

Lessons of Black Armed Resistance: White Violence, Black Subjectivity, and the Forceful Pursuit of Revolutionary Change

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INTRODUCTION

I am saying as you must say too, that in order to see where we are going, we must not only remember where we have been, but we must understand where we have been. - Ella Baker

I first encountered the incredible life and story of Ella Baker in the summer of 2020, when an independent research project led me to read *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (2003)—a masterful and breathtaking account of Miss Baker’s personal and political life as an organizer written by Barbara Ransby. In many ways, this text became the gateway into what has since become a two-year and multifaceted exploration of the Black Freedom Movement. In fact, so inspired by my reading, I reached out to Dr. Ransby directly. An excerpt of that email reads:

I would like to begin by thanking you for your incredible work, and for providing myself and all who read your book with a powerful, nuanced and localized understanding of a movement all-too-often portrayed as homogenous, continuous, and sustained by a select number of chosen leaders. I found myself not only learning about Ella Baker and the incredible organizer and human being that she was, but also about the fundamental meaning of democracy, and the masses of unrecognized individuals who truly built and sustained the Black Freedom Movement. Perhaps more important than what I learned, I also found myself engaging in a deep and challenging process of unlearning: the history of our struggle for freedom, the role(s) of various prominent leaders, and the difference between 'Democracy' (as conceived by our political system) and true 'democracy' (as an essential and radical concept that governs all social relationships and systems).

As a young scholar and activist of color myself, your work has inspired and informed my thinking; it has also left me with many questions. I find myself thinking about the meaning of democracy, about how we might move ourselves toward a truly democratic society, and about how to infuse democratic structures and processes into all of our work and organizing, as Baker herself always strived to do. I also find myself thinking about the movements of today, specifically BLM, and wondering how young organizers and activists today might learn from the examples of groups like SNCC (I found chapter 8 to be one of the most informative and relevant pieces of literature I have read in recent years).

The email went on to pose a number of questions,¹ and, to my delight, Dr. Ransby replied. At that time, I was unaware that many of the insights and questions that emerged from reading Miss Baker's story would become the impetus for a double-credit thesis that I would finish writing nearly two years later.

Ransby's text exposed the deficient and deeply problematic nature of my existing understanding of the Black Freedom Movement, and inspired me to seek out more nuanced and complicating narratives. And it was through this desire to develop a deeper understanding of the Black Freedom Struggle, specifically as it manifested during the twentieth century, that I first encountered the (hi)stories of Black armed resistance. After reading chapters from *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* (Cobb 2016) and *We Will Shoot Back* (Umoja 2013), and reading Robert F. Williams' *Negroes with Guns* in its entirety, I was both inspired and incensed—a combination that lends itself well to further research. Having only encountered pacified and compressed versions of the Civil Rights Movement, in which the theatrics of Black suffering, together with white moral outrage, ultimately toppled the system of Jim Crow, the very idea that Black individuals and communities had taken up arms to defend themselves was earthshaking.

¹ Among these questions, I asked the following: *How do we understand/contextualize BLM and the Movement for Black Lives within the history of Black Freedom movements? In what ways is it similar/a natural progression, and in what ways does it differ? How might we learn more deeply from the past?; Related to this, in your book you discuss the difference between organization and mobilization (as viewed by Baker), and I'm curious how you see that paradigm applying to today's movement?; I noticed the repeated use of the term "militant" throughout your book, and would love to hear about your choice to use that terminology. I am also curious to hear how you understand what it means to be (a) militant, and how we reconcile the meaning of the term that Baker championed (which I find to be incredibly powerful, important and unique, especially within the tradition of Black resistance) with the negative connotations often employed today? For example, I imagine many people would find the concept of militant non-violence paradoxical. As you will discover in reading this thesis, especially in the Conclusion, I continue to reflect on these same questions today.*

And all of this was taking place against the backdrop of immense racial uprising, as Black communities across the country witnessed the ongoing assault on Black life at the hands of law enforcement officers. So, as I was reading about the histories of militant Black rebellion, and coming to more deeply understand the problematic ways in which we have (mis)remembered and discussed Black resistance, I was also watching the next chapter of the Black Freedom Struggle unfold before my eyes—and I was both struck and troubled by the way that many public officials, politicians, academics, media outlets, and the general public were describing and reacting to Black resistance in the present moment. More than troubled, I was angry—angry that peaceful protestors were being criminalized, that more disgust was allotted to so-called rioters than to the violent parties and systems responsible for the continuous murder of Black people, and that the cries for justice and reform were, yet again, falling on seemingly deaf ears. And it was from within this moment of bearing witness to the very real and ongoing legacies of white supremacy that I decided to grapple with the issues and questions that undergird this project.

