

ABSTRACT

WALDKIRCH, JENNIFER CAROLINE. Black Historical Memory of Slavery and Emancipation in the Activism and Politics of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Late Pan-African Movements, 1960-1988. (Under the direction of Dr. Susanna M. Lee).

This thesis is about the memory of slavery in black activism of the mid-to-late twentieth century. It explores the historical memory of various political and social groups within the black community, highlighting the way historical perspectives shaped the methods and goals of social movements. In the 1960s, civil rights activists took inspiration from the fight against slavery during the Civil War, urging the government officials to finish the work of black emancipation by abolishing segregation and granting black inhabitants the full rights of citizenship. During the Black Power Movement, as a radical narrative of slavery focusing upon uprisings and revolutions spread to a younger generation of activists, black college students and professors demanded academic institutions, which had long profited off the labor of the enslaved and their descendants, work towards black educational and economic empowerment. Finally, in the 70s and 80s, as a rise of African heritage consciousness grew within the black community, many began to seek cultural and political representation of the unique ethnic history of African Americans, challenging the nation to confront its complicity in the transatlantic slave trade and advance the cause of black empowerment in foreign policy related to the modern decolonization of Africa. In each of these time periods, activists, writers, and historians constructed the memory of the past to reflect the injustices of American democracy in the present, shaping both racial and national identity.

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Black Historical Memory of Slavery and Emancipation in the Activism and Politics of the Civil
Rights, Black Power, and Late Pan-African Movements, 1960-1988

by
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Introduction

Though their Declaration of Independence denounced the “absolute tyranny” of the English monarchy and dedicated a new nation under the principle that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights,” the leaders of the American Revolution failed to secure liberty for enslaved African Americans, making up around 20 percent of the nation’s population in the early eighteenth century. Over the past centuries since the nation’s founding, many advocates for racial justice and equality have framed the oppression of black people as a complete denial of the ideals of citizenship which serve as the basis for America’s democracy. Yet, though the memory of slavery has played a significant role in the nation’s past movements for racial and democratic progress, many of America’s historical myths prevent our society from fully coming to terms with the historical truth of our nation’s early beginnings. In *Sites of Slavery*, historian Salamishah Tillet argues that events like slavery which “have challenged the reality of an unfettered American democracy” are seen largely “as aberrations in American history” and dismissed by “a civic culture that either forgets or casts itself in contradistinction to the lives and contributions of enslaved African Americans.”¹ Many historians of collective memory, like Tillet, agree that American identity is predicated both on the repression and valorization of the nation’s antebellum history and the marginalization of the struggle for universal rights within the black freedom movement.

Historians often describe the African American perspective of slavery as a “counter-memory” because it contradicts dominant views about the moral foundations of our democracy, reflecting the tension between the promises of the constitution and the legacies of American slavery. As historian Michel-Rolph-Trouillot argued in *Silencing the Past: Power and the*

¹ Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.

Production of History, the memory of slavery, like all collective histories, is revealed “only through the production of specific narratives” and defined by the distribution of power within society.² Thus, as Trouillot suggests, those individuals and groups within a society that have the most power, have often had the greatest amount of control over the way the history of slavery has been collected, researched, and retold. During the antebellum period, many southern states prohibited enslaved people from learning to read or write and most slaveholders upheld this custom regardless of legal prompting. This reality alone prevented many black men and women from preserving personal accounts of their own experiences, often leaving historians to study enslaved communities primarily through the business records of white masters and overseers. Eventually, as many southern states moved to preserve historical artifacts and documents through the funding of archives, museums, historical commissions, and other public history projects, little thought was given to the preservation of African American history. Finally, this anti-black bias within the archives helped to create and perpetuate historical narratives which distorted and silenced the experiences of African Americans under slavery in order to fit certain beliefs and values held by the white majority.

Since Emancipation, white historical memory of slavery, comprised like all collective narratives of many strands and deviations, has failed to challenge the ideologies of the racial caste system left in slavery’s wake. In particular, two different narratives of slavery formed in the aftermath of the Civil War to address the significance of slavery to the war’s beginning and its ultimate meaning within the national ethos, have majorly impacted the way Americans engage politically and culturally with issues of racial inequality. Firstly, the reconciliationist narrative, portraying the causes of the Confederacy and the Union as two equally honorable causes, served

² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 25.

both as a political slogan for bipartisanship in the post-war era and a warning against legal measures for racial equality that might inflame sectional tensions once again. Secondly, the lost cause narrative, a pro-southern ideology championing the causes of secession by minimizing the trauma of slavery and promoting a states' rights ideology, dominated many early academic studies of slavery and helped to propagate white nationalist and segregationist political movements. As historian David Blight concludes in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, these popular visions of the Civil War, "in which the Old and New South were romanticized and welcomed back to a new nationalism," worked in tandem to silence the black historical memory of slavery and emancipation and subsequently the continuing plight of the black freedom struggle.³

As it has been used by activists, historians, and politicians, black historical memory of slavery often runs counter to narratives of national reconciliation and the lost cause, challenging claims that slavery was not central to the founding of the nation, played no part in the disunion of the Civil War, and had no lingering effects upon social progress. Yet, the label of counter-memory is also misrepresentative of many black citizens who kept the memory of slavery alive, not in reaction to white narratives but as a reflection of their own communal past and values. After the Civil War, black historical memory spread through Emancipation Day celebrations, religious services, and political rallies, preserving and propagating distinct cultural and historically contextualized identities. In her essay on the creation of Civil War memory within southern black communities, historian Thavolia Glymph describes the efforts of black Southerners who developed the memory of emancipation "as a political tool, a part of the larger struggle for autonomy, [and] a key component of the complicated task of molding a class

³ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 4.

consciousness among former slaves.”⁴ Later, in the early twentieth century, black historians of the “Negro History Movement” championed belief in the power of black history to liberate black bodies and minds from physical and mental bondage. These groups shaped history by connecting slavery to the racial violence and discrimination of the Jim Crow era and framed the long black freedom struggle, from slavery onward, as force of social change.

By including black historical memory within our understanding of the production of American history, it is clear how later black social movements beginning a hundred years after the abolition of slavery helped to transform American identity as a whole. While the memory of slavery has long pervaded movements for black liberation, in some ways, the Civil Rights Movement became a watershed moment for the historical revision of slavery in American society. It was, for many citizens, a national awakening to the black historical past and its connection to the inequity of black citizens in the modern era. While the Black Power Movement continued this tradition, it also questioned and deconstructed many narratives of democratic progress in which mainstream civil rights leaders often urged trust. Finally, in a period spanning both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and onward as Europe’s domination over Africa came to a close and the Pan-African Movement grew across the world, black people in the United States embraced the transatlantic heritage of slavery and transformed African American history and identity to fit both within and outside of traditional American and democratic values. Throughout these periods, as activists defined their own individual sense of identity within black history, they also helped to shift American politics to focus more on the past and present black freedom struggle.

⁴ Thavolia Glymph, “‘Liberty Dearly Bought’: The Making of Civil War Memory in Afro-American Communities in the South,” in *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950*, edited by Charles M. Payne and Adam Green, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 114.

Black historical memory, particularly that of slavery, serves as an important ideological context for the movements for racial equality and empowerment in the last half of the twentieth century. Activists of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements utilized the search for truth in American history within the development of group identity and goals, created through a shared memory of slavery and emancipation. Likewise, many black historians of the era viewed the spread of African American history as vital to the spread of racial pride and civic unity, teaching Americans of all races to see the humanity and value of black individuals and their communities. This communal belief in the importance of black history descended in many ways from the “Negro History Movement” of the early twentieth century. The historians of this movement understood that, as historian Brenda E. Stevenson explains, “The nation’s understanding of the slave status and experience ... was readily drawn upon to shape social policy to either support, or suppress, African Americans’ civil rights and economic opportunities.”⁵ Myths that suggested black people were better off under slavery, for example, helped not only to justify black disenfranchisement in the South, they also fed the institutionalized biases that limited black economic mobility all over the country. Thus, black historians of the era often framed the fight for equal historical representation as a matter of survival and progress against the psychological and social effects of slavery.

Many of the founding members of the Negro History Movement, such as Carter G. Woodson, understood that access to historical production is linked to power and also determinative of a group or individual's place within society, defining the lines between the oppressor and the oppressed. In his famous 1933 book, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson wrote:

⁵ Brenda E. Stevenson, “‘Out of Mouth of Ex-Slaves’: Carter G. Woodson’s Journal of Negro History ‘Invents’ the Study of Slavery,” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 705.

Starting out after the Civil War, the opponents of freedom and social justice decided to work out a program which would enslave the Negroes' mind inasmuch as the freedom of body had to be conceded. It was well understood that if by the teaching of history the white man could be further assured of his superiority and the Negro could be made to feel that he had always been a failure and that the subjection of his will to some other race is necessary the freedman, then, would still be a slave.⁶

Woodson and his colleagues witnessed how the system of segregation that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented to many white southerners a return to stability as it established a safeguard against future disruptions of the racial caste system formed under slavery. As many prominent white historians portrayed the enslaved and their descendants as unfit for the unrestrained freedom of full citizenship, black historians portrayed African Americans as a group that had risen up out of bondage and gained, for a short time, some control over their own political and economic future. By depicting the historical agency of the enslaved, they helped to shape ideas of self-determination and black pride within African American identity.

Like the academic reformers of the Negro History Movement, activists of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements recognized the history of slavery as vital to the identity and social perspective of the African American community. Borrowing the historical presentism of previous generations, the Civil Rights Movement helped to usher black historical memory beyond the African American community and into the national consciousness. Yet, as this study endeavors to show, activist views of history were complicated by the myriad of political strategies and philosophies that define the history of the black freedom struggle. While there are many ways to understand the complexity of black historical memory, this thesis will focus mainly on the divisions between integrationists and black nationalists, a large umbrella term ranging from black separatists to those calling for a consolidation of black power within

⁶ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, (New York, NY: Tribeca Books, 2013), 69.

America's cultural, political, and economic systems. To begin to define civil rights and black power activists in these terms alone is a challenge, made difficult by the plurality of individual beliefs and experiences. Many black activists in this era did not fall neatly into a philosophical category and neither did their beliefs about the past. Yet, within the political environment of the 60s and 70s, while de jure and de facto segregation still dominated national conversations on race, allusions to the black historical past during slavery often appealed to questions of national and racial identity.

Making pleas for federal intervention in the South, integrationists often appealed to a patriotic history of America, grounded in a remembrance of black contributions to the preservation of democratic ideals. The emancipationist narrative of the Civil War, which viewed slavery as an aberration of democracy and necessitated its destruction in the fight to preserve the Union, originated in the rhetoric of abolitionists decrying the toxic nature of a democracy, half slave and half free. In the 1960s, black activists and intellectuals used this particular memory of slavery primarily to refute the historical arguments of segregationists and portray the disenfranchisement of black men and women in the South as a latent victory for the architects of the Confederacy. Much of the work of the Civil Rights Movement focused on identifying the harmful effects of segregation upon modern society. In 1963, Kenneth B. Clark, a black psychologist whose work, along with that of his wife Mamie Clark, was instrumental to the Supreme Court ruling against school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, argued that segregation not only damaged the psychology of black individuals, but the stability of society at large, writing, "Those who would seek to block the integration of the Negro into the educational, political, and economic fabric of American life are in a very literal sense subversive, since they

seek to weaken America.”⁷ By helping to correct America’s collective amnesia towards slavery, activists and historians of the Civil Rights era hoped to illustrate the damage of any racial caste system upon the nation’s moral values.

While the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act put a legal end to segregation in the South, they also left many racial problems unsolved. In both the North and South, housing and job discrimination limited the economic and social mobility of African Americans. For many activists of the late Civil Rights and Black Power era, the failures of integration produced a condition of “civic estrangement,” defined by Salamishah Tillet as the paradoxical experience of African Americans “as simultaneous citizens and ‘non-citizens,’ who experience the feelings of disillusionment and melancholia of non-belonging and a yearning for civic membership.”⁸ In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, many black activists drifted away from the patriotic vision of integration, embracing historical narratives which portrayed slavery as a fundamental aspect of America’s origin while framing African Americans as independent from their historical oppressors. While integrationists saw themselves as American citizens, deserving of the rights of citizenship denied to them under slavery and thereafter, black nationalists generally questioned their place in a democracy that still resembled, in many ways, the slavocracy that existed at its origin. As many black nationalists of the era believed, integrationist appeals to a common American history and identity weakened political claims to black self-determination and autonomy from the nation’s corrupt laws and institutions, leaving those of African descent firmly bound to the enslavers and colonizers who stripped them of their own heritage. Black liberation, they reasoned, depended on the rejection of the American Dream and the pursuit of equal opportunity outside of white political, economic, and cultural control.

⁷ Kenneth B. Clark, “A Relevant Celebration of the Emancipation Centennial,” *Ebony*, September 1963, 25.

⁸ Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 3.

By comparing and contrasting the historical positions taken by a multitude of black activists, historians, politicians, writers, and average people, each individual existing on a spectrum of black political backgrounds, each chapter in this thesis will focus on a series of events which thrust the black historical perspective into the national consciousness, bringing to light a potent idea within the memory of slavery and tracing its usage within American culture and politics to create social change. The first chapter of this thesis, an analysis of civil rights activism during the Civil War Centennial, focuses on the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement and those who utilized the memory of emancipation to accentuate a historical claim to the rights of American citizenship. Hoping to overturn the racist myths that drove white prejudice and revise America's collective amnesia towards slavery and its modern remnants, they sought to push the issue of racial reconciliation within celebrations of the Civil War Centennial by framing civil and voting rights as important parts within the unfulfilled promises of emancipation.

The second chapter, on the emergence of black studies programs during the Black Campus Movement of the late 60s and early 70s, explores the growing disillusionment among many black Americans regarding the promises of integration. During the Black Campus Movement, many black student groups invoked the memory of slavery to highlight evidence of modern white tyranny embedded deep within institutions of higher learning. From 1968 to 1975, following numerous protests that often ended in police confrontations and many tense debates between students and faculty, over 500 universities and colleges instituted black studies programs and courses.⁹ Many vocal student leaders identified themselves within the black radical tradition, often advocating ideas like Afrocentrism, black self-determination, and, in some cases, armed self-defense. They became, in many ways, grassroots foot soldiers for the

⁹ Ibram H. Rogers, "The Black Campus Movement and the Institutionalization of Black Studies, 1965–1970." *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 28.

newly emerging Black Power Movement, influenced by the rhetoric and ideas of revolutionaries calling for black political and economic control. Yet, the emancipationist dream was by no means dead, as black activists continued working to mend the estrangement between black students and their educational institutions by molding curriculum and campus life to encompass themes of racial diversity.

The third chapter examines the African heritage consciousness movement which spanned the Civil Rights and Black Power eras and beyond. Encouraging black Americans to unite with other communities of the African diaspora, early civil rights activists stressed the need for black political participation in Africa's modern struggle against colonization. Yet, while some self-avowed pan-Africanists rejected any identification with America, many black Americans embraced a transnational identity, acknowledging the unique cultural journey of African Americans through slavery as well as their place within the founding of the nation. Following the 1976 publication of *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Alex Haley's book detailing the story of his African and American ancestors since the 18th century, many in the United States began to understand black Americans as a transnational group with an important historical legacy that extended beyond the nation's borders and connected them to those of African descent around the world.

In all of these time periods, the collective memory of slavery framed many of America's most pressing social issues, contextualizing the continuation of institutional racism within the culture, economy, and systems of governance for more than a hundred and fifty years after the abolishment of slavery. As many of the activists and historians maintaining the black historical memory of slavery throughout the twentieth century argued, the failure of the United States to come to terms with the history of slavery allowed racial inequality to persist through its laws,

social customs, political culture, and economic structures for generations following slavery's end. In each case, black history was malleable as a tool of social change, because as historian Vincent Harding explained in 1970, "it deals with the most political phenomenon of all, the struggle between the master and the slave, between the colonized and the colonizer, between the oppressed and the oppressor. And it recognizes that all histories of peoples participate in politics and are shaped by political and ideological views."¹⁰ The black historical memory of slavery in America often reveals a societal understanding of the racial imbalances of power. It reminds Americans that, even before America became a country, some of its residents have maintained dominance over other residents. Sometimes it is used as a measure of racial progress, or lack thereof. Perhaps most importantly, it demands that Americans of all races continue to reckon with its remaining consequences.

¹⁰ Vincent Harding, *Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land*, (Atlanta: GA, Institute of the Black World, 1970), 21.

Chapter 1

The Civil Rights Movement and the Civil War Centennial: Transforming National Commemoration to Fulfill the Promises of Emancipation

From 1960 to 1965, Americans commemorated the hundred-year anniversary of the Civil War with many celebrating the event as a time for national unity and pride. Yet, despite the hopes of many national and state organizers who aimed to keep the controversial themes of the Civil Rights Movement from overtaking public commemorations, the Centennial arrived at a time in which rising racial tensions threatened to divide the nation. Though a majority of white Americans failed to see the relevance of black civil rights to the Centennial, many black Americans of the early 1960s saw the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement as inextricably linked within the narrative of a long black freedom struggle. Civil rights leaders drew a direct line between the fight against slavery and to their contemporary struggle for racial equality in the form of voting rights and anti-segregation laws. Many activists of the era often referred to the modern condition of African Americans in the South as slave-like, in other words, devoid of all real political and economic self-determination. Though no longer held captive by individual slaveholders, black southerners were bound to a system that constrained their social and economic mobility by restricting access to public spaces, education, voting, housing, and jobs. As the Civil Rights Movement claimed, the black enslavement of the past was at the root of black disenfranchisement and impoverishment in the modern South.

By asserting the end of slavery as the Civil War's purpose and greatest legacy, civil rights activists centered both emancipation and their current struggle against white supremacy in the South within the fight to preserve the nation. The history of African American participation in the struggle to preserve the Union also legitimized demands for black integration into the

democracy they helped to save. By highlighting the importance of black emancipation, integrationists urged reflection on the liberal and democratic principles that necessitated the abolishment of slavery and the inclusion of African Americans within the nation's body politic. Seizing upon America's preoccupation with the past during the Centennial, black historians, writers, and activists utilized public commemoration of Emancipation to bring attention to its racial legacies in the era of Jim Crow and to promote federal action against segregation by emphasizing the role of the federal government in ending slavery. Appealing to the federal government, they produced proof of a legal precedent for the nation's leaders to act in the interest of oppressed racial minorities in the South by prohibiting the suppression of black political activity. By directing national attention towards a collective remembrance of the struggle for black emancipation, advocates of the Civil Rights Movement helped to generate political support for voting rights and desegregation, therefore rallying Americans to fulfill the promises of emancipation.

For many black Americans, the fight for inclusion in the nation's memory of the Civil War was a small part of a larger effort to inspire recognition of racial equality within the nation's political ethos by illuminating the struggle for abolition that defined much of America's early history. Yet, in the late 1950s, as national and state organizers made plans for the Civil War Centennial, the theme of Emancipation largely fell to the wayside in most government-sponsored celebrations for three major reasons. Firstly, for the most part, members and advisors to Congress's Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC), tasked in 1957 to create numerous plans and programs for the anniversary, were far more concerned with fighting a culture war with the Soviet Union than attempting to solve America's racial issues. In *Troubled Commemorations*,

historian Robert Cook describes the Civil War Centennial as a “cold war pageant,” functioning as anti-communist propaganda intended by the federal government to inspire pride in the resiliency of American democracy in the face of past great challenges. At the CWCC’s first meeting, one of the commission’s historians, Bell Wiley, had guided his fellow delegates away from “any sort of activity that will tend to revive the bitterness and hatred engendered by the conflict of a century ago.”¹¹ Believing that the Civil Rights Movement would be a distraction from the Centennial’s patriotic themes, Congressman Wint Smith reportedly told a Commission colleague, “I am determined that no left wing group is going to run off with this show.”¹² Not long after America’s second Red Scare and the 1950s witch-hunt led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, many conservatives in the CWCC perceived civil rights activists as in league with communism and a threat to the pro-America messaging of the commemoration.

In addition to the political theater of the Cold War era, each of the Centennial organizers came to work on the national project with a particular view of Civil War history, molded not only by their own family legacies and stories, but also by the collective memory taught to them through education and popular media. While the whitewashing of slavery and emancipation from national commemorations aided their mission to counter anti-Soviet propaganda, the CWCC also approved themes of Civil War memory appealing to the widest commercial audience possible. During the early 1960s, as historian David Blight writes, for most Americans, “to claim the centrality of slavery and emancipation in Civil War memory was still an awkward kind of impoliteness at best and heresy at worst.”¹³ While the Civil Rights Movement proposed

¹¹ Robert Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 61.

¹² *Ibid*, 31.

¹³ David W. Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

a bloodless social revolution, similar in purpose to the Civil War, aiming to free black southerners from southern tyranny, many Americans of the era still remained incredulous of this historical premise.

Feeling little pressure to address the racial aspects of the war, the major themes proposed by the CWCC largely ignored both the role slavery played in causing the Civil War as well as the progress made towards racial equality in the immediate aftermath of slavery's abolition. At the beginning of 1959, the CWCC's executive director, Karl Betts, told an interviewer, "We're not emphasizing Emancipation. You see there's a bigger theme—the beginning of a new America."¹⁴ Referring to positive changes the Civil War brought to America, Betts apparently did not perceive black emancipation or black citizenship as a significant part of America's rebirth, or at least not a part to be singled out for celebration or even remembrance, adding, "a lot of fine Negro people loved life as it was in the old South."¹⁵ Betts and many of his colleagues dismissed slavery and its destruction as secondary to the war's unification effort. The committee's only black delegate, Colonel West Hamilton, a member of the District of Columbia's Civil War Centennial Commission, later admitted that he joined for fear "that the part played by the Negro in the Civil War would be misrepresented or omitted, if left solely to the arrangements of the various state commissions."¹⁶ Black historians like Hamilton attempted to influence CWCC projects to include the struggle for Emancipation and the contributions of black soldiers, yet the committee largely stifled their direct participation.

Lastly, the influence of black historical interest groups was dwarfed by the financial power of many southern state commissions who planned to portray the Civil War as a tragic end

¹⁴ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Centennial and the Negro," *Negro History Bulletin* 24, no. 8, (May 1961), 184.

to a proud and heroic civilization, the former slave society of the South. Not only would this message affirm the political and social values of segregation in the twentieth century, southern politicians knew it was also profitable. As state and local commissions all over the country raised funds for their own commemorations, the CWCC promised Americans that the Centennial would not only be a time for national unity, but also a boom for tourism revenue. Karl Betts predicted that 1961 to 1965 would be “the biggest travel years in American history.”¹⁷ Due to the fact that most Civil War battles were fought in the South, former Confederate states were responsible for organizing many of the Centennial’s public ceremonies. States like Virginia and Mississippi invested large sums in their centennial commissions, respectively \$1,750,000 and \$500,000 compared to \$100,000 appropriated by Congress, helping to ensure the dominance of Confederate memory in the travel campaigns, reenactments, and media of the Centennial.

