deep-seated, gnawing terror that Black people might, one day, rise up and demand for themselves the same freedoms and inalienable rights that led white colonists to declare the American Revolution has shaped our nation's politics, culture, and systems of justice ever since. The specific forms of repression and control may have changed over time, but the underlying pattern established during slavery has remained the same. Modern-day policing, surveillance, and mass criminalization, as well as white vigilante violence and "know-your-place aggression," have histories rooted in white fear—not merely of Black crime or Black people but of Black liberation. Nothing has proved more threatening to our democracy, or more devastating to Black communities, than white fear of Black freedom dreams.

**Most schoolchildren** are taught the Declaration of Independence's most famous lines: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." But relatively few children or adults today are as familiar with the right to revolt that follows: "Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it. . . . When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."<sup>8</sup>

When Thomas Jefferson penned those words, he owned hundreds of enslaved people. Yet he was acutely aware that Black people yearned for freedom no less than the white colonists who had waged the American Revolution and that no principle of justice could defend slavery. Even God, he later claimed, would likely side with enslaved people if they organized a successful revolt against their enslavers. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785, Jefferson admitted that rebellions were a legitimate, rational response to an immoral and inhumane system: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever; that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events; that it may become probable by supernatural interference!"<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson's anxious reflections were a kind of inheritance, something

passed down from generation to generation among uneasy white enslavers. At the heart of slavery lay a terrifying conundrum—an epic struggle between the enslavers who sought to extract labor, loyalty, and submission from their human property and the enslaved people who longed for freedom and were willing to obtain their liberation by any means necessary. Jefferson, whose ancestors had been enslaving Africans on large Virginia plantations since the seventeenth century, understood this dilemma well. Slavery, he once quipped, was akin to having a "wolf by the ear"—white people could not release their grip on it, but they also knew that beneath the surface boiled a formidable Black rage that could not be fully contained.<sup>10</sup>

From the founding of the original thirteen colonies, white people in the North and South lived in constant fear that the men and women they whipped, raped, and forced to work without pay would, if given the chance, rise up and take revenge on their white enslavers. This is why governmental surveillance and severe punishment of Black people began almost concurrently with the introduction of slavery itself. In 1669, the Carolina colony granted every free white man "absolute Power and Authority over his Negro Slaves." Within decades, Carolina law drastically bolstered white authority, mandating that *all* white people ought to be responsible for policing all Black people's activities. Any white person who failed to properly monitor suspicious Black activity would be fined forty shillings.<sup>11</sup> This notion—that Black people were inherently devious and criminal, and that white people were required to monitor and police them—ultimately defined the nature of race relations in the United States.

Convinced that the prevailing social and economic order could be preserved only if Black people were objects of perpetual surveillance and control, authorities across the colonies enacted slave codes, laws that governed Black people's lives and denied them basic human rights, including the rights to move freely, to "resist" any white person, and to carry weapons of any kind.<sup>12</sup> Failure to adhere to these restrictions resulted in brutal punishment. Early slave codes also legally empowered enslavers to beat, maim, assault, or even kill an enslaved person without penalty.<sup>13</sup> And if found guilty of participating in insurrectionary activity, an enslaved person would automatically receive the death penalty.<sup>14</sup> In many colonies, such as Virginia, the public treasury was even required to compensate enslavers if an enslaved person was killed while resisting or running away.<sup>15</sup>

Even so, these efforts proved insufficient. In the colonial era alone, fifty documented conspiracies against slavery were identified in the mainland British colonies and nearly fifty more in the British Caribbean.<sup>16</sup> On April 6,



1712, for example, approximately two dozen enslaved men and women gathered in New York City in the early morning hours. Armed with guns, axes, clubs, and knives, they set a building ablaze, hoping to inspire panic. When unsuspecting white people arrived to douse the flames, the rebels ambushed them, killing nine and wounding seven others. The rebellion was quickly quashed. Twenty-one people were executed: some were burned at the stake, while others were hanged in chains or had their necks snapped. One rebel was strapped to a large stone wheel, each of his bones broken with a wooden mallet while he screamed in agony, and then he was left to die painfully.<sup>17</sup>

Fearful of just these sorts of rebellions, colonists at the turn of the eighteenth century created civilian-based systems of law enforcement. Initially, these patrols were reminiscent of the *posse comitatus* in England, in which bands of men were called out to chase down and arrest people suspected of felony crimes.<sup>18</sup> It soon became clear, however, that an ad hoc voluntary system was wholly inadequate for the challenge of controlling thousands of enslaved people, especially in places like the Carolina colony, where enslaved people outnumbered white people.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, white colonists devised a new law enforcement institution, one that would serve, to a significant degree, as the foundation for modern policing: the slave patrol.<sup>20</sup>

The first official slave patrol was created in South Carolina in 1704, following rumors of a planned rebellion. As the historian Sally Hadden writes in her comprehensive study *Slave Patrols*, colonists already fearful of attack by the Spanish in Florida concluded that they needed two military forces: “a militia to repel foreign enemies, and a patrol to leave behind as a deterrent against slave revolts.”<sup>21</sup> Every militia captain would select a group of men under his command to serve as patrollers, a separate unit that was responsible for enforcing slave codes. Patrollers were required to hunt fugitives and rebellious enslaved people and to visit every plantation at least once a month; there they invaded slave cabins, confiscating any items they believed to be stolen, as well as anything they judged could be used as a weapon.<sup>22</sup>

By the late 1720s, slave patrolling in the Carolina colony had become a fundamental part of the militia’s regular duties.<sup>23</sup> Virginia and North Carolina soon created their own slave patrols, and by the mid-eighteenth century, colonial authorities there had transformed groups of white settlers, who were recruited and handsomely rewarded, into a militarized law enforcement organization that, as Hadden notes, was primarily engaged in “watching, catching, or beating black slaves.” Patrollers enforced slave codes and routinely broke into the homes of enslaved people, aggressively searching them and their quarters and subjecting women to sexual violence.<sup>24</sup>

Everywhere the pattern was the same: white people enslaved, raped, terrorized, and murdered Black people, mostly for profit and also to enforce a rigid racial hierarchy in which they maintained both status and power. Black people resisted and rebelled, often violently. White fear of Black rebellions soared after each rumored or attempted revolt, leading to heightened surveillance, brutal patrolling, and new waves of laws or policies that aimed to permanently subdue the enslaved population.

The Stono Rebellion offers a dramatic example. On September 9, 1739, in South Carolina, twenty enslaved Africans gathered near the Stono River some ten miles southwest of Charleston, where they plotted their revolt. Led by a man named Jemmy, they raided a local store, grabbing weapons and ammunition, and then marched from plantation to plantation, killing nearly thirty enslavers as they burned and raided their properties. Using drums and other musical instruments, the rebels attracted supporters, and soon the uprising blossomed to more than a hundred persons. When the local militia caught wind of the attacks, they hunted down the rebels and successfully quelled the revolt: dozens of enslaved people lay dead. Heads were displayed on massive wooden poles at every milepost leading to Charleston as a ghoulish warning that the cost of resistance would be death. Over the next few months, South Carolina officials arrested more than 150 Black people, publicly hanging ten per day.<sup>25</sup>

South Carolina legislators, enraged and horrified by the Black insurrection, passed the Negro Act of 1740, which was designed to force enslaved people into “due subjection and obedience” and to save the “public peace and order.” The legislation aimed to go further than any previous form of racial control by authorizing the policing of nearly every aspect of Black people’s lives. The act prohibited enslaved people from moving beyond the boundaries of their plantations, assembling in groups on roads, growing their own food, or earning money, and it imposed harsh penalties on enslaved people who learned to read. It also empowered constables to deputize any white person to “disperse any assembly or meeting of slaves which may disturb the peace or endanger the safety of his Majesty’s subjects” and to “search all suspected places for arms, ammunition or stolen goods, and to apprehend and secure all such slaves as they shall suspect to be guilty of any crimes or offences whatsoever.” In an effort to reinforce universal white authority over Black people, lawmakers also empowered all white people to “pursue, apprehend, and moderately correct” any Black person who refused to submit to their authority. If any enslaved persons tried to defend themselves, they could be “lawfully killed.”<sup>26</sup>

In the years that followed, South Carolina’s Negro Act became a model for

slave codes throughout the colonies, governing Black lives for more than a century. Such laws existed in the Northern colonies as well, even though the enslaved population was comparatively small. In New York, for example, authorities banned enslaved people from gathering in groups larger than three, holding funerals at night, being out after sunset without a lantern, selling food in the streets, playing musical instruments, or associating with free Black people. Enslaved Black people weren't even allowed to simply ride a horse, for fear they would use the horse to escape.<sup>27</sup> Northerners also implemented strict curfew laws, which targeted all Black people, enslaved and free. Legislation in Connecticut and Rhode Island, for example, explicitly encouraged anti-Black vigilantism by authorizing *any white person* to capture an enslaved person who appeared to be out after nine without specified permission.<sup>28</sup>

These oppressive laws did not cease after the collapse of British rule. Instead, government policing of Black communities, free and enslaved, persisted throughout the American Revolution, and became state law once the United States gained its independence. However, no amount of brutal repression could prevent enslaved people from dreaming of—and fighting for—freedom. And no quest for liberation would terrify white Americans more than the one that would take place on a small island in the Caribbean, about fifteen years after the United States was founded.

