Black freedom struggles and African American identity

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Intellectual development

The more authentic question was not whether the slaves (and the ex-slaves and their descendants) were human. It was, rather, what sort of people they were . . . and could be. Slavery altered the conditions of their being, but it could not negate their being. (Robinson 2000: 125)

What we now can recognize as “Black freedom struggles” are as old as Blackness itself. Formed within and through – but also, beyond – the dialectic of capitalism and slavery, the “history of Blackness,” as Fred Moten suggests, is “testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (Moten 2003: 1). Moten opens his book with these lines to rupture the presumptions that equate personhood and subjectivity. Subjectivity, to Moten is “defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects” (ibid.: 1). Accordingly, Moten must investigate how, historically, Blackness strains the commonly held assumptions separating subject and object. This also reveals how Blackness strains notions of the subject rooted in the political and philosophical discourses of liberalism buttressed by a Lockean understanding of natural liberty and property ownership. To understand Blackness, rather, Moten is more interested in resistance to the subjects’ identifications. He investigates how humans who were defined and treated as property have resisted that assertion to be property, as well as the construction of desire to own property.

While the “social cauldron” of Black freedom struggles is Western civilization, it cannot be solely defined as a response to the slave trade and the advent of racial capitalism (Robinson 2000: 72–3). Cedric Robinson’s writing is one of the most influential in making such an argument. He suggests that:

Black radicalism is a negation of Western civilization, but not in a direct sense of a simple dialectical negation . . . Black radicalism . . . cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis. It is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be Black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from
the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization.

(ibid.: 72–3)

While in our current intellectual moment such comments about the specific African response may invoke troubling ideas about essential identities, this is not Robinson’s argument. What he shows through his research is how, against all odds and oppositions, Blackness and Black community were formed. Robinson’s thesis finds affinity with Moten’s argument, and is rooted in the historical materialist methodology. Out of the many social systems, within the place now called Africa, that were irreparably ruptured as a result of colonialism and slavery, there were specific cultures that lived on. This is what Robinson investigates in his analysis of the conditions of possibility for Black radicalism. He argues that the transportation of “African labor to the mines and plantations of the Caribbean and subsequently to what would be known as the Americas meant also the transfer of African ontological and cosmological systems” (ibid.: 122). These systems of being and meaning formed the core of what he identifies as the Black radical tradition.

The great Martinician poet, theorist, and politician Aimé Césaire related a similar point about the histories of the societies destroyed by colonial regimes and enslavement. Césaire along with Léon Damas and Léopold Senghor inaugurated the Négritude arts movements in 1935. Damas (from French Guinea) and Senghor (from Senegal) met Césaire while studying at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and all had a deep investment in overturning the regimes of violence that brought their homes and the colonial world into being. Césaire would argue that these sites “were societies that were not only ante-capitalist . . . but also anti-capitalist . . . I make a systematic defense of the societies destroyed by imperialism” (Césaire 2000: 44). Césaire wrote these words almost a decade after the fall of the Nazi regime, in the midst of anti-colonial nationalist movements throughout the world. In this text, Discourse on Colonialism, he also theorized the connection between colonialism and the rise of fascism suggesting that fascism within Europe was an outgrowth of colonial regimes.

While both Césaire and Robinson demand that one appreciate the rupture and the deliberate decimation of possibilities that colonialism instantiated, neither proposes “going back” to before colonialism as a viable response to the enormous violences. Césaire argues that “it is the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia who are demanding schools and colonialist Europe that refuses them . . . it is the colonized man that wants to move forward, and the colonizer who holds things back” (ibid.: 46). Both are dialectical about the question of redress. They both understand how enslaved labor provided the engine of Marx’s so-called primitive accumulation of capital in the Americas and Europe (what Robinson has also called “imperial accumulation”); so the demand for redress is a part of the historic mission to locate the wealth of the planet in the labor that created it.

**Major developments**

**Capture and the slave ship**

I am a reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not yet over. I am the progeny of the captives. I am the vestige of the dead. And history is how the secular world attends to the dead.

(Hartman 2007: 18)
What was the experience of capture and enslavement? How can the historian or the theorist represent this reality? What types of texts and archives must the scholar use and subvert in order to investigate these questions? These are conundrums that have perplexed and frustrated scholars’ attempts to write about the Middle Passage and slavery. The stories of history are dictated by the limits of archives. But archives are always places of knowledge production, not simply retrieval. It was not until the 1960s, for example, that historians began to be attentive to “what the slave felt, thought, or did” (Huggins 1990: xxiv). Accordingly, the archive of the slave trade requires one to scrape for sources of meaning to answer Cedric Robinson’s question: what sort of people were they?

Saidiya Hartman is one of the most important and imaginative scholars writing about the history and present of enslavement. “Contrary to popular belief,” Hartman explains, “Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery. They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners and barbarians at the outskirts of their country, and lawbreakers expelled from society” (2007: 5). This point is crucial to understand the context of Robinson’s arguments about the making of Blackness and the invention of race and racism. Racism and race have been fused together as historical experiences and have, in-turn, created new communities. Hartman argues against apologists for the slave trade who maintain innocence on the ground that “Africans sold Africans.” “In order to betray your race, your first had to imagine yourself as one. The language of race developed in the modern period and in the context of the slave trade” (ibid.: 5). Hartman, here, is being historical and accounting for how the people involved in the slave trade imagined themselves in those moments. Additionally though, she points to the fact that slavery was not initially determined by what we now call race for “it was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the line between the slave and the free separated Africans and Europeans and hardened into a color line” (ibid.: 5). Hartman’s goal in her research is to illuminate the present by investigating the “lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities” (ibid.: 6). In order to do this, though, she must revise and write against many of the dominant conventions of historical writing.