The South’s political and financial control over the Centennial threatened not only the memory of slavery but also the political fight against segregation. Fearing that the South’s influence would overshadow the emancipationist themes of the Civil War, activist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois warned in 1960 that white southerners, “insist[ing] that theirs was a just war fought with the highest motives by the noblest of men,” were “pouring forth books and pamphlets to prove this” and leading the rest of the country to celebrate “as a triumph in human effort this despicable struggle to keep black Americans in slavery.”¹⁸ Like many black historians of the time, Du Bois reasoned that the lost cause narrative propagated by southern Civil War commissions also functioned as pro-segregation propaganda. While many segregationists may have publicly denounced the actual institution of slavery, they valorized the cause of the Confederacy to save the South’s racial status quo from progressive disruption. If Americans

¹⁷ Dan Wakefield, “Civil War Centennial: Bull Run with Popcorn,” *National Guardian*, January 30, 1960.

¹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Lie of History as It Is Taught Today,” *The National Guardian*, February 15, 1960.

could accept the plantation myth, believing that the strict racial caste system of the antebellum period produced peace and prosperity for both slaveholders and the enslaved, they could also dismiss major arguments for integration, namely that black communities might prosper as full citizens outside of white control. Thus, the politics of memory within the Civil War Centennial had major implications for the public policy debate over segregation.

In early 1961, when the South Carolina Commission on the War Between the States invited the CWCC to participate in a pageant commemorating the Battle of Fort Sumter in Charleston, it became clear that the South's commemoration of the Civil War would be at odds with the national Civil Rights Movement. Controversy began in February when news broke that a black delegate of the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission, Madaline Williams, would not be able to attend the event due to South Carolina's segregation laws. After a period of evasion by the CWCC, President John F. Kennedy asked for compliance in a letter to the Commission's director, Ulysses S. Grant III, writing, "the Commission has the responsibility to see that all of its members and guests are treated on a basis of equality at all the facilities arranged by the Commission."¹⁹ As one of the first civil rights related controversies of the Kennedy administration, the conflict in Charleston exposed the national disunion of America one hundred years after its Civil War. While the federal government had failed in the eyes of many African American leaders, the backlash to the scandal pressured organizers to make a compromise, allowing for two separate Centennial events. President Kennedy invited the Commission to convene at Charleston's naval base, a desegregated federal facility, while members of the South Carolina Commission implemented their centennial as previously planned. Yet, the damage to the CWCC's reputation on issues of race had already been done.

¹⁹ Cook, *Troubled Commemorations*, 99.

For many civil rights leaders, the event in Charleston proved that the federal government remained unwilling to challenge segregation in any meaningful way. On March 4, 1961, a leader of one North Carolina NAACP chapter, Robert Williams, denounced the “Centennial Shame” in his newsletter, *The Crusader*, informing readers, “the entire Colored world can get a good look at the true attitude of the nation that is out to enforce this special brand of democracy on a world still struggling to cast off its chains of bondage.”²⁰ With the Civil War serving as a backdrop to the political circumstances of its centennial celebration, civil rights leaders used history as an appeal for federal condemnation of segregation during national commemorations. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary for the NAACP, called the scheduled celebration at Charleston “a betrayal of everything the Civil War was fought for,” especially the patriotic struggle to preserve a union “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”²¹ Williams and Wilkins pointed to the corruption of democratic values, depicting segregation and federal appeasement of the South as the source of the nation’s moral decay.

Behind the pageantry and commercialism of grand tributes to the Confederate heroes and victories of the Civil War, there was often a violent backdrop to unbridled celebrations of Confederate memory in the South. According to white Tennessean and journalist Ralph McGill, white southerners were acting “as if they had not come back into the Union.”²² Writing in April, McGill chastised the growing enthusiasm for Confederate memory which he blamed for “stirring up old hatreds, making ancient wounds bleed again, reviving Ku Klux Klans, working themselves into immature fits of emotionalism, recreating old battles, and otherwise doing a

²⁰ Robert Williams, *The Crusader*, March 4, 1961, 4, Special Collections, Duke University Library, Durham, NC.

²¹ “NAACP Raps Civil War Centennial Fete,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1961.

²² Cook, *Troubled Commemorations*, 86.

great disservice to the memory of those who fought and died in the war of 1861-65.”²³ The next month, as white and black activists of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) drove through Alabama in “Freedom Rides” to challenge segregation in public transportation, members of the Ku Klux Klan rallied to forcefully block their entry.²⁴ On May 14, in the city of Anniston, a mob of Klansmen firebombed one of the Freedom Ride buses and beat riders almost to the point of death before being stopped by the local highway patrol. In the following week, as the Freedom Riders continued their dangerous mission in Birmingham, a white mob once again brutally assaulted bus passengers as law enforcement refused to interfere. Summarizing the conflicts in Alabama, the Southern Regional Council, an Atlanta based civil rights organization observed that the paramilitary forces of segregation had “reproduced in a few long days a lot of southern history.”²⁵ As CORE’s activists witnessed, appeals within the South’s centennial to preserve the legacies of the Confederacy were answered by a petulant faction of white citizens who would take up arms to preserve what they understood as the southern way of life.

In the early 1960s, the federal government’s neglect towards the celebration of black emancipation and the embracing of Confederate heritage by many southern states represented a national indifference, not only to black history but also to the plight of African Americans in the present. After the Freedom Rides in Alabama, federal officials warned against further action by civil rights organizations attempting to integrate the South by direct action, or acts of civil disobedience in which protesters peacefully and publicly violated the laws they wished to change. When members of CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) continued the Freedom Rides in Mississippi, both John Kennedy and his brother, Attorney

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Derek Catsam, *Freedom’s Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 149.

General Robert F. Kennedy, demanded a “cooling-off” period giving the administration time to formulate a political strategy against the South’s continued violation of anti-discrimination rulings and laws. In a telegram to Robert Kennedy, a Freedom Rider in Mississippi named Uriah J. Field rejected the administration’s attempts to placate protesters, asserting, “Had there not been a cooling off following the Civil War, the Negro would be free today. Isn’t 99 years long enough to cool?”²⁶ Signaling their intent to persevere against the threat of white supremacist violence, the Freedom Riders endeavored to finish the work begun by the federal government a hundred years prior to make black southerners full and equal citizens under the law.

Throughout June, July, August, and September, Freedom Riders continued to garner the scorn of segregationists and uneasy federal officials as they made their way across the South. On June 2, 1961, former president Harry S. Truman compared the freedom riders to abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe who “did their part in bringing about the Civil War.”²⁷ He added that the Freedom Riders ought to remain in the North, “attend to their own business and work through the people who are interested in an orderly, legal manner.”²⁸ While Truman’s comparison was meant to negatively cast civil rights activists as outside agitators dangerously exacerbating sectional tensions, many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement aimed to cast black protesters in the role of abolitionists awakening the moral consciousness of America. Framing their demands within the legacy of the Emancipation Proclamation, some black activists called on Americans to look to the history of the Civil War for inspiration in solving the country’s race problems.

²⁶ Catsam, *Freedom’s Main Line*, 256.

²⁷ “Freedom Rider Situation Arouses Truman Anger,” *Tampa Bay Times* (St. Petersburg, FL), June 3, 1961.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Perhaps more than anyone of his time, Martin Luther King Jr. strategically used the history of emancipation to demand federal intervention in the segregated South. On June 6, 1961, King spoke at a news conference in New York on the relevance of Lincoln's political struggle for Emancipation to the modern Civil Rights Movement, declaring, "Just as Abraham Lincoln had the vision to see almost 100 years ago that this nation could not exist half-free, the present administration must have the insight to see that today the nation cannot exist half-segregated and half-free."²⁹ In the early years of the Civil War Centennial, King focused much of his efforts on trying to spur action from John F. Kennedy, believing that Kennedy's presidency, much like that of Abraham Lincoln's, signified an important opportunity for the power of the executive office to once again be levied in favor of black liberation. Kennedy, who promised in his 1960 presidential campaign to enforce "equality of opportunity" with the "stroke of the President's pen," had long inspired hope for civil rights reform from the executive office.³⁰ That year, King, hoping to transform the Centennial into an opportunity for Kennedy to address real solutions to racial inequality, told his legal advisor Clarence B. Jones that they must "get Kennedy to issue a second Emancipation Proclamation on the anniversary of the first one."³¹

On May 17, 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a manifesto to President John F. Kennedy, urging the him to consider the proclamation's role in the work of civil rights activists working to "affirm that democratic heritage so painfully won, in part, upon the grassy battlefields of Antietam."³² Requesting that Kennedy issue a "second Emancipation Proclamation" by legally abolishing segregation, he wrote, "We believe that you, like Abraham Lincoln before

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ David W. Blight and Allison Scharfstein, "King's Forgotten Manifesto," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2012.

³¹ Blight and Scharfstein, "King's Forgotten Manifesto."

³² Martin Luther King Jr., "Appeal to the President of the United States," May 17, 1962, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/appeal-president-united-states> (accessed November 25, 2015).

you, stand at a historic crossroads in the life and conscience of our nation. The Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation must be honored by the complete elimination of all forms of state imposed segregation and discrimination.”³³ The following summer, in a speech at the New York Civil War Centennial Commission’s Emancipation Proclamation Observance, King told attendees, “there is but one way to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation, and that is to make its declaration of freedom real; to reach back to the origins of our nation when our message of equality electrified an unfree world, and reaffirm democracy by deeds as bold and daring as the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.”³⁴ Speaking to both the president and the American people, King insisted that Lincoln’s proclamation had confirmed the ability of the executive branch to dispute discriminatory state laws. Though Kennedy ultimately rejected the advice to officially end segregation and enforce black voting rights in the South, King’s early correspondence with the president strengthened political connections between the history of emancipation and the struggle for black civil rights.

As civil rights activists grew increasingly disillusioned with the federal government and its failure to protect black citizenship in the South, some began to protest the national silence over the issue of slavery during the Centennial. In September of 1962, after the CWCC scheduled a “quiet ceremony” at the Lincoln Memorial to commemorate the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s issuing of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, a document threatening his intent to free the slaves of rebel states who refused to rejoin the Union, leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) warned of a boycott if the CWCC failed

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “Emancipation Proclamation Centennial Address,” September 12, 1962, <http://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/historyculture/mlk-ep.htm> (accessed November 25, 2015).

to adequately incorporate black participants and anti-discrimination themes.³⁵ Bishop Smallwood E. Williams, organizer of the boycott, framed this demand for unbiased historical truth as a civil rights issue, explaining, “If our approach to the goal of full citizenship at times seem uncourteous and embarrassing, one only has to reflect upon the condition the Negro finds himself in today.”³⁶ Eventually, the SCLC called off the boycott after a handful of prominent African Americans, including singer Mahalia Jackson, composer Ulysses Kay, and then federal court judge Thurgood Marshall, were asked to perform and speak at the event. Yet, in a crowd of around 5,000, less than 500 African Americans attended. In his brief remarks at the Lincoln Memorial, however, Marshall made clear the connections between Lincoln’s destruction of slavery and the work of the modern Civil Rights Movement:

While the enforcement of the Civil War Amendments as other constitutional provisions must remain with the courts, the realization of the equalitarian purpose of the Emancipation Proclamation is the responsibility for all. We must rededicate ourselves to recognize every American on his merit, without regard to race, color, or previous condition of servitude.³⁷

Marshall, like Martin Luther King Jr., reminded Americans of their civic duty to rectify the wrongs of slavery by politically supporting the legal protection of black citizenship.

On the hundredth year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, many activists, politicians and writers also commemorated the document by stressing its unfinished work in the modern era. At the beginning of 1963, white Philadelphia Mayor James H.J. Tate called for donations to finance a monument to the end of slavery, declaring, ‘The Emancipation Proclamation, though it rang out across the land in 1863, has still to be fully implemented in this

³⁵ “Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation is 100 Years Old Today,” *The Bristol Daily Courier*, September 22, 1967.

³⁶ “500 Show In Crowd of 5,000,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 29, 1962.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

great country of ours.”³⁸ At an Emancipation Centennial commemoration in Springfield, Illinois, Georgia State Senator Leroy R. Johnson, the first black man to hold a position in Georgia’s legislature in over fifty years, told the audience, “Today, 100 years after the Proclamation ... The Negro is not now free and never will be until the idea that he is free lives in other minds.”³⁹ Prominent black writer James Baldwin agreed that there had never been “one hundred years of Negro freedom,” adding that the centennial year “which so harshly illuminates our failure either to end the Civil War or to recognize the Negro as a human being,” should be seen “as an opportunity to take a delicate and arduous inventory” of past racial injustices.⁴⁰ Though many prominent civil rights figures agreed that Emancipation had failed, it was unclear which direction the movement would ultimately take to address racial inequality.

While mainstream civil rights organizations continued to call for federal intervention, many activists also remained skeptical of the nation’s commitment to black freedom, both in the past and the present. Emancipation, they reasoned, never actually resulted in full racial equality. After all, during the century since the Civil War, the federal government had done little to oppose southern rejection of black citizenship, especially after the era of Reconstruction. The history of national silence towards state sanctioned violence and discrimination in the South engendered distrust of the federal system. Most importantly, many African Americans saw racial inequality and segregation as a national issue, pointing to the prejudice that black families and individuals faced finding decent jobs and housing in the urban centers of the North. Though many in the Civil Rights Movement recognized the negative impact of these and other issues of economic injustice, they were not the focus of efforts by major Civil Rights organizations in the

³⁸ “Tate Proposes Shrine to Honor End of Slavery,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 3, 1963.

³⁹ “Freedom Struggle Goes On,” *Jet*, January 24, 1963, 6.

⁴⁰ James Baldwin, “Not 100 Years of Freedom,” *Liberator*, January 1963, 2.

early 1960s. Still, many of those considered radicals in 1963 refused to let the national narratives around Emancipation and Civil Rights inspire a sense of pride or accomplishment in the government's handling of black citizenship.

In some ways, the patriotic memory put forth by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., emphasizing the role of the federal government in ending slavery and segregation, oversimplified the historical processes of enslavement by casting American democracy as the foundation for racial equality. For the writers of *Liberator* magazine, a socialist Pan-African publication advocating black self-government and economic control, racial inequity stemmed from deep corruptions within America's political, economic, and cultural institutions. Writing in the January 1963 issue, the magazine's editorial board described "a long and bitter struggle ahead before the fulfillment of the emancipation prophecy."⁴¹ They continued, "Racism and jim crow are such basic ingredients of the American way of life that they will not be eliminated without major surgery."⁴² The News and Letters Committee, a Marxist humanist group founded in 1955 by a Jewish Ukrainian-born woman named Raya Dunayevskaya, likewise marked the centennial by placing "American Civilization on Trial" and detailing the abandonment of black workers' rights in the aftermath of Emancipation. Writing for her organization's newspaper, *News and Letters*, Dunayevskaya endeavored to expose "the truth of American democracy: that the racism which is the basis of the political rule of the South is acceptable to the North, and has been so not only since it withdrew the Federal troops from the South at the end of Reconstruction in 1877, but ever since the ambivalent Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776."⁴³ These works

⁴¹ Daniel Watts, statement from the editor, *Liberator*, January 1963, 2.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Statement of the Editorial Board, "Emancipation Proclamation: 100 Years After American Civilization on Trial," *News and Letters*, January 1963.

signified, among some Americans in both socialist and Black Nationalist circles, disillusionment with the democratic idealism of the Emancipation Centennial.

In 1963, though many were disappointed in the progress of Emancipation, voices calling for a serious reevaluation of institutionalized racism throughout the United States largely fell to the background of mainstream civil rights efforts in the South. Yet, for many African Americans, the Southern direction of the Civil Rights Movement seemed, not ignorant of Northern racism, but strategic in addressing it. In 1965, historian Howard Zinn compared the black activists of the 1960s to the abolitionists of the antebellum period who exposed the cruelties of slavery to gain sympathy from a northern audience. Yet, as Zinn argued, “these new abolitionists” had a significant advantage over their anti-slavery counterparts: the rise of “mass modern communication.”⁴⁴ He wrote that the televisation of activists “marching, praying, singing, [and] demonstrating their message” forced white people to witness and empathize with the plight of black citizens.⁴⁵ Like abolitionists who used pictures, slave narratives, and oral history to spread their message, many civil rights leaders believed that the key to abolishing segregation in the South was to humanize black activists in their public confrontations with white supremacist factions in the South by forcing them to physically and peacefully confront racial separation in prominent city centers.

Following in the legacy of abolitionists, activists continued to put pressure on the federal government in the spring of 1963, this time by exposing the violence of southern resistance to desegregation to the national and international media. The Birmingham campaign, led by Martin Luther King Jr. and members of the SCLC and SNCC, aimed to desegregating the city’s downtown stores and public facilities through direct action. Boycotting anti-black merchants,

⁴⁴ Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965), 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

conducting sit-ins, and marching to City Hall, black activists forced the white citizens of Birmingham to confront the racial boundaries of their city. As the media began to focus on the brutal suppression of non-violent protesters in Alabama, Americans began to witness the racial violence of the South from the perspective of its victims. Wyatt Tee Walker, an SCLC member and one of the campaign's chief strategists, later explained that the movement's leaders expected and planned for retaliation, believing that "the opposition would surely do something to attract the media, and in turn induce national sympathy and attention to the everyday segregated circumstance of a black person living in the Deep South."⁴⁶ For more than a month, participants from the SCLC and SNCC and local activists in Birmingham put their lives at risk to challenge public opinion on race by forcing America to reckon with the legacy of slavery within the modern South.

Yet, in the first few weeks of the campaign, while these demonstrations did catch the attention of national newspapers, they failed to arouse much sympathy from the American public. In an open letter published in the local newspaper, eight white Birmingham clergymen petitioned the leaders of SCLC and SNCC to cease all direct action and to "observe the principles of law and order and common sense."⁴⁷ Though they condoned the struggle against segregation, they argued, "a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets."⁴⁸ The stalling of moderate religious leaders angered Martin Luther King Jr., who believed that the creation of tension through peaceful means could combat America's apathy towards its racial problems. On April 12, Birmingham police arrested King

⁴⁶ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*, (New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group, 2011), 125.

⁴⁷ Edward Gilbreath, *Birmingham Revolution: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Epic Challenge to the Church*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

after he refused to obey a court-ordered injunction banning public demonstrations. During his time in prison, King penned a famous response to the clergymen, known today as “The Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” expressing his disappointment with “the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.”⁴⁹

Detailing a long history of moderation, King admonished the “lukewarm acceptance” of racial justice exhibited by the clergymen, which, for one hundred years after emancipation, had failed to achieve any real progress. Comparing their malaise to the brave sacrifices made by black freedom fighters against slavery, King reminded his audience that black people in America “know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”⁵⁰ Though King was definitively non-violent in his approach to social revolution, he evoked a memory of a more radical black generation that had taken up arms against persecution in the days of the Civil War. He promised that he and his peers would “reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom,” adding, “If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail.”⁵¹ Unlike the radical writers of *Liberator* magazine and the News and Letters Committee, King framed the footsoldiers of this new revolution, not in opposition to American democracy, but as defenders of its principles and successors to the battles for freedom in both the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

King had long professed the importance of racial equality to America’s democratic civil religion. In the first two years of the Centennial, King pleaded with President Kennedy to take on the mantle of black liberation in fulfillment of the work of his predecessor,

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” in *Liberating Faith Religious Voices for Justice, Peace, and Ecological Wisdom*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 178.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

Abraham Lincoln. Yet now, in 1963, his focus on the president faded as he placed everyday Americans battling segregation in the role of emancipators. After his release from jail on April 20, the Birmingham campaign continued to position nonviolent protesters, many of them young black students, against the violent Birmingham police department in their attempts to dissuade protesters from freely assembling. In early May, after local police arrested hundreds of children participating in a mass demonstration to desegregate several buildings in downtown Birmingham, many northern newspapers reacted with shock and outrage. An editorial in the *New York Times* described the dehumanizing police tactics weaponized against black students, asserting that “the use of police dogs and high-pressure water hoses to subdue schoolchildren is a national disgrace.”⁵² While many criticized the decision to put children as young as eight years old on the front lines of a violent conflict, this demonstration, called the “Children’s Crusade” by *Newsweek* magazine, helped awaken Americans to the lengths that white power structures would go to suppress criticism of segregation.⁵³

Months later, when Alabama governor George Wallace stood in front of the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama, blocking black students from enrolling and refusing “to willingly submit to illegal usurpation of power by the Central Government,” Americans again confronted the uneasy process of desegregation through the historical lens of abolition.⁵⁴ In response to Wallace, John F. Kennedy issued an executive order, authorizing the Alabama National Guard to ensure the student’s enrollment. That same day, on June 11, Kennedy delivered his famous televised address on civil rights, announcing publicly for the first time his intentions to pursue the abolishment of segregation by a Congressional bill. “One hundred years

⁵² “Outrage in Alabama,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1963.

⁵³ “Birmingham, U.S.A.: Look at Them Run,” *Newsweek*, May 13, 1963, 27-28.

⁵⁴ Lloyd Earl Rohler, *George Wallace: Conservative Populist*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 122.

of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves,” he declared, “yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression.”⁵⁵ Recalling the events of the Birmingham campaign and warning of a “moral crisis,” Kennedy counseled Americans, “The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.”⁵⁶ By comparing the domestic upheaval of the Civil War to the fight against segregation in modern Birmingham, the president helped Americans to see the push for civil rights made by King and other activists of the era as a part of a long and historic struggle for the moral conscience of the nation.

The president, pledging that 1963 was the time “for this Nation to fulfill its promise,” set a new precedent for political action against segregation.⁵⁷ Yet, as activists well understood, neither legislation nor Supreme Court rulings could change the South overnight. Both white southerners and their elected officials were poised to fight federal meddling at all costs. Of course, it was not federal officials like Kennedy who bore the brunt of this resistance, but the southern black activists who worked on the front lines to secure full citizenship and voting rights. A night after Kennedy’s speech, a Ku Klux Klansman killed Medgar Evers, field secretary of the Mississippi NAACP, with a shotgun in the activist’s own front lawn. In the wake of the murder, thousands marched in Jackson, Mississippi to demand justice for his killers, some reportedly

⁵⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Report to the American People on Civil Rights,” (speech, Washington, D.C., June 11, 1963), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/LH8F_0Mzv0e6R01yEm74Ng.aspx (December 24, 2017).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

shouting, “We want freedom ... and it won’t be long.”⁵⁸ With a sense of sad hopefulness, Evers’s mourner’s reminded those watching that change, while not necessarily easy or without bloodshed, was on its way.

In national commemorations of the Civil War Centennial, it became difficult for some to ignore the parallels between competing themes of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Opposing political positions on the civil rights issue were highly visible in the dedication speeches given by state governors, invited from around the country to speak at the centennial commemoration of the battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. Governor James Hamilton Peabody of Massachusetts remarked that America had “failed, to date, in its expressed purpose of achieving a real democracy for all its citizens.”⁵⁹ New Jersey Governor Richard J. Hughes reminded his audience, “The Civil War was not fought to preserve the Union ‘lily white’ or ‘Jim Crow’; it was fought for liberty and justice for all.”⁶⁰ While some Northern politicians framed the Civil War as a national struggle for racial progress, southern politicians used the occasion to defend the history and racial status quo of the the South. Maintaining his commitment to segregation as he paid tribute to Confederate soldiers, George Wallace of Alabama asserted that his state would continue to “stand for constitutional government and thousands of people throughout the nation look to the South to restore constitutional rights and the rights of states and individuals.”⁶¹ Like the sectional tensions that led to the Civil War, civil rights and racial equality began to define the political divisions of the conflict’s centennial anniversary.

⁵⁸ “US Attorney Helps Police Quell Mourners in Jackson,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 16, 1963.

