

Unbroken and Unbowed  
*A History of Black Protest in America*

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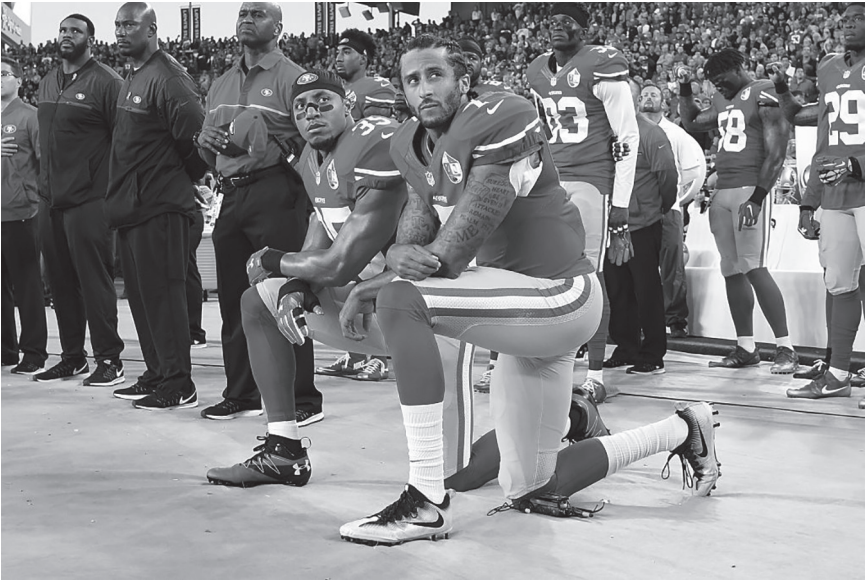
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# Introduction

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Despite the pervasiveness of the concept of nothingness, worthlessness, inferiority, the Negro has continued to assert his worth and attempt to validate his claim to human rights. . . . The history of the black man's protest against enslavement, subordination, cruelty, inhumanity began with a seizure in African ports and has not yet ended. . . . Never having been stripped of his humanness despite all that he has endured, the Negro has continued to follow the advice of Frederick Douglass: “. . . there shall be no peace to the wicked . . . this guilty nation shall have no peace. . . . We will do all that we can to agitate! AGITATE! AGITATE!!!”<sup>1</sup>

—*Historian Joanne Grant*

On August 12, 2016, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began a silent and at-first-unnoticed protest against police brutality. On that day he sat on the bench while other players and coaches stood during the playing of the national anthem. He did that for two more games before a reporter asked him about it. “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color,” he replied.

The next game, he knelt in line with his standing teammates during the anthem. That got people's attention. Soon players from his and other teams were also kneeling. Criticism was swift from inside and outside the sports world. Critics blamed diminishing viewership of NFL games on fan ire against the athletes. Dallas Cowboys team owner Jerry Jones, after initially standing and locking arms in solidarity with the players, later threatened that any player kneeling during the anthem would not play and would possibly be cut from the roster. Jones declined to comment about his inattentiveness



when he was caught on video chatting with his son while the anthem played. The most vocal critic was President Donald Trump, who railed, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, they say ‘get that son of a bitch off the field right now, he’s fired!’ Fired! That’s a total disrespect of our heritage. That’s a total disrespect of everything that we stand for, OK?”<sup>2</sup>

This was not the first time that race and the anthem resulted in controversy. Kaepernick was not the first African American player to protest racism and was not the first to resist standing during the display of the American flag. The examples are endless:

- Jackie Robinson, the first Black player to play Major League Baseball, gave public notice of his alienation from his nation’s symbol. “I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag; I know that I am a black man in a white world.”<sup>3</sup>
- On March 8, 1973, Brown University cheerleaders refused to stand for the national anthem before a game on the grounds that the flag did not represent them as citizens of color living under legalized discrimination.<sup>4</sup>
- That same year, at Nassau Coliseum on Long Island, New York, an Eastern Michigan University, African American runner stretched on the ground as “The Star-Spangled Banner” played. He stated that it was not arranged; he was simply stretching. Said his coach, “At our place, when they play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at basketball games, a lot of the Black students don’t stand. I guess things are different here.”<sup>5</sup>
- In 2003, Toni Smith, a white basketball player for Manhattanville College, objected to the war in Iraq by turning her back to the flag during the playing of the anthem. ESPN writer Ralph Wiley described the impact of her actions: “But what Toni Smith doesn’t know, and I hope to God she never does, is that very often these protests end with the ostracizing of the protestors rather than the evils they protest.”<sup>6</sup>
- In 2004, professional baseball player Carlos Delgado walked into the dugout during the anthem the entire season, citing disapproval with the war. He reflected in 2016 about Kaepernick, “At this moment, he decided to take a knee during the anthem, and he will have supporters and detractors. I think the important thing is for him to be consistent with his principles and his message. It is not normal that here we are in 2016 and we still have segregation, marginalization, and the abuse that we have against minorities, religious communities, and African-American communities.”<sup>7</sup>
- Former Denver Nuggets’ player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf viewed the American flag as a symbol of oppression and racism and refused to come out of the dressing room as the anthem played for much of his career. In a 2017 interview he reflected, “The anthem, the flag is supposed to represent the character of a people . . . in terms of freedom and justice and fairness and all this stuff. But we don’t necessarily see that, especially people of color. We’ve never been really shielded by the rule of law.”<sup>8</sup>

As this short list shows, African American athletes have faced severe criticism and charges of being unpatriotic for these protests. This was no less true during the Kaepernick controversy. NFL player Eric Reid, the first player to join Kaepernick in kneeling, commented in 2017,

It baffles me that our protest is still being misconstrued as disrespectful to the country, flag and military personnel. We chose it because it's exactly the opposite . . . we chose to kneel because it's a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy. . . . It should go without saying that I love my country and I'm proud to be an American. But, to quote James Baldwin, "exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."<sup>9</sup>

As in every other area of life, when Black athletes offered social critique, the backlash was brutal. Sociologist Steven R. Cureton said, "The challenge for the African-American male in America has been a constant struggle to reconcile the seemingly dominant social dynamic that black masculinity is significantly less human than white masculinity."<sup>10</sup> As long as athletes performed superbly on the playing field and were acquiescent off it, they received the temporary approval of white America. As long as they exhibited patriotic fervor and stood during the national anthem with a hand over their heart and were silent concerning racism off the field, they received measured acceptance. African Americans, the unspoken social agreement went, should be happy just to be able to live in America and be grateful for all of the opportunities afforded. They should just "shut up and play ball." Sports journalist Zach Johnk wrote, "Such acts of protest, often by black athletes and carried out recently by quarterback Colin Kaepernick and others who have knelt for the anthem at N.F.L. games, have a long history in the United States and an equally lengthy tradition of angering mostly white fans, sports officials and politicians."<sup>11</sup> In 1968, legendary white sportscaster Brent Musburger described John Carlos and Tommie Smith's raised fists at that year's Mexico City Olympics as done by "black-skinned storm troopers . . . destined to go down as the most unsubtle demonstration in the history of protest . . . insuring maximum embarrassment for the country that is picking up the tab for their room and board here in Mexico City. One gets a little tired of having the United States run down by athletes who are enjoying themselves at the expense of their country." He followed up five decades later by attacking the entire 49ers team and Kaepernick for taking a knee.<sup>12</sup>

Colin Kaepernick not only put his career on the line but backed up his on-field stand with off-the-field donations. His Colin Kaepernick Foundation provided \$1 million to local charities, matched by the San Francisco 49ers. At

the end of the 2016 season his teammates honored him with the Len Eshmont Award as the player who demonstrated “inspirational and courageous play.” *Time Magazine* placed him on the October 2016 cover for “fueling a debate about privilege, pride and patriotism.” He received the *Sports Illustrated* 2017 Muhammad Ali Legacy Award. Nike made him the face of their “Just Do It” campaign. Overlapped on his picture were printed the words, “Believe in Something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt.”<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International awarded him its highest honor, the 2018 Ambassador of Conscience Award.<sup>14</sup>

And at the end of the 2016 season, the San Francisco 49ers told Kaepernick that they would not be re-signing him because he did not fit their future plans, and he became a free agent. Despite being an elite athlete in the prime of his career, one who had led his team to a Super Bowl, Kaepernick has remained out of football since.