Nathan Huggins argues that the rupture of one’s community ties were essential to the attempted process of converting humans into commodities. Huggins and Hartman both, for example, discuss how the barracoons along the western coast of Africa became the “factory” for constructing the enslaved (Hartman 2007: 6; Huggins 1990: 36–7). In 1481 the Portuguese built Elmina Castle and while it was planned to be used to hold nonhuman goods, it would become a site of terror and loss – a prison to hold captured people before the forced passage – a school where death was the chief lesson (Hartman 2007: 111; Huggins 1990: 36). With this in mind, it’s important to consider the fact that Elmina and the British-built Cape Coast Castle were called “factories,” because these are the places that built the modern world. In fact, Hartman notes “factory” had “its first usage in the trading forts of West Africa” (Hartman 2007: 111). This note should clarify, as Eric Williams did in *Capitalism and Slavery* and as Sidney Mintz did in *Sweetness and Power*, the essential link between the slave trade and the industrial revolution.

Hartman argues, “the dungeon was the womb in which the slave was born” (ibid.: 111). But this was not the only thing made. Even the most awful forms of oppression built into them conditions for their negation. One of the many keys to elucidate the fact that freedom struggles of various sorts, scales, and success have always existed is the knowledge that these barracoons were necessary to prevent the would-be enslaved from “self-inflicted injury which would lower their value” (Huggins 1990: 36).

The prisons on Africa’s west coast were one key site for the development of the slave trade. Another was the actual slave ships. Marcus Rediker describes the slave ship as “combination of war machine, mobile prison and factory . . . central to the making of modern capitalism”
(Rediker 2007: 9–13). Like the barracoons, an entire industry would rise in response to the problem of how to restrain the enslaved people from harming themselves and to compel life in enslavement. Hartman describes the case of an enslaved girl who refused to eat and the lengths the captain went to compel her to do otherwise. She writes of the captain, “he had used the *speculum orbis* (to pry her teeth apart and shovel in some food), thumbscrews (to make her submit), coals pressed near the lips (to scare her), and four days of the whip (to break her stubbornness), all to no avail” (p. 145). What does it mean for the understanding of Black freedom struggles that such industries existed to manufacture such products used precisely to manufacture humans into slaves? As we know from the fact that such an industry existed, this case was not in isolation. So, neither the oppression nor the resistance should be imagined to be isolated either.

Rediker describes resistance to the tools of forced life. In a scene on the slave ship *Brooks* between 1783 and 1784, the *speculum orbis* could not be used upon an enslaved man who was attempting to commit suicide (p. 17). The enslaved man was refusing to eat and pulled apart his throat with his hands. The doctor on the ship stitched up the wound, and the slaveholders were unable to use the *speculum orbis* as a result. The subsequent day after the wound had been treated, the man “tore out the sutures and cut his throat on the other side” (p. 18). After more attempts to compel this man to become human capital, he died upon the slave ship approximately ten days after these incidents. As the doctor on the ship attempted to treat this wound the man said that “he would never go with white men” (p. 18). The doctor on the ship related this story in 1790 at a British parliamentary hearing on the slave trade. When asked if he thought this man was insane, the doctor replied, “by no means insane” (p. 18). Rediker writes, “the man’s decision to use his own fingernails to rip open his own throat was an entirely rational response to landing on a slave ship” (pp. 18–19).

Not only were incidents such as these common place, but there were both voluntary and involuntary suicides that cannot be made sense of through contemporary medical science. Huggins writes of how many of the would-be enslaved died “from no disease and no apparent conscious act. Europeans were baffled for an explanation. Some claimed these captives had wanted death so badly that they held their breath, suffocating themselves . . . whether or not medical science had ever known such a phenomenon, the captains of the slave ships sought an answer to it” (1990: 51). As with the production of torture tools to compel life, captains employed all sorts of tactics to ensure their profit. Nets were mounted on the sides of ships to prevent some of the captives from jumping (Huggins 1990: 50). Attracted by the human waste thrown off the ships, sharks would follow along their routes and captains would use the threat and practice of throwing crew overboard in an attempt to maintain discipline amongst both the enslaved and the crew (Rediker 2007: 39–40).

The system of capture and forced passage to enslavement was the key factory for building the modern world. In addition to structuring modern capitalism, out of this experience of terror and against the attempted destruction of African pasts a sense of Blackness was created. Rediker (2007) argues that those captive in the slave ship were of “different classes, ethnicities, and genders” all together, but that “dispossessed Africans formed themselves into informal mutual-aid societies, in some cases even ‘nations,’ on the lower deck of a slave ship” (pp. 130–1). Through these renderings of the enslaved experience one can see how “the enslaved now appear as the first and primary abolitionists as they battle[d] the conditions of enslavement aboard the ships on a daily basis” (pp. 11–12). Robinson makes a similar point both about the identity-making apparatus and the resistance built within it: “The peoples of Africa and the African diaspora has endured an integrating experience that left them not only with a common task, but a shared vision” (p. 166). This shared vision of life and liberation against and through the most severe
regimes of oppression is the hallmark of the Black freedom struggles and the identities formed therein.

**Enslavement and the Haitian revolution**

The contention that enslaved Africans and their descendents could not envision freedom – let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing freedom – was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants.

(Trouillot 1995: 73)

Colonial America of the early seventeenth century was the space in which the opposing demands of freedom and enslavement were worked out. Initially the status of Black people in the English colonial settlements was ambiguous and vacillated between statuses of “slaves, indentured servants and freemen” (Robinson 1997: 2–3). However, this began to change toward the later part of the century. Virginia in the post-1660 era enacted many laws that in turn calcified a racial capitalist order that at that time was still in the making. Cedric Robinson reports:

In 1662, a law was passed preventing a child from inheriting the father’s status if the mother was a “negro woman”; in 1667, another law prevented baptism from freeing “slaves by birth”; in 1680, a law was passed “for preventing Negroes Insurrections”; in 1692, another to aid “the more speedy prosecution of slaves committing Capitall Crimes” established special courts for slave trials . . . the incremental construction of slave law mirrored reality: “Englishe” men were sexually consorting with African women; Africans were acculturating to colonial society; and slave workers were turning toward resistance.