⁵⁹ Brian Matthew Jordan, “‘We Stand on the Same Battlefield’: The Gettysburg Centenary and the Shadow of Race,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135, no. 4 (2011): 505.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 505-506.

⁶¹ Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 47.

After Kennedy's pledge to support new civil rights legislation, the job before civil rights leaders was to promote the legal abolishment of Jim Crow as the next logical stage in the country's evolution. In his famous "I Have A Dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. once again reiterated the importance of national reflection over the Emancipation Proclamation to the future prosperity of all Americans. This address, delivered on August 28, 1963 to over 250,000 Americans in front of the Lincoln Memorial, firmly established the role of the Civil Rights Movement in fulfilling the hundred-year-old promises of freedom. King proclaimed:

Five score years ago, a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree is a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice ... But 100 years later the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still badly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.⁶²

In making this claim, King affirmed that racial equality represented the next step in the narrative of American democracy. The ethical appeals within King's "I Have A Dream Speech," like his plea to President Kennedy for a second Emancipation Proclamation, aimed to accommodate the average American's view of slavery and the Civil War and their racial legacies in the present.

While northerners might be able to dismiss demands for federally mandated equal job and housing opportunities as a radically socialist idea, they could not ignore the historical precedent for the federal protection of civil rights either in the form of Lincoln's wartime emancipation efforts or the constitutional amendments giving black Americans citizenship and voting rights in the aftermath of slavery.

Yet, even more than that, the March on Washington attested to the wide appeal of Lincoln's legacy among Americans of all regions and political ideologies. A year later, the

⁶² Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," (speech, March on Washington, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963), <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/appeal-president-united-states> (accessed November 25, 2015).

prominent novelist Robert Penn Warren interviewed William Stuart Nelson, a friend and advisor to Dr. King, and asked why the Lincoln monument was “chosen as the spot for the March on Washington to reach its climax.”⁶³ Nelson explained that Lincoln’s legacy appealed, “not only to Negroes, but to any group that is struggling against vast odds.”⁶⁴ King’s dream that “all of God’s children [would] be able to sing with new meaning: ‘My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee i sing,’” encouraged a new inclusive approach towards national patriotism.⁶⁵ King challenged Americans simply to empathize with the struggle for black liberation by thinking of it as a historical movement to better the lives of all citizens. The March on Washington meant more than just a reaffirmation of the principles of Emancipation and the responsibility of the federal government to ensure those principles.

To many, the moment also seemed like a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, meaning that black activists had finally begun to influence the beliefs of white citizens throughout the country. In September of 1963, psychologist Kenneth B. Clark suggested that African Americans were “at last being taken seriously.”⁶⁶ Clark, explaining his optimism about “the chances of the Negro’s successfully completing the unfinished business of his emancipation,” argued that “equality and democracy for the Negro are tied inexorably to the effectiveness, if not the survival, of America in a frighteningly complex present and future world.”⁶⁷ Clark also described a shift in the strategy and outlook of civil rights activists, writing, “the centennial crisis of the American Negro is not only a revolt against overt and flagrant forms of racism of the distorted bigots, but it is also a revulsion against the moral dry rot of tokenism,

⁶³ William Stuart Nelson, interview with Robert Penn Warren, March 3, 1964, *Who Speaks For The Negro? An Archival Collection*, <https://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/william-stuart-nelson> (accessed December 25, 2017).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ King Jr., “I Have A Dream.”

⁶⁶ Clark, “A Relevant Celebration of the Emancipation Centennial,” *Ebony*, September 1963, 23.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

moderation, evasiveness, denial and double-talk of the respectable and gentle people of prejudice.”⁶⁸ In cities like Birmingham, activists had proved an unwillingness to accept the complacency of white moderates who valued the maintenance of law and order above the struggle for equality. Skillfully representing their movement within core ideas of American identity, civil rights leaders challenged the hesitancy of centrists by connecting their struggle against segregation to the future of the nation.

Just as the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement helped solidify the memory of emancipation within American patriotism, the tragedies of the era confirmed to many that segregation, like slavery, went against many of the nation’s greatest democratic principles. Less than a month after the March on Washington, on September 15, four members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed 16th Street Baptist, the black Alabama church used as the headquarters for the Birmingham campaign, killing one eleven and three fourteen year-old girls. As many black southerners grieved and feared continued violence, some politicians used the publicity of the murders to subtly urge congressional legislation against southern forms of racial oppression. Two days after the church bombing, four senators, including Minnesota congressman and future Democratic presidential nominee Hubert H. Humphrey, called upon John F. Kennedy to make September 22, 1963 a day of national mourning in an open letter, declaring “that these cruel and tragic events will awaken the conscience of every American to the folly and evil of this racial injustice, hatred and violence,” and adding that the day would be “particularly appropriate,” since it was also “the 101st anniversary of the Emancipation proclamation.”⁶⁹ In remembering the trauma of slavery, hate crimes against the black community in the era of segregation signified

⁶⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁹ “Reaction to Murders ‘World-Wide,’” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 28, 1963.

a symptom of deep societal ills leftover from the era of slavery and untreated in the aftermath of emancipation.

As support grew in late 1963 for a bill to abolish segregation, another national tragedy affected the legislative struggle for civil rights, this time connecting Americans of the 1960s to the memory of Abraham Lincoln as a great defender of racial liberty. On November 22, when Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, a stunned American public was left to make sense of the late president's unfinished work in the White House. For many Americans, Kennedy became an instant martyr of the Civil Rights Movement. Vel Phillips, a black Milwaukee city councilwoman and personal friend of Kennedy, told reporters, "As with Mr. Lincoln, President Kennedy was 'dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal' and he, too, gave the last full measure of devotion to the cause of freedom."⁷⁰ A. Philip Randolph, a veteran of the early Civil Rights Movement and one of the leaders of the March on Washington, said of Kennedy's death, "The second emancipator of black people from the serfdom of racial segregation has been struck down by an assassin's bullet."⁷¹ In the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, it was widely believed that the Johnson administration would have little problem in 1964 garnering political support for civil rights legislation. As executive editor of *Ebony* magazine Lerone Bennett Jr. explained, "Because of the circumstances of President Kennedy's death and the whiplash of emotion that followed it, President Johnson is expected to have greater success with the legislative end of the civil rights battle."⁷² By championing Kennedy as Lincoln's predecessor and claiming him as their own, civil rights advocates were once again able to channel the nation's grief towards the cause of racial equality.

⁷⁰ "Councilwoman Close to JFK," *Jet*, December 19, 1963, 24.

⁷¹ "News Stuns Leaders of Negroes," *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, November 23, 1963.

⁷² Lerone Bennett Jr., "What Negroes Can Expect From Lyndon B. Johnson: First Southern-born President since Wilson faces acute civil rights crisis in North and South," *Ebony*, January 1964, 82.

In January, when South Dakota became the 38th state to ratify the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, prohibiting any poll taxes or payments required to vote in federal elections, Johnson also utilized the patriotic rhetoric of emancipation to qualify the importance of this achievement, calling the amendment a “triumph, now, of liberty over restriction” and “a verification of the people’s rights which are rooted so deeply in the mainstream of this nation’s history.”⁷³ Yet, despite increasing federal support for voting rights, in many southern states, officials refused to ratify the Twenty-Fourth Amendment and poll taxes remained for all local and state elections. Many of the old techniques used to disenfranchise black voters, such as literacy tests and a range of voter intimidation methods, remained perfectly intact. As the nation made small strides towards increasing voter equality and abolishing segregation, black southerners continued to face barriers to political representation.

To many Civil Rights leaders and organizations, voting rights stood at the center of the struggle for black liberty in the South. Beginning in the midst of slavery, black activists had long struggled to gain a right which essentially separated the enslaved from the free, ideally granting each individual the privilege and responsibility to elect representatives who spoke for their concerns in the nation’s many governing bodies. While the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited the denial of voting rights on the basis of skin color, by the early twentieth century, white supremacists hijacked the South’s electoral process to maintain domination through laws and legal enforcement, violently suppressing any black man or woman who threatened this political monopoly. In spite of the threat of voter suppression, in the summer of 1964, activists of four civil rights organizations, SNCC, NAACP, SCLC, and CORE, collectively the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), focused much of their efforts on achieving political

⁷³ “24th Amendment Ratified, LBJ Hails Poll Tax Defeat,” *The Miami News*, January 24, 1964.

representation for African Americans in Mississippi, educating locals on the voting process and helping them to register. This project, collectively called “Freedom Summer,” evoked the moralist tone of the abolitionist movement by framing suffrage as major part of black liberation. Like the Freedom Riders and the protestors of SCLC’s Birmingham campaign, activists continued to elicit Northern sympathy by exposing the brutish behavior of white locals and law enforcement faced with civil disobedience against the established order of white supremacy.

On June 21, at the beginning of the Mississippi Freedom Project, members of the KKK killed three CORE activists, white New Yorkers Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner and black Mississippian James Chaney. Like the 1963 Birmingham church bombing victims, the murdered civil rights workers brought national attention to the denial of black citizenship in the South, bringing back a now common refrain from civil rights leaders and the Johnson administration urging federal intervention in the South. Two weeks after the disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, on July 2, under increasing pressure, Congress finally passed the Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination or segregation based on race, color, religion, or national origin. Yet, as many activists believed, the passage of laws and amendments were limited in their ability to change the day-to-day lives of black southerners. James Farmer, a founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, remarked that though the new law was “an assertion that the American people and government do intend to put into practice the ideals of the ... Emancipation Proclamation,” the bill still had to be put “into practice, into living reality in thousands of American communities and millions of American hearts.”⁷⁴ Like the Emancipation Proclamation, it also meant practically nothing without federal enforcement.

⁷⁴ “Reaction Varies to New Rights Law; Some Expect Gains, Others Trouble,” *The Bridgeport Post*, July 3, 1964.

Yet, in the midst of tragedy during the Mississippi Freedom Project, activists became increasingly doubtful that the federal government would actually work to ensure and protect the liberties of its black citizens. After federal agents recovered the bodies of the civil rights workers in early August, CORE's Dave Dennis gave the eulogy at Chaney's funeral, alleging, "A hundred years ago, if the proper thing had been done by the federal government of this particular country and by the other people, responsible people or irresponsible across the nation, we wouldn't be here today to mourn the death of a brave young man like James Chaney."⁷⁵ Attributing Chaney's death to a long history of racist political corruption which extended beyond Jim Crow to the national government, Dennis urged black southerners to fight for political representation, telling the funeral attendees, "All these people here who are not registered voters should be in line Monday morning from one corner of this country to the next, demanding, don't ask if I can become a registered voter. Demand!"⁷⁶ If a people cannot trust in their government simply to grant them their rights, Dennis argued, they must become their own emancipators and fight for it.

Framing the legacies of slavery as widespread throughout the country, the activists of COFO sought an increase in black political participation, particularly in the rural communities of the South. Back in April, COFO helped black Mississippians band together to form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), a new populist political party attempting to seize control by winning Mississippi's delegation seats at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Activists argued that Mississippi Democrats, who passed a resolution at the state convention stating their "belief that the separation of the races is

⁷⁵ Dave Dennis, (eulogy at funeral of James Chaney, Meridian, MS., August 7, 1964), in *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, Volume 1, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 775.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 778.

necessary for the peace and tranquility of all the people of Mississippi,” had also violated state party rules by denying registration to African Americans and preventing them from voting in the primaries.⁷⁷ Suggestions that the MFDP split representation with state Democrats were met with disdain from activists who were tired of compromise, stating on the record, “We do not believe the State Party deserves even one seat at the national convention. Nor do we believe that a systematic denial of civil rights can be half condemned, half condoned. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, we are dubious of the value of a delegation half slave, half free.”⁷⁸ As their use of Lincoln’s rhetoric suggests, members of the MFDP refused to equivocate on the matter of black representation, warning of destruction for a nation whose governments deprived any group of people of their basic political rights.

By making their historical appeals for black participation in the political process, the MFDP used a strategy similar to that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s successful “I Have A Dream Speech,” relating black voting rights to the future stability and progress of America’s democracy. In *Freedom Summer*, historian Bruce Watson argues that “Freedom Democrats represented the very idea of democracy” and the ideals they raised touched upon “the most sacred American rhetoric.”⁷⁹ One of the most fundamental values of American democracy, activists reasoned, was the right to vote. Yet, the presence of the MFDP at the convention panicked many Democratic officials, especially President Johnson, who feared losing the support of white southern Democrats in the upcoming presidential election. By the end of August, 80,000 Mississippians had registered to vote as Freedom Democrats, but the national party

⁷⁷ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967), 93.

⁷⁸ Van Der Linden, “Emotion-Packed Floor Fight Seen Over Two Mississippi Delegations,” *The Greenville News*, August 2, 1964.

⁷⁹ Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy*, (New York, NY: Penguin, 2010), 238.

refused to seat them as delegates, offering instead two honorary seats which allowed them to watch floor proceedings but not take part. Refusing the compromise, activists remained in Atlantic City till the end of the convention, protesting the federal government's complicity in the denial of black enfranchisement.

Through the brutality of their segregationist enemies and the indifference of the white liberal allies, some members of the Freedom Democrats began to question whether the rights of black citizenship, attained and subsequently stolen after the abolition of slavery, could ever be regained under the social conditions imposed by the system of segregation. A little over a year before the Democratic National Convention, Mississippi police brutally beat and jailed Fannie Lou Hamer, a 44 year-old civil rights organizer and one of the co-founders of MFDP, as she and other activists returned home from an activist training session in South Carolina. Recounting her assault as well as her memory of the murder of Medgar Evers before the convention in August 1964, Hamer questioned the limits placed on American democracy, asking, "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"⁸⁰

By the time the MFDP left the convention and ended their Freedom Summer project, many felt betrayed by national officials and disillusioned with the democratic process. Years later, SNCC organizer John Lewis argued that the Democratic National Convention was a major "turning point" for the civil rights struggle, causing many activists to question the goals and aims of the movement.⁸¹ Before the summer of 1964, Lewis explained, "despite every setback and

⁸⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁸¹ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 291.

disappointment and obstacle we had faced over the years, the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen, the system would respond.”⁸² Yet, having “played the game exactly as required,” many black southerners could find no legal path to enfranchisement.⁸³ In the late years of the Civil War Centennial, activists were tiring of empty lip service for integration and racial equality, refusing to be treated like pawns for the political gain of men like Johnson.

By 1965, the emancipationist vision of King, which put trust in the federal government to rectify southern perpetuations of slavery’s caste system, was losing favor among a new generation of activists. Many became worried that civil rights legislation was an attempt to silence black protest while offering token reform. Expressing this sentiment to a growing number of supporters, black Muslim leader Malcolm X spoke in January 1965, “[the white man] came up with a trick, pretending that he was fighting a civil war to set us free ... that he was issuing an emancipation proclamation to set us free.”⁸⁴ Along with the recent civil rights bill, these historic measures meant little in an apartheid state fundamentally bound to the ideologies of white supremacist politics. Though he was assassinated just one month later, Malcolm X’s legacy continued as a major influence within the black radical tradition of the Black Power Movement, carrying on this historical vision of black history. To his ideological successors, slavery had never ended, just transformed, and it had continued, not in opposition to, but alongside ideologies of American democracy. As Malcolm X preached, the promises made by the constitution and by the federal government in the aftermath of slavery were little more than deceptions created to placate African Americans.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Malcolm X, Speech to the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Audubon Ballroom, Harlem, N.Y., January 24, 1965, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* (New York: Pathfinder, 1967): 43.

Though their tones often greatly contrasted, the historical disagreement between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were not as irreconcilable as they seemed. Though King utilized the iconic imagery and rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln, a man Malcolm X openly scorned, both men framed Emancipation as a broken promise. Neither man believed that the Civil War had truly freed any black man or woman from oppression. Yet, unlike Malcolm X, King saw value in asserting black citizenship within the American political tradition. Drawing from a socialist view of American inequality, he also emphasized an intersection between the oppression of black people and poor whites, arguing that discriminatory institutions like slavery and segregation were designed to keep the white working class from uniting with black laborers and challenging the political and economic power of the white ruling class. To King, segregation and slavery were not only antithetical to the goals of democracy, they were inherently foreign to the natural order of American life. The book he called “the historical Bible of the Civil Rights Movement,” historian C. Vann Woodward’s 1955 study of the history of segregation laws, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, argued that while many southerners “grew up along with the [Jim Crow] system” and were “unable to remember a time when segregation was not the general rule and practice,” segregation, like all of the South’s regimes, could be easily overturned.⁸⁵ King often referenced this book as proof of segregation’s shaky foundations, dependent on the economic interests of white upper-class as well as racial prejudice. In March of 1965, as he led 300 marchers from Selma to Montgomery in protest of Alabama’s refusal to comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, King reasoned in a speech concluding the march, “the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep

⁸⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), xv.

the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land.”⁸⁶ Repeating Woodward’s thesis, King challenged America, once again, to closely examine its own false sense of history. Emphasizing the shared fate of white and black laborers, he attributed segregation, like slavery, to the economic interest of a wealthy white minority.

Six months after the Selma to Montgomery March, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. The new law answered the cries of King and Alabama protestors by requiring federal registrars to oversee districts where black enfranchisement had been suppressed. In a March address urging Congress to pass the bill, Johnson echoed the sentiments King had made three years earlier in his second Emancipation Proclamation proposal, declaring, “A century has passed, more than a hundred years, since equality was promised. And yet the Negro is not equal. A century has passed since the day of promise. And the promise is unkept. The time of justice has now come.”⁸⁷ Though Johnson’s speech framed the Voting Rights Act as an answer to centuries of injustice, most Americans would come to agree that racial conflict had not disappeared in 1965. Yet, at the close of the Civil War Centennial, Americans were more prepared than ever before to begin the work of Emancipation. The patriotic fervor of the Centennial’s first year had given way to the somber reflection of the civil rights struggle, often defined by death and tragedy. Though themes of national reconciliation had remained prominent, white Americans of the Civil Rights Era began to envision black emancipation as fundamental to the nation’s survival in both the past and present.

⁸⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., “Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March, Montgomery,” King Encyclopedia, <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu> (accessed November 25, 2015).

⁸⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise,” Washington, D.C., March 15, 1965, *Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library*, <http://www.lbjlibrary.org> (accessed November 25, 2015).

For many black southerners, however, the political reforms of the civil rights acts were too little too late. For a century, officials of the federal government largely remained silent and inactive as citizens of their own country were ghettoized, lynched, and denied basic rights. Fannie Lou Hamer, embittered by the events of Freedom Summer and despairing about the past and future of the United States, spoke in a 1968 interview, “The flag is drenched in our blood... All across this country. They know what they’ve done to us ... This country is desperately sick, and man is on the critical list. I really don’t know where we go from here.”⁸⁸ The hopelessness felt by Hamer and others of the Civil Rights Movement signaled a growing distrust of white moderates and interest in civil rights projects that relied more heavily on black community leadership and control. While, during the Centennial, the Civil Rights Movement utilized the history of Civil War to focus upon the actions and legacy of modern federal officials, it had also succeeded in stressing the agency of black Americans in the emancipationist struggle. While King’s use of emancipationist rhetoric did not end with the Civil War Centennial, he began to focus more clearly on the power of African Americans to effect change in America, proclaiming in 1967, “If the negro is to be free, he must move down into the inner resources of his own soul and sign with a pen and ink of self assertive manhood his own emancipation proclamation.”⁸⁹ In the last half of the 1960s, the notion of self-emancipation would take hold as the patience of activists waned and the politics of Black Power gained steam.

⁸⁸ Fannie Lou Hamer, interview with George Foster, *Heritage of Slavery*, (documentary, CBS News, 1968).

⁸⁹ Herbert Robinson Marbury, *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), 228.

Chapter 2

Desegregation and the Development of Black Historical Consciousness in Higher Education

Despite some ideological and tactical differences, many activists of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements shared a belief in educational reform as a tool of political and social resistance to racial inequality, rooted in a common historical perspective which viewed American education as both a force of emancipation and a barrier to it. Education, as many activists of the era understood, had the power to shape the economic future of black citizens ideally by helping them compete on an equal footing with white people in the workforce. Yet, America's public school system, created largely under segregation, could also be stifling to the emotional and mental development of black youth, teaching them to resent black history and culture, and by extension, themselves. During the early struggle for civil rights, reformers highlighted the South's negligence towards black public schools, which were chronically underfunded, as a perpetuation of the antebellum caste system. Yet, while many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement believed that integration would allow the black community to rise above its disadvantaged economic position, placed there originally by the institution of slavery, a new generation of black students found that racial integration alone could not transform the inherent racial biases of America's education system.

As demands for black political, economic, and cultural power spread, activists of the Black Power Movement embraced a memory of slavery and black oppression which exposed the hypocrisy of American egalitarianism and justified a distrustfulness of white institutions and power structures. In the late 1960s, as several events classified by historians as the Black Campus Movement, students across the country in newly formed black student organizations led mass demonstrations protesting for higher admissions rates for black students, the hiring of more

black teachers, and the recognition of black studies, a new academic field encompassing black and African culture, languages, and history.⁹⁰ Within protests and discussions over the implementation of black studies programs, African Americans in academia began to wrestle with the problems that integration posed for the preservation of black culture and history and the liberation of black students and their communities from the psychological burdens of slavery and Jim Crow. Often portraying themselves as freedom fighters against white tyranny, prominent figures of the movement challenged black student protesters to demand reform without compromise and to meet threats of racial violence with promises of retaliation. While some black youth of this era began to turn away from many of the integrationist goals of the Civil Rights Movement, many others found ways to create opportunities for black empowerment within white university systems. Exposing the legacy of slavery upon American society by highlighting the failures of a democratic society to provide its citizens fair and equal access to education, activists and historians promoted black history and culture in academia as tools of economic uplift, social mobility, and political self-determination, helping black students take pride in their racial identity as they created educational institutions which validated and empowered students of color.

Throughout the black freedom struggle, black schooling has often represented the path out of slavery and the push for upward social mobility in black communities. Thus, black education has long been politicized as a strategy of resistance to white economic and political domination. During the early days of Reconstruction, many of the first black men elected to political office in state and national legislatures fought to secure

⁹⁰ Ibram X. Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

government funding for black schools. Describing these black Republicans as “the first architects of public education,” historian Jon N. Hale notes that they passed many of the first laws creating public school systems in former Confederate states.⁹¹ “As freed people carried forth the ideology of education for freedom,” Hale writes, “black politicians, educators, and civil rights leaders during Reconstruction viewed the schoolhouse as a site of politicization that could be used in the ongoing struggle for freedom.”⁹² From the Civil War onward, movements for racial equality often understood educational activism within the history and politics of Emancipation, framing educational equality as a solution to the economic stratification and legal disenfranchisement caused by centuries of black enslavement and struggle for black institutional power within American educational systems. Those that fought for immediate integration hoped for a kind of assimilation into American society that would provide equal rights and protection under the law while preserving black culture and history. Skeptics of integration hoped, like their abolitionist forefathers, that separation might allow them to safeguard the foundations of African American identity, yet they also strove to remove themselves completely from white funding and meddling. In the late 1960s, these two paths would clash and converge in the education reforms of the Black Student Movement.

Prior to the desegregation of public education under *Brown v. Board of Education*, many black activists sought to foster black cultural empowerment within Jim Crow systems of education. In black schools across the country, some black administrators learned to placate white benefactors while teaching their students to have pride and confidence in themselves and their race. Often, the neglect of state legislators towards black education allowed

⁹¹ Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 23.