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## BLACK PATRIOTIC PROTEST

Over the centuries, the right to protest in America has always been racialized. For many white Americans, there is disbelief, even denial, that the player’s actions have anything to do with love of country. Whites exercise their First Amendment rights while Blacks are deemed unpatriotic, ungrateful, and contextually inappropriate.<sup>15</sup> In a 2017 *Washington Post* article titled “From Jimi Hendrix to Colin Kaepernick: Why Black Americans’ Patriotism Often Looks Like Protest,” Robyn C. Spencer wrote that “Black people have asserted their inextricable contributions to the history of this country while simultaneously protesting the racism embedded in the American nation-state since its inception. And yet, the patriotism of the Black activist has again come into question as dozens of American athletes have taken a knee during the national anthem.”<sup>16</sup> Michael Tesler wrote in the *Washington Post*, “For many, to be American is implicitly synonymous with being white, and that whiteness and American patriotism are deeply linked.” He listed studies where whites associated “being white” with patriotism while being Black equated as the opposite.<sup>17</sup>

Given the history of continuous oppression that Black Americans experience, the question is not “Why are Blacks unpatriotic?” Rather, one could reasonably ask, “Why are Blacks patriotic at all?” In the face of centuries of crippling structural racism and white supremacy, African Americans have proven their patriotism time and time again. There has been no other racial demographic to suffer generations of government-enforced subjugation yet retain an elevated level of patriotism. African Americans have fought in

America's wars, often at disproportionately high rates. Blacks vote in presidential elections at rates similar to whites, and in 2008 and 2012 exceeded those of whites. African Americans, even when faced with legalized oppression, retained unwavering love for their nation even as they demanded the rights of American citizenship. Blacks remained loyal to a country whose primary intent was to keep them in their place as second-class citizens, even as they did all that was asked of them out of a desire to participate in the dream called America. The jazz singer Nina Simone once said to an interviewer,

When I was young I knew to stay alive. As a Black family, we had to work at it. We had to keep secrets. We never complained about being poor, or being taken advantage of, or not getting our share. We had to keep our mouths shut. . . . So I knew to break the silence meant a confrontation with the white people of that town. And though I didn't know I knew it, if the Black man rises up and says, "I'm just not gonna do that anymore," he stands to get murdered. But no one mentioned that, which is, indeed, quite strange.<sup>18</sup>

It is ironic that white men like Eric Rudolph, Timothy McVeigh, and Ted Kaczynski perpetrate extreme violence while disparaging the U.S. government as oppressive to their liberty,<sup>19</sup> while it has been the Black race which has faced persecution while being accused of lacking patriotism.

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## THE ORIGINS OF BLACK PROTEST

The Black protest movement did not begin with Colin Kaepernick. Far from it. During every period of oppression, active, deliberate, and ongoing movements have evolved to match the levels of oppression experienced. Black protest is defined as the variety of ways African Americans have resisted oppression, racial discrimination, and exploitation. It has taken place through overt resistance by public demonstrations, nonviolent and violent revolt, marches, petitions, publications, sit-ins, migration, community organizing, and boycotts. Throughout American history, the penalty for Black protest has been severe and life-threatening, so covert action was a necessary approach, especially during slavery and Jim Crow. Protest was found in the ways Blacks sought to undermine oppressive systems through teaching children how to survive, for example, and in establishing institutions of self-help and empowerment. Even philanthropy, "paying it forward," has an element of protest. A wide range of strategies and programs was used to make life better for Black Americans and oppressed people. The Anti-Defamation League states,

There are a variety of potential goals for protest: influence public opinion, draw attention to and share information about a perceived injustice, gain a wide audience for the cause, push public policy or legislation forward, learn more about an issue, connect with others who feel passionate about the issue, speak one's truth and bear witness. Protests can also provide inspiration and a sense of being part of a larger movement. The overarching purpose of protests is to demand change.<sup>20</sup>

Protest movements were begun by the first African Americans and continued by their descendants each generation. According to Lerone Bennett Jr., "The Negro rebellion of 1960–65 is a continuation on a higher level of desperation of the evaded confrontations of the past."<sup>21</sup> While each generation felt that it was the first to demonstrably rebel, all were part of a continual line of insurgents. Alicia Garza, a cofounder of the Black Lives Matter movement, stated,

It is important to us that we understand that movements are not begun by any one person—that this movement was begun in 1619 when Black people were brought here in chains and at the bottoms of boats. . . . Because there was resistance before Black Lives Matter, and there will be resistance after Black Lives Matter . . . a continuation of a uniquely American struggle led by Black people.<sup>22</sup>

Africans who were brought to the land of slavery rejected attempts to subjugate them, resisting with both reserved defiance and outright force. This involved such things as enslaved men and women running away and indentures working off debt to gain freedom and land rights. After permanent slavery was instituted in the latter half of the seventeenth century, rebellions occurred aboard slave ships and in every region slavery existed. The earliest uprisings were in the colonial North, in cities such as New York City, and then traveled downward throughout southern states from Virginia to Louisiana. During the country's two internal wars, Blacks fought for the side that promised freedom. Between 1866 and 1877, they used their freedom to pursue political office, rewrite state constitutions, and create schools. They confronted presidents who lacked political and moral courage. Veterans of the two world wars took up arms to defend their homes, families, and neighborhoods against white mobs, the police, and National Guard. In response to nationwide racial violence, they founded institutions as a form of protest to support families and educate children. Civil rights organizations created during the 1920s and 1930s defended a people under constant attack. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) mounted protest after protest, and, eventually, won the judicial battle against racial segregation. During the Great Migration, millions left the South and resettled in the North, and their voting

strength became a factor in determining presidential elections. The 1950s ushered in a period of organized protest that within a decade caused an awakening in the American consciousness about the harm inflicted by white supremacy. The final evolution was Black participation in areas previously denied to them: business, education, and politics.

The methods, strategies, and declarations have been remarkably similar in the prophetic messages and actions proclaimed over the centuries. Transportation protests, from the days of segregated stagecoaches to Montgomery buses, shared the strategies of boycott, confrontation, and disruption. The Rev. Lott Carey, of the controversial American Colonization Society, an eighteenth-century group that attempted to secure passage for Black Americans back to African countries, said, "I wish to go to a country where I shall be estimated by my merits, not by my complexion."<sup>23</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. echoed those sentiments in 1963 when he spoke the famous words "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."<sup>24</sup> Also in the 1960s, Malcolm X urged Black Americans to liberate themselves "by any means necessary." As far back as 1843 the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet urged enslaved Blacks to "use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical."<sup>25</sup>

Black confrontation influenced the transformation of America from a slave-justifying nation to one that now recognizes the evils of slavery even as it grapples with the legacies of that same institution. The white population's growing awareness that human rights are due to all people owes much of this awareness to Black resistance. Blacks keenly and accurately scrutinized America's debased legal system in contrast to her stated creeds. The enslaved scoffed, both privately and publicly, at hollow, pious declarations of "Liberty or Death." Vincent Harding noted that enslaved Africans challenged the

justice, authority, and legitimacy of their captors. Their words . . . were among the earliest forms of what we shall call the Great Tradition of Black Protest . . . if those European ships indeed represented the rising white racist nation-state and its developing systems of economic and cultural exploitation, then the black voices of the Gold Coast were also part of a beginning tradition of radical challenge to such a state. . . . They declared that for them this system had absolutely no legitimacy. . . . This was black radicalism at the outset.<sup>26</sup>

America marketed herself as a land of liberty and justice in the purity of daylight, yet the darkness of night revealed a more sinister, racist demeanor executed by monstrous violence. The illiterate, enslaved woman intellectually critiqued the hypocrisy of the country's revolutionary zeal. She was acutely

aware of America's failure to live by her own moral and ethical standards immortalized in the Declaration of Independence that "all" are "created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." "All" really meant "all white men," and not even all of them, just the ones who owned property. The founding fathers mouthed pious slogans demanding political freedom from Britain yet theologically justified their enslavement of human beings as the will of God. Whites applied the demands of liberty in word only and designated it the domain "of the (white) people, for the (white) people and by the (white) people."

