

Introduction

“A NEW HUMANITY”

The African bruises and breaks himself against his bars
in the interest of freedoms wider than his own.

C. L. R. James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*

The social movements, activist intellectuals, and cultural formations described in this book have produced conceptions of freedom, interdependence, and anti-subordination never envisioned in the nation’s dominant political framework. Together, these stories recast the long struggle to abolish racial subordination as a movement of broad-based social transformation. Their vision of racial justice goes beyond asserting the rights of subordinated people within present structures, or inclusion into the nation on its existing terms. They have insisted instead that the abolition of particular forms of racial domination can yield universal horizons of freedom.

To understand the contours of this assertion, we can turn to one of its most astute chroniclers, the Trinidadian-born writer and political critic C. L. R. James. James stands in a long tradition of Black radical intellectuals, including Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Anna Julia Cooper, and W. E. B. Du Bois, who have advanced this analysis.¹ His insights remain as relevant today as when they were written more than 75 years ago.

In 1938, as the tremors of war began pulsating across Europe, the 37-year-old James penned a series of pamphlets from his London flat. Like many of his contemporaries on the left, James sought to make sense

of the broad forces that produced continual crisis and upheaval in the modern world. What political traditions and optics on life might prove capable of liberating humanity before it destroyed itself?²

James turned his attention to what he described as a “revolutionary history” that was “rich, inspiring, and unknown.” A particular tradition of Black revolt and struggle, he argued, represented the repudiation of the West’s most corrupting tendencies: slavery and labor exploitation; land appropriation and control; authoritarian governance and genocide. Published together as *A History of Negro Revolt* (and 31 years later, with a new epilogue under the title *A History of Pan-African Revolt*), the short essays took aim at a prevailing historical record that depicted Black people as passive objects of history, destined to realize a painful but inevitable fate of servitude. James subverted this narrative, describing instead a people in constant revolt: striking for better wages in the mines of West Africa; leading uprisings on the plantations of Haiti and Jamaica; acting decisively to win their liberation during the Civil War; building new churches, schools, and associations in the aftermath to secure their freedom. As he explained in an essay published a year later, “The only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians.”³

James argued that these particular struggles for Black liberation had universal implications; they were responsible for nothing less than the “transformation of western civilization.” This was not because of a mystical predisposition within Black social formations toward revolt, though James did note the cultural practices, memories, and traditions that nourished these efforts. It was a quality instead of the particular forms of political consciousness and practice produced in response to the domination they endured. In Haiti, for example, James described the way in which enslaved people who lacked formal education and who suffered the degradations of bondage achieved “a liberality in social aspiration and an elevation of political thought equivalent to anything similar that took place in France.”⁴ Similarly, after the Civil War, the forms of schooling and governance enacted by free women and men in the South reflected “the policy of a people poor and backward seeking to establish a community where all, black and white, could live in amity and freedom.” In the crucible of their despair, new understandings of freedom and human possibility emerged,

ideas that could never be imagined by polities premised on the buying and selling of human flesh.

James urged others on the left to pay attention to these traditions, stories, and histories, insisting they held invaluable lessons for a world in continual crisis. James concluded the last essay of *The History of Negro Revolt* in this way: “The African bruises and breaks himself against his bars in the interest of freedoms wider than his own.”

On first blush, James’s assertion might seem puzzling. Political struggles led by a particular group appear by definition to be parochial, applicable only to the specific conditions and experiences of those group members. Within market- or interest-based frameworks of understanding political conflict and power, one group’s gain is interpreted to be another group’s loss. This contention forms a cornerstone of white supremacist political logic, in which assertions of life and sovereignty among nonwhite people are marked as inherently threatening those who identify as white. From this perspective, struggles authored in the interests of Black people are at best relevant only to other Black people. At worst, they may challenge the interests of those who are not Black.

James thought and wrote from a much different perspective. He understood that prevailing capitalist economies and governance structures required the social production of difference and hierarchy for their legitimacy. Elite power depends on putting people who are denied assurances to life and land and kin into competition with one another. The modern formations of race and nation are indispensable to producing these relationships of estrangement and rivalry.