(ibid.: 2–3)

Laws are always crucial to understand how states are formed and changed; such laws need the actions of people to create their significance – laws always mediate bodies. The 1667 law that established the maternal status lineage for Black women was essential for bringing a particular type of gender difference into being for the enslaved. This law allowed for and encouraged the rape of enslaved women by the masters. Jennifer Morgan in *Laboring Women* has documented how laws such as these caused slave owners and traders to envision enslaved women’s wombs as sites of speculation and venture capital in the form of future slaves. Laws and practices such as these would circumscribe a very limited sense of

representational possibilities for African Americans: 1) motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and the social enactment; 2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father’s banished name and body and the captor father’s mocking presence . . . only the female stands in the flesh both mother and mother-dispossessed.

(Spillers 1987: 80)

Spillers and Morgan show how laws such as these enabled specific forms of racial-gendered terror for the enslaved.

In the early colonial period, the relations of law, race, and power were not clean and clear-cut in specific locals within colonial America, let alone across different places. Though Virginia, Carolina, and Georgia would all become dominated by slave economies, the “colonies’ destiny
of slave owning was barely discernible from their origins” (Robinson 1997: 3). Such knowledge is crucial to remember for it displays how racial regimes are constructed over time and everyday, but their results are not natural or inevitable.

While the early resistances by slave and bonded laborers took on many forms – “appeals to the courts, physical violence, flight, and rebelliousness” – by the beginning of the eighteenth century, legal rights for the enslaved had been eviscerated (pp. 8–9). Before this occurred there were examples of European servants and African slaves working together to plot revolts. The establishment of slave codes destroyed what could have been other alliances and social movement formations. For example, “with the enactment of the slave codes, both Black and Native American slaves were denied allies in the Euro-American poor” (p. 9). In the subsequent era, slave uprisings mounted. As Robinson notes after documenting the many and various forms that resistance took, “slavery gave the lie to its own conceit: one could not create a perfect system of oppression and exploitation” (p. 11).

Another form of resistance included escape and marronage. While it is no surprise that maroon communities of fugitive slaves have been difficult for historians to document, it is also a topic that many scholars have deliberately neglected. Maroon communities were not exclusively Black, though they were the most prominent group. These communities were made up of European poor servants, escaped slaves, and Native Americans (p. 13). Whole networks of abolitionists also aided these types of resistances and escapes. Most famously the Underground Railroad provided help and support for those escaping from enslavement and fleeing to Canada and is thought to have supported the escapes of 60,000 enslaved people (pp. 29–30). Of course, while the network was crucial, “it was the intelligence, desire, and courage of the fugitive slaves themselves that jolted the Underground Railroad into movement” (p. 31). Harriet Tubman, a formerly escaped slave herself, was a “general” along the routes helping to free some 300 slaves by assisting the navigation of treacherous terrain that had increased in danger after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law (p. 30). Later, during the Civil War, Tubman would utilize her skill as a guide in this terrain to lead Union Army troops and also spent time organizing intelligence units amongst the enslaved (p. 31).

Starting in the nineteenth century, the Black freedom struggles expanded to fight against the entire enslavement regime. While most historians note the British Abolitionist movement against the slave trade (though not slavery), these struggles are best exemplified by such large-scale planned uprisings of the enslaved as Gabriel’s rebellion in Richmond, the Pointe Coupee Conspiracy in Louisiana, and Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia. Robinson clarifies what all of these modes of resistance meant for the construction of Black culture:

For the slaves, acts of resistance and the lore that swelled around them . . . provided the integument of a Black culture, the materials for a historical consciousness and a sense of community, and a moral system for determining how the lord of the cosmos negotiated the existence of good and evil . . . in a social order obsessed with domination and policing of the spirit, resistance was the antithetical core, the soul of Black life. But the secret languages, the furtive acts, even the covert taxes on non-Blacks exacted through sarcasm, word-play, indirection, and humor were not sufficient to themselves.

(p. 40)

Indeed, as Robison notes, these struggles were essential to the historic feat that is Black survival. But the historic mission – the common task and shared vision – was liberation.

The liberation struggles of this era received their most powerful inspiration from the Haitian Revolution. San Domingo, on the dawn of the revolution, “supplied two-thirds of the overseas
trade of France and was the greatest individual market for the European slave trade” and was the “most profitable colony the world had ever known” (James 1989: ix, 57). The great Trinidadian writer, theorist, and activist C.L.R James wrote one of the most comprehensive histories of this struggle and would argue that the seeds of the revolution were the context and contradictions of the experiences of the enslaved. “Men make their own history, and the Black Jacobins of San Domingo were to make history which would alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic currents of three continents” (p. 25). The quotidian experiences of the enslaved formed the core of the Haitian Revolution, and, accordingly, the religious cosmology of Voodoo was a key factor: “Like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors . . . Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy” (pp. 85–6). Like Robinson and Moten, James draws on songs in order to argue that the ontological totality of Blackness was not and could not be identified by that of oppression. James documents lyrics to songs with lines such as: “we swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow” (p. 18). Such cultural forms exemplify the revolutionary tradition that circulated through Haiti. Knowing this, it should be no surprise that in 1803, as the Revolution entered its twelfth year, the US House of Representatives instituted “a ban on Haitian refugees because they posed a ‘danger to the peace and security of the United States’” (Robinson 1997: 24).

As structures of oppression create the condition of their demise, James argues that it was the Black Jacobins of San Domingo that revised and reconceived the best of the French Revolution for their own ends. He writes, “the Blacks were taking their part in the destruction of European feudalism begun by the French Revolution, and liberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution, meant far more to them than any Frenchman” (James 1989: 198).