Through their shared experience of racial and economic exploitation, enslaved Blacks reinterpreted patriotism and inscribed upon whites the inscription of patriotic hypocrisy. Frederick Douglass wrote in a scathing essay,

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham. . . . There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.<sup>27</sup>

Several prominent whites also subscribed to this thinking. President Abraham Lincoln privately disclosed a similar scrutiny in an 1855 letter to friend Joshua Speed: "As a nation, we began by declaring that '*all men are created equal.*' We now practically read it '*all men are created equal, except Negroes.*' . . . When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."<sup>28</sup>

Key throughout American history is the pivotal role in protest played by the masses of Black Americans. Much attention has been given in history books to national leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King Jr., but scant attention has been given to the ways in which Black people resisted in the absence of singular, national leadership. Slave insurrections, Black towns and settlements, plantation survival techniques, abolitionist activities, the Underground Railroad, mass migrations, and voting blocs demonstrate collective unity and resolve to resist oppression. Individual resistance in one area almost supernaturally mirrored actions in different locales throughout the nation. There materialized an assemblage of methods used by men and women whose identities shall forever be unknown. A spirit motivated resisters to plan rebellions and to migrate from southern killing fields. And when competent leadership appeared, thousands marched, withstood beatings, spent nights in jail, and braved threats to act in unison to resist, resist, resist. Masses of people of African descent altered

the course of this nation in ways still unacknowledged. One Duke University researcher on the *Behind the Veil* project, which gathered Jim Crow-era recollections, wrote, “When you really listen to people, they were resistant to the laws and to the insults given to them by white supremacy and they resisted it in all kinds of ways, both hidden and public.”<sup>29</sup>

The masses relied on one another, shared hardships, and developed coping techniques effective across different contexts. They relied on one another because there was no one else. While leaders sought the ears of powerful and influential whites, Black parents raised their children, started businesses, built homes, fought in wars, and even fought among themselves, but they were forever moving forward toward a better day. To quote historian Edward E. Baptist, “What mattered was to matter.”<sup>30</sup> And that meant doing what was best for family to survive with a hope for a better future for their children and grandchildren. Life was a struggle, but it was a struggle filled with sacrifice so that their children would receive the right to live fully as American citizens.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *Colored People: A Memoir*, wrote, “My grandfather was Colored, my father was Negro, and I am Black.”<sup>31</sup> A vital component of protest and resistance has been the quest for identity. One could argue that protest birthed the drive for identity. Eugene D. Genovese wrote, “The question of nationality—of ‘identity’—has stalked Afro-American history from its colonial beginnings, when the expression ‘a nation within a nation’ was already being heard.”<sup>32</sup> Every race, tribe, and ethnic group pursued identity formation. Other races project culture, tradition, language, and familial memory as a bond to distant lands never visited. Ethnic loyalty and education changed “Oriental” to “Asian” and “Spanish-speaking” to “Hispanic,” “Latino/a,” and “Latinx.” Gates wrote, “In your lifetimes, I suspect, you will go from being African Americans, to ‘people of color,’ to being, once again, ‘colored people.’ . . . I have tried to evoke a Colored world of the fifties, a Negro world of the early sixties, and the advent of a Black world of the later sixties.”<sup>33</sup> The uniqueness of the African American experience is that no other demographic has had to re-create itself time and time again. Blacks have had to forge a new sense of self-awareness for each subsequent generation, each of which had to contend with a change in status often pressured by outside forces. Attempts to overcome suppression called for the creation of a new identity, as slaves became freedmen, and as the disenfranchised became voters.

African Americans are the only people to have had their ethnic heritage permanently erased. They were left with few surviving cultural traditions as their linguistic, cultural, and familial heritages were successfully expunged on the crossing from Africa to America. Cultural underpinning was dismantled as each succeeding generation had to reimagine itself in the face of a new



manifestation of white supremacy. The vast majority of Blacks not only cannot identify what part of the continent their ancestors originated from, but most don't feel a sense of connection with Africa.<sup>34</sup> Their only linkage is race, which has not served as a source of emotional correlation. Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson said, "Every ethnic group in this country has a reference to some land base, some historical cultural base. There are Armenian-Americans and Jewish Americans and Arab-Americans and Italian-Americans; and with a degree of accepted and reasonable pride, they connect their heritage to their mother country and where they are now."<sup>35</sup> Irish Americans sing "Danny Boy" at wakes. Scottish American men dress in kilts even though some Americans view them derogatively as a woman's skirt. White Americans venture to Ellis Island to locate the names of European ancestors with whom they relate. Cultural traditions generate connection, something generations of African Americans never experienced. The blockbuster 2017 movie *Black Panther* caused more barbershop conversations over the fictional African country of Wakanda than any discussions of actual African countries. To many Americans, any mention of Africa yields negative images, such as Ebola, famine, and AIDS. Nina Simone commented,

To me, we are the most beautiful creatures in the whole world, Black people. So, my job is to make them more curious about where they came from and their own identity and pride in that identity. That's why my songs, I try to make them as powerful as possible. Mostly, just to make them curious about themselves. We don't know anything about ourselves. We don't even have the pride and the dignity of African people, but we can't even talk about where we came from. We don't know. It's like a lost race.<sup>36</sup>

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## OUTLINE

This book will briefly trace the major Black protest movements of the last five-hundred-plus years in America, dividing them into five periods: 1440–1775, 1776–1877, 1878–1954, 1955–1987, and 1988–2020. Later in the introduction the description of these time periods will be provided.

This work examines the narrative of American history from an African American perspective. It analyzes American history through an African American protest lens. American history as it is typically told is incomplete and one-sided, as people of color have been excluded from the narrative of pivotal events in which they played fundamental roles. America's narrative is told from the perspective of whites who identified an event's historical significance and noteworthy contributors. Much of American history must be

recast with a mind-set to publish the complete story. As early as 1912 historian Lucy M. Salmon wrote,

History again needs to be rewritten, in order to prune away the excrescences of tradition. . . . Another reason for rewriting history is the necessity of correcting the false assumptions of writers of history. History has often been written along the line of least resistance. . . . If a history is tainted with inaccuracy, if its conclusions rest on insecure premises, if its foundations are on shifting sands, then it must be rewritten.<sup>37</sup>

African Americans seek not so much to revise history as to fill in the missing pieces. They seek to have their story told from a wider vantage point—beyond victimization and with wider inclusivity and greater acknowledgment beyond slavery and Jim Crow. Blacks were present in major historical events in every decade, not just being acted upon but as actors in the unfolding of the American drama. The country has been impacted by the creative genius displayed through the inventions by Black Americans of the traffic signal, gas mask, ice cream, potato chips, plasma separation, crop rotation, and so much more. Federal and state laws, constitutional amendments, and cultural regulations were written with Black people in mind. Only in the last half-century have Blacks managed to effectively challenge the narrative and receive some recognition for their role in the American story.

In order to examine the periodic protest movements, it is important to document the oppression that was being resisted. To appreciate and understand the importance of Black protest, one must be knowledgeable about the circumstances governing the lives of the protesters. Protest was not just a matter of defiance but of survival. Each generation's protest was molded by the setting to which it was reacting. As exploitation evolved from slavery, domestic terrorism, political disenfranchisement, segregation and racial discrimination, so morphed the Black response. Each decade of life in the United States was one of constant threat to one's mental and physical well-being. Each generation faced a renewed effort to dehumanize people of African descent to justify their oppression. But there was also a stream of resistance in order to neutralize the obstacles in their path. Therefore, this work contains sections that describe with great detail the life experiences of everyday African Americans and the oppression arrayed against them. The horrors of slavery illustrate how every aspect of Black life was controlled under the exploitative dominance of white supremacy. Human beings were considered property and could be bought, sold, raped, and murdered; attempts to resist resulted in inhumane punishment not limited to the resister. It was not unusual for a child, husband, or wife to be sold as a means of control. The Jim Crow era installed legalized segregation and white

superiority, as violence was painfully inflicted for the slightest infraction. The institutions of justice provided little relief. That protest occurred in the midst of these debilitating conditions makes its mere presence remarkable. Blacks rallied within repressive environments to create their own opportunities for advancement, survival, and, yes, protest. While victimized, they were determined to refute a victim's mentality. They built churches, schools, businesses, and homes as a unified statement of protest and self-determination. Many fought for the right to find inclusion as American citizens while others wanted to leave or form their own separate communities. Two things have been certain in the Black experience in America: It has been an experience of racist discrimination and terrorism, and it has been one of resistance.

This work is not a comprehensive effort to fill in the gaps in each ebb and flow of American history. It is instead an examination of influential protest movements by Black Americans through five time periods. American history is divided here into five historic time lines from the period of exploitation to the second decade of the twenty-first century. I have named each period with the rubric of a collective identity espoused by the majority of people of African descent during that period: African, Colored, Negro, Black, and African American, with a brief reference to Afro-American in section 4.

This work is unique in that there is no book that documents African American protest history from the beginning of the European invasion to the twenty-first century. Manuscripts with a similar focus are few, with seemingly none covering the period beyond the civil rights movement. Vincent Harding's excellent *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (1981) concluded at the end of the Civil War. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's *From Plantation to Ghetto* was published in 1966. Louis E. Lomax's *The Negro Revolt* (1962) and Lerone Bennett Jr.'s *Confrontation: Black and White* (1965) concluded with the civil rights movement. Documentaries include Bennett's *Pioneers in Protest* (1968) and Joanne Grant's *Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analyses, 1916 to the Present* (1968). A few others offer similar analysis but are dated. This is the only work that extends from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. Further, it is the only work using a formula timeline of American history based on these five profiles.