Black revolts against elite power and domination challenged the fundamental contention that hierarchies are inevitable and that human solidarity is folly. They enacted new forms of social relations that rejected the unequal ordering of humanity that constituted the modern world. These uprisings and rebellions illustrated possibilities for social and political life in opposition to the edicts of nationalism and hereditarianism ascendant across the US and much of Europe. Thus, the specific struggles James recounted—the abolition of slavery in the French colonies; the end of lynching in Alabama; the demand for fair wages in the Congo—produced wider interrogations of power. At stake in these particular Black-led collective movements were universal possibilities for liberation.

In a 1948 essay James noted that Black resistance in the United States had a “vitality and validity of its own” and “an organic political perspective” that was not simply derived from the broader labor movement or the dominant framework of rights-based liberalism. This perspective included a deep skepticism of “imperialist war[s]” that were never meant to secure the “freedom of the persecuted peoples by the American bourgeois.” These insights consistently led to forms of self-organization and mass action, as Black people in the South in particular understood that ordinary structures of representative government, including voting, the two-party system, and other routine forms of political participation (what James derided as “telegrams to Congress”) were incapable of addressing their grievances. As a result, Black movements have been able “to intervene with terrific force upon the general and social and political life of the nation.”⁵

In rebelling against the terms of their own subordination, these movements also confronted the broad foundations of exploitation and despotism that defined so much of the development of the West. At particular moments in the history of the United States, James later explained, these rebellions “formed a force which initiated and stimulated” other sections of the population, acting “as a ferment” for much broader opposition.⁶ They demanded structural changes including the redistribution of land and resources, and the reorganization of social and political life. Thus, James argued, Black people had long toiled “in the interest of freedom wider than [their] own.”

RELATIONAL ANTI-RACISMS

Many of the examples in this book extend from the legacies and practices of Black-led social movements described by James, and the capacious alternatives they have developed to a society suffused in domination.⁷ These practices have an expansive genealogy. For example, across time and place Indigenous people have revolted against the appropriation, commodification, and desecration of their lands and attempts to abolish their political and cultural sovereignty. Such practices are evident in the complex ways that Indigenous nations and societies have survived the twinned modes of elimination and incorporation they have faced since

first contact with European settlers. These struggles to preserve life and ways of being have been rooted in practices of relationality to land and human and nonhuman life that have exceeded the profoundly limiting version of citizenship and rights that has prevailed in the United States.

The particular demands of such resistance are well documented across a rich archive, foregrounding issues of sovereignty, genocide, land theft, and the destruction of tribal practices. The specific resistance over these issues has directly confronted the same regimes of private property and state violence that undergird the United States economy as a whole. Thus, Indigenous-led action against uranium mining on Diné (Navajo) lands in the Southwest, and the generations-long resistance against treaty violations and extractive capitalism evident in recent organizing against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, have universal implications. The Lakota Sioux scholar and organizer Nick Estes explains that these practices assert a common social vision of “caretaking and creating just relations between human and nonhuman worlds on a planet thoroughly devastated by capitalism.”⁸ They too are bruising and breaking themselves against their bars in the interest of freedoms wider than their own.⁹

Consider also migrants who have come to the United States since the late nineteenth century, particularly from outside of western Europe. A continuous series of racist immigration laws and state-sponsored and extralegal violence has barred many from entrance or civic rights and recognition. The alternative to such a fate has been incorporation and naturalization, with its obligations of national patriotism and allegiance to US militarism, economy, and state. What can we learn then from those who have refused both offers, who have demanded entry into the nation while still inhabiting and constructing lifeworlds that exceed the narrow terms of national incorporation? These “migrant imaginaries” have rejected the inevitability of militarism, colonialism, and US exceptionalism and have been premised on forms of connection and kinship rooted in neither blood nor soil.¹⁰

Particular traditions of collective resistance emanating from Chicana, Puerto Rican, and other Latinx communities have challenged wide-ranging forms of power. For example, as explored in chapter 1, in the 1970s in New York and Los Angeles, Latinas mobilized to end practices of coercive and involuntary sterilizations performed on thousands of women

deemed unfit to make their own decisions about bearing children. Latinated organizations such as the Committee to Stop Forced Sterilizations centered their organizing on the women most directly affected by abusive sterilization practices. But they explained that the stakes were much wider. Public discourse diverted anger about high taxes toward Black and brown families by claiming they were having too many children, blaming these families for their own poverty while shielding the government and wealthy corporations from responsibility.¹¹ The Committee to Stop Forced Sterilizations linked their demand to eradicate compulsory sterilizations to a wider vision of economic justice and redistribution that would no longer view poor women of color as failed objects of social policy.