Joining the Conversation

My goals in writing this thesis are threefold: (1) first, in addition to reinforcing the basic fact that armed resistance has been essential to the historical pursuit of Black liberation (which Cobb and Umoja have already done very well), and therefore refuting the notion that nonviolence and armed self-defense are incompatible or even antithetical, I hope to expand our understanding as to *why* Black armed resistance has been so important and effective—functionally, but also ideologically; (2) further, in illuminating the historical arc and evolution of Black (armed) resistance, I hope to expose a few key problems with the way we often remember and reflect upon past social movements, specifically as it impacts our ability to understand and

undermine the sources of white supremacy; (3) finally, I hope that by exploring these histories, we might better understand where we are today, and this might ultimately allow us to more accurately and effectively challenge white supremacy moving forward—to envision what the future of successful Black resistance might look like.

In many ways, underlying and informing my research is also a desire to overcome an apparent gap between scholars of Peace and Conflict Studies and those who have studied the history and tradition of Black armed resistance, as there has yet to be significant overlap or dialogue between these two groups—at least within the confines of academia. And, for both academics and activists, and especially those who have committed themselves to studying and deploying civil resistance as a transformative—and even revolutionary—tool, understanding and grappling with these histories of successful and effective armed resistance is critical to accurately assessing the potential of strategic nonviolence. In fact, while existing theory on civil resistance offers a useful and compelling analysis of certain past social movements, it struggles to provide a clear path toward revolutionary social change, and is often limited by a focus on maximal campaigns against corrupt or oppressive regimes. Thus, the patterns and insights put forward by prominent scholars of civil resistance cannot necessarily be extended to include all resistance campaigns—this is especially true, perhaps, of oppressive structures rooted in aspects of identity, and upheld by hegemonic forces embedded in, yet extending beyond, the legitimate structures of political systems (or what Frances Piven calls “electoral-representative arrangements”). In fact, one of the greatest shortcomings within the field of civil resistance is its inability to adequately account for and address the effects and implications of hegemonic forces, such as white supremacy and the patriarchy. Thus, before beginning an examination of armed resistance in

African-American communities—of its function and effects as a cultural and political resistance strategy—it is necessary to first address the contemporary field of civil resistance studies.

What is Civil Resistance?

Though the fundamental practice of acts of nonviolent resistance has likely existed during every period of human history, strategic campaigns of “nonviolent action rose to unprecedented political significance throughout the world” during the 20th century (Sharp 2005, 16). Thus, despite its long history, the explicit theorization of organized movements and campaigns of civil resistance, also commonly referred to as strategic nonviolent action, is still in its relative infancy. One of the individuals most responsible for the contemporary theorization of civil resistance is Gene Sharp. Sharp’s extensive scholarship, which came to prominence in 1973 with the publication of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, offers a comprehensive and compelling framework for a pragmatic approach to nonviolent struggle, (strategic) nonviolent action, which drew from but also departed in critical ways from the principled nonviolence most famously championed by Gandhi. Whereas principled nonviolence is rooted in a believed moral purity and the virtuousness of pacifism, Sharp sought to identify a pragmatic understanding of nonviolent struggle, “identified by what people do, not by what they believe” (Sharp 19). Central to Sharp’s theorization of nonviolent action, and to the various theoretical offshoots that have since followed, is the *social view of power* (28-29), which views political power as rising from the social and institutional resources of which society is composed. More specifically, he posits that political power is drawn from six distinct sources: *authority* (or *legitimacy*), *human resources*, *skills and knowledge*, *intangible factors* (think ideologies), *material resources*, and *sanctions* (29-30). Accordingly, Sharp suggests that those in power are dependent on the cooperation and

obedience of the masses, and that through the withdrawal of this cooperation and obedience—through noncooperation and disobedience—the masses can effectively challenge and limit the political power of those whose rule they oppose. Another important feature of Sharp’s theoretical framework, then, is the centrality of consent and consent theory. Summarizing the role of consent, Sharp writes:

the rulers’ power depends upon the availability of its six sources, as reviewed previously. This availability is determined by the degree of obedience and cooperation given by the subjects. Despite inducements, pressures, and even sanctions, such obedience and cooperation are, however, not inevitable. Obedience remains essentially voluntary. Therefore, all government is based upon consent (34).