⁹² *Ibid.*

black principals and teachers to run most day-to-day activities and create their own curriculum. In their educational separation from whites, black students also learned historical topics like slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction from the black perspective. In 1926, Carter G. Woodson began his campaign for Negro History Week, a celebration to take place every year during the second week of February.⁹³ During these annual observances, black students and their teachers collaborated to put on plays and performances, celebrating black historical figures like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth. For many activists in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, these programs were foundational experiences. In her autobiography, black political activist Angela Davis recalled celebrating Negro History Week at Carrie A. Tuggle Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, writing, “black identity was thrust upon us by the circumstances of oppression. We had been pushed into a totally black universe; we were compelled to look to ourselves for spiritual nourishment.”⁹⁴ For those of the Davis’s generation, black schools were a source of affirmation for ideas of black political resistance contextualized in the past of the black freedom struggle.

Despite the cultural and social importance of black schools within black communities, black access to education was undeniably limited. During the early Civil Rights Movement, reformers highlighted the South’s negligence towards black public schools, which were chronically underfunded, as a perpetuation of the antebellum caste system. In the 1930s, Carter G. Woodson, a pioneer of the early Negro History Movement, argued that the “mis-education of the Negro” had enforced a kind of mental slavery upon African Americans, compelling them to accept “the status of the weak as divinely ordained.”⁹⁵ In the 1954 Supreme Court Case, *Brown*

⁹³ Carter G. Woodson, “Negro History Week,” *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 2 (1926), 238.

⁹⁴ Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 91.

⁹⁵ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, (New York, NY: Tribeca Books, 2013), 69.

v. Board of Education, ruling segregation in schools unconstitutional, Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel of the legal defense team for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), argued that there was no other basis for school segregation but “an inherent determination that the people who were formerly in slavery, regardless of anything else, shall be kept as near that stage as is possible.”⁹⁶ As the struggle over integration shifted back to demands for black institutional control, student activists also understood the capacity of educational systems to be used as weapons of racial propaganda and social control. After the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional in the *Brown* case, increasing numbers of black students enrolled in predominantly white colleges and universities. Yet, because the Court had issued no method of enforcement and set no specific date for the end of segregated schools, change occurred slowly across the nation.

For decades, segregationists continued to fight fiercely against the *Brown* decision. The ideology of Jim Crow, designed to restrict black access to spaces of economic, social, and political power, framed the entrance of black students into white educational institutions as an assault on white freedom. A popular and widespread movement among white southerners emerged to counter the Supreme Court ruling, decrying what they saw as federal usurpation of state power. With the support of their white constituents, elected officials from across the South moved swiftly to obstruct federal enforcement of desegregation. Ten days after the *Brown* decision, Senator James Eastland of Mississippi pleaded with his colleagues in Congress to support a constitutional amendment giving states the power to resist desegregation of public institutions by the Supreme Court. Like many white segregationists of the Civil Rights era, Eastland justified the system of Jim Crow through a specific and often spurious understanding of

⁹⁶ A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83.

its past. Calling segregation “the correct, self-evident truth which arose from the chaos and confusion of the Reconstruction period,” he depicted the institution as an old, enduring, and indelible savior of the southern way of life and an early defense against federal intervention.⁹⁷ Though cloaked in a debate over constitutional power; the argument for states’ rights appealed to a particular understanding of southern history; one that both justified slavery and black disenfranchisement through white supremacist ideology and depicted white southerners as perpetual victims of federal tyranny. Consequently, segregationists often embraced specific language and symbols which valorized the Confederacy and its citizens, hoping to unify white southerners under a common heritage.

For black students attempting to gain admission to historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs) in the South, symbols like the Confederate battle flag not only represented the state’s commitment to legally opposing desegregation, they also represented the angry and violent resistance of everyday white southern citizens to federal enforcement of *Brown*. In 1958, June Purcell Guild, a sociologist and NAACP member, described the growth of Confederate pride in Virginia following the *Brown* decision as a sign of an impending “Civil War II.”⁹⁸ Describing a surge in the sale of Confederate flags in local shops, she also noted an increased use of “Dixie,” a song most Americans recognized as an anthem of the Confederacy. Confederate flags and song held strong connections to the narrative of the lost cause. The lyrics of Dixie, for example, depicted a black person yearning to be under the rule of slavery in the South. For much of the song’s history, entertainers would perform it in blackface, emulating what whites considered slave dialect, singing, “I wish I was in de land ob cotton, old times dar am not

⁹⁷ Matthew Yglesias, “The White Supremacist Caucus,” *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2007, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2007/11/the-white-supremacist-caucus/47144/>.

⁹⁸ June Purcell Guild, “Why Choose Virginia?” *The Journal of Negro Education* 27, no. 1 (1958), 26.

forgotten. Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.”⁹⁹ Guild framed the popularity of Confederate paraphernalia as a symbol of another white supremacist revolution, akin to that of the Civil War and post-Reconstruction periods, writing, “The frenzied applause, the wild cheering when Dixie is played startles and grieves the American. ‘The Southern way of life, it must be preserved.’ A phrase often heard but seldom defined seems to mean ‘Down with the Negro’ and with the Supreme Court.”¹⁰⁰ Symbols like the Confederate flag and “Dixie” signified a belligerent radicalism based among pro-segregationists.

In large protests at schools and college campuses, white agitators often proudly displayed the symbols of their Confederate heritage, attacking black students as they struggled to break racial barriers at historically white schools. On February 3, 1956, the day Autherine Lucy became the first black student to attend the University of Alabama, over a thousand students marched in protest of her admission. After planting a small burning cross on campus, the crowd headed to the house of the university president to demand Lucy’s removal, many carrying Confederate flags and singing “Dixie” as they walked.¹⁰¹ The next day of classes, over 3,000 protesters gathered to harass and intimidate her, some reportedly pelting her with eggs and shouting, “let’s kill her, let’s kill her.”¹⁰² In 1962, when James Meredith became the first black student at the University of Mississippi, rioting broke out once again, this time resulting in the deaths of two civilians with over 300 people injured. A journalist surveying the scene before the riot described the thousands of protesters who showed up that day, writing “the streets were alive

⁹⁹ Christian McWhirter, *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 69.

¹⁰⁰ Guild, “Why Choose Virginia?” 26.

¹⁰¹ E. Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 64.

¹⁰² Diane McWhorter, “The Day Autherine Lucy Dared to Integrate the University of Alabama,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 32 (Summer, 2001), 101.

with Confederate flags” and noting that “some men even wore Confederate uniforms.”¹⁰³ In these famous battles over desegregation, white men and women made a spectacle of the pain and suffering of black students as they attempted to integrate. Together with threats of violence and intimidation, white mobs weaponized historical symbols of white domination in the South, signaling to civil rights organizations and black families that black students were neither welcome, nor safe at historically white schools.

While segregationists of the Civil Rights era justified white resistance to integration by exploiting a history that minimized enslaved African Americans as casualties to Southern independence, historians and activists of the Civil Rights era encouraged young Americans to recognize the humanity of the enslaved as a way of emphasizing the importance of black rights to citizenship. The architects of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools, an education project conducted by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during its famous summer drive to register black Mississippians to vote, began to pioneer an educational curriculum designed specifically to teach black students about the ongoing struggle for civil rights. In their own words, the organizers sought “to provide an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives, and ultimately new directions for action.”¹⁰⁴ During his time as director for the Freedom Schools, Staughton Lynd, a history professor from Spelman College, created a teaching manual, called “The Guide to Negro History.” Lynd instructed SNCC volunteers on how to teach subjects like Nat Turner’s revolt, the Haitian Revolution, and the underground railroad. He believed that highlighting the long tradition of black resistance to racial injustices like slavery would remind students “that protest is nothing

¹⁰³ “Barnett Backs Down in Plea for Peace, Order,” *The Daily Notes* (Canonsburg, PA), October 1, 1962.

¹⁰⁴ “Institute Discusses How to Teach Controversial Issues,” *The Daily Herald* (Chicago, IL), November 12, 1964.

new for Negroes.”¹⁰⁵ Freedom School curriculum, constructed to encourage student activism and civic engagement, utilized African American history as a weapon against segregation in the South by arming future generations with both a historical understanding of black disenfranchisement and the intellect to dismantle it.

Like their predecessors in the early Negro History movement, many black historians of the Civil Rights era believed that a historical education that minimized black contributions to American democracy also helped to justify their subordinate role in society. In 1965, black historian John Hope Franklin published an article in *The Crisis*, focused on cultivating black historical perspectives within the creation of American history textbooks. Though the claim that slaves did not protest their enslavement in meaningful ways had been largely discredited by the sixties, Franklin pointed to the widespread usage of history textbooks that still depicted the enslaved as “a docile, tractable, irresponsible, childlike race.”¹⁰⁶ “One learns almost nothing,” he noted, “of the Negroes who ran away, poisoned their masters, and revolted.”¹⁰⁷ He argued that the history of slavery taught in America’s schools, which were “all too frequently based on the fallacious assumption that the Negro is innately inferior and that he has contributed virtually nothing to the growth of American civilization,” had long confirmed the position of black people in America as “not only a fact of history but justified by history.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, as he also noted, the Civil Rights Movement had birthed a new wave of interest in the history of black Americans and their struggle for liberation. In this new era, black historians like Franklin and Lynd advanced an

¹⁰⁵ Staughton Lynd, “Guide to Negro History,” in *Freedom School Curriculum*, ed. Kathy Emery, Sylvia Braselmann and Linda Gold (2004),

http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC3a_GuideNegroHistory.htm.

¹⁰⁶ John Hope Franklin, “The Negro in History Textbooks,” *The Crisis*, August-September 1965, 426.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 426-427.

educational perspective that emphasized slave revolts and other acts of rebellion to help frame the fight for civil rights as part of a larger struggle for black equality.

In the mid sixties, many black historians were attempting to use history as a tool of civic education, to teach both black and white children about the importance of racial equality and integration to democratic ideals. Yet, whether intentionally or not, their work helped shape a more critical lens towards racial injustices within the founding of American democracy. In 1968, writing on what he identified as a “neo-revisionist” movement in the historiography of slavery, historian Robert Starobin argued that because the Civil Rights Movement failed to address many problems facing African Americans, proving just “how deeply entrenched discrimination and racism are in American society,” historians had begun to gain “a deeper understanding of how firmly embedded slavery was in the social order of the nineteenth century.”¹⁰⁹ One of the “neo-revisionists” Robert Starobin pointed to was Staughton Lynd, who published an article entitled “The Compromise of 1787” in 1966, two years after his time working for SNCC. Lynd argued that slavery was written into the American constitution through the “three-fifths” clause, a compromise reached between constitutional delegates deciding the distribution of congressional representatives that allowed three-fifths of enslaved people to be counted towards representation in the House. Another popular historical work published in 1966, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina* by William W. Freehling, revealed how South Carolina’s government suppressed debates over slavery in the wake of a slave revolt led by Denmark Vesey in 1822. Starobin argued that historians like Lynd and Freehling represented slavery “not as an American anomaly, but as central to American society from its early

¹⁰⁹ Robert Starobin, “The Negro: a central theme in American History,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 2 (1968), 44.

beginnings.”¹¹⁰ As evidenced by this moment of historical revision in the study of slavery, some academics were beginning to debunk civic myths of American exceptionalism, casting doubt upon the project of black advancement should black activists continue to work towards civic assimilation.

In the mid 60s, radical leaders like Malcolm X contended that America’s corruption extended to every facet of white American society, a fact that made black self-reliance and empowerment a necessity of survival. He highlighted the importance of black historical knowledge, arguing that the founders and early implementers of America’s racial caste system constrained black access to their own history as a method of control. In 1965, Malcolm X gave a lecture on African American history, emphasizing pride in ancient African civilizations and examining the strategies employed by white “slavemakers” to rid the enslaved of their history and identity. “By keeping [African Americans] completely cut off from our past,” he explained, “it is easy for the man who has power over us to make us willing to stay at this level because we will feel that we were always at this level, a low level.”¹¹¹ For Malcolm X and his ideological successors, control of American historical narratives was a form of cultural power that whites wielded over black people to secure their own political and economic supremacy. Thus, black control over the institutions that produced history became integral to the success of black liberation.

As the struggle for civil rights gave way to demands for black economic and political self-determination, a new generation of black leaders, often labeled “black militants” by the press, revealed a growing cynicism towards the project of a multiracial American democracy.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1967), 13.

¹¹² Wilkins, “Black Militants’ Jim Crow College Goal Questioned,” *The Des Moines Register*.

On October 29, 1966, Stokely Carmichael, the newly elected leader of SNCC, spoke to a crowd of students at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), proclaiming, “We have found all the myths of the country to be nothing but downright lies. We were told that if we worked hard we would succeed, and if that were true we would own this country lock, stock, and barrel. We have picked the cotton for nothing.”¹¹³ Comparing the modern condition of black people to the exploitation of their labor under slavery, Carmichael belied the notion that African Americans as a group could ever rise above oppression through their own hard work, continuing, “we are the maids in the kitchens of liberal white people; we are the janitors, the porters, the elevator men ... we are the hardest workers and the lowest paid ... Are the liberals willing to share their salaries with the economically insecure black people they so much love?”¹¹⁴ Past racial progress had done little for the economic emancipation of African Americans. Throughout slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, black laborers struggled in the North and South to find middle to upper income jobs and were often denied advancements in their fields. Carmichael and other activists of the time believed that universities and colleges, essentially institutions of social advancement, held the key to black economic progress. Using the slogan, “Black Power,” he called upon student activists to stop relying on governmental change and “to start building [black] institutions and to fight to articulate our position, to fight to be able to control our universities ... and to fight to control the basic institutions which perpetuate racism by destroying them and building new ones.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Stokely Carmichael, “Black Power,” in *The Will of a People: A Critical Anthology of Great African American Speeches*, ed. Bernard K. Duffy and Richard W. Leeman, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 312.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 310.

Viewing Carmichael's calls for black power as endorsements of violence against whites, many Americans feared that the nation's growing racial tensions would end in bloodshed. Few black power organizations were labeled a greater threat to the social order than the Black Panther Party, organized in Oakland, California fourteen days before Stokely Carmichael's Black Power speech. On May 2, 1967, the Black Panthers rose to national infamy when they rallied on the steps of California's capitol building in Sacramento, legally carrying guns for self-defense and dressed in paramilitary garb. Ronald Reagan, Governor of California at the time, was shocked by the display, telling reporters, he saw "no reason why on the street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons."¹¹⁶ In *Framing the Black Panthers*, historian Jane Rhodes argues that the nation's reaction to the Panthers revealed a deep societal fear in "the ever-present threat of black revolt."¹¹⁷ She writes that over the next two years several violent encounters between the BPP and state and federal police "became part of national discourse, painting the Black Panther Party with a broad brush that led many in mainstream America to believe they were out to kill white people—particularly the police—to finally avenge centuries of slavery, discrimination, and abuse."¹¹⁸ In many ways, BPP members used this fear to their advantage, highlighting the historical justification for their anger at white power structures.

Regarding anti-blackness as a fundamental cornerstone of American democracy, the Black Panthers often alluded to the history of slavery to expose the weak moral standing of the American government. A week after the protest at the capitol building, Bobby Seale, a founding member of the BPP, argued that the American government had no right, for

¹¹⁶ Peter Weber, "How Ronald Reagan learned to love gun control," *The Week*, December 3, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/582926/how-ronald-reagan-learned-love-gun-control>.

¹¹⁷ Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

example, to draft black Americans, declaring, “In the civil war, 186,000 black men fought in the military service, and we were promised freedom and we didn't get it ... And now here we go with the damn Vietnam War, and we still ain't getting nothing but racist police brutality, etc.”¹¹⁹ Five days later, the Black Panthers released their “Ten Point Program,” defining goals and beliefs sustained by a particular conceptualization of the relationship between America and the formerly enslaved populations within its borders. “We believe that this racist government has robbed us,” the manifesto read, “and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules ... promised 100 years ago as retribution for slave labor and mass murder of black people.”¹²⁰ In addition to reparations, “payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities,” the BPP demanded “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”¹²¹ Back in 1865, when Union General William Tecumseh Sherman pledged “forty acres and a mule” to every formerly enslaved black farmer, this promise represented a great chance for black men and women to become recipients of prosperity in the agrarian societies they helped to build.¹²² Yet, it was a promise the United States did not keep. A little over a hundred years later, the Ten Point Program illuminated the great debt owed to black people and called upon the government to make good on the promises of emancipation by helping to free African Americans from racially discriminatory systems of labor.

Within this emancipatory debt, the BPP also included the theft of black cultural and educational institutions, thereby denying black youth the pride and self-fulfillment of knowing about their own people group. Aware that anyone who didn't “know black history” might find

¹¹⁹ San Francisco Bay Area Television, “Bobby Seale Speech,” San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/190420> (accessed October 31, 2017).

¹²⁰ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 71.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 129.

the their demands “unreasonable,” the Panthers demanded an education for black youth “that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.”¹²³ Like Carter G. Woodson and the many historian activists who followed in his steps, the Black Panthers believed in the revolutionary capacity of black historical education to liberate black youth from the feelings of self-hatred and powerlessness encouraged by white historical narratives of America. Yet, unlike Woodson, they also wanted African Americans to have full control over black history. To Panther member George Mason Murray, this also meant a complete casting off of white culture and history:

Our culture must not be something that the enemy enjoys, appreciates, or says is attractive, it must be repelling to the slave master. It must smash, shatter and crack his skull, crack his eyeballs open and make water and gold dust run out ... We are changing, we are deciding that freedom means change, changing from the slaves, the cowards, the boys, the toms, the clowns, coons, spooks of the 50's, 40's, 30's, into the wild, courageous, freedom fighting, revolutionary black nationalists.¹²⁴

Murray and many other Black Panthers wanted to forge a new society in America, free from the values and culture of white supremacy imposed by American slavery and premised on the equality and empowerment of the black community. While civil rights laws of the past had focused on the rights of the individual, such as the right to vote or gain access to public facilities, they had not directly addressed the systemic problems facing black communities beyond segregation laws. Therefore, Murray's emphasis on a revolutionary culture was not only a promotion of black-centrism in history and media, but also a statement of opposition to the whole of American society. He argued that the new generation of African Americans was no longer willing to take part in institutions that, like slavery, were built upon their subjugation.

¹²³ Bloom and Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire*, 71.

¹²⁴ George Mason Murray, “For a Revolutionary Culture,” *Black Panther*, September 7, 1968, 12.

While the revolutionary tone and militant rhetoric of the BPP members often garnered scorn and rebuke from leaders in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement, the ideas they espoused regarding the cultural deprivation of African Americans still appealed to many integrationists of the day. Like self-professed followers of Black Power, Martin Luther King Jr. also began in the late 1960s to take a positive outlook on the possibilities of black consciousness raising education. Though he remained devoted to project of racial integration, in the last two years of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. became committed to creating a dialogue between the integrationist pleas of the Civil Rights Movement and the demands for self-determination and black consciousness raising in the era of the Black Power Movement. In his 1967 book, *Chaos or Community: Where Do We Go From Here?*, Martin Luther King Jr. urged Americans “to understand that Black Power is a cry of disappointment” and a reaction “to the failure of white power” to do away with race-based discrimination.¹²⁵ “For years,” he wrote, “the Negro has been taught that he is nobody, that his color is a sign of his biological depravity, that his being has been stamped with an indelible imprint of inferiority, that his whole history has been soiled with the filth of worthlessness.”¹²⁶ To offset what he called a “cultural homicide” of black identity throughout slavery and Jim Crow, referring to the way white Americans stifled black confidence by dehumanizing African Americans under slavery, spreading propaganda of their inferiority, and silencing their history in public education, King encouraged young African Americans to take pride in themselves by celebrating and promoting black history and culture.¹²⁷

Martin Luther King understood slavery as a collective trauma that preyed upon the minds and development of black individuals, yet he was also concerned that the Black Power slogan,

¹²⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010), 33.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

and its black nationalist undertones, might limit black liberation by forcing African Americans to define themselves in opposition to whiteness. Calling Black Power “a psychological reaction to the psychological indoctrination that led to the creation of the perfect slave,” he argued that groups like the Black Panthers were clinging too closely to the justified hostility of a past enslaved generation, writing, “Black Power assumes that Negroes will be slaves unless there is a new power to counter the force of the men who are still determined to be masters rather than brothers.”¹²⁸ Rather, Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a society in which Americans of all races could embrace the ethnic cultural differences in one another. He argued that, just as black children were taught to believe in their racial inferiority, white children, “through daily miseducation,” were wrongly “taught that the Negro is an irrelevant entity in American society.”¹²⁹ In King’s view, a push against prejudiced education should be centered around saving both African Americans from racial shame and self-doubt and white Americans from the corrupting influence of white supremacy.

In the last half of the sixties, the same demands for social relevance in education that united activists of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements echoed on college campuses around the country. In 1969, historian Vincent Harding argued that, in the last few years, black students had begun to understand “the bankruptcy of American higher education . . . and understand that its failure to deal with blackness is a sign and signal of its profound illness, the illness of the entire society.”¹³⁰ For many black students, educational institutions became microcosms for the way America institutionalized its racial problems. Historian Ibram X. Kendi (formerly Ibram H. Rogers) places the earliest demands for black studies programs in higher

¹²⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹³⁰ Vincent Harding, “Black Students and the ‘Impossible’ Revolution,” *Ebony*, August 1969, 144.

education in 1965 at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Tuskegee, Howard, Southern, and Hampton University, where student protesters criticized black and white administrators for failing to consider the needs of black students and prioritizing the interests of white trustees.¹³¹ While the organizations of the Black Campus Movement had a wide array of differing beliefs and goals, shaped as much by the specific needs of black students at their particular schools as the philosophies of the national movement, Kendi argues, “the general objective of the Black Campus Movement” at both HBCUs and eventually HWCUs, “was to create in varying degrees ‘Black Universities,’ an educational institution controlled by Blacks that educates Black students about their experience from their perspective and gives them tools to advance themselves and their communities.”¹³² Advocating for both autonomy and curricular reform, newly emerging black student groups became an important source of community and political organizing for many young African Americans.

As colleges and universities became increasingly places of black political protest, many activists began first to look at the historical curriculum at their schools, attempting to break free of many mainstream narratives and national myths surrounding slavery and the founding of the country. The first Black Student Union (BSU), founded in 1966 by former SNCC organizer Jimmy Garrett at San Francisco State University (SFSU), modeled much of its early activism from the Mississippi Freedom Schools, using SFSU’s Experimental College, a student-led university project offering non-credit courses on common issues facing the student body, to teach about black art, culture, and history. Researchers at SFSU who later compiled a report on BSU activity described the group’s historical perspective as highly skeptical of white establishments, citing “examples ranging from the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ... to the fact that

¹³¹ Rogers, “The Black Campus Movement and the Institutionalization of Black Studies,” 23.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 22.

many signers of the Declaration of Independence owned slaves, and the theory that President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation not because he believed slavery to be wrong, but because it was in the economic interests of the North at the time.”¹³³ While denouncing the whitewashing of slavery and racial discrimination within the school’s historical curriculum, Garrett and his peers also sought recognition of the black perspective within all fields of study.