Likewise, groups such as the New York-based DRUM–South Asian Organizing Center (formerly Desis Rising Up and Moving), which organized against the profiling and detention of Muslim and South Asian Americans after 9/11, represent the latest chapter of a much longer history of Asian American resistance against militarism and racial profiling. The working-class Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities DRUM organizes challenge both the particular surveillance and detention programs that wreak havoc on their lives and other interconnected forms of state violence, from the militarization of the US border with Mexico to drone strikes in Pakistan. DRUM has consistently opposed reforms to immigration laws that might benefit some undocumented immigrants, including many South Asians, because they would inevitably criminalize and exclude other groups. As DRUM founder Monami Maulik writes, “We never framed our analysis nor centered our campaigns on bias crimes against Muslims or South Asians alone. Instead, we worked proactively to model Muslim and other youth of color organizing together to end over-policing and for dignity in their schools.”¹² DRUM advocates a “transformational solidarity” in which “masses of oppressed communities choose to forgo something that would benefit them, and do not take it because it comes at the expense of other oppressed communities.”¹³ The organization took its name from the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, a collective of Black workers in the late 1960s that linked the racist hierarchies within auto factories in Detroit to US imperial wars in Southeast Asia (see chapter 4). In both iterations, DRUM rejected measures that simply shifted the terms of subordination onto other groups.

There are important specificities within each of these traditions; they cannot be collapsed together or imagined as interchangeable.¹⁴ The histories of Black insurgency described by James emerged within the particular context of the transatlantic slave trade, the revolts of the enslaved that produced abolition, and the building of new lifeworlds that followed. In the same way, Indigenous experiences of land appropriation, resistance, tribal recognition, treaty violation, and assertions of sovereignty are undergirded by specific relations to the land and particular bodies of federal law and jurisprudence. The contemporary racial formations of Latinx and Asian Americans were similarly produced through diverse yet distinct histories of US imperialism, migrations, nativism, demands for labor, and the forging of diasporic communities and social relations. These specificities demand attention.

But there is also a danger of reproducing a core logic of white supremacy that imagines these racial formations and histories as unrelated and discrete, rather than interdependent and coproduced.¹⁵ Treating histories of contestation and freedom in the same way—as isolated, discrete, and unconnected—only reproduces this diminished understanding of humanity. Imperialism and white supremacy are always relational—producing groups as differentiated and ranked within a broader hierarchy of human value. Rebellions against such hierarchies have long recognized these connections. As Audre Lorde explained, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives . . . Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone.” The work to forge such collectivities was critical precisely because “we share a common interest, survival, and it cannot be pursued in isolation from others simply because their differences make us uncomfortable.”¹⁶

Thus, the “revolutionary history” described by C. L. R. James more than 80 years ago as “rich, inspiring, and unknown” extends across many sites and traditions of resistance. Black Freedom movements, Indigenous sovereignty struggles, and revolts led by migrants and the minoritized have sought transformations in our material and social relations that could produce universal possibilities for emancipation. Rejecting a market framework of politics rooted in a zero-sum understanding of interests and power, these episodes demonstrate the ways that particular anti-racist struggles are capable of a broad interrogation and transformation of power. They do not seek integration into dominant systems of power or to

desegregate the ranks of those who wreak violence on the world. Their demands are not for a diversification of the elite.¹⁷

These movements have also refused to make whiteness, or white racial consciousness and attitudes, the center of their political energies. Take the example of Ella Baker and the many legions of voting rights organizers she mentored with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in rural Mississippi in the early 1960s. As discussed in chapter 2, their efforts were often opposed by racist county voting officials through the use of discriminatory literacy tests and other measures. But Baker and SNCC leaders and organizers were uninterested in the diminished framework of governance and democracy those officials embraced, considering it, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, “unworthy of grown folk.”¹⁸ They focused their labor instead on the tens of thousands of Black Mississippians who were eager to collectively govern their lives. They opened Freedom Schools committed to developing these capacities, and engaged in direct actions to assert and demand new institutions that would meet their needs.