Although the book covers the start of the African presence in what would become America through to modern times, it is not written in strict chronological order. As the material advances, so will the time line, but not every historical episode will be covered to the degree it might deserve. Section content is arranged by topics, often combining different time periods to give a fuller picture of its significance.

Section 1, "African Protest (1440–1775)," shows that Black protest has an African bloodline. From the start, the enslaved maintained an African label.

They not only preferred to be referred to as African; they *were* African. This section covers the period from contact with European traders in Africa to life in colonial America. It examines the fact that the first Africans came to America not as slaves but as a mixture of free men and indentured servants. The latter achieved autonomy, owned land, and controlled indentures. As the institution developed, rebellions throughout the Caribbean established independent, Maroon communities. Africans posed a hostile threat to slaveholders, as they were molded by a consciousness of what it meant to live free. Slavery slowly unfolded in the American landscape and produced the lasting scourge of white supremacy. This epoch bears witness to those who never lost hope. Across the Americas, insurrection occurred, intending to liberate and strike a blow against the institution of slavery. By this period's end, a different person evolved, as the enslaved African evolved into an enslaved American.

Protest movements during this period existed in the form of rebellions, litigation, and escapes. Slavery was not entrenched for the first African colonists, and once they gained their freedom from indentured servitude, they purchased land, worked farms, and raised families. They pushed back against efforts at a secondary status and sought to participate fully in society. They even controlled indentures and enslaved others. However, after legislation in the 1660s legalized slavery, a psyche of resistance created a system of protest that was at times subliminal and at times overt. Moments of resistance occurred daily, from the disobeying of orders to finding ways to slow down the regular order of plantation life. Direct and open defiance resulted in swift consequences, so when it did occur, often the results were fatal uprisings.

Section 2, "The Protest of the Enslaved: The Color Fight Back: 1776–1877," covers the War of Liberation (also known as the Revolutionary War) to post-Reconstruction. By 1750 the goal shifted, as the enslaved no longer desired to return to the land of their fathers but to acquire freedom in America. Most were born within the United States, never having set foot in the motherland. For the enslaved, the war to achieve independence from Great Britain was an opportunity for their liberation as well. Slavery birthed a double-minded American psyche, which cried out for independence from the British monarchy while holding Africans in chains.

For the first time, racial identity was debated with ideological profundity. For the previous generation, all were African without debate. But for this war generation, "African" as a title saw decreased usage by a people who defined themselves as Americans—Colored Americans. The term *Colored* helped define who they were—human beings made in the image of God. Being Colored was distinct from whiteness and a sign of pride and self-awareness. James Walker Hood, at the North Carolina constitutional convention, rejected the interjection of "Negro" as offensive and urged racial pride.<sup>38</sup>

Black protest reached an amazing height during this period of enslavement, as the banner of freedom waved vigorously between the two most significant wars in the nation's history. Both the War of Liberation (Revolutionary War) and the War to Free the Slaves (Civil War) produced a spirit of individual and organized rebellion in every region of the country. These two wars shaped the nation and embedded within Blacks a determination to challenge whites to live up to their creeds of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The 1776 revolution witnessed Blacks fighting for both the Americans and the British, wherever freedom was to be granted. As a result, protest movements were sectional and differed according to the region of the country. In the South they were largely underground leading up to the War to Free the Slaves. The enslaved, in ways subtle and overt, mounted efforts to gain their freedom and end the institution. In the North, the abolitionist movement challenged slave legislation, escorted the enslaved as conductors of the Underground Railroad, and hid the enslaved in homes and churches. During the war, freed and enslaved men fought as soldiers, and women served as spies and nurses. Freedmen voted and held office during Reconstruction and passed progressive legislation granting equal access to public education for all children.

Section 3, "Protesting Reconstruction's Failures: Negroes in the New America: 1878–1954," covers almost two-thirds of the twentieth century, extending to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The term *Colored* was placed aside as *Negro* gained relevance. The former term, once viewed positively, came to represent inequality associated with white supremacy. Signs with the word *Colored* placed on doors and water fountains signified subservience. As mentioned above, *Negro* was in usage as far back as the 1830s, when a "Back to Africa" colonization convention urged the rejection of both *Colored* and *African* in favor of *Negro*. By the 1930s, organizations translated "Colored" into "Negro" and after 1940 few associations referred to themselves with the term *Colored*. *Negro* was the term of choice for Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Frederick Douglass used "Colored" and "Negro" interchangeably. Reconstruction Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce stated defiantly, "I am a Negro, and proud of my race."<sup>39</sup> Some insisted on the capitalization of *Negro*. But *Negro* suffered from negative connotations as whites used it derogatively as a derivative of *neggab* and *n\*\*\*\**. Roland A. Barton wrote in 1928 that "the word, 'Negro,' or 'n\*\*\*\*'; is a white man's word to make us feel inferior."<sup>40</sup> Earlier individuals from Philadelphia urged the usage of "Oppressed Americans," with little adoption.<sup>41</sup>

Once slavery ended and the period of Reconstruction died out, states in the South legalized segregation and Black inferiority through Jim Crow laws and policies. American apartheid was enforced by racial violence, especially lynching. Black protest converged to create institutions that directly confronted

legalized discrimination. Schools, churches, businesses, and communities were constructed as a means to combat racism. Resources were combined to invest in improving the life and well-being of the community. Black intellectuals agitated as activists and engaged in the campaign for Black rights. Institutions of learning equipped the race with leaders trained to challenge and reform the system. By this period's end, war veterans again offered pivotal leadership for the upcoming civil rights movement, the culmination of all the protests emanating from the descendants of enslaved people who openly demonstrated for full citizenship rights. The Great Migration of this period changed the culture and racial demographic of the country as the largest migration of people in the history of the nation. And Black women played a prominent role in the fight against lynching, especially Ida B. Wells.

Section 4, "Black Protest (1955–1987)," covers the civil rights movement to the late 1980s. Even though the word *Negro* was a generally acceptable title in the 1930s, there arose strong opposition from more militant leaders like Adam Clayton Powell, who early on preferred *Black*. In the fifties and sixties, Malcolm X and Black Power adherents tendered a biting critique of the "so-called Negro." They provided articulations for the Black Power movements of the sixties and seventies. Malcolm X kindled the fiery linguistic transition from *Colored/Negro* to *Black/Afro-American* even as the integrationist rhetoric of Dr. King morphed into the radical pro-Black declarations of SNCC and Black Power organizations. The Black Power movement triggered a widespread rejection of *Negro*, as Stokely Carmichael, Charles Hamilton, and Whitney M. Young promoted a defiant label. Black power meant Black control, ownership, and governance over Black institutions. In its more moderate stance, it meant equal competition with white-controlled institutions. *Black* symbolized "self-determination, pride, self-respect, and participation and control of one's destiny and community affairs." It meant "group inclusion rather than individual access. . . . Black was associated with youth, unity, militancy, and pride, while Negro increasingly connoted middle age, complacency, and the status quo."<sup>42</sup> By 1968 the shift from *Negro* to *Black* was in full effect. National Black magazines, such as *Ebony*, dropped *Negro* and alternated between *Black* and *Afro-American*. By the seventies, the national press advanced the adoption of *Black* as appropriate terminology. A 1974 *Newsweek* polling of the Black public revealed a growing endorsement, as a majority looked favorably upon the usage of *Black*.<sup>43</sup> By 1980, 81 percent responded that they had no negative reaction to being referred to as *Black*.