In the spring of 1967, the BSU at San Francisco State University (SFSU) made the first known proposal for a black studies department. Jimmy Garrett presented “A Proposal to Initiate an Institute of Black Studies at San Francisco State College,” in which he wrote, “there is no such thing as an integrated institution when the educational process is geared towards one group of students.”¹³⁴ Shocked by demands for a black studies department controlled and operated by black students and staff, the university subsequently denied Garrett’s request. On December 6, hundreds of black students from the SFSU Black Student Union and nearby colleges gathered to protest the university’s unresponsiveness. Garrett reportedly told the crowd, “We are going to close the place down now and tomorrow. Do you dig? The school is closed.”¹³⁵ After faculty members refused protesters entry to the administration building, things quickly escalated, reportedly causing a riot among white and black students who “broke into the locked administration building, looted in the cafeteria and bookstore, and forced classes to halt.”¹³⁶ Embarrassed by this incident, a scandal that ultimately led to the firing of university President John Summerskill, the administration proved finally willing to discuss changes to the school

¹³³ William Horsley Orrick, *Shut It Down! A College in Crisis: San Francisco State College, October 1968-April 1969; a report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1969), 87.

¹³⁴ Rogers, “The Black Campus Movement and the Institutionalization of Black Studies,” 24.

¹³⁵ “Summerskill Facing Ouster; College Trustees Summoned,” *Daily Independent Journal* (San Rafael, CA), December 7, 1967.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

curriculum in the spring semester, hiring Nathan Hare, a former Howard University professor, to head the development of a black studies program in early 1968.

Two months later, following the April 4 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., college students joined communities around the country erupting in anger at King's death. In over a hundred cities around the country, rioters destroyed local businesses, many of them black-owned, and protesters clashed with police, killing thirty-nine people, thirty-four of them black, and injuring thousands.¹³⁷ At the historically black Florida A&M University, students reportedly armed themselves with small caliber guns and at least one bow and arrow, firing and missing local police. The authorities also blamed A&M students for the death of a young white man, killed in a grocery store fire after someone threw a molotov cocktail through the window.¹³⁸ A day after King's death, in Washington, D.C., Stokely Carmichael, recently named the prime minister of the Black Panther Party, urged young black men and women to begin preparing for the possibility of a violent racial conflict, announcing, "When white America killed Dr. King last night, she declared war on us."¹³⁹

The violence of early 1968 helped frame the movement for black studies as a solution to an increasingly serious crisis of faith among black students, disillusioned with the racist practices of colleges and universities and seeking to give back to their besieged communities. Historian Ibram X. Kendi argued that King's death "more than any other historical incident, gave life to Black Studies," granting greater visibility and urgency to demands for black studies

¹³⁷ Richard Woodsbury, "How many men must die?" *Life*, April 1968.

¹³⁸ Walter Grant, "Assassination Causes Calm Reaction," *The Daily Utah* (Salt Lake City, UT), April 10, 1968.

¹³⁹ Rebecca Burns, *Burial for a King: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Funeral and the Week that Transformed Atlanta and Rocked the Nation*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 53.

curriculum.¹⁴⁰ For a time, and often with much cajoling on the part of black student groups, many college administrations seemed responsive to demands for black studies departments and courses. Yet, as riots over King's assassination raged in many major urban centers, black students and professors became more determined to move beyond curricular reform, explicitly seeking to increase the social mobility of underprivileged black communities. At SFSU, Nathan Hare worked on defining the goals and guiding principles of the movement, releasing on April 29 his "Conceptual Proposal for a Department of Black Studies." Describing education as "one important escalator" aiding "the elevation of a people," Hare contended that both separatism and integrationism were "possible approaches to that end."¹⁴¹ Yet, he also suggested that integration in higher education had arguably weakened the black community as a whole, writing, "Integration, particularly in the token way in which it has been practiced ... elevates individual members of a group, but paradoxically, in plucking many of the most promising members from a group while failing to alter the lot of the group as a whole, weakens the collective thrust which the group might otherwise master."¹⁴² Advocating restrictions upon the involvement of white students and faculty, Hare and members of the BSU hoped to steer the black studies movement in the direction of black autonomy and self-determination.

In the Fall semester of 1968, SFSU initiated the first black studies department at a four-year college in the United States. Yet, as Black Power advocates continued the push for independent black pedagogy, the administration began to backtrack on its commitment to black studies. That September, the English department at SFSU hired Black Panther Party member

¹⁴⁰ Rogers, "The Black Campus Movement and the Institutionalization of Black Studies, 1965–1970." *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁴¹ Nathan Hare, "Conceptual Proposal for a Department of Black Studies," in *College in Crisis: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, edited by William Horsley Orrick, (Nashville, TN: Aurora Publishers, 1970), 160.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 160-161.

George Mason Murray as a teaching assistant, a decision that sparked outrage among alumni and the school's trustees. For the administration, the final straw against Murray came on October 24, when he encouraged rebellion to students at Fresno City College, declaring, "We are slaves, and the only way to become free is to kill all the slave masters."¹⁴³ Appealing to the memory of slave revolts within the black radical tradition, Murray urged students, "Political power comes from the barrel of a gun. If you want campus autonomy, if the students want to run the college, and the cracker administration don't go for it, then you control it with the gun."¹⁴⁴ When Smith fired Murray on November 1, black students began to protest once again, this time taking part in a campus wide strike led by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), uniting members of the BSU with the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor, the Filipino-American Students Organization, the Asian American Political Alliance, the Latin American Students Organization, and El Renacimiento, a Mexican-American group. In the longest campus strike in US history, from November 1968 to March 1969, they protested outside of class to demand the administration hire more faculty of color, admit more students of color, and institute new curriculums embracing the culture and history of all non-white ethnic minorities. For the next four months, the TWLF urged SFSU students not to attend classes until administrators reformed the school's racially exclusionary curriculum and policies.

Influenced by the radical politics and historical vision of the Black Panther Party, BSU members framed themselves as revolutionaries challenging an institution fundamentally and historically bound to the oppression of African Americans. In an interview with the campus newspaper, BSU president Ben Stewart explained the governing principles of the student strike, including the "fight against racism" and for the "right to seize power in order to control our

¹⁴³ Orrick, *Shut It Down*, 33.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

destiny.”¹⁴⁵ Outlining fifteen demands to the administration, including the installment of both a black and ethnic studies department, fully credited and controlled by black and other non-white students and faculty, Stewart made clear that the demands of the TWLF were “nonnegotiable.”¹⁴⁶ Like George Mason Murray, Stewart characterized the student movement as a rebellion against white tyranny, asserting that, when oppressed people discover their own power, they will “break the old slave-master relationship by not merely asking what the slave-master is willing to give us.”¹⁴⁷ As activists remained steadfast in their commitment to seeing all the demands of the strikers fulfilled, the campus erupted in a series of demonstrations, press conferences, and violent clashes with police. In the summer of 1968, the administrators at SFSU finally relented, albeit briefly, to student demands, creating the nation’s first black studies department.

For many students of the Black Power era, rhetorical allusions to slave-like conditions within the university system, though often used hyperbolically to illustrate a point, were also useful in challenging the historical perspective of predominately white institutions. In some universities, particularly those in former Confederate states, black activists focused upon the demolition of historical symbols of racial oppression at their universities. For black students navigating southern academic environments, symbols of Confederate heritage represented an institutional commitment to the enslavement of African Americans. Within the nation’s southern colleges, the Black Studies Movement transformed to focus more clearly upon the legacies of slavery in the modern era. In November 1969, *Jet* magazine reported on a “black anti-Confederacy rebellion” and an “eruption of hostilities that usually follow[ed] the unfurling of the Confederate battle flag at social, political and athletic events and the vocal and/or instrumental

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

renderings of *Dixie*.”¹⁴⁸ In February 1969, for example, the Association of Afro-American Students (AAS) at the University of South Carolina (USC) asked the administration to take down a Confederate flag on campus. After their request was denied, another black student group at the school, the more radical AWARE, burned a Confederate flag on February 12, intentionally on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. A statement later released by AWARE confirmed that they supported and commended the act and hoped “that as a result the flag of the forces of insurrection against the United States over 100 years ago will finally be hauled down.”¹⁴⁹ “Meaningless dialogue,” they added, “has ended and now action begins.”¹⁵⁰ As some white students and faculty began to become more aware of the racial connotations tied to Confederate legacies at southern universities and colleges, black students used this rising cultural awareness to frame their struggle within a historical context.

Whether protesting the anti-black bias of college curriculum or the racism of campus culture, black student groups continued to challenge the antiquated discriminatory practices of higher education. Still, black students argued that the racism and historical bias of university systems ran far deeper than the individual prejudices and bias of their white peers and professors or even the white-centrism of many academic fields. As they saw it, college and university administrators were mishandling their responsibility to help contribute to the economic success of the communities in which they resided. At the time, this kind of thinking was popular throughout many liberal political circles, falling in line with the ideas of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s national “Great Society” program, which sought to eliminate poverty through policies like welfare, jobs programs, and healthcare. In the spring of 1968, activists of the Southern

¹⁴⁸ “Rebel Flag Lowered After War Between States Of Mind,” *Jet*, November 1969.

¹⁴⁹ Fred Monk, “Confederate Flag Burned on Campus,” *The Gamecock* (Columbia, SC), February 14, 1969.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) launched their own anti-poverty program, called the Poor People's Campaign. In April, one of SCLC's founders, Ralph Abernathy, compared the plight of impoverished Americans of all races to the conditions of slavery, declaring, "to live in a capitalist economy with no access to capital is to be in slavery, as surely as if one's feet were bound by chains."¹⁵¹ Impoverished African Americans, Abernathy argued, had "created the capital base of this society through [their] labor for hundreds of years as slaves," and thus were owed a fair share of the wealth they helped produce.¹⁵² In the late civil rights era, leaders like Abernathy, who joined forces with activists of the Chicano and American Indian civil rights movements to create an alliance amongst all members of the working class, grew more openly critical of capitalism and the mistreatment of industrial laborers. While many black student groups expressed a more complex understanding of race and class, pointing to the privileged treatment of white laborers over black laborers, they also likely absorbed the themes of economic justice propagated by many politicians and civil rights leaders of the era.

Pushing for widespread university reform on campuses all over the country, the Black Campus Movement called for the hiring of more black professors, better pay for black university workers, and higher admissions rates for black students. In December 1968, the Black Student Movement (BSM) at the University of North Carolina (UNC) in Chapel Hill issued a list of fifteen demands to school administrators, condemning the school's discriminatory admissions and hiring practices against black students and faculty. Two months later, in February 1969, they rallied behind the rights of the university's black food workers who were often given little pay by the state government to work long hours in unsafe conditions. Elizabeth Brooks, one of

¹⁵¹ Amy Nathan Wright, "Civil Rights 'Unfinished Business': Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign," (dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 187.

¹⁵² Ibid.

the workers in the student cafeteria, later described her abusive white bosses, telling an interviewer, “[our manager] would just stand there over us and watch us, and just, you know, made us feel like that we were just like a bunch of slaves.”¹⁵³ Daniel Pollitt, one of UNC’s few African American professors at the time, claimed that many in the faculty called the cafeteria a “plantation system,” recalling that students and staff all called black workers by their first names, similar to the common custom under slavery denying those in bondage the dignity of a title and surname.¹⁵⁴ “They could be fifty years old,” he said, “and could have worked there for thirty years and they were still Mary and their job was to dish out the potatoes.”¹⁵⁵ Treated “like slaves,” the black food workers at UNC decided to demand fair compensation and better working conditions. As they went on strike, protesters repeated a slogan devised by Elizabeth Brooks, declaring, “It isn’t slavery time anymore!”¹⁵⁶

As student activists like UNC’s BSM peacefully protested against the economic exploitation of black and impoverished workers, they often faced severe legal consequences as well as the threat of police violence. On March 13, Governor Robert Scott sent 75 state troopers to shut down the strike and seven BSM members were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. As the law and order backlash against campus reforms grew, black students began to look outside of white university systems to construct black studies curriculum. In Durham, North Carolina, for example, black students at Duke University began to search for a solution to the disenfranchisement and economic discrimination faced by many local residents. Though

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Brooks, interview by Beverly Jones, October 2, 1974, in Chapel Hill, NC, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel H. Pollitt, interview by Ann McColl, March 21-22, 1991, in Chapel Hill, NC, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ University of North Carolina, “Women Behind the Lines,” Carolina Digital Repository, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent/uuid:343f9155-29c8-440c-97ed-361e36b01581> (accessed October 31, 2017).

African Americans made up almost a quarter of Durham's voting population in the late 1960s, they held little power in local government, a factor which led to the destruction of many black neighborhoods by urban renewal programs.¹⁵⁷ Duke's black student group, the Afro-American Society (AAS), began directing its efforts towards increasing black political and economic power in a city where many black residents lacked basic necessities like food and water and lived in homes controlled by white landlords who took advantage of their tenants. Disillusioned by Duke's lack of interest in creating a black studies program or creating financial aid for black students, many members of the AAS left the university in the summer of 1968 to follow the educational leadership of twenty four year old student organizer Howard Fuller, who began to work on the creation of a black-centric education that could address the problems faced by black communities like those in Durham, called Malcolm X Liberation University (MXLU).

Opened in October 1969, MXLU created a curriculum directed towards "Nation Building," offering history courses on "Independent African Civilization, Slavery, Neo-Colonialism, Colonialism, and the Independent African World," and language courses in Swahili, French, and Spanish, three languages prominent outside the US African diaspora. Howard Fuller believed that white systems of education were fundamentally detrimental to the development of black studies, arguing "[The white man] uses the educational system to glamorize himself. All he does is tell us lies about history, lies about what our people have contributed to this country ... The white man has used education to kill our minds."¹⁵⁸ The founders of MXLU sought to move black studies towards an international perspective,

¹⁵⁷ Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 57.

¹⁵⁸ Belvin, "Malcolm X Liberation University: An Experiment in Independent Black Education," (Master's thesis, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 2004), 44.

encompassing movements for black liberation all over the world.¹⁵⁹ Chuck Hopkins, who became the university's Information Officer, described the university's purpose "to provide a framework within which education can become relevant to the needs of black people," with training "geared toward the analysis of the American system, and of all other institutions of colonizing societies, which serve the process of black dehumanization."¹⁶⁰ By urging students to embrace a Pan-African identity, MXLU's founders hoped to liberate black Americans from the psychological and social traumas of slavery.

Unlike many historically black colleges and universities in the country founded by white men for the purpose of black technical training, MXLU and other Black Power era universities were created for black people and by black people. While Howard Fuller responded to early inquiries about the requirements for acceptance that "MXLU would be open to all who desire an education which would prepare them to work with groups of black persons," he doubted whether any student could be "more committed to the cause of solving the problems of being black in America" than black students.¹⁶¹ Though leaning towards a racially separate education, the pedagogy of some black universities and colleges resembled the training conducted by SNCC in Mississippi Freedom schools, designed to move the black freedom struggle forward by teaching black students to think critically about their roles in bringing social justice to their communities. Charles G. Hurst, a former professor at Howard University and president of Malcolm X College in Chicago, Illinois, described his college as "a concept of the future whose past is rooted in the enslavement of black people," adding, "So pervasive is the heritage of slavery in this society, that we must constantly struggle to keep from unconsciously allowing to develop at this

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 65.

¹⁶⁰ Hopkins, "Interim Report," 41.

¹⁶¹ Belvin, "Malcolm X Liberation University: An Experiment in Independent Black Education," 49.

institution situations which serve to enslave and to exploit rather than to develop and actualize human potential.”¹⁶² To uproot themselves from white supremacist pedagogy, some students chose to abandon white universities, where black studies curriculum was either refused by the administration or unaccountable to the black protesters, and instead enroll in universities that offered to grant them self-confidence in their black identities and a role in positively shaping the welfare of their communities.

In some ways, the historical memory of the Black Campus Movement represented a rejection of integrationist appeals to America’s egalitarian history during the Civil Rights Movement, repudiating reliance on white power structures and faith in the democratic process. If the project of integration had not led to equal educational opportunities, many black students and teachers reasoned, how could it ever lead to full black liberation? In the rhetoric of activists like Howard Fuller and other popular campus figures, American systems of education were cast as the ultimate weapon against the struggle for black freedom, brainwashing black youth to strive against the betterment of their own communities, thus necessitating a breakaway from those institutions. By 1969, many revolutionaries of the Black Power era had become deeply involved in the production of black studies activism and programs, leaving a radically militant mark upon the formation of scholarly journals establishing the methods and principles of this new academic subject. That year, Nathan Hare and his colleague at SFSU, Robert Chrisman, both eventually dismissed from their positions for involvement in the student strike, founded *The Black Scholar*, the first scholarly journal dedicated to the field of black studies. In the first issue of *The Black Scholar*, published in November 1969, black nationalist intellectuals like Imamu Amear Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael, postulated the purpose of education within the future

¹⁶² Charles G. Hurst Jr., “Malcolm X: A Community College with a New Perspective,” *Negro Digest*, March 1970.

of a Black Power revolution in America preparing black youth for the possibility of revolutionary warfare.

Imamu Amear Baraka, a prominent poet and essayist, argued that an armed struggle, while still possible, was premised upon the success of a cultural revolution in the black community, writing, “One cannot have a slave’s mentality and hope to be free.”¹⁶³ Before waging a “physical war” against white supremacy, he continued, “We must build black institutions. In all the different aspects of culture. Political, Religious, Social, Economic, Ethical, Creative, Historical, institutions, all based on a value system that is beneficial to black people.”¹⁶⁴ An avowed anti-capitalist and leader of the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver believed that the rebellion currently waged on college campuses should continue targeting the power of America’s “ruling class” and their control over systems of higher education devised “to keep black people and so-called minorities ignorant” while keeping “the masses of white students in harmony with this system.”¹⁶⁵ Stokely Carmichael, however, believed that the only struggle worth fighting in America and around the world was the struggle for a free and independent Africa, writing, “It is clear now that the only position for black men is Pan-Africanism ... We need a base that can be used for black liberation, a land that we can say belongs to us.”¹⁶⁶ For all of these men, independent black education, ideally used to arm future black dissidents with book knowledge and leadership skills, was merely the first step in a grander project for black independence.

As the Black Campus Movement spread, important questions arose surrounding the purpose and intended audience of black studies programs. Could they benefit both black and

¹⁶³ Imamu Amear Baraka, “A Black Value System,” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 1 (November 1969), 55.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁶⁶ Stokely Carmichael, “Pan-Africanism: Land and Power,” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 1 (November 1969), 39.

white students, leading youth of all races to understand the inequality of American society and help to reform it? Or, as many Black Marxist and Pan-African intellectuals claimed, was black studies primarily an instrument of black social and cultural revolution? In 1969, black historians in Atlanta, Georgia founded a new organization, Institute of the Black World (IBW), described as “an experiment with scholarship in the context of struggle,” hoping to bridge academics divided by integrationist and black nationalist approaches.¹⁶⁷ The following year, IBW founder Vincent Harding published *Beyond Chaos* on the transformation of black political thought, from civil rights to Black Power, specifically in the academic field of history. Detailing the historiography of African American history, he concluded that “the movement from Negro History to Black History”, which he defined as generational differences between historians of Carter G. Woodson’s era and those of black studies programs, had “amazing parallels to the political encounter” between civil rights and Black Power activists, “partly because they are both really a part of the larger issue.”¹⁶⁸ Both in politics and history, he wrote, “a movement which began largely as a struggle for inclusion in America as America defined itself increasingly became a political struggle for the power of self-definition and self-determination and for the ability to make America ‘ready’ for the coming of black men.”¹⁶⁹

The primary differences between “Negro History” and “Black History” centered on the way various generations processed the paradox of American democratic ideals and its historical suppression of black citizens. The scholarship of the Negro History Movement, Vincent argued, “did not intend to threaten the established heroes or the basic values of America ... Rather it sought only to guarantee that the black presence was properly acknowledged, assuming that

¹⁶⁷ “The Institute of the Black World Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center Atlanta, Georgia Statement of Purpose and Program Fall, 1969,” *The Massachusetts Review*, Inc. 10, no. 4 (1969), 713.

¹⁶⁸ Harding, *Beyond Chaos*, (Atlanta: GA, Institute of the Black World, 1970), 5.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

blackness could be contained within the confines of the American saga.”¹⁷⁰ In contrast, scholars of the black studies movement saw America as a “cancerous state” from its inception, demanding “to know whether it is possible for a democracy to exist where one quarter of the population of the land is either in slavery or being steadily driven off its ancient grounds.”¹⁷¹ In short, the new scholars of black history were unafraid of offending white America by exposing the hypocrisy of its egalitarian ideals. They were unromantic about the slaveholding founding fathers or men like Abraham Lincoln, who publicly proclaimed freedom and equality for all men, yet privately believed in the inherent inferiority of black men. By rejecting the myths of American exceptionalism, as Harding believed, black Americans were awakening to the limitations of their acceptance within modern American society and beginning to embrace their own cultural power. “In the darkness of our new gropings with the past and our plunging toward the future,” he wrote, “we reach out, and we touch, and we grasp our blackness. We discover that it means, perhaps above all else, endurance in the face of hell.”¹⁷²

In the beginning of the seventies, only a couple of years after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the proponents of black studies put forward a realistic response to King’s original vision of a multi-racial democracy, grounded in the principles of America’s founding. While acknowledging the nobility of King’s dream for America, they revealed the falseness of this narrative, warning that clinging too closely to the myths of America’s past blinded African Americans to the realities of the present. Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP and one of the fiercest critics of black studies, criticized the tempering of black patriotism within new historical pedagogy, writing that “many black history courses in high schools and the more pretentious

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁷² Ibid., 26.

college black studies departments have concentrated on ancient black nations in Africa and on the outrages and cruelties of slavery.”¹⁷³ To Wilkins, this negative focus invalidated the story of American progress, and of the black freedom fighters who struggled for legal and political reform. “Negro American young people,” he complained, “are grossly ignorant of their history” and “perfectly sincere when they declare, sweepingly and scornfully, that ‘nothing happened’ before they came along, that absolutely no progress has been made.”¹⁷⁴ Wilkins had long labeled black studies as a kind of “Black Jim Crow,” fearing its themes would alienate potential white allies.¹⁷⁵ Believing black studies programs to be antithetical to the project of integration, Wilkins branded black student activists as a frivolous revolt led by naive youth and separatist extremists, willfully destroying the racial reconciliation achieved through the Civil Rights Movement’s patriotic appeal to America’s anti-slavery tradition.

Yet, while the Black Campus Movement spurred many black separatist educational institutions, it could be said that the legacy of black studies, even encompassing its radical historical perspective, is one of inclusion. That is, it forced those who control America’s institutions of higher learning to reckon with the distinct perspective of its non-white populations, therefore challenging exclusionary policies and curriculum. In the field of history, many integrationist intellectuals continued to see the value of black historical scholarship within multiracial education systems. In 1970, black historian Benjamin Quarles asserted that recent advances in the scholarship of black history had a “revolutionary potential,” writing, “For blacks it is a new way to see themselves. For whites it furnishes a new version of American history, one that especially challenges our national sense of smugness and self-righteousness and our avowal

¹⁷³ Roy Wilkins, “Knowledge Is Key To Equality Fight,” *The Fresno Bee The Republican* (Fresno, CA), December 6, 1970.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 133.

of fair play.”¹⁷⁶ Whether they liked it or not, due to advances in desegregation, many black students were now attending schools with white students, presided over by white faculty and staff, and thus, cut off from the black-centric historical education of segregated black schools. For historians like Quarles, black history had to reach both black and white students, if only because black students could not healthily and happily exist in a system which denied their humanity. In the next few decades, as academic opportunities widened for African Americans, black students continued to fight for inclusion and equal opportunity at predominately white institutions, often by struggling for white acceptance of the black historical perspective.