However, for all the revolutionary inspiration that the Haitian Revolution would inspire, it was also victim to a harsh counter-revolution. The revolt in Haiti shook not only the French economy to its core, it “challenge[d] the ontological and political assumptions of the most radical writers of the Enlightenment” (Trouillot 1995: 82). Following the revolution, Haiti was victim to international trade isolation. Peter Hallward notes:

France only re-established the trade and diplomatic relations essential to the new country’s survival after Haiti agreed, in 1825, to pay its old colonial master a “compensation” of some 150 million francs for the loss of its slaves – an amount roughly equal to the French annual budget at the time, or around ten years’ worth of total revenue in Haiti – and to grant punishing commercial discounts. With its economy still shattered by the colonial wars, Haiti could only begin paying this debt by borrowing, at extortionate rates of interest, 24 million francs from private French banks.

(Hallward 2004: 26)

In James’s analysis though, he also takes to task the revolutionary leader, Toussaint L’Ouverture, for his failures. For all of L’Ouverture’s revolutionary brilliance and military strategy, James is frustrated with his inability to envision what would come next. James writes that for L’Ouverture “the ultimate guarantee of freedom was the prosperity of agriculture” (James 1989: 242). But this was not enough for it created a shift from an old despotism to a new one (though he points out that this is not simply a substitution). In his appendix written twenty-five years after the original publication, James would write, “Toussaint could see no road for the Haitian economy but the sugar plantation” (ibid.: 393). As with the escaped slaves and the maroon communities, the Haitian revolution was a success, but not of the mass liberationist variety necessary to break apart the violences of slavery, capitalism, and patriarchy.
**The Civil War, reconstruction, and abolition democracy**

The true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of American, lay in the ultimate relation of the slaves to democracy . . . if all labor, white as well as black, became free, were given schools, and the right to vote, what control could or should be set to the power and action of these laborers?


Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued that the Haitian Revolution has been epistemologically erased by most scholarship in spite of, or perhaps as a result of, being the most fundamentally human of the modernity’s revolutions; the French and American Revolutions, for example, were revolutions that served the interests of Man, as opposed to the entire human species. “The Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in the West not only because it challenged slavery and racism but because of the way it did so . . . [it] expressed itself mainly through its deeds, and it is through political practice that it challenged Western philosophy and colonialism” (Trouillot 1995: 87–9). As this great revolution has been erased, the greatest social movement victory in the US history is not remembered as such. This, of course, is the great general strike of the enslaved that abolished slavery within the US.

Contrary to the popular national mythology, the Civil War was not a referendum on slavery as a political and economic structure; rather, it was a struggle over power. The leading industrial capitalists of the North and the plantocrats of the South both “shared the same ambition – control of the surplus capital produced by slave labor” (Robinson 1997: 68). The Southern plantocrats wanted assurances they could retain “their rule over a thriving slave economy, the maintenance of a societal stratification based on slavery, and the defense of master/slave culture” while the Unionists of the North wanted to ensure the power of the industrial bourgeoisie within a national economy still reliant on slavery (ibid.: 67). The Unionists wanted to dominate the economy and the federal government with the help of “protective tariffs, a national banking system, labor regulation and federal corporate and stock supports” (ibid.: 67–8). As the great abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass said, the war was initiated, “in the interests of slavery on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North was fighting to keep it in the Union” (Du Bois 1935/1992: 61). Initially, most leaders on both sides thought that the struggle would end after a brief three-month conflict. Obviously, most miscalculated.

One the chief miscalculations is rooted in the same epistemological presumptions that Trouillot discussed – that the enslaved did not desire freedom. It was assumed by the racist planter-elite that the enslaved were simple, loyal, and dependent, and would continue that way without the harsh cudgels of plantation power. However, as we have seen, when given the opportunity, the enslaved did all they could to struggle for liberation whether in this world or the next. So, with the slaveholders occupied fighting another enemy, the enslaved used their advantage to rebel through defections and insurrections (Robinson 1997: 68). This would become the general strike that decimated the infrastructure of the South. The great African American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized this point: “The Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the black worker raising food and raw materials held an even more strategic place than the white” (Du Bois 1935/1992: 63). Every battle that the North won, and space the Union Army moved into meant more fugitive slaves joining their ranks (ibid.: 62). While there were some 33,000 Black people from free states who fought, “the overwhelming majority of Blacks who served in the Union army (179,000) and navy (10,000) were slaves. For a time, the slaves transformed the Union military into an
army of liberation and the conflict into a war for freedom” (Robinson 1997: 68, 76). The general strike involving about 500,000 people was not only “to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work . . . they wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations” (Du Bois 1935/1992: 62). And they were successful. With the labor and infrastructure of the South devastated, the North won militarily and on January 1, 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed outlawing enslavement or involuntary servitude except for those convicted of crimes. This was followed with the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 that overturned the Dred Scott Decision (1857) and established citizenship rights for former slaves.

However, this abolition of slavery would be one of negative abolition. Slavery was abolished, but new institutions were not sustained to attempt to redress the violences of slavery, for its supporting structures – racism, patriarchy, and capitalism – all remained intact. There were efforts to create what Du Bois called abolition democracy – a positive abolition to join with the negative one that would work to abolish the vestiges of slavery. But such institutions as the Freedmen’s Bureau – established to assist in acquisitions of land, food, housing, healthcare, education – were disestablished or eviscerated of their power after Andrew Johnson replaced Abraham Lincoln as president.

While the Fourteenth Amendment is the most high profile of the attempts for abolition democracy coming from Congress from 1865 to 1877 (the era of “radical reconstruction”) – some of the most important were those of the majority Black legislature of South Carolina. Throughout the South during this era, “African Americans led the fight for free universal public education” (Kelley 2002: 130). In South Carolina, this movement for education for everyone was particularly strong: “Freed people contributed nearly thirteen-thousand dollars to keep twenty-three schools running, schools that had been established by the Freedman’s Bureau . . . between 1866 and 1870, newly freed people contributed more than three-quarters of a million dollars in cash to sustain their own schools” (ibid.: 130).