**In 1791, just** seven hundred miles from U.S. shores, enslaved men and women in France's most profitable colony, Saint-Domingue, unleashed a rebellion. The revolt should have surprised no one. Like many other colonies in the Americas, Saint-Domingue's main cash crop was sugar. Planting, growing, and harvesting it required intense labor performed in sweltering heat under the constant pain of the lash. Processing sugar was equally grueling, often pushing enslaved people to exhaustion, injury, and dismemberment as they labored throughout the night to feed the cane stalks through the mills.<sup>29</sup> More than half of the men and women imported into Saint-Domingue directly from the African continent died within a few years, and those who survived were typically subjected to harsh punishments and outright torture. Following a whipping, enslaved people in Saint-Domingue were often burned with an open flame, while others were subjected to burning wax, hot coals, or boiling cane juice; some were even buried alive. The conditions for rebellion were especially ripe on the island, since the enslaved people there—the largest enslaved population in the Caribbean—far outnumbered the white enslavers and colonizers.<sup>30</sup>

Gathering nightly over several days in mid-August in the northern region of Saint-Domingue, enslaved people painstakingly planned an insurrection—a revolutionary war against their white enslavers that they intended to fight to the death in order to reclaim their human right to freedom. Dutty Boukman, an enslaved man and a highly respected spiritual leader, assembled hundreds of enslaved people in the woods at Bois Caïman and led them in a religious ceremony, calling upon their God to guide them and sealing their revolutionary pact with oaths and ritual sacrifices. On the night of August 21, 1791, rebels began seizing their freedom. Spreading rapidly across the northern region over the next two days, nearly two thousand rebels marched from plantation to plantation, armed with machetes, burning and destroying workhouses and other buildings, and killing their oppressors. Within a week, French authorities believed, nearly ten thousand enslaved people had joined the revolt, and it seemed unstoppable. “We were attacked by a horde of assassins,” one plantation manager later wrote, “and could offer only meager resistance.” By the end of September, more than one thousand plantations had been burned and hundreds of white people lay dead. Eventually expanding to an estimated eighty thousand rebels, the revolt erupted into the largest, bloodiest, and most successful rebellion of enslaved people in history.<sup>31</sup>

White enslavers throughout the world recoiled in shock and horror. Enslaved people were rising up and asserting their determination to be free at any cost. In the United States—the world's newest slaveholding republic—President George Washington and the other “founding fathers” openly panicked, nervously speculating about whether the spirit of rebellion would be infectious enough to afflict their fledgling nation. Politicians throughout the country expressed outrage and horror as Black people in a neighboring nation sought their own liberty, even as they basked in the glow of their own revolution, during which they had sought to free themselves from tyranny and oppression.

Just weeks after the rebellion in Saint-Domingue began, Charles Pinckney, the governor of South Carolina, warned President Washington that similar uprisings would soon spread to the Southern United States and devastate the economy. “I am afraid,” Pinckney wrote to Washington, that if the insurrection is “not checked in time it is a flame which will extend to all the neighbouring islands, & may eventually prove not a very pleasing or agreeable example to the Southern States . . . [and be] particularly unpleasant to us who live in Countries where Slaves abound.”<sup>32</sup> By the end of 1791, Washington had finally succumbed to the growing panic. “Lamentable! to see such a spirit of revolt among the Blacks,” Washington exclaimed. “Where it will stop, is diffi-

cult to say.”<sup>33</sup> Thomas Jefferson also fretted about the “formidable insurrection” in Saint-Domingue, as did Alexander Hamilton, who expressed regret about “the calamitous event” taking place just a short distance away.<sup>34</sup>

As the uprising unfolded in Haiti, rumors of potential revolts in the United States spread like wildfire, prompting desperate new measures to prevent and thwart rebellions by the enslaved.<sup>35</sup> Authorities in Charleston, South Carolina, for example, tried to protect themselves by banning the importation of French enslaved people.<sup>36</sup> In Richmond, Virginia, the mayor mandated a search of all enslaved people in the city and enlisted extra patrols throughout the remainder of the state.<sup>37</sup> On the federal level, in 1793 lawmakers passed a fugitive slave law, clearly warning enslaved people that rebellion or flight was useless, as they would find no paths to freedom in the United States. The new legislation empowered enslavers to cross state lines to pursue and recapture enslaved people “escaping from the service of their masters.” It also imposed a fine on anyone who prevented the capture and return of a fugitive from slavery.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, the flames of insurrection continued to burn brightly in Saint-Domingue. Toussaint Louverture, who had assumed leadership of the rebellion, and his army successfully held off military invasions from the French, Spanish, and British—the greatest military powers on earth at the time. In 1794, the French National Convention agreed to abolish slavery throughout Saint-Domingue, hoping it would quell the resistance. But peace did not return. Saint-Domingue remained under French control, formerly enslaved people still labored under oppressive plantation systems, and rebels persisted in their demand for full freedom, equality, and sovereignty for all Black people.<sup>39</sup> Emboldened by the uprisings in Saint-Domingue, free and enslaved Black people in Martinique, Curaçao, Jamaica, Grenada, and many other slaveholding colonies, including Spanish Louisiana, demanded their freedom and proved that they, too, were willing to sacrifice their lives to obtain it.<sup>40</sup>

By the late 1790s, it had become clear that the rebellion in Saint-Domingue could not be contained. White politicians in the United States grew increasingly alarmed. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, one prominent Virginian, Arthur Campbell, expressed his concern that the Saint-Domingue rebellion would lead to similar “calamities” in Virginia.<sup>41</sup> If that happened, he warned, the United States would “rapidly decline.” Henry Tazewell, a U.S. senator from Virginia, apparently agreed, anxiously urging Jefferson to recognize that people from Saint-Domingue gave the Southern states “much to dread.”<sup>42</sup> Fear permeated the highest levels of government, and in 1799, Secretary of State

Timothy Pickering urgently wrote to President John Adams, arguing that in the interest of national security, the United States must use all necessary measures to prevent Black revolt: “Our southern states . . . are yet in much danger from attempts to excite the blacks to insurrection.” It is essential, he urged, “to guard against the danger to be apprehended from St. Domingo.”<sup>43</sup>

The fear was well founded. Enslaved people in the United States and across the Americas saw themselves as part of a joint struggle for freedom, as news of insurrections traveled across the water. The following year, an enslaved man in Virginia named Gabriel was inspired by the uprising in Saint-Domingue to hatch an insurrection of his own, which reportedly grew to several hundred conspirators.<sup>44</sup> As Virginia governor (and future president) James Monroe, himself an enslaver, wrote in a letter to Vice President Thomas Jefferson, “It is unquestionably the most serious and formidable conspiracy we have ever known of the kind.”<sup>45</sup> Although traitors betrayed Gabriel’s plot before the rebellion could fully materialize, Virginia responded by further restricting Black people’s lives. Governor Monroe ordered the state militia to patrol the capitol, sweep the region, and arrest any enslaved person they deemed suspicious.<sup>46</sup> White Virginians also strengthened the slave codes, hoping that strict surveillance and control over gatherings would stymie the ability of Black people to plot and execute rebellions. They further circumscribed the movements of enslaved people, explicitly preventing gatherings on Sundays or in the evenings and banning education and literacy among the enslaved. The new law also required Black people freed by their owners to leave the state within twelve months or face reenslavement.<sup>47</sup> In Virginia, then, to be Black was to be enslaved. To be free and Black was to be a threat.

Nevertheless, the Black sovereignty that white Americans feared most eventually came to pass. On November 29, 1803, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the new leader of the rebel army in Saint-Domingue, declared victory in the revolution against French authority. Weeks later, he publicly unveiled l’Acte de l’Indépendance d’Haïti (the Act of Independence of Haiti), officially introducing Haiti to the world as a sovereign nation.<sup>48</sup> In a speech delivered in the port city of Gonaïves, Dessalines called upon his people to pledge themselves to liberty at any cost. “Let us swear before the whole universe, to posterity, to ourselves,” he urged, “to renounce France forever, and to die rather than live under its dominion. To fight until our last breath for the independence of our country.”<sup>49</sup>

The announcement sent shockwaves around the world. Slavery in Saint-Domingue had provided France with nearly half of its global trade profit on an annual basis, and by 1791 Saint-Domingue was the world’s largest producer

of coffee and sugar.<sup>50</sup> Although France had fought desperately to maintain its power to exploit and control the Black population, the rebels had managed to defeat Napoleon's army—reportedly the greatest military power on earth—and declare their independence less than three decades after American colonists declared their own.

In establishing their own nation, Black rebels had accomplished what the scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot has described as the “unthinkable.”<sup>51</sup> After all, Haiti became the first and only country in the Americas where enslaved Africans threw off their shackles, fought for their freedom, defeated European powers, established their own nation, and pledged to defend their freedom and independence until their “last breath.” The Haitian act of independence radically upended the basic premise of white supremacy upon which slavery rested, and asserted Black people's fundamental human rights to liberty and self-governance.