In the South, where relics of slavery existed tangibly upon many campuses, student activists maintained a struggle against the ideology of the lost cause. In 1970, civil rights leader Whitney Young Jr. noted after a trip to colleges across the South that many campuses were debating “the flying of the stars and bars of the old Confederacy and public singing of Dixie.”¹⁷⁷ Across the South, symbols of confederate pride dominated the sports culture of colleges and high schools. Along with Confederate flags, black students often took offense at the playing of the song “Dixie” by many southern school bands. Young noted that, for many African Americans, the song represented “slavery, oppression, and brutality” and “recalls the whip and the lash.”¹⁷⁸ As the Black Power revolution on college campuses spread to high schools around the country, black teenagers led a revolt against the Confederate flag and “Dixie,” challenging the existence of Confederate pride in supposedly integrated educational institutions. In March 1970, black students led a class boycott at El Dorado High School in Arkansas after white students painted Confederate flags on campus buildings and sidewalks. At a student assembly following the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷⁷ Whitney M. Young Jr., “Stick to Star Spangled Banner,” *The Morning Call* (Allentown, PN), February 9, 1970.

¹⁷⁸ Young, “Stick to Star Spangled Banner.”

incident, white students asked black students why they considered the Confederate flag a symbol of racism. A black high schooler named Robert Warren put it succinctly, answering, “What’s wrong with the flag? It represents slavery. It makes us think you want us as slaves. Do you want us here or do you just tolerate us?”¹⁷⁹ Warren’s question to white students illustrated the rejection black students often felt in the presence of white students and faculty committed to preserving symbols which, as black students frequently explained, insulted the memory of their enslaved ancestors.

For many black student athletes, the prominence of “Dixie” at sporting events felt especially demoralizing. In the fall of 1970, ten black football players quit their positions at Thurmond High School in Edgefield County, South Carolina, citing their exhaustion playing for a team called the “Rebels” and listening to “Dixie” at their games. One of the players admitted, “I quit because it would make me feel bad when we would come onto the field and we could hear it and know it had something to do with slavery.”¹⁸⁰ That fall, black students at Thurmond High demanded the administration change the name of the football team and the school—referring to the famous segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond, who at the time, had only recently ceased using explicit segregationist language to dismantle the gains of the civil rights era—in addition to banning the song “Dixie” from being played at school functions. By the end of 1970, after more student athletes had resigned from the football and cheerleading teams, under a group called the “Community Action for Full Citizenship of Edgefield County,” black students and their parents filed a suit against the Edgefield County School Board, demanding the removal of Thurmond’s name and an end to the school band’s performance of “Dixie.” As explained by

¹⁷⁹ Curtis Butterfield, “What Were Assembly Accomplishments?” *The El Dorado Times* (El Dorado, AK), March 13, 1970.

¹⁸⁰ “Thurmond High’s Old South Motto is Target,” *The Gaffney Ledger* (Gaffney, SC), October 9, 1970.

one of their legal representatives, black students were “suffering from cultural difficulties imposed by historical and present patterns of educational, social, and political discrimination.”¹⁸¹ Like the early activists of the integration movement, black families in Edgefield used the legal system to set a precedent against exclusionary educational practices.

The historical memory of the Black Student Movement represented a resistance to the psychological conditioning of slavery in all its forms, combating racist propaganda and culture in universities while demanding educational institutions become accountable to the needs of local black communities. Most of its activists, however, were motivated by a desire to see themselves represented in the educational systems they depended on for economic opportunities, not to reverse the victories of desegregation. In *The Black Revolution on Campus*, historian Martha Biondi contends that many activists of the Black Campus Movement endeavored, not to destroy integration, but “to redefine integration—as multiculturalism, rather than assimilation into white culture.”¹⁸² They fought to transform the university system from the inside, by molding their campuses into spaces that gave equal power and opportunities to students of all races. Arguing that white-centric studies stifled the cultivation of black identity and self-pride, reformers championed black intellectual thought within college curriculum and demanded that higher academia become relevant to the experiences, culture, and history of African Americans.

¹⁸¹ “S.C. Judge, Edgefield Board Sued,” *The Greenville News* (Greenville, SC), December 2, 1970.

¹⁸² Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 19.

Chapter 3

Pan-Africanist Memory of American Slavery in the Global Politics of the Black Power Movement and Beyond

In the 1970s and 80s, “African American,” a term which acknowledges both the ethnic heritage of black citizens and their nationality, came into common use among most Americans. While the term “black” by no means fell into disuse, the popularity of the new phrase signaled a shift towards African culture, history, and modern politics in both radical and mainstream black social movements of the era. In the decades prior, Pan-Africanism, or the movement to empower those of African descent all over the world, remained largely on the edges of the black freedom struggle as organizations like the NAACP focused on establishing black people as full American citizens and incorporating them into an integrated American society. Still, the shared past between Africans and African Americans, detached from narratives of western and white supremacy and dependent upon ideas of black peoplehood and nationhood, have long inspired a connection between black activists struggling against racial injustice in both America and Africa. Throughout the 60s and 70s, when former African colonies gained their independence from European control, civil rights and Black Power activists journeyed to the newly independent nations, seeking both spiritual and political connections to the black nationalist movements and leaders of Africa. As a new generation of black activists made their entrance into international politics and the fight against global racism, the memory of slavery helped to define the dual heritage of African Americans by connecting the modern struggles for black liberation in both African and American society.

As positive messages on multiculturalism and the value of America’s “melting pot” began to take hold in American politics, the national discourse on racial equality and justice

began to shift once more as black Americans became increasingly interested in discovering the history of their enslaved African ancestors. As popular media like Alex Haley's *Roots* depicted slavery as a force of cultural genocide, the heritage consciousness movement of the late twentieth century granted African Americans an increasingly loud voice in US discussions on African decolonization by connecting modern white conquest to the history of slavery in America. Those who identified as black nationalists in America often embraced a Pan-African identity fully rejecting the sovereignty of the United States and other white colonial powers over their black citizens. Other activists, working within the American political system, embraced both an American and Pan-African identity, helping to center the black experience within a national multi-ethnic movement in America aimed at bridging transnational culture and foreign policy. Utilizing the memory of slavery, a system that left the enslaved with little knowledge of their ancestral homelands and excluded them from American citizenship, black activists of the late twentieth century championed a common global struggle for black self-determination and against white dominance in America and Africa while pursuing their cultural and political claims to ethnic identity.

In the early twentieth century, Pan-Africanism, a global movement that sought to unite the people of the African diaspora across the world, emerged in support of the colonized people of Africa, and, for some, the repatriation of African descendants to their ancestral home. The Universal Improvement Association (UNIA), which attracted around four million members between 1914 and 1926, helped to popularize the Pan-Africanist movement within the United States. Its founder, the Jamaican-born activist Marcus Garvey, advanced the idea that black Americans should seek African decolonization in the ultimate pursuit of migrating back to

Africa. A return to Africa, he believed, was the only real option for those seeking black economic and social progress in a country that would never grant them any power. For Marcus Garvey, the memory of slavery was key to understanding the importance of black nationhood and what he called “African redemption,” a process of rectifying the consequences of European conquest.¹⁸³ In a 1922 Emancipation Day speech, Garvey emphasized justice for his enslaved ancestors, proclaiming, “I shall give back to Africa that liberty that she once enjoyed hundreds of years ago, before her sons and daughters were taken from her shores and brought in chains to this Western World ... no grander gift can I bear to the sacred memory of the generation past than a free and a redeemed Africa.”¹⁸⁴ Garvey’s utopia, dreaming of an African continent fully controlled and populated by black people, represented a complete reclamation of the heritage and land European groups stole from Africa and its descendants.

Over the next few decades, the Pan-African Movement in America retained its historical focus on the analogous memories of slavery and colonialism. During the early Civil Rights era, a movement of solidarity began to grow between anti-segregation activists in America and the decolonization leaders of Africa, linked by a shared African heritage and bonded through a common struggle. Like Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr. saw the capacity of Pan-African identity and history to globally unite black people against racial oppression. In 1965, he spoke out against South African apartheid, comparing it to the transatlantic slave trade “in which Africans were seized and branded like animals, packed into ship holds like cargo and transported into chattel slavery.”¹⁸⁵ The United States, he argued, had “an obligation of atonement” to

¹⁸³ Marcus Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey: Africa for the Africans*, edited by Amy Jacques Garvey, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 91.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., Address to Hunter College (speech, New York, NY, December 10, 1965), *RFK In the Land of Apartheid*, www.rfksafilm.org/html/speeches/peopleking.php (accessed December 24, 2017).

rectify its part in this international genocide and to sever its political and economic ties to modern colonizers in South Africa.¹⁸⁶ For King, Africans served as both models and allies, yet his support for African decolonization stemmed largely from a humanitarian desire to see the United States become a global force against racist tyranny. For the most part, integrationists of the Civil Rights Movement discounted the black nationalist identity of Pan-Africanists, arguing instead that black Americans were central to the development of American history.

As the ideas of Black Power began to permeate the social activism of the 1960s, many black Americans looked increasingly for political and cultural connections to Africa as they began to become disillusioned with racial injustice in America. Yet, for many African Americans who chose to move to Africa, African identity remained elusive. In *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora*, historian Ronald Walters describes the experience of African Americans in Ghana seeing, for the first time, black men in positions of national political power. To live within a place like Ghana, Walters writes, “meant getting used to seeing black people in every conceivable role, in contrast to their prior experience with the limitations placed upon the horizons of black people by the strictures of racism.”¹⁸⁷ Many black expatriates, however, often struggled to relate personally to Africans themselves. While many African Americans had been exposed to the concept of “African brotherhood,” they lacked specific cultural experience with that idea as applied to the society and politics of modern Africa. The basis of their connection to Africa, as Walters explains, “comprised their own community and extended family ties, their

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ronald Walters, *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements*, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 104.

regional origin in the United States, their state of residence, or their biological history, little that was functional within the cultural context of Ghana.”¹⁸⁸

In 1962, prominent black poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou moved with her son to Ghana to attend college there. Angelou later recalled the anxiety she felt at the beginning of her time in Africa, doubting that she “or any black from the diaspora, could return to Africa.”¹⁸⁹ Unlike the Ghanaians she met, living on land which “had been in their people’s possession beyond remembered time” and therefore “retained an ineradicable innocence,” black Americans “wore skeletons of old despair like necklaces” and carried “the badge of a barbarous history sewn to [their] dark skins.”¹⁹⁰ Angelou represented the trauma of slavery as a great obstacle to the assimilation of black expatriates in Africa. She admitted resentment towards Africans whose families had escaped bondage in America and jealousy of their identities as members of African nations. Feeling neither American nor African, she described the pain of not belonging and sadness for all “the nameless orphans of Africa who had been shunted around the world.”¹⁹¹ Yet, despite the attrition of African heritage under slavery, African Americans had clung to visions of a romanticized idea of the African homeland. Angelou compared yearning for Africa to religious contemplations of heaven, writing, “Our people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place not built with hands, where the streets were paved with gold, and were washed with honey and milk.”¹⁹² While slavery in America had eradicated practice and knowledge of many African customs, languages, and religious practices there, stranding the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁸⁹ Maya Angelou, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 76.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 902.

enslaved in a culture hostile to their African roots, the memory of Africa endured as a mythic homeland.

Just as slavery forcibly severed many aspects of the relationship between descendants of enslaved Africans and their ancestral land, for many African Americans, it also complicated adoption of an American heritage as well. Some black nationalists who, like Marcus Garvey, considered themselves to be African rather than American, urged black people to reject racial assimilation by embracing elements of modern African culture. Black communities like the Nation of Islam (NOI), a black religious group that preached racial separation and black superiority, symbolized their allegiance to a lost African heritage by adopting Muslim faith and practices. Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation from 1934 to 1975, taught his followers that Islam, a majority non-white religion, was the only hope that black people in America had for both spiritual and earthly liberation. While many African Americans practiced Christianity, Muhammad saw it as the “the white man[’s] religion” and “the chains of slavery that hold [black people] in bondage to them.”¹⁹³ Without knowledge of Africa, Muhammad preached, “and without the knowledge of those who have enslaved them-the white race-for the past 400 years, and without the knowledge of God Almighty whose proper name is Allah and His true religion Islam, this makes the American, so-called American, Negroes blind, deaf and dumb, as prophesied throughout the Bible and the Holy Qur’an.”¹⁹⁴ Through his teachings, Muhammad attempted to reconstruct the formation of racial identity in America, positioning black men and women as part of a lost African tribe.

¹⁹³ Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Black Man in America* (Phoenix, AZ: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1965), 26.

¹⁹⁴ Elijah Muhammad, “Elijah Muhammad Speaks on the Importance of History,” Radio Broadcast, New York, NY, November 23, 1960, Columbia University, <http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/mxp/speeches/005.html>.

One of the most famous followers of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, commonly preached against the assimilation of black people in America. In the 1950s, he changed his last name “Little” to the Roman numeral symbol for ten. For black Muslims in the NOI, “X” as a last name commonly referred to an unknown African name, lost to black families under enslavement. During his conversion to Islam in prison, Malcolm X had come to revile the name “Little,” which he later claimed, “some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears.”¹⁹⁵ In his 1963 speech, “Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm X reminded his black audience, “You are ex-slaves. You didn't come here on the ‘Mayflower.’ You came here on a slave ship—in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the ‘Mayflower.’ You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers.”¹⁹⁶ Malcolm X explicitly rejected the labeling of himself as an American citizen, arguing that it was impossible for black people to have citizenship if their rights had never, in the history of the nation, been truly recognized. Pointing to the famous immigrant tale of a group of English Puritans who settled in America to practice their religion without interference from the British government, Malcolm X juxtaposed this mythic story in America’s founding with the abduction of Africans from their homeland. African descendants in America, he reasoned, never chose to be Americans. They were, as he later put it, each a “victim of America’s so-called democracy.”¹⁹⁷

In 1964, after becoming disillusioned with the Nation’s leadership, Malcolm X broke away from the NOI to establish his own group, Muslim Mosque Inc., based in orthodox Muslim

¹⁹⁵ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1965), 229.

¹⁹⁶ Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” (speech, Detroit, MI, December 10, 1963), *Black Past*, <http://www.blackpast.org/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots> (accessed December 14, 2017).

¹⁹⁷ Malcolm X, “It Shall Be the Ballot or the Bullet,” (speech, New York, NY, March 29, 1964), *AMDOCS: Documents for the Study of American History*, <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/malcolmx0364.html> (accessed November 10, 2016).

religious doctrine and tolerant views of other religions and races. Making political use of his African heritage with the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), he promoted self-determination and economic independence for black people around the world. Following a religious pilgrimage to Mecca in the spring of 1964, Malcolm X toured many countries in Africa, meeting with prominent leaders of the African independence movement. Returning from his trip, he championed African pride as a tool of global black liberation, proclaiming, “You can’t hate Africa and not hate yourself... To the same degree that your understanding of and attitude toward Africa becomes positive, you’ll find that your understanding of and your attitude toward yourself will also become positive.”¹⁹⁸ Malcolm X also encouraged members of the OAAU to see how the philosophy of Pan-Africanism could directly aid the struggle for black freedom in America, declaring, “As long as we think we’re over here in America isolated and all by ourselves and underdogs, then we’ll always have that hat-in-hand begging attitude that the man loves to see us display. But when we know that all of our people are behind us ... we don’t need to beg anybody.”¹⁹⁹ For Malcolm X, Black Power rested on the ability to unite people of African descent all over the world.

The messages of leaders like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, urging black Americans to embrace African identity within the United States, spurred a new cultural aesthetic in the late 60s and 70s that emphasized visual and wearable markings of African heritage. In *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture*, historian William L. Van Deburg describes the impact of this cultural philosophy upon the increasingly popular “natural hair style,” which “served as a highly visible imprimatur of blackness; a tribute to group unity; a

¹⁹⁸ Malcolm X, “Brotherhood Among Ourselves” (1965), in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, ed. William Safire (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 672.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

statement of self-love and personal significance.”²⁰⁰ The members of US Organization, established in reaction to Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, often wore African inspired garb and natural hairstyles. In 1966, Maulana Karenga, a founder of US Organization, created the first Kwanzaa festival in 1966, a holiday to replace Christmas, which he hoped would “give blacks an alternative to the existing holidays and an opportunity to celebrate themselves and history, rather than simply imitate the practice of the dominant society.”²⁰¹ For some, black empowerment demanded a conscious movement away from American society and towards African heritage.

As the cultural roots of the Black Power movement spread, encouraging black people to celebrate their African lineage and embrace their unique cultural traditions, the federal government began to take a new approach to racial policy, beginning with a critical look at the sociology of black families. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson, released *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, often called the Moynihan Report, arguing that black Americans faced a crisis in the rise of black single-mother families, threatening the economic and political elevation of black communities. Historians Douglas Massey and Robert Sampson argue that the original purpose of the Moynihan Report “was to make an impassioned moral case for a massive federal intervention to break the cycle of black poverty and put African Americans on the road to socioeconomic achievement and integration into American society.”²⁰² Yet, as historian James T. Patterson describes in *Freedom Is Not Enough*, many Americans were unable to read the full

²⁰⁰ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 198-201.

²⁰¹ John M. Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015), 255.

²⁰² Douglas S. Massey and Robert J. Sampson, “Moynihan Redux: Legacies and Lessons,” *The Annals Of The American Academy Of Political And Social Science* 621, no. 1, (January 2009), 6.

report, and were thus left to piece together its arguments from secondhand accounts. While some stories emphasized Moynihan's outline of white racism and economic discrimination as the source of black impoverishment, "many others news stories and commentators," Patterson writes, "zeroed in on boldfaced headlines and passages in [Moynihan's] report that painted a devastating portrait of family disorganization."²⁰³ While Moynihan intended to frame the federal government as responsible for the impoverishment of black communities, the legacy of his report has been one of racist and sexist propaganda, upholding the myth of a criminal black pathology and offering an early academic justification for increased policing in black communities and incarceration of black individuals. At the time of its release, many civil rights activists viewed the report as an assault on the integrity of black families, blaming the oppressed for their own oppression.

The Moynihan Report did, however, acknowledge a familiar perspective of slavery and its long-term effects on the psychological and cultural uplift of America's black population, drawing substantially from the work of many black historians and sociologists. In 1959, in *The Negro Family in the United States*, black historian E. Franklin Frazier formulated that slavery had created a "matriarchate," or the opposite of a patriarchal social order, within black communities.²⁰⁴ By supposedly forcing women into the role of family figureheads, Frazier postulated that slavery had crippled the economic and political power of black men. Like Frazier, Moynihan believed that the black community "had paid a fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past centuries ... forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously

²⁰³ James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 10.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

retards the progress of the group as a whole.”²⁰⁵ In a book released the same year as the Moynihan Report, *Dark Ghetto*, black sociologist Kenneth Clark agreed that the systematic rape of black women and separation of black men from their families had “made the female the dominant person in the Negro family.”²⁰⁶ Throughout slavery and segregation, the black man, Clark wrote, “was not allowed to be a consistent wage earner; he could not present himself to his wife and children as a person who had the opportunity or the ability to compete successfully in politics, business, and industry.”²⁰⁷

The representation of slavery in the Moynihan report, while controversial in its time for its generalization of black family pathology and later for its sexist conclusions regarding the supposed weaknesses of black female leadership, conformed to a common historical notion—that black families had lost autonomy of their own cultural and social values in their forced departure from Africa. In many ways, debates over the heritage of slavery outlined America’s various views on the present day condition of African Americans. For many white sociologists, black Americans constituted a culturally underdeveloped society within the United States. Two years before *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Moynihan and his colleague Nathan Glazer co-wrote an analysis of New York City’s various immigrant and ethnic communities, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, arguing, “It is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves because—and this is the key to much in the Negro world—the Negro is only an American, and nothing else. He has no values and no culture

²⁰⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition,” edited by Daniel Geary, *The Atlantic*, September 14, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/>.

²⁰⁶ Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 70.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

to guard and protect.”²⁰⁸ Yet, in the late 60s, as the Black Campus Movement encouraged an academic focus on black cultural agency, new waves of black historical scholarship told a different story about the identity and heritage of African Americans.

In 1968, black sociologist Andrew Billingsley, published *Black Families in White America*, his response to the Moynihan report, which, he wrote, “concluded, quite incorrectly, that the Negro family in this country is falling apart.”²⁰⁹ Billingsley agreed that slavery had, in some ways, robbed black people of a “strong family and community life.”²¹⁰ Yet, it was not simply the denial of black humanity under slavery that drove this destruction of social ties, but also the separation of black communities from African civilization. “The transportation of slaves from Africa to the New World,” he wrote, “completely disrupted the cultural life of the Africans and the historical development of the Negro people.”²¹¹ Yet, Billingsley disagreed that black families, or black mothers for that matter, had lost traditions of racial uplift and survival passed down through generations of African descendants. He described the historical black family as “an absorbing, adaptive, and amazingly resilient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of its society.”²¹² Focusing on the agency of enslaved Africans and their descendants, many black scholars would continue to respond to the denigration of black families by focusing on the sociohistorical development of African American identity before and throughout slavery.

Black nationalists of the later Black Power era seized upon African identity to define themselves within American society. Advising black Americans to call themselves “African,”

²⁰⁸ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963), 78.

²⁰⁹ Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 199.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

Stokely Carmichael suggested in 1969 that “Africans who live in America” must understand the importance of a cohesive pan-African identity and “begin to alienate our people completely from the culture and values of Western society.”²¹³ Yet, he admitted that this would be “very, very difficult” for black Americans to reject the beliefs and customs of a society in which they had been socialized for their entire lives.²¹⁴ In the late 1960s, many African Americans, especially those older than the generation of the Black Campus Movement, remained incredulous of their own cultural connections to any country other than America. As Andrew Billingsley lamented, “Negroes, under the tutelage of white Americans, have long viewed their African background with a sense of shame.”²¹⁵ In 1970, Alice Walker, a former voting rights activist who would later become a prominent writer and poet, published an account of her time as a black history consultant working for the federal program Head Start, helping to develop new curriculum for Mississippi public schools. Much of her work focused on teaching mostly black female teachers in rural and impoverished parts of the Mississippi delta, whom she felt were completely uninformed of their own history and racial legacy. Discouraged by their lack of connection to an African past, Walker wrote:

How do you get them to understand the pathos and beauty of a heritage they have been taught to regard with shame? ... Try to tell a sixty-year-old delta woman that black men invented anything, black women wrote sonnets, that black people long ago were every bit the human beings they are today ... Chances are she will begin to talk ‘bible’ to you, and you will discover to your dismay that the lady still believes in the curse of Ham.²¹⁶

While, as Walker claimed, some black people were prejudiced against their own past, many average African Americans were simply unable to see how, after hundreds of years of white

²¹³ Stokely Carmichael, “Pan-Africanism: Land and Power,” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 1 (November 1969), 42.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 38.

²¹⁶ Alice Walker, “‘But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working...,’” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 3/4 (January-February 1970), 20.

cultural domination, individual connections to Africa would ever truly be known. In a 1972 interview, activist Fannie Lou Hamer explained her frustration upon meeting black Africans and not being able to relate to them, saying, “I felt the anger of why this had to happen to us. We were so stripped and robbed of our background; we wind up with nothing ... We just don’t know anymore about ourselves than the names that the slave owners gave us, and you know that was a real crime.”²¹⁷ For those like Hamer, the idea that African Americans could trace their family history all the way through slavery and back to Africa seemed next to impossible.