Nevertheless, after the federal government removed its support for reconstruction, what Du Bois calls a “counter-revolution of property” was commenced whereby “an organized monarchy of finance . . . overthrew the attempt at a dictatorship of labor in the South” (Du Bois 1935/1992: 580). The construction of the railroads and roadways (a portion of which was done by former slaves who had been convicted of crimes and leased to private industry) provided the backbone of the shift to this “new American industrial empire” (ibid.: 580–6). The refusal of the white working classes across the US to align with Black labor was vital to this. “National industry could get its way easier by alliance with Southern landholders than by sustaining Southern workers. They did not know that when they let the dictatorship of labor be overthrown in the South they surrendered the hope of democracy in America for all men” (ibid.: 592). Horribly, this reveals what had been noted as the primary goal of the North for the Civil War – “to reappropriate the human, capital, and natural resources of the South . . . by 1870, 80 percent of the super rich would now be Northerners” (Robinson 1997: 82, 69).

The birth of Jim Crow and the anti-lynching movement

There would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom.

(Woodson 1977: 3)

Freedom, as has been shown, came neither cheap nor easy for any involved in the Black freedom struggles. It was always a process, each and everyday to carve out space for survival and more. For example, as Black women entered the “free” workforce after slavery, they would
steal time from their employers by attaching books to nearby fences so they could read and study while washing clothes (Hunter 1997: 42). Such practices brought meaning to the word freedom. For the formerly enslaved freedom was not simply of the liberal variety rooted in property ownership. It was far more. “Freedom meant the reestablishment of lost family connections, the achievement of literacy, the exercise of political rights, and the security of a decent livelihood without the sacrifice of human dignity or self-determination” (ibid.: 43). To this end, the struggle to take hold of one’s laboring capacities remained essential to the long struggle for freedom both before and after slavery. The formerly enslaved refused to allow freedom to mean “free to sell one’s labor.”

The late 1870s and 1880s were a period of immense labor struggle amidst a capitalist crisis. This was the age of major strikes most notable of which were the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the 1886 fight for eight-hour work days via a general strike in Chicago, which eventually culminated in the Haymarket massacre. In a post-bellum urban city such as Atlanta, the struggles were not identical, but remained fierce and tumultuous. In Atlanta in early July of 1881 a group of Black women working as laundry washers met in a church to form the Washing Society so as to begin to organize for a uniform rate of pay, as well as respect at their jobs. The decision to meet in a church was no mere accident either. Historically, as Eddie Glaude has shown, the Black church had been a space for fashioning freedom dreams both adapted from and created anew through the exodus story. “During the violent, oppressive, and disheartening trial that was post-Civil War America, Black Christianity was at once the dominant moral philosophy, the centering source of collective and personal identity, and the conceptual marking device for the historical past and political destiny of Blacks” (Robinson 1997: 98). The church also provided some much-needed cover from the society of constant surveillance to which African Americans were subjected. Indeed, organizing meant even greater threats to one’s safety. In order to mask their activities, “it is likely that all of the domestic workers’ associations in Atlanta . . . adopted the institutional framework of secret societies” in order to manage this (Hunter 1997: 88). In addition to the church serving these purposes, it was a likely place for this group of women to meet because women represented the majority of the church members (p. 69).

The Washing Society called a strike on July 19. The protest was considered to be the “largest and most impressive among black Atlantans during the late nineteenth century” (p. 88). Their demands met their situation – a uniform rate of pay. There were frequent instances of non-payment of wages as well as payments in the form of clothes or food, or docking of wages, or promising one wage and paying another. Additionally, “laundry work was critical to the process of community building because it encouraged women to work together in community spaces within their neighborhoods, fostering informal networks of reciprocity that sustained them through health and sickness, love and heartaches, birth and death” (p. 62). Uneven wages for the same and similar work undermined the efficacy of these communities and the potential for unification – communities they had been building since reconstruction (p. 94); indeed, this struggle was not only about wages, but about the self-regulation of their work and finding those spaces of freedom within one’s work even under conditions not of their own choosing. Of course, the communities that had been formed through struggle were vital to the success of the strike. In three weeks, the number of striking workers grew from twenty to three thousand (p. 91).

Such struggles were examples of the centrality of everyday networks and everyday acts of resistance to daily life in the post-slavery South: “The strike is also suggestive of the character of domination in the emergent New South. White employers certainly had the power to confine black women to domestic work, but not the unilateral power to determine how and under what conditions that labor would be organized” (p. 97). Like before, resistance often took other
forms as well, of the less visible and high-profile variety. Just as women stole time as a mode of resistance, the theft of commodities also occurred, and the definition of what this was often depended on one’s perspective: “While ‘pan-toting’ was regarded as theft by many employers, household workers believed they had the right to take home leftovers, excess food, and redundant or broken utensils for their use . . . theft at the workplace is also a strategy to recover unpaid wages and/or compensate for low wages and mistreatment” (Kelley 1994: 20).

However, it is successful organization such as the Washing Society as well as the everyday acts of resistance such as pan-toting that provided the backdrop for the increasing oppressive power that would arise as Jim Crow. Hunter elucidates this, “despite effective community mobilizations on many fronts – indeed, because of their effect – blacks were increasingly met with systematic encroachments on their civil and human rights . . . political disenfranchisement, vigilante violence, and de jure segregation intensified in the 1890s and began to tip the scales of justice decidedly in the favor of whites” (Hunter 1997: 98).

While such struggles occurred in the growing urban cities of the New South, Black people in rural areas also struggled to take hold of their labor capacities. Much of the farmland remained owned by White people and many Black farmers were tenants. Of course there was resistance to this – the formation of The Colored Farmers’ National Alliance and Cooperative Union in 1888 boasted a membership of 40,000 members in South Carolina and 20,000 in Virginia by 1891 (Robinson 1997: 103–4). But the 1890s would prove to be the reaction to this, especially concerning the possibilities of biracial alliances: “In the 1890s the Southern white reformers and the Democratic party appropriated segregation as the basis of their new social order . . . thus ended Black mass participation in white agrarian radicalism” (ibid.: 105).