**The emergence of a sovereign Black nation**, rising from the ashes of France's most profitable slave colony, represented the culmination of white people's deepest fears and Black people's deepest hopes. After all, if the enslaved in Haiti could have a successful rebellion, defeat multiple armies, and establish a sovereign country, couldn't the same thing happen elsewhere? Perhaps in their very midst?

White people in the United States did not have to wait long for answers to these questions. Embracing sovereign Haiti as a symbol for global Black freedom, enslaved people in the United States waged their own battles for liberation. Multiple revolts erupted in the early nineteenth century, nearly all of them inspired in some way by the Haitian Revolution. In 1811, Black people rose up in Louisiana and were brutally suppressed in what became known as the German Coast rebellion.<sup>52</sup> About a decade later, in 1822, political officials in Charleston, South Carolina, reported that Denmark Vesey, a free Black abolitionist, had developed a plot with other rebels to undermine slavery and escape to Haiti. Although that revolt never fully came to fruition, and some historians have contested its existence, the rumors of insurrection terrified white Americans and led to the bloody executions of thirty-five alleged conspirators, including Vesey.<sup>53</sup> As a correspondent to President Thomas Jefferson noted, “Who can reflect on the Scenes of St Domingo, & of often occurrences among you, of now one, & then another, murdered by his Slaves, Houses fired,” and not wonder when the next uprising would come?<sup>54</sup>

And then, about a decade later, on August 21, 1831, Nat Turner, an enslaved

man in Virginia who believed that slavery violated God's law and that God had selected him to lead his people to freedom, unleashed a bloody rebellion.<sup>55</sup> Over the next two days, he and his followers, which included several free Black people, attacked farms and killed some sixty white enslavers throughout Southampton County.<sup>56</sup> The local militia, joined by troops from the United States Navy, which was anchored nearby, murdered at least a hundred Black rebels in an effort to suppress the uprising.<sup>57</sup> Turner himself remained at large for six weeks, but he was eventually captured, hung, skinned, and brutally dismembered.<sup>58</sup>

While Turner was still free, however, roving gangs of white men attacked Black people in Southampton and nearby counties, killing as many as two hundred to ensure that Black rebels would not dare to attempt another revolt. One observer wrote that white vigilantes “formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will.” Virginia lawmakers also surrendered to fear. Although, in the aftermath of Turner's rebellion, they briefly considered abolishing slavery, they ultimately elected, once again, to pass draconian laws severely restricting Black people's lives. Aware that literacy inspired Black people's strivings for freedom, and that religious gatherings were used as opportunities to plot rebellions, lawmakers augmented punishments for enslaved people who learned to read, held unsupervised religious gatherings, or interacted with free Black people.<sup>59</sup>

In the decade following Nat Turner's rebellion, as rural areas struggled to suppress the enslaved population, Southern cities concluded that the only way to protect their residents from uprisings in surrounding areas was to invest in armed patrols.<sup>60</sup> In most urban areas, after establishing a city patrol, officials would also build a town jail and a punishment site, often referred to as “the cage,” where suspicious enslaved people could be incarcerated and tortured.<sup>61</sup> By 1837, the patrol in Charleston, South Carolina, comprised one hundred armed officers, who policed free and enslaved Black communities, captured fugitives, prevented rebellions, and enforced the slave codes.<sup>62</sup>

Legally free Black people, in both the North and the South, were subjected to similar forms of surveillance and terrorism. Lawmakers across the nation enacted legislation to ensure that free Black people would remain firmly in their place, at the bottom of the social order. Foreshadowing the “know your place” aggression that would dominate race relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, white politicians outlawed any Black behavior that was not immediately recognizable as labor or subservience. In Louisiana, for example, it was illegal for free people of color to “conceive themselves equal to



the whites." As the law explicitly stated, Black people should "yield" to white people "on every occasion, and never speak or answer them but with respect." If legally free Black people failed to submit to white authority, they were subject to imprisonment.<sup>63</sup>

By the time the Civil War began, in 1861, Southern states had established an elaborate governing framework for race relations. Through trial and error, as well as careful planning, white authorities had created oppressive laws and systems of patrolling, surveillance, and punishment, all of which were designed to protect enslavers and the white citizenry from the consequences of their own unmitigated violence and to ensure centuries of prosperity for the planter elite. If the Confederacy had been a separate nation when the Civil War began, it would have ranked among the richest in the world. As the historian Steven Deyle writes in *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, the monetary value of the enslaved population in 1860 was "equal to about seven times the total value of all currency in circulation in the country, three times the value of the entire livestock population, . . . twelve times the value of the entire U.S. cotton crop, and forty-eight times the total expenditures of the U.S. federal government that year."<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, the war ended the South's economic power, but it did not reduce white fear of Black liberation or the perpetual quest for racial control. To the contrary, white fear and paranoia grew as Southern white people lost control over the Black population in their midst. Formerly enslaved people literally walked away from their plantations, causing panic and outrage among plantation owners. Large numbers took to the streets and highways in the early years after the war, looking for work and missing family members. Some converged on towns and cities; others joined and formed militias.<sup>65</sup> Many white people feared violent reprisals or a "turning of the tables" now that Black people had access to arms and ammunition and were no longer subject to perpetual surveillance and control by white plantation owners.

Violent insurrection, however, was not the only fear seizing the minds of many white Southerners in the aftermath of the Civil War. White people of all classes and backgrounds feared permanent economic ruin, a disordered social system, and the loss of white privilege. Without the stolen labor of formerly enslaved people, the region's economy swiftly collapsed, and without the institution of slavery, there was no longer a formal mechanism for maintaining racial hierarchy and preventing "amalgamation" with a group of people considered intrinsically inferior and vile. Plantation owners had benefited

the most from the institution of slavery, yet the collapse of the racial order was a bitter pill for poor white people as well. In the antebellum South, the lowliest white person at least possessed his or her white skin—a badge of superiority over the most skilled enslaved or prosperous free Black person. Poor white people feared that the abolition of slavery would erase the line that separated them from the most abused and despised people on earth.

Any stride toward freedom by Black people provoked alarm throughout the South, as any perceived increase in Black political and economic power triggered white fears of losing power and status.<sup>66</sup> Although many white Northerners supported voting rights and other basic civil rights for Black people, at least initially, white Southerners overwhelmingly opposed any move toward greater freedom or equality for the Black people in their midst. In the years that followed the Civil War, white Southerners employed a wide range of weapons—legal and extralegal—to restore their control over rebellious Black people and return them to "their place." Southern states swiftly reinvented their tools for racial control and enacted "Black Codes" that were akin to the old slave codes. As expressed by one Alabama planter: "We have the power to pass stringent police laws to govern the negroes—This is a blessing—For they must be controlled in some way or white people cannot live amongst them."<sup>67</sup>

Some of the Black Codes foreshadowed Jim Crow laws by policing the movement of Black people, whose recent emancipation had become a perpetual source of fear and resentment. These codes segregated schools and prohibited, for example, interracial seating in the first-class sections of railroad cars. Other codes were intended to establish systems of peonage resembling slavery to ensure a cheap labor force. Vagrancy laws were adopted and selectively enforced against Black people; these essentially made it a criminal offense not to work, often forcing formerly enslaved people to sign labor contracts with the same people who had once enslaved them. Simply being Black and standing on a street corner could be interpreted as idleness or vagrancy by the police and result in arrest. In several states, convict leasing laws allowed the hiring out of people in county prisons to plantation owners and private companies in an unobtrusive effort to establish another system of forced labor. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Codes spoke for themselves. . . . No open-minded student can read them without being convinced they meant nothing more nor less than slavery in daily toil."<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps most disconcerting for white Southerners was the prospect of Black people holding political power over white people, and thus gaining the opportunity to rewrite the rules, overturn exploitative economic arrange-



ments, and redesign the social and political order. With the passage of the Reconstruction Act in 1867, followed by the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged" on the basis of race, an era of rising Black power began. For nearly a decade, Black people voted in huge numbers across the South, electing a total of sixteen Black men to serve in the U.S. Congress, including two in the Senate. Literacy rates climbed, and educated Black people began to populate state legislatures, open schools, and initiate successful businesses.

Tragically, the Black freedom dreams that propelled swift progress toward equality were arrested by the late 1870s, as a fierce white backlash against Black freedom succeeded in turning back the clock on racial progress.<sup>69</sup> Southern white people effectively nullified the post-Civil War amendments that were intended to dismantle the racial caste system in the South, including the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing "equal protection of the laws," and the Fifteenth Amendment. The Freedmen's Bureau—an agency created by Congress in 1865 and charged with the responsibility of providing food, clothing, and other forms of assistance to destitute former enslaved people—was dismantled, and a plethora of discriminatory practices, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, were employed to prevent Black people from exercising their right to vote and gaining political power. When those efforts proved insufficient to maintain complete control, white Southerners wielded their most effective weapon: vigilante violence and terrorism.