Before working on his genealogy, black writer Alex Haley knew very little about the history of both slavery and Africa in his family, recalling later, “I really hadn’t thought all that much about Africa.”²¹⁸ As a child, female relatives had told him about an African ancestor who had his leg cut off for defying his slave master, but it wasn’t until he was middle aged that he began to investigate this story. Upon discovering that his family likely descended from the Mandinka tribe in modern Gambia, Haley embarked on a quest to find his ancestor in Africa. There, an old *griot*, a West African word for storyteller, revealed to him the name of his ancestor, Kunta Kinte. Thrilled to finally confirm a story so important to the identity of his family, especially his grandmother who held it “as the most precious thing in her life,” Haley felt inspired to bring that joy to other African Americans.²¹⁹ “Back home,” he wrote, “I knew that what I must write, really, was our black saga, where any individual's past is the essence of the millions.”²²⁰

²¹⁷ Fannie Lou Hamer, *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, edited by Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 160.

²¹⁸ Alex Haley, “Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy,” *The Oral History Review*, vol. 1 (1973), 13.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²²⁰ Alex Haley, “My Furthest-Back-Person: ‘The African,’” *The New York Times*, July 16, 1972.

When *Negro Digest* reported on Haley's early research in 1968, it framed Haley's discovery of roots in Africa as a symbolic "documented breakthrough."²²¹ Writers for the magazine were astounded by the ability of a black man to trace his family genealogy all the way back to his ancestral home in Gambia and the last ancestor to have been born there, Kunte Kinte. For Carolyn Rodgers, a prominent black poet, Haley's findings were an emotional spectacle. Her prose in the poem, "for Alex Haley (the Man who did it)," reflects a mixture of anxiety and excitement towards the prospect of "knowing" one's black ancestors:

i have often ached to know how
craved to find out where i
came from...
KNOW where my fathers fathers
fathers fathers fathers fathers
father where were they
they were not here I know not
where where is the root of my
father long gone ago.²²²

Many others shared her enthusiasm towards Haley's work. In 1972, Haley received a letter from a black inmate in a New York prison, in which he told Haley, "the coal which you have added to the flames of black identity and black pride will surely spread through the minds and souls of black people everywhere, and add spice to the cry, 'We are somebody.'"²²³ Both Rodgers and the inmate perceived Haley's genealogical journey as an affirmation of black humanity and reclamation of black families within the story of American history. For his part in inspiring this new outlook, Haley felt a responsibility to help other African Americans realize their "common saga" by helping them access records of their ancestors. In 1972, he complained, "All of the 50 states have at least one library devoted to the genealogy of European heritages. We don't have

²²¹ "Journey into the African Past" *Negro Digest*, November 1968, 78.

²²² Carolyn Rodgers, "for Alex Haley (the Man who did it)," *Negro Digest*, November 1968, 48.

²²³ Patrice Agnew, "Black Author Harvests Joy After Digging Up His African Roots," *The Pittsburgh Press*, September 30, 1972.

one.”²²⁴ A year later, he announced plans for the nation’s first black genealogical library, which he promised would “collect everything that we can lay hands on that documents slaves, free blacks, any blacks, preceding 1900.”²²⁵ As confidence in black genealogical missions surged, genealogical resources for black researches began to grow into an industry.

Alex Haley’s discovery inspired many black Americans to begin their own personal search for African roots, spurring a boom in the popularity of black genealogy. Moreover, this genealogical movement culminated at a time when Americans of all ethnicities were becoming more interested in their family history, a phenomenon believed to be spurred partly by the 1976 bicentennial of the American Revolution. Regardless of its cause, black participation in the national genealogy craze challenged the claim that black people in America had no culture or history of their own and compelled archival institutions to begin incorporating a multi-ethnic approach to genealogy. In 1976, James Walker, a black genealogist and local history specialist at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., began to notice an uptick in African American visitors looking for genealogical information. While noting the universality of the “burning desire” people of all ethnic groups had for “defined roots,” Walker acknowledged that this interest in African Americans represented a particular yearning for cultural validation of their African heritage.²²⁶ Arguing that interest in black genealogy was “an important aftermath or outcrop of the national heritage trend of the sixties,” he credited the movement towards Pan-African and Black Power ideology as motivation for it.²²⁷

In the 1970s, views on the heritage of slavery and its devastation of African identity began to shift as black historians attempted to transform the public’s knowledge about the lives

²²⁴ Dorothy Gilliam, “Alex Haley Pursues Genealogy of Blacks,” *Gazette-Times* (Corvallis, OR), October 13, 1972.

²²⁵ Haley, “Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy,” 25.

²²⁶ Harriet Jackson Scarupa, “Black Genealogy,” *Essence*, July 1976, 87.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

of enslaved people and the cultures they created while in bondage. Attempting to look beyond the perspective of whites, historians began to utilize the 10,000 interviews of former slaves, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the New Deal Era, and other sources they hoped might give them a more intimate insight into the lives of slaves. In 1971, *Ebony* editor Lerone Bennett Jr. chastised "white authorities" who questioned "the existence of an African-influenced slave community," arguing that many had ignored important testimonies from slaves, slave owners, and "the testimony of slave behavior as objectified in events, folklore, and art."²²⁸ From these sources, he wrote, "it is perfectly clear that the slaves recognized that they had a common interest... a recognition of special obligations, and an *us* perspective."²²⁹ In his 1976 book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, historian Herman Gutman studied the records of large plantations and analyzed them against slave narratives. He too identified "a fusion by Africans and their early Afro-American descendants of Anglo-American beliefs, behavior, and institutions with West African beliefs and behavior."²³⁰ For example, while plantation records indicate that most slaves went by Anglo-American names, Gutman suggested that naming customs often diverged from Anglo-American practices. He pointed to the African religious belief that "the first infant born in a family after the decease of a member was the same individual come back," and revealed many instances in which black children were named after deceased relatives.²³¹ By studying enslaved people as agents of history, historians began finally to understand African Americans as a people with roots and heritage.

²²⁸ Lerone Bennett Jr., "The World of Slaves," *Ebony*, February 1971, 49.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ Herman G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1976), 332.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

Like many slavery historians of the era, Haley attempted to assign agency to African Americans by depicting their ties to African culture and history. Yet, while utilizing many of the historical truths set forth by historians like Herman Gutman, *Roots*, as many have now come to believe, was not a true story, but rather based in truth. Haley himself qualified his story as “faction,” somewhere between fact and fiction.²³² He also claimed, however, a certain amount of historical authenticity, writing in the final chapter, “To the best of my knowledge and of my effort, every lineage statement within *Roots* is from either my African or American families’ carefully reserved oral history, much of which I have been able conventionally to corroborate with documents.”²³³ Almost immediately following its release, numerous journalists and academics began to question the factual nature of the book. In 1977, a journalist for the *London Times*, Mark Ottaway, examined “the central question of the book—that for the first time a black American has actually succeeded in tracing his genealogy back to a specific African ancestor and to a specific ancestral village.”²³⁴ Ottaway’s search through Gambian archives and British colonial records cast significant doubt on Haley’s ancestral claims. He determined that “the Kunta Kinte who apparently once disappeared from Juffure must have done so later than 1767, and capture by slavers is the least likely of all possible explanations.”²³⁵

Historian Henry Louis Gates, a personal friend of Haley, admitted after the author’s death, “Most of us feel it’s highly unlikely that Alex actually found the village whence his ancestors sprang.”²³⁶ Yet, to Gates and other defenders of Haley’s work, the legacy of *Roots* has little to do with historical reality. He believed *Roots* “was an important event because it captured

²³² Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, “‘Roots’ and the New ‘Faction’: A Legitimate Tool for Clío?” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89, no. 1 (1981), 3.

²³³ Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of An American Family*, (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), 892.

²³⁴ Mark Ottaway, “Tangled Roots,” *London Times*, April 10, 1977.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Alex Beam, “The Prize Fight Over Alex Haley’s Tangled ‘Roots,’” *Boston Globe*, October 30, 1998.

everyone's imagination."²³⁷ Journalist Clarence Page agreed, writing, "If *Roots* was a hoax, it was a hoax Americans wanted desperately to believe."²³⁸ Both Gates and Page viewed *Roots* in the context of America's collective memory surrounding slavery. They argued that Haley's critics had lost sight of *Roots*' primary achievement, refuting centuries of racist myths and stereotypes that denied the humanity of enslaved African Americans. In Haley's own defense of his work, he wrote, "I was just trying to give my people a myth to live by."²³⁹ While Haley's work lacked historical credibility, it granted African Americans the ability to claim some cultural ownership over the lands where their ancestors were first captured and brought to America.

In writing *Roots: The Saga of An American Family*, Alex Haley hoped that portraying the personhood of the enslaved would inspire African Americans to take pride, both in their African ancestors and the impact they made upon the history of America. "For generations we have been a people who subconsciously carried around in our minds the suspicion that we had no past," Haley once told an interviewer, "Or if we did acknowledge a past, we say it negatively. The African was always a caricature, a neo-simian."²⁴⁰ Haley's depiction of his family's journey from Africa to America alluded to the conservation of African heritage through slavery. Within the pages of *Roots*, the character of Kunta Kinte fights to preserve his African traditions several times throughout his life in bondage. Kunta and his American-born wife, Bell, argue frequently over the influence of African culture in raising their daughter, Kizzy. When Bell catches Kunta whispering Mandinka words to their daughter, she exclaims, "Ain't you got no sense at all, man ... Don't you know you better pay me 'tention--git dat chile an' all us in bad trouble wid dat

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Clarence Page, "Alex Haley's Facts Can Be Doubted, But Not His Truths," *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1993.

²³⁹ Philip Nobile, "Roots Uncovered," *Village Voice*, February 23, 1993.

²⁴⁰ Unger, "Alex Haley: Black at the Roots."

mess! You better git in yo' hard head she ain't no African!”²⁴¹ While Bell fears the danger that will befall her daughter if she grows outwardly prideful of her African heritage, Kunta scorns her for disowning “his blood and his seed,” asking, “Could not one breathe a word of one's true heritage without fearing punishment from some *toubob* (West African name for whites)?”²⁴² Haley displayed Kinte’s recollection of his African heritage as a form of defiance to cultural oppression. His instinctive impulse to practice African religious traditions under slavery also preached the importance of heritage preservation as a source of spiritual strength and confidence.

While Alex Haley’s *Roots* emphasized the common peoplehood of black men and women through a shared memory of slavery, it also represented those of African descent as important voices inside the American worldview; validating black people as a distinct cultural and political faction while processing the themes of African heritage through the lens of an American national identity and history. *Roots* represented Haley’s family as an “American family,” steeped in the important democratic values of liberty and equality. By giving his ancestors personhood, Haley sought not only to uncover the rich cultural traditions of the African diaspora, but also to translate that experience within the American “melting pot” of immigrant experiences. As he saw it, *Roots* was a celebration of American multiculturalism. It allowed African Americans, as well as other citizens, to take pride in their ethnic heritage as a form of patriotic expression by reinforcing the idea that all Americans, regardless of their ethnic background, have an equal claim to the American Dream, defined in the Declaration of Independence as a right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Dedicating *Roots*, published the same year as America’s Bicentennial, as “a birthday offering to my country,” Haley encouraged Americans in 1976 to reimagine the egalitarian notions of America’s founding by seeking unity in diversity and

²⁴¹ Haley, *Roots*, 259.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 259-260.

acceptance towards the unique cultural perspectives of African Americans and all other ethnic groups.²⁴³

To many white Americans, the message of *Roots* had less to do with black cultural connections to Africa and more to do with the correction of white historical myths regarding the popular history of African enslavement. In the 1970s, many Americans had slowly become accustomed to seeing black families on television in shows like *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. Yet, *Roots* the miniseries, broadcast from January 23 to January 30, 1977 on ABC, was in many ways the first television show to center the experience of African Americans in the context of American slavery. While the two most popular and financially successful films of the first half of the twentieth century, *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, reinforced stereotypical representations of black slaves as either villainous, lazy, or zealously devoted to their white captors, *Roots* strove to emphasize the humanity of enslaved people. In *Prosthetic Memory*, historian Alison Landsberg calls the character of Kunta Kinte “an honorific body imprinted by history,” representing “a black body that Americans can inhabit to remember prosthetically a past that has for too long been the site of a shameful silence.”²⁴⁴ The characters of *Roots* represented, not just a family, but also an entire race of people, stolen from Africa and forced to endure centuries of violence, degradation, and injustice.

Many viewers championed the miniseries as a tool to combat America’s collective amnesia regarding the history of slavery and the harm it brought to black American families. An editorial in *The Washington Post*, published eight days after the series finale, praised *Roots* for allowing “white and black Americans to sit down as a people and hear the story of slavery with

²⁴³ Robert J. Norrell, *Alex Haley: And the Books That Changed a Nation*, (London, England: Macmillan Publishers, 2015), 150.

²⁴⁴ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 105.

something more than guilt, on the one hand, or shame and anger, on the other,” and marked it as a sign of “how far we have come” as a country.²⁴⁵ To some, the success of the *Roots* miniseries showed the rising prominence of black historical memory within American culture. *Roots* also helped create a new audience of readers for historical works that explored the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. Seizing on the popularity of *Roots* in 1977, many newspapers and magazines took the opportunity to review contemporary historical works like Gutman’s, helping readers, as one journalist put it, “get up to date on America’s favorite current historical pastime.”²⁴⁶ Part of what made *Roots* so influential was its ability to translate the stories of a largely unremembered people into the mainstream of popular culture. As Larry King, an Afro-American history professor from Illinois, told an interviewer after watching *Roots*, “Now that we’ve been exposed to the black man’s perspective on U.S. history, I think people are going to want more.”²⁴⁷

For the Americans who saw the airing of *Roots* as a moment of racial reconciliation, changes in the depiction of slavery in popular culture seemed to mark a moment of social progress. Yet, some scholars have since concluded that *Roots*, while it translated black historical themes to a wider American audience, had a greater impact on the way white Americans saw themselves than the way they saw either slavery or race relations. In 1992, researchers in mass communications, Lauren R. Tucker and Hemant Shah, wrote, “Rather than a story that revealed how slaves kept a measure of dignity and self-esteem, and the social and cultural mechanisms they used to survive in the face of inhuman oppression, TV *Roots* became a generic tale of the

²⁴⁵ “Roots,” *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1977.

²⁴⁶ Johnny Malone, “Seven Scholars Examine Tragic Legacy In US History,” *The Jackson Sun* (Jackson, TN), January 16, 1977.

²⁴⁷ Diane Mermigas, “Black historians lavish praise on Roots TV Series,” *The Des Plaines Herald* (Arlington Heights, IL), February 1, 1977.

classic immigrant success story in America.”²⁴⁸ Marketing for the series had emphasized the universality of its message. Historian Matthew F. Delmont also points, for example, to ABC’s decision to change the subtitle of the show to “The Triumph of An American Family,” writing, “This small but important tweak to the book’s subtitle, *The Saga of an American Family*, promised viewers that Haley’s ancestors would weather the horror of slavery and emerge triumphantly as Americans.”²⁴⁹ Producers wanted viewers to see *Roots* as a success story, paralleling the narrative of the “American Dream” amongst white immigrant families. Head producer of *Roots*, David Wolper explained this focus as an explicit choice, arguing, “If people perceive *Roots* to be a black history show—nobody is going to watch it. If they say, “Let me see, there are no names in it, a lot of black actors and there are no whites’ ... It looks like it's going to be a black journal—it's all going to be blacks telling about their history.”²⁵⁰

While television producers attempted to reframe *Roots* to appeal to white audiences, Haley rejected the myth that all immigrants to America faced the same barriers and opportunities to success. Writing about the popularity of the miniseries and celebrating the way it resonated with Americans of all races, he also reminded readers, “In our nation of immigrants, blacks have been the only unwilling immigrants.” He continued, “the lot of chattel slaves,” or Africans forced to work in bondage for the rest of their lives, “was not comparable to the status of indentured servants,” such as the impoverished migrants from all over Great Britain who agreed to work for four to seven years without pay for passage to North America and shelter when they

²⁴⁸ Hemant Shah and Lauren R. Tucker, “Race and the Transformation of Culture: The Making of the Television Miniseries *Roots*,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, (1992), 334.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵⁰ Matthew F. Delmont, *Making Roots: A Nation Captivated*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 109.

arrived.²⁵¹ Yet, he also stressed the universal applications of his work, giving non-black people both “a positive avenue into a new perception of others, an understanding of a proud African, of a proud people, and the sensitive culture in which they lived,” and a “springboard” to discover their own ethnic history.²⁵² Haley envisioned his work as a bridge across the country’s racial divide, teaching Americans to respect the distinct histories that made up their collective culture.

Roots depicted African immigration to America as particularly unique, especially in its representation of the Middle Passage. In the book, Haley did not hold back on grisly and brutal details, such as the chapter in which Kunta Kinte, Haley’s African ancestor, is first loaded onto the slave ship that would bring him to America: “Through swollen lids, Kunta saw a thicket of legs and feet all around him... [He] began vomiting as the *toubob* [white person]—holding dim yellowish flames that burned within metal frames carried by a ring—shackled his wrists and ankles, then shoved him backward, close between two other moaning men.”²⁵³ In the miniseries, this scene was faithfully depicted in all its gore, this time in a very visual medium. For some, the experience of watching this and other violent scenes was particularly emotional. Black civil rights activist Benjamin Hooks described the experience of watching *Roots*, recalling that it “hurt at physical and psychic levels in [the] most excruciating ways. It gagged at the throat, throbbed at the temples, burned behind the eyeballs, ripped at the gut, tugged at the chest. At times I would have to shut off the set and walk out of the room, ears burning, knees wobbly.”²⁵⁴ For many black Americans, *Roots* was personal. It was their story being told, in all its pain and tragedy, in front of millions of viewers. Writing in the summer of 1977, Professor Nancy L. Arnez of Howard University wrote of *Roots*:

²⁵¹ Alex Haley, “Alex Haley: What Roots Means to Me,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), May 20, 1977.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Haley, *Roots*, 200.

²⁵⁴ Delmont, *Making Roots*, 175.

It sutures the wounds that European and American historical scalpers presented to blacks as the truth about their heritage in an effort to enslave their minds as well as their bodies ... Haley, with this seminal work, *Roots*, has helped mightily to destroy the chilling terror of ignorance of who we are as a people. He has given our proud heritage back to us. He has given us back our ancestor and our land.²⁵⁵

For many, the experience of Alex Haley's *Roots* was more than simply reading the book or watching the television show. It drove some to take action, whether through personal or political convictions, to connect individually to their African heritage. In June of 1977, Dr. Sheila S. Walker, an anthropologist from the University of California Berkeley, reported on "the rash of black babies being named Kunta Kinte and Kizzy," after two of Alex Haley's ancestors.²⁵⁶ Arguing that this phenomena pointed to a resurgence in Pan-Africanist attitudes and behavior, she wrote, "Original African names that were taken away by slavemasters are returning in increasing numbers with the conscious reaffirmation of Afro-American culture, the result of black people's newly revived pride in their genetic and cultural roots."²⁵⁷ In a letter to *Ebony Magazine*, Jeannette Drake from Richmond, Virginia explained how watching *Roots* had led her to talk to her 84 year old grandmother about their family history. Feeling the "joys of blackness" and urging others to talk to their elders, Drake wrote, "The negative connotations of blackness, which this country gave me, now seems balanced by the sense of joy I feel at recognizing more keenly the strength, love and faith of my foreparents."²⁵⁸ For Drake and the parents who named their children after *Roots* characters, the story of Alex Haley's family represented the history of a people.

²⁵⁵ Nancy L. Arnez, "From His Story to Our Story: A Review of *Roots*," *The Journal of Negro Education* 46, no. 3 (1977), 367.

²⁵⁶ Sheila S. Walker, "What's In A Name?" *Ebony*, June 1977, 78.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Jeannette Drake Robinson, "Letters," *Ebony*, July 1977, 20-22.

For some African Americans, *Roots* also inspired a desire to see Africa for themselves. In the first episode of the miniseries, idyllic images of the village of Juffure represented a clichéd vision of Africa in its “primitive” form, still unspoiled by colonial influence. Following the airing of the miniseries, tourists rushed to see the birthplace of Kunta Kinte, in Juffure, Gambia, for themselves. In 1977, several travel companies created travel packages to Gambia, specifically targeting fans of *Roots*. In *The Crisis*, writer Douglas O’Connor explained the draw of African Americans to Haley’s homeland, writing, “Africa is wide and our ancestors were forced into brutal passage from many of its ports. Still the possibility of our beginnings haunts us. The Gambia must be considered as such a possibility, whether vicariously or in the process of serious research.”²⁵⁹ Just ten months after Haley published *Roots*, an estimated 300 Americans had traveled to Gambia.²⁶⁰ By 1979, due to the high volume of *Roots* tourists, the Gambian government officially professed that Juffure “must be declared a national monument and protected as a traditional village to retain its appeal.”²⁶¹ Throughout the next few decades, people of African descent continued to travel to Juffure and other sites of African origin and enslavement.

Yet, within the context of heritage tourism, the perspective of Africa was often filtered through narratives of an African past, leaving many African American visitors with little connection to the culture and society of modern Africans. In *Sites of Slavery*, historian Salamishah Tillet argues, “While narratives of the African diaspora often attempt to address the racial exclusivity of national myths, they do so by inventing... myths of transnationalism,” that “dissolve the nation-state by emphasizing commonalities that transcend geographical, linguistic,

²⁵⁹ Douglas O’Connor, “The Gambia, Gateway To An Emotional Experience,” *The Crisis*, April 1977, 151.

²⁶⁰ Maureen Johnson, “Looking for ‘Roots’ in Africa’s Gambia,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 30, 1977.

²⁶¹ Liza A. Gijanto, “Competing Narratives: Tensions Between Diaspora Tourism and the Atlantic Past in the Gambia,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 6, no. 3 (2011), 229.

or even ethnic difference,” thus rendering issues of modern Africa obsolete.²⁶² By selling Americans on his vision of the African past, Haley inadvertently drove more tourists to Juffure than the village was equipped to handle. Just three years after the airing of *Roots*, the Chief of Juffure, Bakary Taal, accused Haley of promising more than he delivered to the village’s community. Claiming that Haley had agreed to build a mosque for the villagers, Taal complained, “We are out of money.”²⁶³ Whatever *Roots* meant for the cultural identity of African Americans, it held little relevance for many Africans beyond a boom in local tourism. Still, Haley’s influence undoubtedly spawned an American interest in the modern affairs of Africa.

In the late 1970s, black members of Congress began leveraging their growing political influence towards the reformation of US policy in Africa. By the presidential election of 1976, African Americans had become an increasingly powerful voting constituency, evidenced by the election of Jimmy Carter and his support by 95% of black voters. As black representation in Congress grew, many African Americans urged the US to help protect human rights in African countries. In September of that year, the Congressional Black Caucus met for a two-day conference at Howard University to create “An Afro-American Manifesto on Southern Africa,” pledging “solidarity with Africans protesting racism and oppression” in the countries of Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa.²⁶⁴ In 1977, Stephen S. Rosenfeld of the *Washington Post* argued that *Roots* had created “a view establishing that blacks have a heritage in Africa and an experience in America entitling them to ‘own’ a noticeably larger piece of American foreign

²⁶² Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 103.