The irony of this adoption was the fact that, for many, in previous generations, to be called *Black* was not viewed in a complimentary manner. One was a Negro, or even Colored, but *Black* reflected demeaning connotations of ugliness, evilness, and decadence. "You so Black" jokes and taunts directed at

dark skin abounded. This period represented a new mind-set, a sense of being comfortable with one's complexion. Light-skinned elites among the middle class began to refer to themselves as a Black man or woman, rejecting earlier preference for the term *Negro*. This warming marked the first time that both groups of Blacks—those with lighter skin and those with darker—were comfortable with the skin they were in. Nina Simone sang to the Black students at the University of Mississippi, "To be young gifted and Black, oh what a lovely, precious dream. . . . It's where it's at." Black became normative for a people proud of their Black skin who tossed off all negative imaging inherited from a racist past. To refute individualism and self-hatred, popular slogans were repeated: "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice"; "Black is beautiful"; and James Brown's "Say it Loud! I'm Black and I'm Proud." Similar to earlier nuances contrasting *Colored* with *white*, the label *Black* offered a distinction from whiteness. Comparatively speaking, if the white race was comfortable with a color label, then so were Blacks. Bennett ruminated, "The word 'Negro' (was) an inaccurate epithet which perpetuates the master-slave mentality in the minds of both black and white Americans."<sup>44</sup>

The U.S. census participated in the debate. From 1790 until 2013, multiple attempts at classification occurred. It was not until 1970 that "Black" as a category would reappear, and the 1990 census contained the hybrid "Black, African Am., or Negro."<sup>45</sup> A 2010 controversy arose when "Negro" was listed for the last time. This year marked when census takers could choose more than one category.<sup>46</sup> In 2013, after "Negro" was eliminated from the annual American Community Survey, Nicholas Jones commented, "Few Black Americans still identify with being Negro and many view the term as offensive and outdated."<sup>47</sup>

Section 4 discusses the return of *Afro-American*. It was first introduced in the 1830s with limited popularity. Mostly in the naming of institutions, such as the *Baltimore Afro-American* (1892) newspaper and the National Afro-American League (1899).<sup>48</sup> It experienced the shortest shelf life of the names discussed here, falling rapidly into disuse. It was revived in the sixties as Malcolm X referred to people of African descent as Afro-Americans and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in 1964. After his death in 1965, few continued to refer to themselves as Afro-Americans.

The civil rights movement was the culmination of two centuries of Black protest. It used all the methods of previous movements in the form of marches, sit-ins, legislative lobbying, and direct resistance. Protesters paid a price as police responded with beatings, violence, and collaboration with the defenders of white supremacy. The movement forced the hands of presidents and Congress to desegregate the nation and provided political enfranchisement previously guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment but never fully

enforced. The Black Power movement was the radical stepchild of the civil rights movement. Blacks who did not embrace Martin Luther King's nonviolent methodology advocated the right of self-defense. Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Deacons for Defense took up arms as a means to defend their communities and advance the destruction of Jim Crow segregation policies.

Section 5, "African American Protest: 1988–2020," presents *African American* as the dominant identity. This hybrid term resonates as a connection between Africa and America and is more expansive as an ethnic reference. At the 1969 Racism in Education Conference of the American Federation of Teachers, delegates unanimously called on all individuals, educators, and organizations to abandon the "slavery-imposed name" of "Negro" and adopt "African-American" or "Afro-American."<sup>49</sup> Widespread adoption was prompted by a 1988 push from Jesse Jackson. He was urged by Ramona Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition, who said, "Calling ourselves African-American is the first step in the cultural offensive. Change here can change the world."<sup>50</sup> During a news conference that was reported in the *New York Times*, Jackson lobbied for *African-American* and the rejection of *Negro* and *Black*. "Just as we were called Colored, but were not that, and then Negro, but not that, to be called Black is just as baseless." His campaign met with a positive reception among African American opinion makers and eventual agreement by the national press. The *Times* opined,

If Mr. Jackson is right and Blacks now prefer to be called African-Americans, it is a sign not just of their maturity but of the nation's success. In part because of Mr. Jackson's electoral success, Blacks may now feel comfortable enough in their standing as citizens to adopt the family surname: American. And their first name, African, conveys a pride in cultural heritage that all Americans cherish.<sup>51</sup>

Sociologist Tom W. Smith added, "The main goal of the switch was to give Blacks a cultural identification with their heritage and ancestral homeland. . . . Culture would then become a lever for improving the lot of Blacks. . . . Black was largely considered inadequate because it did not emphasize the cultural origins of Blacks."<sup>52</sup> Coming full circle, the reemerging desire to identify with Africa was evidenced by the wearing of African clothing, dashikis, and afros. Africanized rituals instilled in children a connection with their African heritage, with the holiday Kwanzaa being the longest lasting. While the last title adopted, *African American* experienced the most rapid ascendancy. The *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* increased their usage of the term by fourfold within just six months. Black media outlets *Ebony* and *Jet* alternated between the two titles.



Nevertheless, *Black* was never completely forsaken and retains strong usage. Younger Blacks today prefer the title for many of the earlier reasons: it provides a greater sense of unity and represents racial pride. It was the term used to self-refer in African American homes and communities. Some utter, “We are not from Africa, I was born here in the U.S. I don’t know anyone there, can’t even say my ancestors are from there.”<sup>53</sup> John H. McWhorter reflected in the *Los Angeles Times*,

So, we will have a name for ourselves—and it should be Black. “Colored” and “Negro” had their good points but . . . we will let them lie. . . . Since the late 1980s, I have gone along with using “African American” for the same reason that we throw rice at a bride—because everybody else was doing it. But no more. From now on, in my writings on race I will be returning to the word I grew up with, which reminds me of my true self and my ancestors who worked here to help make my life possible: Black.<sup>54</sup>

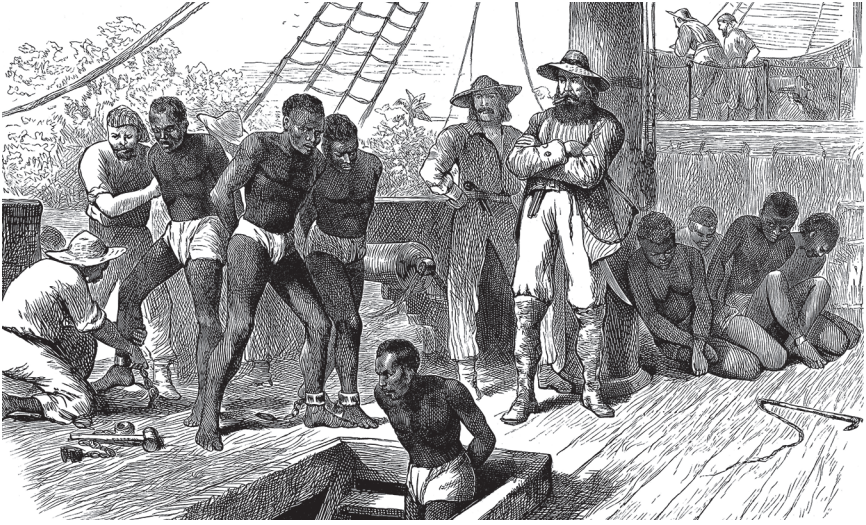
Others reject *African American* for the opposite reason: that they were not born in Africa and prefer Black because it points to the Black experience, not just where you were born. Said Darien LaBeach, “I am Black, and within that, I am a Jamaican-born, African American man, but I call myself and identify as Black. . . . My blackness is the overarching umbrella of those different flavors of my identity.”<sup>55</sup>

The term “people of color” (POC) promotes pan-racial unity among people of the African diaspora to represent a wider array of African descendance for greater inclusion, especially for those of Caribbean ancestry. Records indicate that its usage dates back to the antebellum period, as “There grew up a class of free persons, which preferred terms such as ‘Free People of Colour’ and ‘Coloured.’”<sup>56</sup> The 1807 ban on slave importation applied to “any Negro, mulatto, or person of colour.” The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted during its 223rd General Assembly (2018) to drop the term “racial-ethnic” and replace it with “people of color.” Children with parents from different races advocate for *biracial*.<sup>57</sup>

Black protest is a continuum that never ends and takes place on a multitude of plateaus as all around the country voices ring out in opposition to racial injustice. The demand for justice took to the streets as the Black Lives Matter movement grew into a global phenomenon in the 2010s. Modern protest takes the form of social media and other forms of technology. Out of the mold of Black protest arose other protest movements, including the women’s and gay rights movements whose histories have origins in the white community.

As we move deeper into the twenty-first century, the question must be asked: What is the next manifestation of Black protest? For some, it is the

opportunity to provide direct leadership in movements advocating for Black rights that whites will support and embrace. Another component is for whites to take the lead of Ibram X. Kendi and not simply proclaim, “I am not a racist” but work on being antiracist—working for the abolition of white supremacy. Black protest continues to evolve as the nation progresses and will adapt to new challenges as new coalitions form to transform the world into a more tolerant and loving place.