Toni Morrison explains that the “monumental fraud” of racism was continually hidden in plain sight. For the white supremacists who engineered and celebrated slavery, land theft, imperialism, and national expansion, their demand was “always jobs, land, or money.” Morrison saw no salvation or promise in addressing one’s powers toward changing the consciousness of those who profess such beliefs. To do so required one to “define Black people as reactions to White presence” and to focus one’s attentions on responding to allegations of inferiority rather than ending the practices of domination. “Where the mind dwells on changing the minds of racists is a very dank place.” For Morrison, Baker, and all of the other movements chronicled in this book, the challenge instead was to build the capacity of everyday people to transform structures of domination into conditions of collective liberation.

DEPOLITICIZED ANTI-RACISM: INTEGRATING INTO A BURNING HOUSE

Despite this long tradition, anti-racism cannot be said to have a single meaning in economic, political, or ethical terms. Different modes of

anti-racism propose different models of freedom and equality, and varying relationships with existing structures of power.

This point was made forcefully by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a startling 1967 confession he made to the actor Harry Belafonte, a close friend and key figure in the Civil Rights movement. King told Belafonte, “I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house.”¹⁹ Just a few years after the passage of new federal laws outlawing discrimination in many realms of public life, Dr. King had come to believe that the institutions into which Black people were demanding integration were in deep crisis. Dr. King’s alarm cuts against the dominant story told about the Civil Rights movement and the 1960s as one of triumph and inclusion into the nation that promised to secure the freedom that Black people and other minoritized groups had long demanded. Yet for Dr. King, these incorporations promised harm rather than safety, suffering rather than emancipation. To understand why is to grasp the difference between the movements described in this book, and a liberal, state-sanctioned form of inclusion that leaves existing structures of power and inequality intact.

In Alabama, for example, where Vivian Malone and James Hood became the first Black students to enter the state’s public university in 1963, advances in civil rights have gone hand in hand with soaring rates of incarceration. In 1963 Alabama’s prisons and jails counted fewer than 2,000 inmates, an incarceration rate of about 50 per 100,000. In 2018, more than 49,000 people were held captive in this way. Alabama that year had an incarceration rate of 946 per 100,000, placing it fifth in a nation that claims the world’s highest rate of incarceration. African Americans in Alabama are locked up at more than three times the rate of white Alabamans. And even still, the white incarceration rate of 535 per 100,000 is also higher than the rate in all but four other nations in the world. Welcome to the burning house.²⁰

All of these people have been arrested, charged, and sentenced through the operations of a criminal justice system undergirded by the state and federal Constitution—formally protected by a long host of procedural rights and protections that were central to the promises of state-sponsored anti-racism. Most of the people incarcerated are poor. Across a wide swath of the state’s Black Belt, upward of 40 percent of the households live in poverty; nearly one in four children statewide regularly go

hungry. They have no claim on the large fortunes amassed in cotton, mining, timber, and other industries by a small number of families in the state, a concentration of wealth that has accelerated rapidly in the last 50 years. Their rise has corresponded almost precisely with the decline of Alabama's labor movement, once a relative stronghold in the South.²¹

For Indigenous people also, the promises inherent in racial liberalism have yielded little. The name "Alabama" is derived from the language of the Muskogee (Creek) people, one of eight Indigenous groups whose ancestral territories lie within the current geographic boundaries of the state. These lands, all "ceded" through treaties negotiated with the democratically elected government of the United States in the early nineteenth century, have never been returned. The promises of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" give the Muskogee and other Indigenous people no title to the places claimed by settlers after their forced removal. The rights-bearing citizens of Alabama have no intention of returning this land. Today, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians stands as the sole federally recognized tribe in Alabama, exercising sovereign control over a small parcel of land in the southwestern corner of the state.²²

The US military, by contrast, maintains five active bases within Alabama, collectively covering more than 1,000 square miles. In the early 1940s, to make room for one of the largest of chemical weapons plants in the world, the army evicted hundreds of tenant and sharecropper families near Huntsville. In 1965, the US Army's Missile and Munitions Center and School opened near that base to train American soldiers in the fine arts of using their guns, tanks, and bombers to advance what President Kennedy described as "a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free."²³

Alabama, as Wallace instructed us more than 50 years ago, is of the nation, not apart from it. The same patterns of separation, extraction, and fatality witnessed in the Heart of Dixie—segregated and underfunded schools, yawning gaps in wealth and wages, mass banishments from participating in governance—exist in every part of the country. It is not just opportunity that is unevenly distributed, but life itself.