In 1898, for example, a group of white residents orchestrated a successful coup to overthrow the city government in Wilmington, North Carolina, home to a thriving majority-Black population. Four years earlier, the Populist movement had joined with the Republican Party to form the "Fusion Party," a political organization that managed to unite poor and working-class white people, formerly enslaved people and their descendants, and liberal Republicans in a movement for economic justice. This racially diverse party defeated old-guard politicians (many of whom were white supremacists and former Confederates) in a series of state and local elections, including in places like Wilmington. In response, the disgruntled white establishment plotted a coup to regain power and reinstate white-only rule that culminated in the murder of Black residents, burning of Black neighborhoods, and the unveiling of a "White Declaration of Independence" at a mass meeting led by a former congressman.<sup>70</sup>

Throughout the South, local police forces were often made up of former slave patrollers and members of the Ku Klux Klan, and they adopted many of the same strategies that patrollers had employed, using the excuse of nightly

curfews and vagrancy laws to control, harass, detain, and punish Black citizens for daring to behave as though they were free.<sup>71</sup> The Klan, operating extralegally, openly murdered Black people who violated the written and unwritten rules of white supremacy.

Often the precise causes and triggers of white fear and rage were mixed or unclear, but the consequences were always devastating. Between 1877 and 1950, more than four thousand Black men, women, and children lost their lives to lynching.<sup>72</sup> Fleeing violence, harsh segregation laws, and exploitative economic conditions, many Black Americans headed north, in what would become known as the Great Migration, to take advantage of the need for industrial workers that arose during the First World War and to achieve some modicum of safety. Unfortunately, many soon realized that white mob violence reigned there as well. One of the bloodiest race massacres in the twentieth century occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917. That tragedy involved a spree of lynchings, mayhem, and brutal burnings of people and buildings that left an official death toll of at least thirty-nine Black and eight white Americans, though historians estimate that more than a hundred Black people were actually killed.<sup>73</sup>

White fear of the disruption of the racial order meant that almost any act by a Black person, especially anything that signaled Black progress or the willingness of a Black person to step out of their place in the racial hierarchy, could spark a conflagration. Simply declaring your patriotism by wearing a military uniform while Black could be enough. Between 1877 and 1950, thousands of Black veterans suffered brutal abuse at the hands of white vigilante mobs who viewed Black military service as an offensive and threatening assertion of equal citizenship. Many of those assaults resulted in lynchings. Black economic success could prove deadly too, such as in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, when a mob composed of more than two thousand white men and women commenced a devastating pogrom in the city's thriving Greenwood District, known as Black Wall Street, killing as many as three hundred people and burning more than thirty-five blocks of Black homes and businesses to the ground. The attack rendered ten thousand Black people homeless and caused more than \$2 million in damage.<sup>74</sup> Simply daring to smile at a white woman could get you killed as well. Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy, was murdered in Mississippi in 1955 because he allegedly flirted with a white woman. As historian Carol Anderson observes in *White Rage*, the mere presence of Black people was not the problem; the problem was "blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship."<sup>75</sup> Just as in the days of the Haitian Revolution

and before, nothing frightened and enraged white people more than Black people who were determined to be free.

After the civil rights movement began, a fresh wave of white terrorism washed over those who had the audacity to organize for freedom and equality. Between the 1940s and 1970s, white vigilantes and mobs—frequently with the support or direct involvement of the police—attacked civil rights activists in Selma, Little Rock, Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, and scores of other cities and towns across the country as they protested legalized segregation in housing and schools, on buses and trains, and at lunch counters and beyond. Protesters were killed, beaten, attacked by police dogs, and arrested en masse for desegregating buses and trains, marching peacefully for voting rights, and demonstrating against the Jim Crow regime. State and federal authorities were complicit, defining their mission to include the monitoring and sabotage of Black leaders, activists, and organizations.

Most famously, the FBI's notorious counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) targeted Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture), and others, subjecting them to tactics adopted from military counterintelligence that, a Senate intelligence committee later found, "would be intolerable in a democratic society even if all of the targets had been involved in violent activity."<sup>76</sup> As explained in that committee's report, published in 1976, COINTELPRO functioned as "a sophisticated vigilante operation aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association, on the theory that preventing the growth of dangerous groups and the propagation of dangerous ideas would protect the national security." The unstated premise of COINTELPRO operations was that activism challenging racial, social, and economic injustice was dangerous and "that a law enforcement agency has the duty to do whatever is necessary to combat perceived threats to the existing social and political order."<sup>77</sup> Over the course of fifteen years, under the leadership of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, COINTELPRO infiltrated numerous organizations devoted to Black freedom, such as the Black Panther Party, harassing, imprisoning, torturing, and even murdering its members, including Fred Hampton.<sup>78</sup>

By the late 1960s, many Black activists and young people had reached their breaking point, no longer willing to tolerate abusive law enforcement and white vigilante violence, and no longer willing to subscribe to nonviolence as a social philosophy or political strategy, as preached by Reverend Martin Lu-

ther King, Jr., and others. Although the federal government passed historic civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, formally banning race discrimination in voting, employment, and public accommodations—including lunch counters and train stations, which had been sites of protracted nonviolent civil rights protest and struggle—economic conditions in many Black communities were dire and worsening. Many gains achieved through the civil rights movement seemed largely symbolic to Black people who were subject to pervasive police violence and trapped in segregated, impoverished ghettos that had been created by white racism and government action.<sup>79</sup> King himself acknowledged this dilemma, wondering aloud shortly before his death, "What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?"<sup>80</sup>

When King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, profound despair and grief swept Black communities nationwide, and violent rebellions erupted in more than two hundred cities. In what came to be known as the Holy Week Uprising, thousands of people were injured, scores killed, and hundreds of buildings looted or burned, marking the nation's greatest wave of social unrest since the Civil War.<sup>81</sup> While many civil rights leaders pleaded for peace in the streets, insisting that any form of violent rebellion would dishonor King's memory and legacy, others refused to condemn the violence. Floyd McKissick, the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), told *The New York Times* on the night of King's murder that his death meant the end of nonviolence as a political strategy. "Nonviolence is a dead philosophy, and it was not the black people that killed it. It was the white people that killed nonviolence and white racists at that."<sup>82</sup> That sentiment was echoed by other Black activists and leaders, such as Julius Hobson, who headed a civil rights group called ACT: "The next black man who comes into the Black community preaching nonviolence should be violently dealt with by the Black people who hear him. The Martin Luther King concept of nonviolence died with him. It was a foreign ideology anyway—as foreign to this violent country as speaking Russian."<sup>83</sup>

A wave of Black rebellion rocked the United States in the months and years that followed. Roughly two thousand uprisings occurred between May 1968 and December 1972, nearly all of which were sparked by routine police violence.<sup>84</sup> As the historian Elizabeth Hinton explains in *America on Fire*, virtually every major urban center burned during those four years: "Violence flared up not only in archetypal ghettos including Harlem and Watts, and in majority-Black cities such as Detroit and Washington, D.C.; it appeared in Greensboro, North Carolina, in Gary, Indiana, in Seattle, Washington, and countless places

in between—every city, small or large, where Black residents lived in segregated, unequal conditions.”<sup>85</sup>

This was not a surge of purposeless criminality, as many white observers claimed; it was a sustained revolt. Throughout American history, white mob violence had been understood as thoroughly political in nature. It was obvious to everyone concerned that white people frequently became enraged when their status or power was threatened, and that they were willing to maintain the racial order through violence—including burning buildings, looting homes, and attacking or lynching Black people. But when Black rebellions swept our nation, they were cast as deviant, criminal, and irrational. Hinton observes, “It was only when white people no longer appeared to be the driving force behind rioting in the nation’s cities, and when Black collective violence against exploitative and repressive institutions surfaced, that ‘riots’ came to be seen as purely criminal, and completely senseless, acts.”<sup>86</sup>

Some experts and politicians during that period did acknowledge that the desperate and unjust conditions in which millions of Black people lived were at least partly to blame for the uprisings, most notably the members of the Kerner Commission, which had been created by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of highly destructive and deadly rioting that had occurred in Detroit and Newark in 1967. The commission’s initial report, released just weeks before King was killed, concluded that severe segregation, poverty, joblessness, lack of access to housing, lack of access to economic opportunities, and discrimination in the job market, combined with pervasive police violence and harassment, had created a tinderbox of rage and despair that would certainly result in more uprisings if drastic action was not taken. The report found that many white people were in denial about the true causes of Black uprisings, but Black people were not: “What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”<sup>87</sup>

Conservative white people mostly rejected the Kerner Commission’s report, preferring to place responsibility for the widespread political violence directly and solely on the Black community and an imagined culture of lawlessness that had been encouraged by civil rights protests. Throughout the civil rights movement, conservative politicians like Richard Nixon argued that the increasing crime rate was not caused by poverty or joblessness but, instead, “can be traced directly to the spread of the corrosive doctrine that

every citizen possesses an inherent right to decide for himself which laws to obey and when to disobey them.”<sup>88</sup>

Others went further, insisting that integration causes crime.<sup>89</sup> That type of fearmongering failed to prevent the passage of major civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, but the imagery associated with the rebellions, as well as the scale and scope of the destruction, helped fuel the racist argument that civil rights for Black people led to rampant crime and disorder. Many white people pointed to the images on their television screens, as Black people burned buildings or looted stores, and claimed that white people had good reason to fear the changes that were being forced upon them, and that Black people must be controlled at any cost. What was happening in the streets was criminal, they argued. Nothing more and nothing less.