## Section 1

# The Age of Exploitation in the New World

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### *African Protest: 1440–1775*

The Negroes who came to America in the eighteenth century were strikingly different from those conditioned by one hundred years of bondage. . . . They did not feel inferior to white men and, what is more to the point, white men were not so sure that they were superior to them.<sup>1</sup>

—*Historian Lerone Bennett Jr.*

With race relations the way they are today at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one would think that there has always been racial tension between whites and Blacks. But before the mid-Atlantic slave trade, race was not a measuring stick for social standing. One's nationality, class, or caste defined one's ranking.<sup>2</sup> According to Lerone Bennett Jr., "Slavery, contrary to the general impression, did not spring from racism; racism sprang from slavery. The concept of race was a direct outgrowth of the slave trade. And it was deliberately invented by an exploiting group which needed a theology to maintain and defend privileges founded on naked force."<sup>3</sup>

For centuries an amazing lack of animosity existed between Europeans and Africans. The book *Forty Centuries: From the Pharaohs to Alfred the Great* declared, "The ancient Greeks copied Egyptian medicine and surgery and in many other fields of knowledge looked upon the Egyptian priests as their mentors."<sup>4</sup> The biblical story of Joseph demonstrates that nationality mattered more than race, as it was an abomination for an Egyptian to eat with a non-Egyptian. Joseph, a nationalized Egyptian, ate at the Egyptian table apart from his non-Egyptian, biological brothers.<sup>5</sup>

For three centuries, between 1440 and 1775, an African presence was established worldwide. Sailing vessels ventured from Iberia (Portugal and Spain)

across the Atlantic to the western shores of Africa and back home again loaded with African cargo. African explorers migrated to the degree that by 1550, 10 percent of southern Iberia was of African descent. Between 1440 and 1640, as many as 400,000 Africans voluntarily relocated to Iberia. Portuguese sailors trafficked with African chieftains for commodities of gold, ivory, wax, peppers, grains, and, yes, human beings. Europeans and Africans lived, worked, worshiped, and fought together during this period of global interchange. There existed no distinction between the treatment of white and African enslaved persons. Africans were human beings who possessed intelligence and spirituality. They were protected by law, afforded church membership, gained freedom, married, and assimilated into society. Free and enslaved Africans labored as herders, shepherds, farmers, sailors, boatmen, artisans, domestics, stevedores, porters, construction workers, and street vendors. Moriscos, Moros, Moores, and berberiscos were Iberians of Muslim ancestry who could read and write Arabic.<sup>6</sup>

Africans who were forced onto American shores were of a different character and perspective than those bred into captivity. Their contribution, despite their captive state, was immediate and monumental. They were determined to maintain as many of the old ways as possible, and to pass traditions on to the next generation. Unfortunately, their heritage was stripped; it would not be found in the passing on of rituals but in a mental awareness that freedom was a birthright and worth fighting for.

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## PRECOLONIAL LIFE

Of the Africans who reached the United States, 90 percent came from Senegambia (Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali), the Upper Guinea Coast (Sierra Leone, Guinea), the Gold Coast (Ghana), the Bight of Biafra (eastern Nigeria, Cameroon), and west-central Africa (Angola, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon). Almost half of the arriving Africans came from two areas—Senegambia and west-central Africa.<sup>7</sup>

It was the European Age of Exploitation that radically altered race relations, benefiting European societies and detrimentally impacting nations populated by people of color. A new, lower form of caste distinction emerged based solely on race. The beginnings of what would become white supremacy furnished Western civilization with a justification for military and economic domination of non-European peoples. It altered the way nations interacted with one another, often no longer based on political alliances but on whiteness.

The opportunity for the rapid accumulation of colossal wealth led to the disintegration of global relations. Greed dictated foreign policy from this

moment in human history in ways never before experienced. The annexation of lands and material resources enabled European nations to hoard the greatest accumulation of wealth and military might in human history. According to August Meier and Elliott Rudwick,

The African slave trade and slavery were major factors in the quickening of European commerce, industry, and banking, and in the shift of economic power from the Mediterranean countries to northwestern Europe—all of which constituted the Commercial Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Slave-produced wealth was first realized by Portugal, then Spain, followed by Holland, France, and England. Throughout industry, including the field of banking, profits were bolstered as the benefits of doing business with enslavers produced remarkable revenue. Banks offered investment and easily acquired loans to large plantation owners who in turn produced crops that augmented European markets.

Edward Baptist, writing almost fifty years later, came to the same conclusion: European and American wealth have as their economic foundation the exploitation and enslavement of human beings: “The returns from cotton monopoly powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy. . . . In fact, slavery’s expansion shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics of the new nation.” Throughout the 1800s, cotton production went from 1.4 million pounds to 2 *billion* pounds; from less than 30 pounds a day to over 100 pounds. Slave-picked cotton supplied the factories of Europe, especially England, and propelled the Industrial Revolution. It created businesses in the North as factories manufactured slave clothing and banks supplied loans for the purchase of slaves and land. The Bank of the United States had partnerships with southern planters granting credit and financial services: “Cheap slave-produced cotton fostered a virtuous cycle of investment capital, factory building, worker employment, consumer demand for goods and a secondary growth of workshops and businesses.” By 1836, cotton played a role in the production of half the revenue of the United States economy.<sup>9</sup>

The Atlantic slave trade, between 1500 and 1860s, resulted in tens of millions of African men, women, and children being kidnapped and sold. Neither Africans nor Europeans were the first to engage in human slavery, as it had existed in various forms throughout human history. The enterprise would not have happened without major cooperation between African kings and European monarchs. Enslavement resulted from crime, debt, or capture. For four centuries, African hunters invaded the interior of West Africa to kidnap and sell millions of bodies to European traders. Reverend Peter Fontaine in 1757 noted, “The Negroes are enslaved by the Negroes themselves before they are purchased by the masters of the ships who bring them here.”<sup>10</sup> Oludah

Equiano recounted three people-stealers who climbed over his village wall to kidnap him and his sister. Once captured, half would perish during the months-long, hundred-mile journey to the African coast. The exchange in African bodies was so lucrative that nations fought wars for control of the nefarious trade.<sup>11</sup>

Africans who cooperated with whites had no awareness of the horrors to which they doomed their captives. Benjamin Quarles proposed that African chiefs traded captives, thinking that they obligated them to an African brand of enslavement. African slavery attached no stigma of inferiority, nor was personhood diminished to property. The enslaved in Africa served as household domestics and servants. There was little to prevent one from obtaining freedom and elevating status. Amongst the Ashanti, enslaved domestic servants could marry, own property, and were shielded from capital punishment. Benin custom provided liberation to all who could afford it. Those adopted lived as sons and daughters amongst the Dahomeans, Ashanti, and Ibo. Societal elevation to prominent positions was common in the Yoruba and Hausa kingdoms. Dahomean servants, sons of beloved enslaved wives, ascended to the throne.<sup>12</sup> Communal rights outweighed the interests of the individual; this eliminated the concept of personal property. Anyone could work land and harvest crops. For Africans, the concept of private ownership, of a person or land, was a surreal experience.<sup>13</sup>

The Portuguese established a three-hundred-mile “hunting ground,” transforming the Gold Coast into a Slave Coast through a harvest of Black Gold. The Slave Coast ran three hundred miles along the western coastline from Senegal to Angola into the interior along the Senegal, Gambia, Volta, Niger, and Congo rivers. Ships floated downriver to frequent trading posts.<sup>14</sup> In 1611 the Dutch equipped a fort on the Gold Coast, and within four decades supplanted the Portuguese as the leaders of the slave trade. Fifty to sixty forts, factories, or barracoons south of Senegal were constructed as trading houses. Each factory held a thousand souls in secluded underground caverns to await the arrival of a ship. On the beach, a surgeon would poke and prod during a makeshift health inspection. A brand burned on the chest signified either Portuguese, Dutch, French, or English ownership.<sup>15</sup> Victims were exchanged for cowrie shells, cotton weaves, cloth, iron bars, sheets, firearms, gunpowder, brass rings, metal, and liquor. Each region bartered over a different commodity, with 150 different items negotiated.<sup>16</sup>

By the 1700s, fifty thousand humans were being transported annually across the oceans; by 1800, a hundred thousand were shipped each year.<sup>17</sup> According to August Meier, the number of captured Africans sent to the colonies of the British Empire is astronomical, with some estimates being as high as 15 million souls. Between the years 1680 and 1786, Great Britain was responsible for the

purchase of 2,110,000 terrified captives and transported them to slave fields in North America and West Indian labor camps.<sup>18</sup> Each century the number grew exponentially. In the sixteenth century around 900,000 arrived. As many as 2,750,000 were brought over the following century and 7 million in the eighteenth and 4 million in the nineteenth. Near the end of the slave trade, estimates are as high as 15 million being transported from African shores.<sup>19</sup>