Although civil resistance theory put forth by some contemporary scholars has diverged in subtle ways from Sharp’s original conception, the field has largely remained committed to the basic framework outlined above.

Limitations of Strategic Nonviolent Action

Over recent decades, and largely informed by Sharp’s work, activists and scholars alike have continued to develop and expand upon these theories of pragmatic nonviolent action. However, despite the continued growth and embrace of strategic nonviolent action, some scholars have challenged its central underpinnings. One area of critique targets Sharp’s reliance on consent theory in his “social view of power” (Sharp 2005, 28-29). In his review essay “Gene Sharp’s Theory of Power,” Brian Martin (1989) suggests that Sharp oversimplifies the organization of political power, and that his reliance on consent theory ignores important systems and structures that govern power relationships, such as capitalism, patriarchy and bureaucracy.

Martin writes that “Sharp's focus on consent is individualistic and voluntaristic in orientation,” and that “an analysis of social structure provides another way to understand consent” (1989, 216). However, Martin ultimately supports Sharp’s power theory for its accessibility, and says that “while it is relatively easy to criticize Sharp's theory of power at an intellectual level, it is immensely more difficult to propose an alternative theory which is more suited for effective practical application” (1989, 221). Other critiques of Sharp, however, do not arrive at the same conclusion.

For example, in “The Limitations of Strategic Nonviolence,” Timothy Braatz (2015) argues for a renewed embrace of principled nonviolence, and suggests that while pragmatic nonviolent action might be able to address direct violence, it is incapable of overcoming the other forms of state violence, such as structural and cultural violence, and is therefore an insufficient solution for contemporary issues (5-6). Braatz also argues that the tendency of nonviolent resistance campaigns to focus on oppressive individuals and regimes, rather than the violence baked into the very arrangements of societies, renders the practice of nonviolent action too normative in nature. He writes:

A typical strategic nonviolence campaign is reformist—seeking to clean up the state and make government less corrupt and less repressive as well as more responsive to the needs of the people. Thus, it affirms the legitimacy and efficacy of a powerful state, and, in that sense, is not revolutionary. The powerful state remains, with all its potential for corruption and abuse (Braatz 2014, 7).

Whether or not one agrees with the specific arguments of Martin or Braatz, their critiques of popular nonviolent action theory are instructive, as they point to a need for more nuanced and holistic frameworks within the broader theory of nonviolent action—a need that various scholars have sought to address. For example, Stellan Vinthagen’s “social pragmatism of nonviolence” is an attempt to reconcile the false dichotomy between principled and pragmatic nonviolence, and to recognize that both morality and pragmatism “are socially rooted and based on practical

knowledge of how groups function in their particular normative order” (2015, 9). However, long before Vinthagen introduced his *social pragmatism of nonviolence*, another model of nonviolence also sought to overcome this polarization: *revolutionary nonviolence*. From a theoretical standpoint, revolutionary nonviolence addresses both Martin and Bratz’ critiques, and offers a compelling approach to civil resistance.

Revisions in the Field: Revolutionary Nonviolence

In his article “Rebuilding Revolutionary Nonviolence in an Anti-Imperialist Era,” Matt Meyer (2014) calls for a renewed consideration and study of revolutionary nonviolence. In many ways, Meyer’s argument emerges from concerns similar to those of both Martin and Braatz—from the recognition that pragmatic nonviolent action often fails to address the complex and intersectional problems facing oppressed peoples today. Meyer also suggests that the tendency to view nonviolent resistance through a reformist lens is a challenge particularly of the Global North, which has led to “consistently unprincipled behaviors in organizations alleging (and genuinely but unsuccessfully trying) to act based on high principles of justice, power sharing, and a valuing of all people” (2014, 72). He argues that until peace scholars and activists, especially those among privileged populations in the Global North, are able to recognize and accept the need for revolutionary social change in every facet of their daily lives—to contend with the most basic and underlying structures and relationships that uphold the violence of white supremacy and imperialism—the full potential of nonviolence cannot be realized. One of the many challenges to achieving this, Meyer argues, is the “widespread debates and accusations often focusing upon the differences between principled or philosophic *ahimsa* on the one hand and practical or strategic ‘resistance’ on the other that have kept meaningful lessons for

contemporary audiences buried beneath rhetorical discourse” (2014, 69). He then goes on to suggest that “in order to understand and reclaim the significance of nonviolence in the current era, to move beyond the false dichotomies of the current debates, the evidence suggests that a careful assessment of revolutionary activity in the Global South and among disenfranchised communities within the North is greatly needed” (Meyer 2014, 69).