President Johnson was not among those who denied that legitimate reasons existed for the rebellions. Echoing Thomas Jefferson more than a century after he’d warned of the dangers of holding a “wolf by the ear,” Johnson said of the uprisings that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “What did you expect? I don’t know why we’re so surprised. When you put your foot on a man’s neck and hold him down for three hundred years, and then you let him up, what’s he going to do? He’s going to knock your block off.”<sup>90</sup> In a July 1967 speech about Black rebellions in Detroit and Newark, he condemned the violence as criminal but also admitted that “the only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack—mounted at every level—upon the conditions that breed despair and violence.”<sup>91</sup>

Like many liberals, Johnson’s rhetoric indicated that he favored social programs to address “root causes” of Black despair, but in practice he—as well as both political parties—increasingly looked to law enforcement as the best strategy to achieve and maintain law and order. The Kerner Commission, in its final report, which became a bestselling book in 1968, warned against this lopsided approach, saying that absent a massive investment in poor Black communities, rebellion and “white retaliation” would render racial inequality a permanent feature of American life.<sup>92</sup>

**That warning was largely ignored.** White fears of losing political, economic, and social dominance—combined with fears of unruly, rebellious Black people—led to massive investments in punitive control over Black people, rather than massive investments that might have repaired the harm caused by centuries of racial oppression. For more than four decades, our nation has

declared wars on drugs and crime, invested billions of dollars in highly militarized police forces, and embarked on a race to incarcerate in Black communities, while slashing funding from education, drug treatment, public housing, and welfare.<sup>93</sup> The result has been disastrous. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world—the number of people behind bars has quintupled in the past four decades—while the Black-white economic divide is as wide as it was in 1968.<sup>94</sup>

In recent years, politicians have defended mass incarceration on the grounds that “getting tough” on crime was what Black people wanted—in other words, that Black fear, not white fear, drove the phenomenon. This is a partial truth. Desperate to address rising crime rates largely caused by the disappearance of work in segregated, ghettoized communities, some Black people have, over the years, supported and advocated for mandatory minimum sentences and other harsh policies. Other Black people—including civil rights activists and organizations—have strenuously opposed crime legislation that propels mass incarceration. The NAACP called the draconian crime bill championed by President Bill Clinton in 1994 “a crime against the American people.” Yet Black voices challenging the prison-building boom and demanding investments in education, full employment, drug treatment, and affordable housing were ignored. As Elizabeth Hinton wrote with the historian Julilly Kohler-Hausmann and the political scientist Vesla M. Weaver in a *New York Times* opinion piece in 2016: “It’s not just that those demands were ignored completely. It’s that some elements were elevated and others were diminished—what we call selective hearing. Policy makers pointed to black support for greater punishment and surveillance, without recognizing accompanying demands to redirect power and economic resources to low-income minority communities.”<sup>95</sup>

Rather than focus on “root causes” of crime and violence, and the systems and structures that create and maintain inequality, politicians across the political spectrum capitulated to a narrative that segregationists had been selling decades earlier—and that enslavers had embraced before them: namely, that Black people were lazy, had to be forced to work, were inherently or culturally criminal, and thus must be subject to perpetual control.

This narrative made it easy to rationalize draconian punishments as well as stop-and-frisk and surveillance tactics not unlike those employed by slave patrollers more than a century ago. In choosing this path, liberal and conservative politicians proved that they could hear, loud and clear, reactionary white voices—belonging to what some media pundits and politicians dubbed the “angry white men,” people who viewed racial and social justice as a zero-sum

game they were afraid to lose—even as they claimed not to hear Black people pleading with their representatives to take the road less traveled and to end the cycle of racial oppression, rebellion, and punitive control once and for all.<sup>96</sup>

This problem of “selective hearing” of Black voices might be dismissed as a profound misunderstanding if it did not fit so neatly into a recurring pattern dating back to our nation’s founding. The impulse to resist efforts by Black people to gain freedom and equality and to respond with punishment or violence, no matter whether demands are made through peaceful protest, lobbying, or outright rebellion, has been the defining feature of Black-white race relations since the first slave ships arrived on American shores. This habitual impulse has been driven by chronic fear not just of Black people—because similar responses can be found in post-colonial dealings with other racial groups and Indigenous communities—but, more deeply, of what true justice might require.

Considering this history, it should have come as no surprise that the election of the first Black president and anxiety over shifting racial demographics due to immigration—including a widely publicized projection that white people will be a racial minority by the mid-twenty-first century—would be followed by a rise in white nationalism, hate crimes, and vigilante violence, as well as the election of politicians like Donald Trump, a man who rose to power by exploiting racial fears and divisions and sought to maintain power by thwarting democracy.<sup>97</sup>

In the same vein, it should have been obvious that rebellions in Black communities would sweep our nation again and again, given that police officers and vigilantes continue to kill unarmed Black people like Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, and given that the deplorable conditions documented in the Kerner Commission’s report remain mostly unaddressed. While some Black people have benefited from the social and policy changes brought by the civil rights movement, in many respects, things have gotten worse for Black communities since that report was published, with so many more Black people in prison, on probation or parole, and subject to legal discrimination due to criminal records.

What does come as a surprise, a welcome one, is that in 2020, the predictable cycle—white fear and violence followed by uprisings and rebellions that lead to white reprisals, retaliation, and strengthening of systems of control—didn’t play out exactly as usual. Instead, the largest racial-justice protests in history—including people of all colors and ages and from all walks of life—occurred during the Trump presidency, after a major Black rebellion, and in



the midst of a global pandemic. Protesters carried aloft signs saying, **BLACK LIVES MATTER** and **DEFUND THE POLICE**, reflecting the understanding that so long as we continue to invest in the types of punitive systems of organized violence that have oppressed and controlled Black people for centuries—rather than in the programs, policies, and forms of structural change that Black communities need to thrive—we will never achieve a truly inclusive, egalitarian democracy that honors the dignity and value of Black lives.

James Baldwin famously said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed unless it is faced.” Perhaps our nation is finally beginning to face our history, as a new generation of activists challenges us to choose a radically different path forward. The future of Black communities, and our democracy as a whole, depends on us finally getting it right this time.

# THE AGE OF WHITE GUILT

And the disappearance of the  
black individual

By *Shelby Steele*

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## **And the disappearance of the black individual**

One day back in the late fifties, when I was ten or eleven years old, there was a moment when I experienced myself as an individual—as a separate consciousness for the first time. I was walking home from the YMCA, which meant that I was passing out of the white Chicago suburb where the Y was located and crossing Halsted Street back into Phoenix, the tiny black suburb where I grew up. It was a languid summer afternoon, thick with the industrial-scented humidity of south Chicago that I can still smell and feel on my skin, though I sit today only blocks from the cool Pacific and more than forty years removed.

Into Phoenix no more than a block and I was struck by a thought that seemed beyond me. I have tried for years to remember it, but all my effort only pushes it further away. I do remember that it came to me with the completeness of an aphorism, as if the subconscious had already done the labor of crafting it into a fine phrase. What scared me a little at the time was its implication of a separate self with independent thoughts—a distinct self that might distill experience into all sorts of ideas for which I would then be responsible. That feeling of responsibility was my first real experience of myself as an individual—as someone who would have to navigate a separate and unpredictable consciousness through a world I already knew to be often unfair and always tense.

Of course I already knew that I was black, or “Negro,” as we said back then. No secret there. The world had made this fact quite clear by imposing on my life all the elaborate circumscriptions of Chicago-style segregation. Although my mother was white, the logic of segregation meant that I was born in the hospital's black maternity ward. I grew up in a black neighborhood and walked to a segregated black school as white children in the same district walked to a white school. Kindness in whites always came as a mild surprise and was accepted with a gratitude that I later understood to be a bit humiliating. And there were many racist rejections for which I was only partly consoled by the knowledge that racism is impersonal.

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Back then I thought of being black as a fate, as a condition I shared with people as various as Duke Ellington and the odd-job man who plowed the neighborhood gardens with a mule and signed his name with an X. And it is worth noting here that never in my life have I met a true Uncle Tom, a black who identifies with white racism as a truth. The Negro world of that era believed that whites used our race against our individuality and, thus, our humanity. There was no embrace of a Negro identity, because that would have weakened the argument for our humanity. "Negroness" or "blackness" would have collaborated with the racist lie that we were different and, thus, would have been true Uncle Tomism. To the contrary, there was an embrace of the individual and assimilation.