While American history is broadcast as having germinated from the English seeds of 1616, the African presence in the New World preceded Jamestown by a full century. As sixteenth-century Europeans sailed across the oceans, Africans were by their side. They were with the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and British as sailors, scouts, pirates, free persons, and servants. African explorers Juan Garrido, Esteban, Jan Rodriques, Gaspar Yanga, Juan Bardales, Juan Garcia, and Juan Beltran traveled through present-day Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Florida, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. When Christopher Columbus arrived in Hispaniola (now Cuba) in 1502, his crew included his African cabin boy, Diego el Negro; Alonzo Pietro navigated the *Nina*. Juan Garrido sailed with both Ponce de Leon and Hernan Cortez to Florida, Alabama, New Mexico, and California. In 1513 thirty Africans accompanied Vasco Nunez de Balboa across the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean. Africans risked all with the Spanish conqueror Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon in 1526, roaming the waters of the Cape Fear River in North Carolina.<sup>20</sup> In 1532 African travelers trekked across the ocean onto Peruvian soil with Francisco Pizarro. Estevanico de Dorantes, also known as Esteban the Moor, hazarded into Arizona and New Mexico searching for El Dorado, the "Lost City of Gold." He was revered as a legend as the first nonindigenous person to venture into Arizona and New Mexico.<sup>21</sup> Between 1584 and 1590, Sir Francis Drake situated African settlers at a base on Roanoke Island in North Carolina.<sup>22</sup> When French Jesuit missionaries ventured as far north as Canada they were accompanied by Africans.<sup>23</sup> Over the centuries, gifted Africans such as York, Negro Abraham, Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, Ben Bruno, Edward Rose, George Bonga, and James P. Beckwourth served as explorers, scouts, and interpreters. The presence of Africans was so evident that it was said, "The first white man to meet an Indian in America was a Negro."<sup>24</sup> Or to put it more precisely, an African.

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## COLONIAL AMERICA

Although the landing of the first group of captive Africans in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 is traditionally considered the beginning of the institution of Black slavery in the North American



colonies of England, the fact is that the category of slave was not yet clearly defined at that time. Nor were the Africans who arrived in the early period limited to or by that status. For several decades, indeed, Blacks in Virginia and elsewhere had a status within the laboring classes that varied from indentured apprentice and servant to free man and free woman; the nature of the quest for justice, the definition of the struggle for freedom, was also fluid.<sup>25</sup>

America developed out of a unique syncretism between the Old World and the New, as indigenous traditions and cultures amalgamated with those of Africa and Europe. Africans became Americanized, and America, Africanized, consolidated by the absorption of Native American life skills. The African diaspora was of tremendous benefit to Spanish and English colonies.<sup>26</sup>

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, the British, French, and Dutch overcame monopolies by the Portuguese and Spanish crowns to emerge as dominant trading nations. A triangular trade route transmuted African labor and American produce into European manufactured goods. Products were then sold in the colonies and the Caribbean. African labor enriched European countries, which controlled every aspect of this devil's triangle.

European American colonists reaped enormous benefits. Africans were forced to adapt to their new environs, and they quickly proved themselves skilled in spinning, carding wool, tanning, ranching, herding, shipbuilding, lumbering, ironworking, cooperage, distilling, blacksmithing, carpentry, and printing. They were capable seamen on fishing, whaling, and trading ships traveling the world. Some were physician apprentices and doctors.<sup>27</sup> According to Meier, the enslaved labored

in the turpentine industry, in sawmills and quarries, in the coal and salt mines of Virginia, in the iron mines and furnaces of Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. They labored as riverboat and deckhands, firemen, dock workers, and laborers constructing canals and railroads. They worked in the tobacco factories of Virginia, in textile mills from Virginia to Mississippi, in cotton presses, in tanneries, in shipyards, and laundries of many towns.<sup>28</sup>

Gambians arrived as expert cattle herders. African trappers worked alongside the French in the lower Mississippi in Biloxi. Angolans and Senegalese helped develop regions from Biloxi to Boston. Dutch speakers planted farms in lower Manhattan as Swedish and German speakers cultivated land in Pennsylvania and Delaware. Natives from Barbados transformed Salem, Massachusetts, and the Carolina Sea Islands.

Colonial Africans were treated not much differently than their white indentured counterparts. "The first black immigrants were not slaves, nor were

the first white immigrants free.”<sup>29</sup> Africans and white indentures began their journey in the New World as equal members of one community. Negro and white Americans confronted each other as “brothers, brothers-in-law, and fellow passengers on a journey into the unknown. For forty years or more, from 1619 to about 1660, Negro Americans accumulated property, participated in the public life of the community, and mingled and mated with whites on a basis of substantial equality.”<sup>30</sup> At this point in history, race did not automatically make a white person free, nor an African enslaved. Africans imported into the Americas arrived as indentured servants to evolve into enslaved persons. In 1619 twenty Africans, seventeen men and three women, landed at Point Comfort (Hampton, Virginia) aboard *The White Lion*. Anthony (Antoney), Isabella, Pedro, William, Angela, Frances, Margaret, John Edward, and twelve others set foot in Jamestown. They came, maintaining the same status as whites, not as enslaved persons but as indentured servants. Their indenture could last four years or as long as seven. Anthony and Mary married in 1624 and gave birth to a son, William Tucker, on January 3, 1625. He was America’s first child of African ancestry born in English North America and the first baptized.<sup>31</sup> The *New York Time’s 1619 Project* celebrated the arrival of Africans as central to the founding of America:

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on (the) horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed.<sup>32</sup>

By 1649 three hundred colonial Africans held virtually every right available to whites. Status was not equated with race but by the class distinction of being a free person or servant. Indentures, regardless of race, had more in common with one another, more so than poor whites and those who were wealthy. Whites and Africans of the same standing could comingle and unite their lives. They shared the same hopes and dreams of raising families and owning land. They worked, lived, loved, cohabited, ran away, married, raised children, and died together. Both became property owners with the right to sue, testify in court, and vote.<sup>33</sup> A handful held official posts. As property owners, they could own the rights of title for indentured servants, white and African. Anthony obtained his freedom and, in 1651, received 250 acres of land in Northampton County for importing five indentured servants. He was the first person to hold an African in perpetual captivity after winning a lawsuit against one of his indentures, John Castor, in 1654. Richard Johnson acquired one hundred acres upon the arrival of two white indentures.<sup>34</sup> Other African

property owners included Benjamin Doyle (three hundred acres), John Harris (fifty acres), and Phillip Morgan (two hundred acres).<sup>35</sup> Six thousand white indentures outnumbered two thousand Africans in the year 1671. By the end of the century the African population mirrored the number of whites.<sup>36</sup>

But the relatively equal status of colonial whites and Africans was soon to change, as the need for more and more labor in the South led to a dramatic increase in the trafficking of human beings. Agricultural contributions gave impetus to the South's economic growth. The demand for cheap labor increased the trafficking of human beings. White indentures, deemed too expensive for the short-term commitments demanded, emerged as small farmers often at odds with large landowners. Profitable crops traveled on a southward trajectory, and the institution of slavery followed. As crops diversified, the type of labor required changed, which impacted the institution. The production of tobacco, rice, indigo, cotton, and sugar enriched the colonies. Planters grew tobacco in Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina for the first marketable commodity.<sup>37</sup> South Carolina struggled to generate revenue until enslaved Africans made rice and indigo profitable. Rice transformed South Carolina into an economic powerhouse. Wealthy white immigrants from Barbados migrated to South Carolina escorted by enslaved men and women. In 1694 expert rice cultivators from Madagascar and the Rice Coast arrived. Bantu speakers introduced cultivation techniques superior to anything Europeans had devised.<sup>38</sup> Georgia's coastal region was equally suitable for rice, and Louisiana sugar produced wealth and prosperity.

But cotton was king and grew to be an economic juggernaut. The 1793 invention of the cotton gin significantly accelerated stagnant harvesting. The picking machinery of enslaved hands increased annual production to excessive heights. Field hands picking cotton in 1792 filled 13,000 bales. In twenty-five years, that number swelled to an exorbitant 461,000 bales and expanded to 2 million by 1840. In ten years, three out of every four enslaved men and women were engaged in the production of the crop.<sup>39</sup> Slave-harvested cotton enabled American mastery over the world's economy. The richest men in the world achieved wealth upon the backs of enslaved pickers. The European industrial age and America's banking system, shipping, and manufacturing industries rose to prominence upon the unpaid labor of enslaved men and women. American servitude was the engine powering the global economy, and it profited everyone but the enslaved.<sup>40</sup>

### Colonial Protest

Enslaved Africans maintained the protest movement inherited from ancestors. From the moment of capture, Africans revealed themselves willing to

die to resist captivity. It was one thing to keep a person enslaved who had been born into bondage; it was another to persuade one born in freedom to accept it docilely. They had a living memory of a homeland populated and ruled by people who looked like them. They had their own languages and cultures that no lash or brutal whippings could eliminate. This made first-generation enslaved Africans a relentless, constant threat. From the moment of captivity, escape was plotted in search of a way to return across the ocean. By the start of the War of Liberation,<sup>41</sup> the native-born enslaved population outnumbered those being shipped from across the ocean. Despite dwindling numbers, imported Africans comprised the majority of those who ran away. Dual motivations stemmed from a desire to regain liberty as well as nostalgia for homeland. They passed on to their children a fierce passion for freedom. The mother of Nat Turner, a native-born African, instilled in him a hatred that inspired his 1831 rebellion. Long after importation ended and the connection to Africa diminished, the spirit to rebel did not.