In addition to the institution of segregation policies, legally codified in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, lynching became the most prominent practice attempting to roll back the racial, gendered, and capitalist order to an antebellum mode. “In the 1890s, Blacks confronted the most oppressive conditions since the ending of slavery” (ibid.: 105). While the most severe time period for lynching was 1892–1902, from 1882–1968 there were 4,743 recorded lynchings. But lynching also worked in concert with a whole range of terror-producing acts – “rape, beating, torture, mutilation, arson, threats” (ibid.: 105). However, like before, social movements arose to respond to this increase in oppression.

In 1892 in Memphis, Black shop owner Tom Moss and his business partner were killed by a White mob. This event was catalytic for Tom Moss’s friend, former school teacher Ida B. Wells (Hill 2008: 121). Wells would become one of the most important voices in creating, theorizing, and organizing the anti-lynching movement. As a journalist, Wells began to document and write about the frequency of lynchings as part of the attempt to “break the big lie” that undergirded the racist rational for lynching: Black deviance, impropriety, and criminality (ibid.: 121). In order to do this, Wells needed not only to show the innocence of the lynching victims, but to reframe the conversation to center how these acts were premised on the relations between state violence and state-sanctioned violence. In turn, Wells’s theorized the situation as that of a police-mob continuum that identified the White mob as part of the criminal legal system premised on maintaining the gendered racial capitalist order.

Wells utilized her pen and her voice to bring attention to the issue of lynching, practicing mass political education campaigns as part of her organizing strategies. With her writings being ignored by all but the Black press, in 1893 and 1894, she traveled to England for a speaking tour and inspired the formation of anti-lynching societies within Britain (Robinson 1997: 105). But Wells did not only demand the end of lynching: “She intended to agitate for an even more ambitious objective than the end of lynching: the launching of a civilizing mission that would bring the rule of law and economic rights for Blacks and women” (ibid.: 105).
As the twentieth century began, provoked by increased mob killings of African Americans, Wells and other Black activists and intellectuals such as Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter, and Mary Church Terrell would work along with some 300 others to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. From the outset, the NAACP was a group that brought together political and ideological tensions between liberals and radicals. Though its leadership came largely from the White and Black middle class, “it was largely through the efforts of grassroots Black women that the NAACP grew into a national organization,” swelling to have 42,000 dues-paying members and 155 chapters within the South alone within a decade (Robinson 1997: 110, 117). While Wells’s work and the formation of the NAACP are highlights of the social movement to end lynching and legal and extra-legal terror, in many places they could not confront the violence of White supremacy. Racism was rising, exemplified with the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915 in Georgia and President Woodrow Wilson’s endorsement of the racist film Birth of a Nation (ibid.: 113). Resultantly, “the most eloquent and effective response to lynching was Black migration to the North” (ibid.: 110). From 1890 to 1910, over 200,000 Black Southerners went to the North, and 300,000–1,000,000 went over the subsequent years from 1910 to 1920 (ibid.: 111).

While, cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York, each of which tripled their Black populations from 1910 to 1930, would prove to have similar ideologies of racism (albeit sometimes different articulations), the Great Migration to the North represented the dream and demand to struggle to imbue freedom with a sense of meaning (ibid.: 110–11). The Great Migration provided the basis for the formation of a number of other groups and political philosophies to come together in the shadow of the First World War. Marcus Garvey, an immigrant from Jamaica organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with a vision of international Black nationalism. A. Phillip Randolph, Chandler Owen, and Cyril Briggs and other key Black members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) formed the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) as a secret organization (as the Washing Society was compelled to be) and “urged Blacks to form mass working class organizations” (Hill 2008: 154). “The ABB was as Black nationalist as UNIA, and . . . persuaded the Communist International in 1928 to consider the ‘Negro Question’ in America as one of Black self-determination” (Robinson 1997: 119). Indeed, such a strategy pushed the CPUSA during its radical “Third Period” (1928–1933) to incubate members of the Black left who saw communism and anti-racism as linked strategies for the goal of self-determination. At the onset of the Depression, communists:

- collaborated with the Black poor in the northern cities and Southern fields. Organizing tenant rent strikes, protest marches and demonstrations; the mobilization of an international campaign to save the Scottsboro boys; writers’ clubs; and sharecropper and trade unions were understood as the necessary precursors of the proletarian solidarity required for the ultimate defeat of capitalism.

( Ibid.: 121–2)

All of these tactics and strategies and alliances became the planted seeds that would soon flower as freedom struggles grew in militancy and numbers after the Second World War.

**Major developments: the Civil Rights and Black Power eras**

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn and to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original
meaning – getting down to the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.

(Ella Baker in Ransby 2003: 1)

As the US entered the Second World War in 1941, previously unemployed people from the Great Depression entered the work force by serving in the military or getting jobs in war-related production. In addition to providing the ships, airplanes, guns, cannons, tanks, and munitions for US soldiers, the US became the production center for all the Allied powers. Though the African American share in the war economy was small, as a result of the increased capital investment in industries (Congress put in place a spending bill of $300 billion) there were jobs available for African Americans in automobile, shipbuilding, aircraft, tobacco, and textile industries. This enabled another large-scale migration for many African Americans. In the 1940s, two million African Americans left the South – often for jobs in California and Michigan and another one million moved within the South but to cities (Robinson 1997: 127). While many of the jobs were in manufacturing (a 135 percent increase between 1940 and 1946), this did not always mean good jobs (ibid.: 127). While Black workers saw their numbers within industrial trade unions grow during the flurry of Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organizing during the war (growing from 150,000 unionized African American workers in 1935 to 1.25 million in 1945), about 80 percent of the Black working class was outside of unions (Kelley 1994: 164). Furthermore, “the upgrading of unionized black workers did not happen without a struggle; throughout the war white workers waged ‘hate strikes’ to protest the promotion of blacks, and black workers frequently retaliated with their own wildcat strikes to resist racism” (ibid.: 164).