My little experience of myself as an individual confirmed the message of the civil-rights movement itself, in which a favorite picket sign read, simply, "I am a man." The idea of the individual resonated with Negro freedom--a freedom not for the group but for the individuals who made up the group. And assimilation was not a self-hating mimicry of things white but a mastery by Negro individuals of the modern and cosmopolitan world, a mastery that showed us to be natural members of that world. So my experience of myself as an individual made me one with the group.

Not long ago C-SPAN carried a Harvard debate on affirmative action between conservative reformer Ward Connerly and liberal law professor Christopher Edley. During the Q and A a black undergraduate rose from a snickering clump of black students to challenge Mr. Connerly, who had argued that the time for racial preferences was past. Once standing, this young man smiled unctuously, as if victory were so assured that he must already offer consolation. But his own pose seemed to distract him, and soon he was sinking into incoherence. There was impatience in the room, but it was suppressed. Black students play a role in campus debates like this and they are indulged.

The campus forum of racial confrontation is a ritual that has changed since the sixties in only one way. Whereas blacks and whites confronted one another back then, now black liberals and black conservatives do the confronting while whites look on--relieved, I'm sure--from the bleachers. I used to feel empathy for students like this

young man, because they reminded me of myself at that age. Now I see them as figures of pathos. More than thirty years have passed since I did that sort of challenging, and even then it was a waste of time. Today it is perseverance to the point of tragedy.

Here is a brief litany of obvious truths that have been resisted in the public discourse of black America over the last thirty years: a group is no stronger than its individuals; when individuals transform themselves they transform the group; the freer the individual, the stronger the group; social responsibility begins in individual responsibility. Add to this an indisputable fact that has also been unmentionable: that American greatness has a lot to do with a culturally ingrained individualism, with the respect and freedom historically granted individuals to pursue their happiness--this despite many egregious lapses and an outright commitment to the oppression of black individuals for centuries. And there is one last obvious but unassimilated fact: ethnic groups that have asked a lot from their individuals have done exceptionally well in America even while enduring discrimination.

Now consider what this Harvard student is called upon by his racial identity to argue in the year 2002. All that is creative and imaginative in him must be rallied to argue the essential weakness of his own people. Only their weakness justifies the racial preferences they receive decades after any trace of anti-black racism in college admissions. The young man must not show faith in the power of his people to overcome against any odds; he must show faith in their inability to overcome without help. As Mr. Connerly points to far less racism and far more freedom and opportunity for blacks, the young man must find a way, against all the mounting facts, to argue that black Americans simply cannot compete without preferences. If his own forebears seized freedom in a long and arduous struggle for civil rights, he must argue that his own generation is unable to compete on paper-and-pencil standardized tests.

It doesn't help that he locates the cause of black weakness in things like "structural racism" and "uneven playing fields," because there has been so little correlation between the remedies for such problems and actual black improvement. Blacks from families that make \$100,000 a year or more perform worse on the SAT than

whites from families that make \$10,000 a year or less. After decades of racial preferences blacks remain the lowest performing student group in American higher education. And once they are out of college and in professions, their own children also underperform in relation to their white and Asian peers. Thus, this young man must also nurture the idea of a black psychological woundedness that is baroque in its capacity to stifle black aspiration. And all his faith, his proud belief, must be in the truth of this woundedness and the injustice that caused it, because this is his only avenue to racial pride. He is a figure of pathos because his faith in racial victimization is his only release from racial shame.

Right after the sixties' civil-rights victories came what I believe to be the greatest miscalculation in black American history. Others had oppressed us, but this was to be the first "fall" to come by our own hand. We allowed ourselves to see a greater power in America's liability for our oppression than we saw in ourselves. Thus, we were faithless with ourselves just when we had given ourselves reason to have such faith. We couldn't have made a worse mistake. We have not been the same since.

To go after America's liability we had to locate real transformative power outside ourselves. Worse, we had to see our fate as contingent on America's paying off that liability. We have been a contingent people ever since, arguing our weakness and white racism in order to ignite the engine of white liability. And this has mired us in a protest-group identity that mistrusts individualism because free individuals might jeopardize the group's effort to activate this liability.

Today I would be encouraged to squeeze my little childhood experience of individuality into a narrow group framework that would not endanger the group's bid for white intervention. I would be urged to embrace a pattern of reform that represses our best hope for advancement--our individuals--simply to keep whites "on the hook."

Mr. Connerly was outnumbered and outgunned at that Harvard debate. The consensus finally was that preferences would be necessary for a while longer. Whites would remain "on the hook." The black student prevailed, but it was a victory against himself. In

all that his identity required him to believe, there was no place for him.

In 1961, when I was fifteen years old, my imagination was taken over for some months by the movie *Paris Blues*, starring Sidney Poitier, Diahann Carroll, Paul Newman, and Joanne Woodward. For me this film was first of all an articulation of adult sophistication and deserved to be studied on these grounds alone. The music was by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, and the film was set in the jazz world of early-sixties Paris--a city that represented, in the folklore of American Negroes, a nirvana of complete racial freedom. To establish this freedom at the outset, Paul Newman (Ram) makes a pass at Diahann Carroll (Connie) as if her race means no more to him than the color of her coat. Of course the protocols of segregation return soon enough, and the four stars are paired off by race. But I could not hold this against a film that gave me a chance to watch the beautiful, if prim, Diahann Carroll against a backdrop of Montmartre and the Seine, Paris a little dim for being next to her.

Sidney Poitier's character (Eddie) has by far the most interesting internal conflict. He has come to Paris--like almost the entire postwar generation of black American artists, musicians, and intellectuals--to develop his talents and live as an individual free of American racism. Eddie finds this in Paris as a jazz musician in Ram's band, and when he and Connie begin their romance, he is an unapologetic advocate of expatriation for blacks. Paris is freedom; America, interminable humiliation. "I'll never forget the first time I walked down the Champs-Élysées .... I knew I was here to stay."

But there is a ghost on his trail. And Connie, the new and true love of his life, embodies that ghost. A teacher on vacation in Paris, she brings him news of the civil-rights movement building momentum back home, and, as their love deepens, she makes it clear that their future together will require his coming home and playing some part in the struggle of his people. She brings him precisely what he has escaped: the priority of group identity over individual freedom. The best acting in the film is Eddie's impassioned rejection of this priority. He hates America with good reason, and it is impossible to see him as simply selfish. He has already found in Paris the freedom blacks are fighting for back home. And he has found this freedom precisely

by thinking of himself as an individual who is free to choose. For him individualism is freedom. And even if blacks won the civil-rights struggle, true freedom would still require individuals to choose for themselves. So by what ethic should he leave the freedom of Paris for the indignities of America?

Clearly no ethic would be enough. But love, on the other hand, is the tie that binds. And when the object of that love is Connie, Eddie begins to see a point in responsibility to the group. But at the very end Eddie does not get on the train out of Paris with Connie. He promises to follow her home as soon as he can arrange his affairs, and it looks like he will be good to his word. But the movie ends on his promise rather than on his action. It is a long time now since 1961, so we can know that Eddie will never have the same degree of individual freedom if he goes back home. If whites don't use his race against him, they will use it for him. And there are always the pressures of his own group identity. As an individual he will have a hard swim. Thinking of the lovely Connie, some days I root for him to leave. Other days, even thinking of her, I root for him to stay.

The greatest problem in coming from an oppressed group is the power the oppressor has over your group. The second greatest problem is the power your group has over you. Group identity in oppressed groups is always very strategic, always a calculation of advantage. The humble black identity of the Booker T. Washington era--"a little education spoiled many a good plow hand"--allowed blacks to function as tradesmen, laborers, and farmers during the rise of Jim Crow, when hundreds of blacks were being lynched yearly. Likewise, the black militancy of the late sixties strategically aimed for advantage in an America suddenly contrite over its long indulgence in racism.

One's group identity is always a mask--a mask replete with a politics. When a teenager in East Los Angeles says he is Hispanic, he is thinking of himself within a group strategy pitched at larger America. His identity is related far more to America than to Mexico or Guatemala, where he would not often think of himself as Hispanic. In fact, "Hispanic" is much more a political concept than a cultural one, and its first purpose is to win power within the fray of American

identity politics. So this teenager must wear the mask that serves his group's ambitions in these politics.

With the civil-rights victories, black identity became more carefully calculated around the pursuit of power, because black power was finally possible in America. So, as the repressions of racism receded, the repressions of group identity grew more intense for blacks. Even in Paris, Connie uses the censoring voice of the group: "Things are much better than they were five years ago... not because Negroes come to Paris but because Negroes stay home." Here the collective identity is the true identity, and individual autonomy a mere affectation.

If Paris Blues ends without Eddie's actual return to America, we can witness such a return in the life of a real-life counterpart to Eddie, the black American writer James Baldwin. In the late forties, Baldwin went to Paris, like his friend and mentor Richard Wright, to escape America's smothering racism and to find himself as a writer and as an individual. He succeeded dramatically and quickly on both counts. His first novel, the minor masterpiece *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, appeared in 1953 and was quickly followed by another novel and two important essay collections.