For the first-generation enslaved African, there was no question of who she was. She was not African American, Negro, or Colored, but an African in America. Those kidnapped retained a consciousness filled with self-worth that connected them through shared experiences. It was reinforced daily by facial and body scarring inscribed onto human flesh by fellow Africans during traditional rites of passage. This provided meaning in a world that attempted to strip a man of his masculinity and a woman of her femininity. They held onto languages and whispered words and phrases into young ears. Traditions and cultures were assimilated into their new reality, secretly passed on from one generation to the next. African traditions and rituals upheld the priority of the family and its sanctity as supreme. They may have been forcibly relocated to America, but they remained Africans.

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## FROM FREEDOM TO SLAVERY

There was no statutory recognition of slavery in Virginia until 1661. Steps in that direction had earlier been taken by modifying the definition of the condition of persons legally recognized as servants. Most of the Negroes brought into Virginia after 1640 had no indentures or contracts and could not look forward to freedom after a specified term of service. Some others that were brought in enjoyed the dubious distinction of having contracts providing that they were “servants for life” or “perpetual servants.” This was the result of vigorous efforts, extending over a generation, to lengthen and renew terms of indenture so as to provide for continuous service.<sup>42</sup>

—*John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom*

Interracial relations in the colonies remained rather peaceful during the period from 1619 to 1660. There were opportunities for advancement for all who resided in European settlements, regardless of race. Both races felt that if one worked diligently, a decent life awaited. But change was coming that would doom one race to enslavement, and the other, to ownership. As indigenous lands were seized, there arose a shortage of hands to work the fields. The remedy appeared as judicial court rulings between 1640 and 1660 designated human beings as chattel property. In 1641 a court case was brought by an owner who claimed ownership of several enslaved children. The court ruled against him in favor of the parents, who maintained control over the lives of their children, for now. In 1656 a similar case decreed that the children of mulattos were servants while the children of Native Americans were free. In 1655 Elizabeth Key, a biracial woman, successfully sued for her freedom on the grounds that her father, Thomas Key, was a white Englishman and she was a baptized Christian. English Common Law, which was what then ruled the colonies, declared that the status of the father was the child's status. It was not until 1662 that Virginia fixed the child's status to that of the mother in order to keep biracial children fathered by white men in slavery. Between 1619 and 1661, because of these laws and the need for more and more labor, the lives of colonial Africans spiraled downward from indenture to permanent enslavement.<sup>43</sup>

Not only was the desire for wealth key in the disruption of race relations, but sexual jealousy also played a role in the emergence of racism. Procreation between whites and Africans birthed a disproportionate number of biracial children, mostly due to consensual relations between indentured African men and European women. White servants identified more so with Africans of their social caste with whom they labored and lived rather than wealthy planters with whom they shared race.<sup>44</sup> African men and white women, indentured and free, were routinely intimately involved and bore children. The sight of biracial children provoked feelings of discomfort for some whites. Such a mixture could prove to be an existential threat to developing theories of African inferiority and eventually threaten its moral justification. What were the sociological ramifications when a white woman fell in love with a Black man? If a white man loved an African woman, what status would the children have?

Rather than reexamine flawed assumptions, white male lawmakers introduced legislation to make illicit interracial relationships. Laws delegitimized Black-white relations and limited the rights of Africans. In the 1630s, colonial legislatures outlawed such cohabitations. White women faced severe penalties for consensual relationships with African men. A white man, Hugh Davis, was whipped "for defiling his body in lying with a Negro."<sup>45</sup> In 1662, Virginia became the first colony to pass laws against "intermingling" and

“anti-amalgamation.”<sup>46</sup> Pennsylvania, in 1726, prohibited marriage between Africans and whites. Reverend John Blacknall was fined fifty pounds in 1743 for marrying an interracial couple. Christian Finny, a white, female, indentured servant, had her term of indenture extended by two years for having two biracial children. These laws turned out to be ineffective as mixed marriages increased. By the start of the War of Liberation, most of the free people of color were biracial. North Carolina Supreme Court Justice William Gaston noted that most were the children of white women.<sup>47</sup>

A spiritual dilemma arose concerning the morality of Christian enslavers who participated in the nefarious trade. Religious faith was twisted to justify oppression. When it came to the relationship between Christians and the institution of slavery, it was “rice over righteousness,” meaning that the labor needed to grow crops justified the means used. Economic greed sought a theological paradigm to underpin an emergent white supremacist worldview. The so-called “Curse of Ham” purported that the will of God commanded that the “Sons of Ham,” Africans, serve as the servants of the white race.<sup>48</sup> Cain Hope Felder, in *Troubling Biblical Waters*, recorded that “the idea that the blackness of Africans was due to a curse, and thus reinforced and sanctioned enslaving Blacks, persisted into the seventeenth century.”<sup>49</sup>

In the following decades, African humanity was securely locked in a box stamped “Slave.” The year 1640 was the pivotal year in the transition from indentured servitude to perpetual enslavement. First, the race of the defendant compounded punishments in criminal cases, with Blacks facing harsher punishment. Also, the number of years served in indentured servitude was increased. Phase two was a sentence of lifetime enslavement. The capture of three runaway indentured servants resulted in two white men receiving four additional years while the African, John Punch, was made an enslaved person “for the time of his natural life.”<sup>50</sup> The 1660s cemented the final phase and eliminated any chances for equality. Race forevermore set status—to be Black was to be enslaved while to be white was to be free. In 1662, as noted earlier, Virginia aligned the status of the child to that of the mother: “All children born in this colony shall be bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.” This reversal of the 1641 ruling established a legacy of racial prejudice. In 1667, Virginia removed the last barrier to lifelong enslavement when baptism into Christianity no longer prevented permanent enslavement: “The conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedome.” The colonies of New Jersey, New York, Maryland, North Carolina, and South Carolina enacted similar legislation.<sup>51</sup>

Known more for its twentieth-century version, the concept of Jim Crow was introduced long before that harrowing period. Jim Crow, a period of legalized segregation, borrowed its name from a minstrel show jingle “Jump

Jim Crow.” A white actor, Thomas “Daddy” Rice, painted in blackface, mimicked and belittled people of African descent as a form of white entertainment.<sup>52</sup> Jim Crow’s social and legal policy of racial segregation designated separate water fountains, eating places, bathrooms, courtroom Bibles, and signs assigning usage for “Colored” and “White” people.<sup>53</sup> In the 1690s, the nation’s first segregation laws were passed. Any manumitted man or woman (one set free from slavery) was given six months to vacate or be enslaved for an additional five years. In 1691 anyone freed in Virginia had to vacate the colony immediately. In 1705 enslaved Blacks were categorized as property and were forbidden to worship. Any apprehended off their plantation without a permission ticket could be punished. Any missing for over two months could be executed. They were barred from taverns after dark; race curfews were passed in Connecticut (1690), Massachusetts (1693), and Rhode Island (1703). New York limited gatherings to three slaves, and no more than twelve could attend a funeral. In 1713 South Carolina posted a Negro Watch with authority to stop, question, and detain any Africans after nine p.m. By 1715 North Carolina prohibited ownership of weapons by Blacks and withdrew their voting rights. In 1721 Delaware barred religious services and the bestowing of Christian names. In 1740 South Carolina’s Negro Act authorized patrols, placed limits on gatherings, and outlawed literacy. In 1741 North Carolina legislators passed a series of similar regulations. Insurrectionists were executed, and emancipation required self-deportation within six months. South Carolina passed a freedman’s poll tax and instituted status papers in 1760. Between 1753 and 1785, patrols, castration, badges, supervision, and curfews disrupted lives.

Thus, in just a few decades’ time, the seeds of white supremacy were sown in the very ground that championed the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”