These modes of domination clearly work through race—they map on to histories of land theft, bondage, and apartheid. But many white Alabamans today are not spared from contending with the increasing prospects of

early death. The state’s opioid-related overdose deaths increased six-fold from 1999 to 2016. A large majority of the dead are people whom Wallace counted as fellow members of a “race of honor.” The state’s suicide rate has doubled since 1970. The badge and virtues of whiteness do not prevent many hundreds of people each year from ending their lives prematurely.²⁴

These widespread experiences of impoverishment, incarceration, and early death were not among the vaunted “privileges of being American” promised by Kennedy in his 1963 civil rights address. But the president concluded his speech with a telling reminder: “We have a right to expect that the Negro community will be responsible, will uphold the law, but they have a right to expect the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be colorblind.”²⁵ The “we” used here is unmistakably a racial referent; a statement on behalf of white America about the culpability of Black people in their own destiny.

Culpability is key. For racially stigmatized groups, once “freed” by emancipation from bondage or the bestowal of citizenship, civil rights, or other grants of opportunity, culpability and blameworthiness cannot be refused. This regime of blameworthiness makes the very regime of liberal anti-racism productive of “demons”—immoral subjects and market failures who threaten to burden us all. Thus, liberal rights and freedom then are fully compatible with industrialized forms of punishment and incarceration. Liberal incorporation does not promise universal emancipation, or even guarantees to life. It only offers a chance to distinguish and offer oneself as a “good” moral subject, worthy of the select rights that might be bestowed by the state.²⁶

The legacies of Kennedy’s liberal anti-racism are evident everywhere today. The promise of inclusion into US nationalism, markets, and militarization often seems to provide the sole framework to address racial subordination. As a result, institutions and structures that produce insecurity and suffering continually invite incorporation into their ranks. Corporations like Amazon, Citibank, Nike, and Goldman Sachs, whose everyday activities reap huge sums for their investors and executives and accelerate global inequality, announce their support for Black Lives Matter and new diversity hiring plans.²⁷ In this way, collective movements that demand the end of state violence and economic predation become transfigured into diversity initiatives for the elite. Militarism and policing are celebrated as

vehicles for racial equity and inclusion, evident in the massive diversity recruitment and public relations budgets of the military branches and law enforcement agencies.²⁸ Elite colleges and universities sustain thinly funded offices for equity and inclusion, even as the institutions as a whole reproduce profound race and class hierarchies in education. All of these dominant efforts promote modest incorporation into their ranks without disturbing the underlying relations of power from which they profit.

Dr. Vincent Harding, the influential historian of the Black freedom struggle and an important confidant of Dr. King, suggests that the very struggle against segregation and racism produces the complicity to participate in such a system. As the Civil Rights movement passed its crescendo, and Dr. King's appeal to struggle against the "triple threats" of capitalism, militarism, and racism faded from collective memory, Harding called for a critical self-examination that would "see how much over the past fifteen to twenty years we black folks have decided (consciously or not) to fight racism by seeking 'equal opportunity' or a 'fair share' in the nation's militarism and its materialism. In other words, we have chosen to struggle against one of the 'triple threats' by joining the other two, a destructive choice."²⁹ Harding warned that in pursuing such a course, "we have imbibed much of the spirit . . . of greed, belligerency, fearful calouses, and individualism, a spirit that makes us anti-poor people, anti-immigrants, that creates injustice, that makes for war."³⁰

Writing 40 years after Dr. King's death, Harding cautioned about the risks of such complicity, explaining that it would be "unfaithful to our own best history of struggle and to the hopes of the exploited peoples of the world, if black folk in the U.S.A. were to settle for what is now called 'a piece of the pie'—some proportionate cut of the wealth amassed by this nation's military-industrial empire." Harding argued that Dr. King "understood how fundamentally the structures of military and economic domination are built on the exploitation and deprivation of our own poor people" and that "by definition, . . . the shares of this system could never be fair." Put another way, they were not interested in a simple framework of equity, or a demand for a racially proportionate allocation of harms and goods. Parity in suffering and domination is not justice.³¹

Harding, like King, rejected the belief that racism is a distortion or a perversion of an otherwise neutral market and state. Racism is not an