One of the lessons that emerges from such an assessment, and that many modern-day scholars and activists neglect, is the importance of connecting means and ends. Meyer writes, “there should be connections between means and ends, where ‘principled nonviolence’ asserts are not just to be applied to war itself but to the causes of war, including the ways in which individuals and institutions interact with one another” (2014, 72). Thus, Meyer suggests that more than simply moving beyond the false dichotomy of principled versus pragmatic nonviolence, we must actively seek to unite the two tenets into a cohesive theory of change—and revolutionary nonviolence, some have argued, is one way of doing so.

Though “nonviolent revolution as an academic concept and practical discipline is still in its infancy” (Meyer 2014, 76), it has been developed and supported by a number of scholars in the last half century. One such scholar, who Meyer turns to in his article, is George Lakey. Co-founder of the Movement for a New Society (MNS), Lakey was among the group of scholars who contributed to “a short period of time in the tumultuous 1970s ” when “revolutionary nonviolence appeared to hold sway among a new generation of radicals living in the context of global uprisings” (Meyer 2014, 75). Meyer writes that “the MNS vision, largely unfinished today, was to create new theory based on mutually reinforcing strengths of pacifism, socialism, anarchism, feminism, environmentalism, the burgeoning gay liberation movement, and other intellectual strands” (2014, 75). This vision for a new society, which captures the heart of

Meyer's argument, is articulated in "A Manifesto for Nonviolent Revolution," which George Lakey authored in 1976 as a part of MNS. In the manifesto, Lakey lays out a framework for the revolutionary process, which includes five stages of development: 1) *conscientization*, 2) *building organization*, 3) *confrontation*, 4) *mass non cooperation*, and 5) *parallel government* (1976, 2). However, despite developing a framework and theoretical basis for revolutionary nonviolence, Lakey himself admits that "there has never been a nonviolent revolution in history, in the sense we mean it in this manifesto" (1976, 12). Even today, it seems that there has yet to be a nonviolent revolution of the type and magnitude that MNS envisioned. For, while Meyer points to the Arab Spring as an illustration of revolutionary nonviolence ideologies, even the democratization of Tunisia fails to satisfy the type of radically-just society described in the MNS manifesto.

The viability of revolutionary nonviolence, especially as a means of overcoming the previously-mentioned limitations of strategic nonviolent action, becomes especially tenuous when considered alongside histories of racial injustice in the United States. An examination of the 19th century abolitionist movement brings this fact to light.

(Non)violence in the Abolitionist Movement

The institution of slavery was foundational not only in the construction of whiteness and the creation of an "American" identity, but also to the nation's transformative economic growth and subsequent independence. In his masterful text *River of Dark Dreams*, Walter Johnson (2013) traces the social and economic importance of slavery, and situates the violent institution within the broader context and history of Atlantic commodity markets. In fact, Johnson even seems to suggest that the Transatlantic Slave Trade was precursory to the emergence of modern

capitalism. Concerning slaveholders, Johnson writes, “rather than a pure form—‘capitalism’ or ‘slavery’—they united, formatted, and measured the actually existing capitalism and slavery of the 19th century” (2013, 10). Thus, it is no surprise that the abolition of slavery marked a period of drastic social transformation and reconfiguration, transcending reform both by definition (abolition necessarily exceeds reform) and implication. However, as the historiography of slavery has continued to evolve, so has the story of abolitionism.

The abolitionist movement is often remembered as a peaceful coalition of white northerners and free Blacks that preached against the evils of slavery, and convinced large sectors of the nation to forego the violent institution. However, as Kellie Carter Jackson shares in her book *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence*, the true history of the abolitionist movement is less buoyant. Jackson contends that “in the history of the movement to abolish slavery, the shift toward violence among African Americans remains largely unaddressed,” and that “Black abolitionist ideology not only explains how the politics of violence paved the way for the Civil War, but how the politics of violence helped prepare the nation to view black people as equal Americans with inalienable rights” (2019, 3). Given the central role of violence in the abolition of slavery, both prior to and during the Civil War, it would be erroneous to classify the movement as nonviolent. And yet its outcome, a fundamental rearrangement and redistribution of freedom and power achieved through a multi-racial coalition of activists, seems to reflect the hopes for revolutionary nonviolence as described by scholars like Lakey.