²⁶³ “Gambians Blast Alex Haley for Reneging On Promise, But Author Denies Charge,” *Jet*, June 7, 1982, 7.

²⁶⁴ “Speaking Out: The African American Manifesto On South Africa,” *Ebony*, December 1976, 88.

policy than they have received or claimed so far.”²⁶⁵ It was also, “no mere coincidence,” he reasoned, “that the book, in both its written and visual form, appears and becomes immensely popular precisely at a moment when Americans choose as their new President a politician with the special political background and moral aspect of a Jimmy Carter.”²⁶⁶

From the early days of his presidency, Jimmy Carter seemed interested in tackling the human rights abuses of African nations against their black populations. Less than two months after Carter’s inauguration, at his bequest, Congress quickly approved a bill reinstating a US ban on exports of chrome from Rhodesia, a majority black country where whites still retained all political control and were currently fighting a war against the Patriotic Front, black guerilla armies led by Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe. Carter had also made a conscious effort to maintain popularity within the black community, a faction credited with having won him the 1976 election. Maintaining a commitment to black political representation, Carter hired the first black woman ever appointed to a presidential cabinet position, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Patricia Roberts Harris, and the first black US ambassador to the United Nations (UN), former civil rights activist and congressman Andrew Young. A number of black politicians seemed to have the ear of the president on foreign affairs.

Andrew Young in particular represented the growing authority of black Americans in foreign policy. In the spring of 1977, during a ten-day trip to Africa, he began to help strengthen the relationship between US and African nations. He cautioned, however, “in no sense should America assume the main burden,” explaining that US officials would take “a supportive role.”²⁶⁷ On the eighth day of his trip, Young stopped in Lagos, Nigeria for an event *Ebony*

²⁶⁵ Paul Scott, “Carter’s African ‘Roots’ Policy,” *Lebanon Daily News* (Lebanon, Pennsylvania), February 19, 1977.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ Brenda Jones, “Young offers moral support,” *The Guardian* (London, UK), February 8, 1977.

called “the biggest family reunion in human history.”²⁶⁸ The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, commonly referred to as FESTAC ’77, gathered 16,000 people of African descent from 56 different nations to celebrate African art, literature, and religion. Back home in the United States, many African Americans were thrilled by the participation of Young and 500 other African American politicians, artists, and academics. Writers at *Ebony* “were particularly pleased by the pivotal role played by the U.S. contingent,” noting that African Americans as a whole represent “the largest concentration of black people outside of the state of Nigeria.”²⁶⁹ To them, US participation in FESTAC ’77 garnered hope that the US government had begun to recognize the heritage of African Americans. They were proud of American participants, coming from a country “founded on the blood and sweat of men and women from Africa,” to join, “for the first time in 500 years,” a global black family, contending that an understanding of the transnational identity of African Americans was “central to an understanding of the American Dilemma, which cannot be solved or even understood until all Americans understand that America is an African as well as a European invention.”²⁷⁰ In the eyes of many, though the US government had a long history of ignoring the plights of black Africans, slavery had forever forged a relationship between the American and Africa.

Back from his Africa trip, Young rallied black Americans to support US involvement in Africa, telling an interviewer, “As long as there’s uncertainty and instability around the world, no matter what we do in this country, black folk are going to suffer ... We must have international stability in order to give the right amount of attention to our domestic problems.”²⁷¹

During the summer of 1977, President Carter also pledged to members of the black

²⁶⁸ “29 Days That Shook The Black World,” *Ebony*, May 1977, 48.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ “Blacks on the Carter Team,” *Ebony*, March 1977, 151.

Congressional Caucus that he would join with them “in matters that affect all human beings—a search for peace in the world, a reduction in armaments, a channeling of scarce financial and human resources to give people a better life, a life with education possible, better health care, more human freedom, the rule by the black majorities in the African nations.”²⁷² That same month, Young, with his British colleague Ambassador David Owens, announced a solution for keeping peace in Rhodesia while echoing the demands of black liberation armies struggling to seize governmental control from white Rhodesians. The Anglo-American proposal called for white Rhodesians to accept a UN peacekeeping force, a new constitution providing universal adult suffrage, the incorporation of black liberation armies into the Rhodesian army, a development fund for one billion dollars, and finally, the promise to fully incorporate black citizens into the political process by 1978.²⁷³

To many black Americans, Young embodied the capacity of African Americans working within both national and international systems of government to stop racial oppression through a particular historical understanding of the global development of slavery. Only a few months after beginning his position at the UN, however, Young had seemingly angered British allies by telling an interviewer that Britain had historically “almost invented racism.”²⁷⁴ This answer, as Young later defended, was given in response to inference by the interviewer that racism was just an American problem, absent from the history of Great Britain. While eventually apologizing for a remark he called “unintentional,” Young admitted that the British had been “a little chicken

²⁷² Jimmy Carter, “Congressional Black Caucus Remarks at the Caucus’ Annual Dinner,” (speech, September 24, 1977, Washington, D.C.), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6684> (accessed December 24, 2017).

²⁷³ Paul E. Masters, “Carter and the Rhodesian Problem,” *International Science Review* 75, no. 3/4 (2000), 26.

²⁷⁴ “Young apologizes, says he was wrong to say British almost invented racism,” *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), April 8, 1977.

on race generally and South Africa maybe.”²⁷⁵ In July of 1978, Young made another gaffe, this time threatening America’s moral authority in the advancement of human rights. While discussing the treatment of political prisoners in the Soviet Union, America’s Cold War foe, Young told a French newspaper, “We [the United States] still have hundreds of people that I would categorize as political prisoners in our prisons.”²⁷⁶ Responding later to public anger at his critiques, Young added, “the things that I’ve said that were controversial in white America are things that everybody in the UN knows to be true ... racism exists all over the world, and all of the diplomats understand that.”²⁷⁷ In fact, it appeared that many of his colleagues at the UN believed that Young had played a major role in improving global attitudes towards America. Said one diplomat, “Before Andy Young and the Carter Administration, America was one of the most disliked countries in the world ... Now the representatives of the Third World countries respect Andy, and they can talk to him.”²⁷⁸

Noting the appearance of African Americans like Andrew Young on a global stage, some political analysts of the Carter era credited this rise in influence as a result of the long cultural commitment to Africa amongst enslaved Africans and their descendants. “Black American interest in Africa probably dates to the Kunta Kintes of the 17th century,” wrote Paul Delaney of *The New York Times*, “but it took three more centuries to translate that interest into influence.”²⁷⁹ In 1978, however, during what became known as “The Andy Young Affair,” Jimmy Carter fired Andrew Young after he went against promises the US made with Israel and met with

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Andrew DeRoche, *Andrew Young: Civil Rights Ambassador*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 102.

²⁷⁷ Herschel Johnson, “A Close Encounter With Andrew Young,” *Ebony*, April 1978, 112.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Paul Delaney, “Blacks plunge into international political arena,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1979.

representatives from Palestine. For Jesse Jackson, Young's firing symbolized the supposed failure of Pan-Africanism within American foreign policy. In an interview, he speculated:

I think that the cap blew off a surging well of international consciousness for the masses of black people ... In the case of Andy, as that wellspring kept building, and because the castigation of him took place at such a high and visible level, none of the people could miss what happened to him. And so the explosion, after many years of saying we have a right to be people of the world, not just slaves of the ghetto. It exploded.²⁸⁰

Despite Andrew Young's dismissal from his position as UN ambassador, American interest in Africa would continue throughout the new decade. In 1980, after Rhodesia collapsed and the new country of Zimbabwe began under the control of Robert Mugabe, African American activists turned their attention once again to the eradication of South African apartheid. Zimbabwean independence had also given African Americans a new confidence in international affairs. Following his departure from the administration, Young spoke openly about his hopes for Carter's future plans for Africa. He argued that the president and his successors would now be held accountable to African independence through the influence of the African American community, writing, "Like Israel, Africa now has an American constituency that measures U.S. government commitment to its own community by the government's response to African interests. This new Africa lobby has been a long time coming, but it now represents a solid base in black America, which is aware of its roots and insistent on being heard."²⁸¹ As Young asserted, many African Americans held the desire to be treated like Jewish Americans, or any other groups of citizens with political influence in the foreign affairs of their ancestral homelands.

In the 1980s, many African Americans were growing increasingly concerned with the suffering of Black citizens in South Africa where, like Rhodesia, the white minority controlled

²⁸⁰ "Foreign Policy, Black America and the Andy Young Affair," *Ebony*, January 1980, 122.

²⁸¹ Andrew Young, "Mugabe Lights Carter's Fire," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1980.

every aspect of law and politics and violently suppressed any opposition from the black majority. Under the administration of President Ronald Reagan, America continued an uneasy relationship with the white supremacist government of South Africa. Reagan believed that a Cold War alliance with the country might block the influence of the Soviet Union in the southern nations of Africa and thus was hesitant to criticize South African leaders. Though many believed that American imposition of sanctions and restrictions could force South African officials to reassess the nation's racial caste system, actions previously taken under the Carter administration, Ronald Reagan refused this tactic. During his 1984 bid for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Jesse Jackson rebuked the Reagan administration, criticizing Reagan's refusal of economic sanctions as complicity with South Africa's crimes against its citizens. Speaking in front of the United Nations on June 18, he called Reagan's policy "an act of barbarism," and urged major American companies to divest from labor contracts in South Africa.²⁸² In Fall 1984, a group of four black legal professionals and policymakers met with the South African ambassador to the United States to demand the release of all South Africa's political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, a prominent anti-apartheid movement leader imprisoned since 1962. With their demands unheard, they staged a sit-in in front of the embassy, leading to arrest and a night spent in jail for all four activists. This incident launched the Free South Africa Movement (FSAM), as one of the group's founders Randall Robinson explained, a coalition standing against "the policies of the most vicious government in the world and the support our government gives it."²⁸³ The next month, many major demonstrations against African apartheid continued in front of the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C.

²⁸² "Jackson Calls U.S. Policy on S. Africa Barbaric," *Jet*, July 9, 1984, 30.

²⁸³ Kenneth M. Jones, "Protesting Apartheid," *Black Enterprise*, February 1985, 24.

As the Free South Africa Movement gained increasing popularity, demanding American intervention against South Africa's inhumane practices, many African Americans organized to rally in support of black South Africans. Becoming ambassadors for Africans within their own country, black citizens utilized heritage consciousness to justify this position. As national coordinator of the Free South Africa Movement, Cecile Counts, pointed out, "Afro-Americans were in essence the first victims of U.S. foreign policy because slavery was a foreign policy decision."²⁸⁴ By 1986, over 3,000 Americans had been arrested in relation to anti-apartheid protests, a fact noted with pride by Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow, Coretta Scott King. Framing the non-violent direct action within her husband's legacy, King wrote, "This wave of massive civil disobedience has helped awaken the American people, the Congress and the White House to the need to do something about U.S. involvement in South Africa."²⁸⁵ In the summer of 1986, Congress finally passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, placing economic sanctions on South Africa. Viewing this accomplishment through a particular understanding of history, African Americans recognized that the international policies of the United States could have a profound impact, negative or positive, on the world's racial inequality. As one writer for *The Crisis* explained, "for politically and economically humbled blacks and other minorities situated on the periphery of American society, much of whose very survival often hinges on matters such as the competition between social welfare programs and the defense budget for federal funding," involvement in international politics was vital.²⁸⁶ For some, it seemed as though global activism could transform the economic and political positions of African Americans in the United States.

²⁸⁴ David Hatchet, "Is there a Black Foreign Policy?" *The Crisis*, November 1986, 486.

²⁸⁵ Coretta Scott King, "Martin's Legacy," *Ebony*, January 1986, 108.

²⁸⁶ Hatchet, "Is there a Black Foreign Policy?"

In the late twentieth century, decades after the Civil Rights Movement began, popular understanding of black identity in both the culture and politics of the United States had begun to shift once again. In the 60s and 70s, the philosophy of Black Power had encouraged African Americans to celebrate aspects of black culture that fell outside of the American experience. Yet, in the late 70s and 80s, as black Americans became increasingly active in the global politics of their time, the history which separated them from other Americans also became invaluable to maintaining America's moral leadership in the world. *Roots* and its pop culture moment demonstrated the growing cultural importance of African heritage. As historian Francois Weil argues, "The success of *Roots* underscored the fact that the Civil Rights Movement had not satisfied black America's demands about identity, the past, Africa, and slavery."²⁸⁷ In his second run for president in 1988, Jesse Jackson began to argue the importance of racial terminology in recognizing the complexity of Black heritage. In a speech at a meeting for his civil rights advocacy group called PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), Jackson declared, "Germans in America are called German Americans. Chinese are called Chinese Americans. Therefore we are African Americans. It is important that we emphasize our culture and heritage. Otherwise we are trapped in a vacuum without a sense of roots or a sense of destiny."²⁸⁸ Whether black individuals felt more African or more American, as a collective, many embraced the possible coexistence of a dual heritage.

From the Civil Rights to the Black Power Movement, the heritage and history of African Americans had a large impact on the way other Americans perceived their own ethnic identities.

²⁸⁷ Francois Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013): 195.

²⁸⁸ Bob Merrifield, "Jackson Urges American Blacks To Rediscover Ties To Africa," *Chicago Tribune*, December 25, 1988.

During the mid-twentieth century, just as the Pan-Africanist vision of black history began to reshape popular understanding of black identity, Americans of all races were beginning to engage in a re-imagining of their own ethnic identity. In *Roots Too*, historian Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that, in some ways, the identity politics of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements inspired and emboldened an “ethnic revival” by providing “a new language” for the intersections of race, ethnicity, and nationality in American society.²⁸⁹ Historians believe that the Civil Rights Movement allowed various racial and ethnic groups to be heard in their own struggles against discrimination and disenfranchisement. The Chicano and Red Power Movements of the 1960s and 70s, for example, organized to lobby for government attention to issues faced by Mexican and Native Americans, respectively. The movement for black studies on college campuses helped to spawn the creation of ethnic studies, originally dedicated to the study of non-European social groups, such as Native Americans, Asians, and Latinx, and largely critical of Europe-centric historical and sociological scholarship. The multicultural aims of the Black Student Movement, however, also inspired interest in the ethnic peoplehood of white Americans, a phenomenon that gained even more traction in the era of Kunta Kinte. The boom in genealogical research following Haley’s *Roots* stimulated a cultural pursuit of America’s immigrant history and helped connect white families to a sense of transnational heritage.

In the 70s and 80s, as African Americans protested the suppression of black African rights by white colonizers, they utilized the memory of slavery to urge American participation in the fight against global racism. In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, black citizens have continued to define themselves both within American and African heritage, yearning to see themselves represented within the multi-ethnic American experience. Slavery, which arguably

²⁸⁹ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

denied African Americans a place in both America and African society, represents an important foundation for this transnational identity by connecting descendants of the African diaspora through a shared history of oppression. Thus its history is tantamount to understanding the limitations that race places on American multiculturalism. By outlining the universal and particular aspects of African migration to the United States, many African Americans of the *Roots* era hoped to position themselves as founders within America's "immigrant nation."

Conclusion

The “Take It Down” Movement and the Future of Social-Historical Activism

Since the Civil Rights Movement, many activists have used the past enslavement of African Americans rhetorically to insist on the need for social justice or political change by highlighting the consequences of slavery within institutional systems of racism. In turn, certain legislative steps towards racial progress and the push for greater representation of African Americans within media and politics have made many Americans more aware of the historical context behind modern racial injustices, helping to frame the memory of slavery as foundational to American history and identity. In the 60s, 70s, and 80s, this historical perspective helped push the country towards voting rights, greater educational and economic equality, and recognition of African American heritage in domestic politics and international policy. Overall, the black historical memory of slavery centered the struggle for racial equality and justice within progressive visions of a multiracial democratic future.

Of course, there are many in the country who still regard slavery as inconsequential to the progress of American history and irrelevant to the social issues of the modern day. Despite the progress made by historians in the last few decades to counteract harmful myths within the study of slavery, America’s educational systems continue to leave many citizens misinformed about basic questions regarding slavery’s impact on the nation. As narratives like the lost cause continue to permeate political and historical understanding of American race relations, this kind of historical illiteracy undermines the progress made towards racial equality and black empowerment in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, those Americans taught to minimize the brutality and significance of slavery or to view it as an institution of the distant past with no relation to today’s social and economic hierarchy may often view political and legal

advancements against racial discrimination as unnecessary or possibly harmful in a country where legal segregation is no longer sanctioned by the federal government. For this reason, many present day activists continue to frame their struggle against the de facto racial inequalities of society as a solution to the legacies of slavery, often by deconstructing historical narratives that ignore or distort the racial power imbalances that define American history.

In the last few years, the memory of slavery has become increasingly relevant as national discussions surrounding acts of white supremacist terror reveal the persistent link between Confederate symbolism and racial violence. In 2015, after a young white man, Dylann Roof, murdered nine people at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, journalists quickly uncovered his personal website expressing an admiration for the Confederacy and its strict racial caste system. A day after the massacre, journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates called for the removal of the Confederate flag flying in front of South Carolina's state house, labeling it an endorsement of Roof's actions.²⁹⁰ Eight days later, at the funeral for one of the murdered congregants, South Carolina State Senator Clementa C. Pinckney, President Barack Obama professed that removing the flag from the state's capital "would simply be acknowledgement that the cause for which [the Confederacy] fought, the cause of slavery, was wrong ... an honest accounting of America's history, a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds."²⁹¹ Obama, however, made it clear that a reckoning of the events in Charleston would require rectification beyond the removal of a flag. Speaking both to funeral attendees and the American people, he continued, "we've been blind to the way past

²⁹⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Take the Confederate Flag Down—Now," *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/take-down-the-confederate-flag-now/396290/>.

²⁹¹ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney," (eulogy at the Funeral of Senator Clementa C. Pinckney, Charleston, SC, June 26, 2015), *The White House: President Barack Obama*, accessed December 24, 2017, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>.

injustices continue to shape the present.”²⁹² In the words of the president, the historical injustice of slavery had not disappeared, it had lingered and transformed.

In the aftermath of Charleston, the Confederate flag represented not only a callousness towards the victims of the shooting but also towards victims of anti-black violence and discrimination across the United States. Outrage over Charleston drove some to vandalize Confederate monuments in the days and weeks following the tragedy. In Raleigh, North Carolina, for example, a Confederate monument was found spray-painted with the words “Black Lives Matter,” a phrase commonly associated with the eponymous movement condemning racial violence and discrimination in the criminal justice system. On June 27, 2015, as pressure mounted on South Carolina’s legislature to take down the flag, black activist Bree Newsome climbed a flagpole and removed the Confederate battle flag flying over the grounds of South Carolina’s state Capitol. As police officers shouted at her from below, she held the flag in her hands, declaring, “You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today!”²⁹³ In a statement released by Newsome and her fellow activists, the group argued that the state’s use of the flag stood as “one of the most familiar remnants of white supremacy that supports the idea that there is still a reigning group of individuals who control our freedom, while tacitly supporting white Americans when they commit heinous and racially charged hate crimes against blacks and People of Color.”²⁹⁴ Though Newsome was arrested, her act of civil disobedience helped continue to frame the flag within modern systems of racial oppression, inspiring communities around the

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Bree Newsome, “Charlottesville is Latest Chapter in Long U.S. History of White Supremacist Terror,” Interview with Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, August 16, 2017, https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/16/bree_newsome_charlottesville_is_latest_chapter.

²⁹⁴ Daniel Kreps, “Activists Removes Confederate Flag at South Carolina Capitol,” *Rolling Stone*, June 27, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/activist-removes-confederate-flag-at-south-carolina-capitol-64430/>.

country to reexamine the social consequences of their own public monuments to the Confederacy.

In many cases, community action to get rid of Confederate symbols has led to wide backlash from those defending Confederate heritage, a cause that has also become popular amongst members of a rising white nationalist movement in America. In the summer of 2017, after the city council of Charlottesville, Virginia voted to take down a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, white nationalist and pro-Confederate groups gathered from across the country to protest the council's decision. On August 11, images from the "Unite the Right" rally, held in support of Lee's statue, began spreading on the news and social media, showing large groups of mostly young white men marching with tiki torches and chanting phrases like, "white lives matter" and "Jews will not replace us."²⁹⁵ The next day, as outraged citizens gathered to oppose the spread of hate speech, a reported white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one woman and injuring nineteen others. After Charlottesville, as concerns over the rise of white nationalist violence reignited, demands for the demolition of Confederate symbols in the South grew. On August 14, partly as a response to the incident in Charlottesville, communist student organizers from the historically black North Carolina Central University (NCCU) helped organize community members in Durham, North Carolina to tear down a local Confederate monument.²⁹⁶ By deconstructing and sometimes physically demolishing Confederate symbols, present day social justice activists and historians

²⁹⁵ Dara Lind, "Unite the Right, the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, explained," *Vox*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138246/charlottesville-nazi-rally-right-uva>.

²⁹⁶ David A. Graham, "Durham's Confederate Statue Comes Down," *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/durhams-civil-war-monument-and-the-backlash-to-the-backlash/536889/>.

expose the power that historical myths hold in the formation of our society by connecting past and present injustices.

Today, a considerable number of American citizens lack full representation within our national history. That fact will be true as long as the production of American history happens within a nation in which black Americans live in perpetual fear of state violence and are denied full protection from discrimination from their political representatives. While the “Take It Down” movement has brought visibility to the many Americans who oppose public Confederate symbols, it has also highlighted the majority of Americans who still believe that statues of Confederate war heroes are emblems of “Southern pride” rather than racism. Yet, in its modern context, the memory of slavery belies more than just the historical fallacies of Confederate heritage ideology. It is an indictment of the myths of our national history, used many times by many different political actors to justify the many racial inequalities of American society. At a press conference following the incident in Charlottesville, President Donald Trump, claiming there “was blame on both sides” between white nationalists and anti-racist protesters in Charlottesville, defended the cause to keep Confederate monuments by arguing that the destruction of Robert E. Lee’s statue would expose other prominent figures in American history to the scrutiny of local activists, asking journalists, “is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after?”²⁹⁷ Since the violent events in Charleston and Charlottesville, Confederate flags and monuments have come to represent the domination of white supremacy within our collective history. As Donald Trump pointed out in his press conference, however, the history of the Confederacy and the myths that have grown up around it make up only a small fraction of our national historical memory. The nation has yet to seriously

²⁹⁷ Maggie Haberman and Michael D. Shear, “Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again Blames ‘Both Sides,’” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2017.

grapple, for instance, with the racial legacy of its founding and the many slave owning founders who constructed our democracy. Indeed, a serious reexamination of figures like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, two men whose images dominate America's commemorative landscape, really could pose a threat to our current national heritage, values, and identity.

Like the Civil Rights Movement, the nation is now passing through an era in which these truths about the American past, and the way that past has been collected and told, means something to our present moment. This, as historian Michel Rolph Trouillot believed, is the condition of humanity, to always see the past through the present and the present through the past. The question that historians, activists, politicians, and every other American must now ask: How does our collective history address the problems of modern society and how does it neglect to do so? And more specifically for those who wish to see the dream of racial equality come true: What does the history of a multiracial American democracy look like? Do we dispense with every public tribute to any slaveholders, including the Founding Fathers? How do we honor the historical contributions of all non-white people, black, Native, Asian, and Latino, who helped to build this country? These are tough questions for the American people and they touch the very core of our national identity. Yet, they are also questions that some Americans have wrestled with for centuries.

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