It was clearly the remove of Europe that gave Baldwin the room to find his first important theme: self-acceptance. In a Swiss mountain village in winter, against an "absolutely alabaster landscape" and listening to Bessie Smith records, he accepts that he is black, gay, talented, despised by his father, and haunted by a difficult childhood. From this self-acceptance emerges an individual voice and one of the most unmistakable styles in American writing.

Then, in 1957, Baldwin did something that changed him--and his writing--forever. He came home to America. He gave up the psychological remove of Europe and allowed himself to become once again fully accountable as a black American. And soon, in blatant contradiction of his own powerful arguments against protest writing, he became a protest writer. There is little doubt that this new accountability weakened him greatly as an artist. Nothing he wrote after the early sixties had the human complexity, depth, or literary

mastery of what he wrote in those remote European locales where children gawked at him for his color.

The South African writer Nadine Gordimer saw the black writer in her own country as conflicted between "a deep, intense, private view" on the one hand and the call to be a spokesman for his people on the other. This classic conflict--common to writers from oppressed groups around the world--is really a conflict of authority. In Europe, Baldwin enjoyed exclusive authority over his own identity. When he came back to America, he did what in Western culture is anathema to the artist: he submitted his artistic vision his "private view"--to the authority of his group. From *The Fire Next Time* to the end of his writing life, he allowed protest to be the framing authority of his work.

What Baldwin did was perhaps understandable, because his group was in a pitched battle for its freedom. The group had enormous moral authority, and he had a splendid rhetorical gift the group needed. Baldwin was transformed in the sixties into an embodiment of black protest, an archetypal David frail, effeminate, brilliant--against a brutish and stupid American racism. He became a celebrity writer on the American scene, a charismatic presence with huge, penetrating eyes that were fierce and vulnerable at the same time. People who had never read him had strong opinions about him. His fame was out of proportion to his work, and if all this had been limited to Baldwin himself, it might be called the Baldwin phenomenon. But, in fact, his ascendancy established a pattern that would broadly define, and in many ways corrupt, an entire generation of black intellectuals, writers, and academics. And so it must be called the Baldwin model.

The goal of the Baldwin model is to link one's intellectual reputation to the moral authority--the moral glamour--of an oppressed group's liberation struggle. In this way one ceases to be a mere individual with a mere point of view and becomes, in effect, the embodiment of a moral imperative. This is rarely done consciously, as a Faustian bargain in which the intellectual knowingly sells his individual soul to the group. Rather the group identity is already a protest-focused identity, and the intellectual simply goes along with it. Adherence to the Baldwin model is usually more a sin of thoughtlessness and

convenience than of conscious avarice, though it is always an appropriation of moral power, a stealing of thunder.

The protest intellectual positions himself in the pathway of the larger society's march toward racial redemption. By allowing his work to be framed by the protest identity, he articulates the larger society's moral liability. He seems, therefore, to hold the key to how society must redeem itself. Baldwin was called in to advise Bobby Kennedy on the Negro situation. It is doubtful that the Baldwin of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* would have gotten such a call. But the Baldwin of *The Fire Next Time* probably expected it. Ralph Ellison, a contemporary of Baldwin's who rejected the black protest identity but whose work showed a far deeper understanding of black culture than Baldwin's, never had this sort of access to high places. By insisting on his individual autonomy as an artist, Ellison was neither inflated with the moral authority of his group's freedom struggle nor positioned in the pathway of America's redemption.

Today the protest identity is a career advantage for an entire generation of black intellectuals, particularly academics who have been virtually forced to position themselves in the path of their university's obsession with "diversity." Inflation from the moral authority of protest, added to the racial-preference policies in so many American institutions, provides an irresistible incentive for black America's best minds to continue defining themselves by protest. Professors who resist the Baldwin model risk the Ellisonian fate of invisibility.

What happened in America to make the Baldwin model possible?

The broad answer is this: America moved from its long dark age of racism into an age of white guilt. I saw this shift play out in my own family.

I grew up watching my parents live out an almost perpetual protest against racial injustice. When I was five or six we drove out of our segregated neighborhood every Sunday morning to carry out the grimly disciplined business of integrating a lily-white church in the next town. Our family was a little off-color island of quiet protest amidst rows of pinched white faces. And when that battle was lost

there was a long and successful struggle to create Chicago's first fully integrated church. And from there it was on to the segregated local school system, where my parents organized a boycott against the elementary school that later incurred the first desegregation lawsuit in the North.

Amidst all this protest, I could see only the price people were paying. I saw my mother's health start to weaken. I saw the white minister who encouraged us to integrate his church lose his job. There was a time when I was sent away to stay with family friends until things "cooled down." Black protest had no legitimacy in broader America in the 1950s. It was subversive, something to be repressed, and people who indulged in it were made to pay.

And then there came the sunny day in the very late sixties when I leaned into the window of my parents' old powder-blue Rambler and, inches from my mother's face, said wasn't it amazing that I was making \$13,500 a year. They had come to visit me on my first job out of college, and had just gotten into the car for their return trip. I saw my mistake even as the words tumbled out. My son's pride had blinded me to my parents' feelings. This was four or five thousand dollars more than either of them had ever made in a single year. I had learned the year before that my favorite professor--a full professor with two books to his credit--had fought hard for a raise to \$10,000 a year. Thirteen five implied a different social class, a different life than we had known as a family.

"Congratulations," they said. "That's very nice."

The subtext of this role reversal was President Johnson's Great Society, and beneath that an even more profound shift in the moral plates of society. The year was 1969, and I was already employed in my fourth Great Society program--three Upward Bound programs and now a junior college-level program called Experiment in Higher Education, in East St. Louis, Illinois. America was suddenly spending vast millions to end poverty "in our time," and, as it was for James Baldwin on his return from Paris, the timing was perfect for me.

I was chosen for my first Upward Bound job because I was the leader of the campus civil-rights group. This engagement with black

protest suddenly constituted a kind of aptitude, in my employers' minds, for teaching disadvantaged kids. It inflated me into a person who was gifted with young people. The protesting that had gotten me nowhere when I started college was serving me as well as an advanced degree by the time I was a senior.

Two great, immutable forces have driven America's attitudes, customs, and public policies around race. The first has been white racism, and the second has been white guilt. The civil-rights movement was the dividing line between the two. Certainly there was some guilt before this movement, and no doubt some racism remains after it. But the great achievement of the civil-rights movement was that its relentless moral witness finally defeated the legitimacy of racism as propriety--a principle of social organization, manners, and customs that defines decency itself. An idea controls culture when it achieves the invisibility of propriety. And it must be remembered that racism was a propriety, a form of decency. When, as a boy, I was prohibited from entering the fine Christian home of the occasional white playmate, it was to save the household an indecency. Today, thanks to the civil-rights movement, white guilt is propriety--an utterly invisible code that defines decency in our culture with thousands of little protocols we no longer even think about. We have been living in an age of white guilt for four decades now.

What is white guilt? It is not a personal sense of remorse over past wrongs. White guilt is literally a vacuum of moral authority in matters of race, equality, and opportunity that comes from the association of mere white skin with America's historical racism. It is the stigmatization of whites and, more importantly, American institutions with the sin of racism. Under this stigma white individuals and American institutions must perpetually prove a negative--that they are not racist--to gain enough authority to function in matters of race, equality, and opportunity. If they fail to prove the negative, they will be seen as racists. Political correctness, diversity policies, and multiculturalism are forms of deference that give whites and institutions a way to prove the negative and win reprieve from the racist stigma.

Institutions especially must be proactive in all this. They must engineer a demonstrable racial innocence to garner enough authority



for simple legitimacy in the American democracy. No university today, private or public, could admit students by academic merit alone if that meant no black or brown faces on campus. Such a university would be seen as racist and shunned accordingly. White guilt has made social engineering for black and brown representation a condition of legitimacy.

People often deny white guilt by pointing to its irrationality--"I never owned a slave," "My family got here eighty years after slavery was over." But of course almost nothing having to do with race is rational. That whites are now stigmatized by their race is not poetic justice; it is simply another echo of racism's power to contaminate by mere association.

The other common denial of white guilt has to do with motive: "I don't support affirmative action because I'm guilty; I support it because I want to do what's fair." But the first test of sincere support is a demand that the policy be studied for effectiveness. Affirmative action went almost completely unexamined for thirty years and has only recently been briefly studied in a highly politicized manner now that it is under threat. The fact is that affirmative action has been a very effective racial policy in garnering moral authority and legitimacy for institutions, and it is now institutions--not individual whites or blacks--that are fighting to keep it alive.

The real difference between my parents and myself was that they protested in an age of white racism and I protested in an age of white guilt. They were punished; I was rewarded. By my time, moral authority around race had become a great and consuming labor for America. Everything from social programs to the law, from the color of TV sitcom characters to the content of school curricula, from college admissions to profiling for terrorists--every aspect of our culture--now must show itself redeemed of the old national sin. Today you cannot credibly run for president without an iconography of white guilt: the backdrop of black children, the Spanish-language phrases, the word "compassion" to separate conservatism from its associations with racism.