For many African Americans, this era was one of optimism about potential for a “Double Victory”: fascism abroad and racism at home. But while double victory and economic empowerment heartened some, it proceeded unevenly. While there were great economic gains in this era, regional and class divisions that had existed all along – between free Black people and the enslaved, for example – were intensified and increased.

As cities burgeoned with working people, often living in close quarters or doubling up as a result of housing shortages, the chasm between middle-class and skilled working class blacks, on the one hand, and the unemployed and working poor on other, began to widen. Intraracial class divisions were exacerbated by cultural conflicts between established urban residents and the newly arrived rural folk.

(Kelley 1994: 164–5)

Nevertheless, these shifts in labor, capital, and geography also provided the opportunity for many Black workers to continue with what would come to be called civil rights organizing, in addition to struggling on the job; from 1942 to 1946 the NAACP membership in Detroit increased from 100 to 1,991 (Robinson 1997: 127). However, as with earlier eras, a backlash came as well.

As the US came out the war, the increased Union organizing (specially from the leftist CIO) was one of the prime “concerns of large employers and political conservatives” (p. 135). Particularly threatening was the connection (for example, in a place such as Detroit) between organized labor and civil rights movements. Additionally the optimism of the double victory campaign was proving increasingly unstable: “Violent reception accorded returning Black veterans provided evidence that the war’s challenge to the racial social order had inspired the fear of a loss of status among white workers” (p. 131). Likewise, the experience of war, the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki exacerbated misgivings about the moral efficacy upon
which the war was propagated and the contradictions arising from US racism. Indeed, all of these national and international tensions in the postwar period provided the context for the civil rights era: “The racewar of the postwar era proceeded not merely from determined attempts to preserve the organization of oppression of the prewar years. The Second World War had loosed resistance from the colored oppressed and a state of revulsion, loathing, and trepidation among those whites implicated by the race order” (p. 131). All of these trends and complications coalesced along with the Red Scare and in 1947 Congress passed the Taft–Hartley Act which curbed union power, forced union officials to disavow communist affiliations and purge more radical members and visionaries: “Such organizations as the UAW, the CIO, and the NAACP were turned over or returned to anti-communist ‘moderate’ leaders and more ‘practical’ reformers” (p. 131).

The NAACP agenda, starting in the 1930s, prioritized “middle-class interests, political sensibilities, and cultural values” (p. 135). This would eventually flower as the Brown v. Board of Education decision (1954), overturning the separate but equal doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson. This case was a landmark in the project for equal rights under the law and the legal fight against segregation, but when combined with the communist purges, much of the more radical vision that was nurtured by the women organizers and the NAACP mass membership (in 1946, 450,000 members and 1,073 branches) was undermined. As a result, “the NAACP lost membership and its mass character (in the Los Angeles chapter, for example, membership fell from 14,000 in 1945 to 2,500 in 1950), but it regained its middle-class character” (p. 137). One of the most important lessons to take from the evolution of organizations within the context of the Black freedom struggles is the dialectical motion of the movements.

Accordingly, it is important to recognize that legal strategies such as Brown v. Board were utilized alongside and underneath broader social movement struggles – the legislation was part of the goal – but never the goal in itself. The great activist William Patterson of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) in 1952 explained the need to think tactically about the role of legal struggles within movements arguing that “legal action alone can never go over to the offensive in the fight to preserve the people’s interests” (Hill 2008: 248). For most of those affiliated with what is now called the “Civil Rights Movement,” the law became a tactical place to organize, and could condition new organizing sites and strategies, rather than an end.

An important example of this came from Patterson and the CRC which would heed the advice of Ida B. Wells when she said, “we should be in a position to investigate every lynching and get the facts for ourselves. If there was no chance for a fair trial in these cases, we should have the facts to use in an appeal to public opinion” (ibid.: 119). Accordingly, the CRC would use the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide to highlight to an international audience the racism of the police–mob continuum and its practices of anti-Black state-sanctioned premature death. In their petition to the UN charging the United States with genocide, they elucidated the changing forms of racism: “Once the classic method of lynching was the rope. Now it is the policeman’s bullet . . . the killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States and that police policy is the most practical expressions of government policy” (Patterson 1970: 8–9). The question of course became how to change this and during the 1950s many activists went to the South – where the African American legacy of fighting the mob, police, and government were most durable.

Ella Baker, exemplified the dialectical motion of Black freedom movements throughout the twentieth century as she nurtured the growth of a number of the most important organizations. One of the most dynamic Civil Rights era organizers to come out of the NAACP, Baker “honored her skills as a rank-and-file organizer” as a field secretary and national director of branches from 1940 to 1946 (Ransby 2003: 106). For Baker, the ‘goal was not a single ‘end’ but
rather an ongoing ‘means,’ that is, a process . . . [that] had to involve oppressed people, ordinary people, infusing new meanings into the concept of democracy and finding their own individual and collective power to determine their lives and shape the direction of their history” (ibid.: 1).

The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 to 1956 was not a spontaneous act of civil disobedience and Rosa Parks was not simply tired. Parks was a long-time organizer and activist – a decade before she refused to give up her seat, for example, she and another key Montgomery activist, E.D. Nixon (who worked with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), attended a leadership workshop that Baker put on (ibid.: 142).