So then here you are, a black American living amidst all this. Every institution you engage--the government, universities, corporations,

public and private schools, philanthropies, churches--faces you out of a deficit of moral authority. Your race is needed everywhere. How could you avoid the aggressions, and even the bigotries, of white guilt? What institution could you walk into without having your color tallied up as a credit to the institution? For that matter, what political party or ideological direction could you pursue without your race being plundered by that party or ideology for moral authority?

Because blacks live amidst such hunger for the moral authority of their race, we embraced protest as a permanent identity in order to capture the fruits of white guilt on an ongoing basis. Again, this was our first fall by our own hand. Still, it is hard to imagine any group of individuals coming out of four centuries of oppression and not angling their identity toward whatever advantage seemed available. White guilt held out the promise of a preferential life in recompense for past injustice, and the protest identity seemed the best way to keep that promise alive.

An obvious problem here is that we blacks fell into a group identity that has absolutely no other purpose than to collect the fruits of white guilt. And so the themes of protest--a sense of grievance and victimization--evolved into a sensibility, an attitude toward the larger world that enabled us always and easily to feel the grievance whether it was there or not. Protest became the mask of identity, because it defined us in a way that kept whites "on the hook." Today the angry rap singer and Jesse Jackson and the black-studies professor are all joined by an unexamined devotion to white guilt.

To be black in my father's generation, when racism was rampant, was to be a man who was very often victimized by racism. To be black in the age of white guilt is to be a victim who is very rarely victimized by racism. Today in black life there is what might be called "identity grievance"--a certainty of racial grievance that is entirely disconnected from actual grievance. And the fervor of this symbiosis with white guilt has all but killed off the idea of the individual as a source of group strength in black life. All is group and unity, even as those minority groups that ask much of their individuals thrive in America despite any discrimination they encounter.

I always thought that James Baldwin on some level knew that he had lost himself to protest. His work grew narrower and narrower when age and experience should have broadened it. And, significantly, he spent the better part of his last decades in France, where he died in 1987. Did he again need France in those years to be himself, to be out from under the impossible demands of a symbiotically defined black identity, to breathe on his own?

There is another final and terrible enemy of the black individual. I first saw it in that Great Society program in which my salary was so sweetened by white guilt. The program itself quickly slid into banana republic-style corruption, and I was happy to get away to graduate-student poverty. But on the way out certain things became clear. The program was not so much a program as it was an idea of the social "good," around which there was an intoxicating enthusiasm. It was my first experience with the utter thrill of untested good intentions. On the way out I realized that thrill had been the point. That feeling is what we sent back to Washington, where it was received as an end in itself.

Now I know that white guilt is a moral imperative that can be satisfied by good intentions alone. In my own lifetime, racial reform in America changed from a struggle for freedom to a struggle for "the good." A new metaphysics of the social good replaced the principles of freedom. Suddenly "diversity," "inclusion," "tolerance," "pluralism," and "multiculturalism" were all conjure words that aligned you with a social good so compelling that you couldn't leave it to mere freedom. In certain circumstances freedom could be the outright enemy of "the good." If you want a "diverse" student body at your university, for example, the individualistic principles of freedom might be a barrier. So usually "the good" has to be imposed from above out of a kind of moral imperialism by a well-meaning white elite.

In the sixties, black identity also shifted its focus from freedom to "the good" to better collect the fruits of white guilt. Thus it was a symbiosis of both white and black need that pushed racial reform into a totalitarian model where schemes of "the good" are imposed by coercion at the expense of freedom. The Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera says that every totalitarianism is "also the dream of paradise." And when people seem to stand in its way, the rulers

"build a little gulag on the side of Eden." In this good driven age of white guilt, with all its paradises of diversity, a figurative gulag has replaced freedom's tradition of a respected and loyal opposition. Conservatives are automatically relegated to this gulag because of their preference for freedom over ideas of "the good."

But there is another "little gulag" for the black individual. He lives in a society that needs his race for the good it wants to do more than it needs his individual self. His race makes him popular with white institutions and unifies him with blacks. But he is unsupported everywhere as an individual. Nothing in his society asks for or even allows his flowering as a full, free, and responsible person. As is always the case when "the good" becomes ascendant over freedom, and coercion itself becomes a good thing, the individual finds himself in a gulag.

Something happened at Harvard last fall that provides a rare window into all of this. Harvard's president, Lawrence H. Summers, rebuked the famous black-studies professor Cornel West for essentially being a lightweight on a campus of heavyweights. These were not his words, but there is little doubt that this was his meaning. West himself has said that he felt "devalued" and "disrespected" in the now famous meeting between the two.

The facts are all on Summers's side. West's achievements are simply not commensurate with his position as a University Professor, the very highest rank a member of an already esteemed faculty can ascend to--a rank normally reserved for Nobel-level accomplishment. West had spent the previous year on leave making a rap CD and chairing Al Sharpton's presidential exploration committee. Privately--that is, behind the mask of the protest identity few serious black academics saw West much differently than Summers did. Even publicly, where the mask is mandatory, he was never more than "officially" defended.

But Harvard itself had created the monster. Harvard did not promote Cornel West to a University Professorship because his academic work was seminal. Cornel West brought to campus the special charisma of the black protest identity--not, of course, in its unadorned street incarnation but dressed up in a three-piece suit and

muted by an impenetrable academese that in the end said almost nothing and scared no one. This was not someone akin to the young Eldridge Cleaver, who had a real fire and could really write but who also might be rather difficult in and around Harvard Square. With Cornel you could sit the black protest identity down to dinner amidst the fine china and pretty girls from tony suburbs and everyone would be so thrilled.

Here, in the University Professorship, white guilt and black protest perfectly consummated their bargain. It was never Cornel West--the individual--that Harvard wanted; it was the defanged protest identity that he carried, which redounded to the university as racial innocence itself. How could anyone charge this university with racism when it promoted Cornel West to its upper reaches? His marginal accomplishments only made the gesture more grand. West was not at Harvard to do important work; he was there precisely to be promoted over his head. In the bold irrationality of the promotion was the daring display of racial innocence.

What Lawrence Summers did not understand, when he became Harvard's new president, was that West was an important part of the institution's iconography of racial innocence. Or maybe he did understand and wanted to challenge this way of doing things. In any case, he did the unthinkable: He saw West as an individual. Thus, he did not confuse the charisma of the protest identity with real achievement.

His rebuke of West caused an explosion, because it broke faith with the symbiotic enmeshment of white guilt and black protest. West has now left Harvard for Princeton, where this enmeshment prevails unthreatened by ham-fisted administrators who might inadvertently see their black moral-authority hires as individuals. Summers himself--as if fresh from re-education camp--has apologized to West and professed his support for affirmative action. The age of white guilt, with its myriad corruptions and its almost racist blindness to minority individuality, may someday go down like the age of racism went down--but only if people take the risk of standing up to it rather than congratulating themselves for doing things that have involved no real risk since 1965.

I know Cornel West to be a good man, whose grace and good manners even with people he disagrees with have been instructive to me. As contemporaries, we have both had to find our way in this age of white guilt. As educated blacks, we have both had to wrestle against the relentless moral neediness of American institutions, though I'm sure he wouldn't see it that way. I saw the way race inflated people like us back in those Great Society programs I mentioned, and it was my good luck to enter them when the corruptions were so blatant that it was mere self-preservation to walk away.

One of my assignments in that last program was to help design some of the country's very first black-studies programs, and by 1970 I already knew that they would always lack the most fundamental *raison d'être* of any academic discipline: a research methodology of their own. This meant that black studies could never be more than an assemblage of courses cobbled together from "real" departments, and that it could never have more than a political mandate--a perfect formula for academic disrespect. But, as I say, it was luck to learn this early, before white guilt became infinitely more subtle and seductive.

In the age of racism there were more powerful black intellectuals, because nobody wanted them for their race. Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. Du Bois, and many others were fully developed, self-made individuals, no matter their various political and ideological bents. Race was not a "talent" that falsely inflated them or won them high position. Today no black intellectual in America, including this writer, is safe from this sort of inflation. The white world is simply too hungry for the moral authority our skins carry. And this is true on both the political left and right. Why did so many black churches have to be the backdrop for Clinton speeches, and why should Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell have to hear Bush crow about their high place among his advisers?

James Baldwin once wrote: "What Europe still gives an American is the sanction, if one can accept it, to become oneself." If America now gives this sanction to most citizens, its institutions still fiercely deny it to blacks. And this society will never sanction blacks in this way until it drops all the mechanisms by which it tries to appease white guilt.

Guilt can be a very civilizing force, but only when it is simply carried as a kind of knowledge. Efforts to appease or dispel it will only engage the society in new patterns of dehumanization against the same people who inspired guilt in the first place. This will always be true.

Restraint should be the watchword in racial matters. We should help people who need help. There are, in fact, no races that need help; only individuals, citizens. Over time maybe nothing in the society, not even white guilt, will reach out and play on my race, bind me to it for opportunity. I won't ever find in America what Baldwin found in Europe, but someday maybe others will.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS (COLOR)

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