Following the bus boycott, Baker was vital to the development of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC): along with her colleague Bayard Rustin she helped organize their founding meeting in 1957. While SCLC is most famous for bringing their high-profile spokesman, Martin Luther King Jr., to prominence, it was quotidian activism and organizing of everyday people that gave the Civil Rights Movement its force. Charles Payne explains:

Finding Dr. King to take leadership of the movement was fortuitous, but the local activists had put themselves in a position to be so lucky through the lifetimes of purposeful planning and striving . . . whether in Mississippi or Montgomery, taking the high drama of the mid-fifties and early sixties out of the longer historical context implicitly overvalues those dramatic moments and undervalues the more mundane activities that helped make them possible – the network-building, the grooming of another generation of leadership, the sheer persistence

(Payne 1995: 417–18)

This is a lesson that the prescient Baker understood as it was unfolding. After the student sit-in movement began in Greensboro in February of 1960, Baker took on a role mentoring and supporting the young activists. At what would become the founding meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Raleigh, she urged them to maintain “autonomy from established civil rights organizations . . . [and] offered the sit-in leaders a model of organizing and an approach to politics that they found consistent with their own experience and would find invaluable in the months and years to come” (Ransby 2003: 239–42). SNCC would go on to push and exacerbate many of the contradictions inherent in the US democratic form as they worked with an older generation of long-time local activists to pursue voting rights in Mississippi.

If Ella Baker acted as a link between the NAACP and SNCC, then the SNCC organizers can be thought of as a link with the Black Power movements of the late 1960s. While a useful conceptualization, such a rendering also obscures a bit of the more dynamic complications inherent in movement struggles. For example, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) formed in Ohio 1962 and could be thought of as the “first black Maoist-influenced organization in history” (Kelley 2002: 72–3). RAM was inspired by the thinking of Robert Williams, a former Monroe, North Carolina NAACP president who had formed armed self-defense groups to combat the Klan in 1957 and at the time of RAM’s founding was living in exile in Cuba while theorizing Black nationalism and Third World Solidarity (ibid.: 70–1). But for many, the shifts in analysis came from 1964 to 1966. Following the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, where there was immense and violent racist backlash to the SNCC activists, there were the brief victories of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, against the backdrop of Malcolm X’s assassination, the Vietnam War, race uprisings in New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and Philadelphia in 1964, followed by Watts in 1965, the demands of the Black freedom struggles could not be contained by legislative acts alone (Robinson 1997: 150).
In the subsequent years, two of the social movements articulating these demands would emerge from Oakland and Detroit – places where in the 1940s African Americans from the South had moved. Following uprisings in 1966 in Cleveland, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Atlanta, Lansing, Waukegan, and as Stokely Carmichael became one of the leading figures within SNCC, “Black Power” became the vernacular to express the fact that a revolution was necessary to solve the problems of the political conjuncture.

In the summer of 1967, in Detroit, there was one of the most massive uprisings in the twentieth century US – 41 people were killed, 347 injured, “damage estimates reached $500 million” (Georgakas and Surkin 1998: 13). Out of such a place came the Revolutionary Union Movements and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The Black industrial working class membership of these movements formed out of a number of wildcat strikes, and arose against the racism and conservatism of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union: “the UAW would risk outright scandal rather than let blacks assume any power” (ibid.: 41). For these organizers, working in one of the country’s most important manufacturing centers, they saw taking control over their jobs as the initial stages in “assuming state power,” and envisioned “workers having all the pie . . . to produce goods only for social needs” (ibid.: 36). From 1967 to 1974 this movement flourished and provided a glimpse of the dynamic organizing strategy that was enabled when Black workers put forward a vision of liberation rooted in taking hold of their labor and putting it to life-affirming ends.

In 1967 at Oakland City College, two students, Bobby Seale (a former RAM member) and Huey Newton, created the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP): “It was in the context of the urban rebellions that several streams of black radicalism, including RAM, converged . . . there was a fundamental difference between the Panthers’ ideology of socialism and class struggle and that of black nationalist groups, even on the Left” (Kelley 2002: 93). As such, BPP brought together a type of revolutionary nationalism that was built off the Marxist insights of the Cuban and Chinese revolutions and adapted new theories in the context of their situation (ibid.: 94). Their programs were innovative: for example, their free breakfast, educational, and healthcare programs challenged the deleterious effects of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism, while at the same time building a social movement vision of the world they wanted to see.

While much has also been written dividing BPP and cultural nationalist organizations such as Ron Karenga’s US Organization, it is impossible to separate their sharp ideological differences from the fact that the FBI’s counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) exacerbated these differences in an attempt to undermine their movement-building strategies, even orchestrating the assassinations of UCLA students and Los Angeles BPP leaders John Huggins and Bunchy Carter. By 1969, COINTELPRO had “orchestrated the assassination of some twenty-nine Black Panthers (including Fred Hampton in Chicago) and the jailings of hundreds of others. But their repression had also forged revolutionaries of young Black men and women whose original intent, as civil rights activists and nationalists, was essentially reformist” (Robinson 1997: 152). As more of their members were faced with imprisonment and worse, BPP built upon the theories of earlier social movement formations such as the anti-lynching movement’s analysis that viewed the law as white supremacist, and police repression as part of the police–mob continuum; for example, “W.E.B. Du Bois and William Patterson both defined the imprisonment of Black people as an ideological and economic problem, Du Bois referring to the ‘national railroading to jails’ of Black youth, and Patterson describing Black youth as political prisoners” (Hill 2008: 272–3). With this analysis, the BPP, where able to see the “accusation of criminality as fundamental to American racism” (ibid.: 69).
Criticism and future developments

Racism is state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.

(Gilmore 2007: 247)

African American identity formations and Black freedom struggles of the twenty-first century are vexed and contradictory. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has suggested, there is one Black man in the White House, but one million imprisoned in the big house. AIDS and HIV rates for Black women are at an all-time high. African Americans and other peoples of color survive extremely high rates of diabetes and asthma – key indicators of the continued importance of environmental and food justice organizing. While much of the knowledge produced continues to suggest that the US is post-racial, the distribution of premature death remains decidedly racialized. As the most devastating military impulses of COINTELPRO moved from the shadows of government to its main public persona in the 1980s, the Keynesian capitalist welfare state was decimated with neoliberal policies. Despite this, Black freedom movements and the identities formed therein continue and will continue into the future to do what they have throughout – struggle for life and liberation against the deathly structures of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy that do not define their being, but are a condition of it. Those struggling to do this give meaning to Robin D.G. Kelley’s words, “revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us” (Kelley 2002: xii).

References