In many ways, this same discussion can be extended to include the Civil Rights Movement—a decade-long resistance campaign organized among African American communities that is celebrated for its transformative social and legislative gains.

Revisions Beyond the Field: Armed Self-Defense in the Black Freedom Movement

Although the field of civil resistance studies has historically situated its focus internationally, often on maximal campaigns launched to overthrow oppressive political regimes, there are a number of social movements in the United States that have garnered substantial attention. For example, in her seminal text *Challenging Authority*, Frances Piven (2008) uses both the Abolitionist Movement and New Deal-era reform to illuminate the importance and centrality of protest campaigns in catalyzing social change. However, no social movement in the United States has garnered as much attention in the field of resistance studies as the Civil Rights Movement. Scholars have routinely turned to this period of racial unrest and mobilization not only as a prime demonstration of the promising potential of civil resistance, but also as an illustrative example of social movement building more broadly. The issue, however, is that the successes of the Civil Rights Movement did not arrive through strategic nonviolent action alone—a fact that many scholars and activists beyond the field of peace studies have highlighted.

In response to historical censorship and incomplete retellings of the Civil Rights Movement, a number of scholars and activists have made a point to remember an oft-forgotten aspect of this transformative historical moment: it was largely inspired, frequently catalyzed, and consistently protected by guns. One of the leading contemporary voices in this corrective project is Charles E. Cobb, Jr. (2016), whose book *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* recounts the vital role that armed self-defense played in securing and preserving the movement's social and political gains. Cobb's perspective is noteworthy not only for his compelling scholarship, but because he himself was also a leading member the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—a group of young activists

and organizers that shaped and carried the final years of the Civil Rights Movement. Another important voice is that of scholar-activist Akinyele Umoja (2013), whose text *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* contributes immense value to the remembering and retelling of the central role armed self-defense played not only in the Civil Rights Movement, but in the broader lineage of the Black Freedom Movement as a whole. In addition to illuminating the prevalent use of guns themselves, both of these texts also accentuate the centrality of the *debates* surrounding the use of guns, which riddled the movement's internal dialogue and disagreements. In many ways, these debates—surrounding the ethics and efficacy of armed resistance, and armed self-defense specifically—were integral to the development and evolution of the Black Freedom Movement. Thus, both Cobb and Umoja not only challenge common misconceptions surrounding the beliefs, leadership, and actions that fueled this illustrious movement, but also uncover a tradition of armed resistance that has long accompanied the push for racial justice within the United States.

Conclusion

The stories and insights put forward by individuals like Cobb and Umoja regarding the use of armed resistance in the Black Freedom Movement, much like those put forward by Carter Jackson regarding the use of violence in the Abolitionist Movement, stand at odds with the ways in which those in the field of civil resistance discuss these same movements. By uncovering and centering the historical role of armed resistance in Black communities, these thinkers call into question many of the underlying assumptions and principles that inform civil resistance theory, therefore identifying a need to consider alternative forms and interpretations of resistance. If the field of civil resistance, and its theory, is to overcome its reformist limitations, then it must first

reckon with the previously-disregarded and dynamic histories that Cobb, Umoja, and Carter Jackson bring forward, and it must contend with the unique oppressive conditions that arise alongside hegemonic forces like white supremacy. Both of these tasks require not just a reconciliation of principled and pragmatic nonviolence, as called for by thinkers like Matt Meyer and George Lakey, but a departure from inflexible notions of nonviolence altogether—they require a framework and lens of analysis that does not exclude the historical traditions of Black armed resistance. Does such a framework exist in the field of Peace Studies? Is it possible to reconcile the studied and established promise of strategic nonviolence with the histories and traditions of armed resistance in African American communities? Further, how might these histories and traditions inform, or challenge, the way we think about and define movement success? And what effect might this have on our understanding of racial injustice and the endurance of white supremacy, as well as other hegemonic forces? Perhaps we might find some of these answers by turning to African American communities themselves—by seeking out and amplifying the voices of Black Americans whose lives and livelihoods have been shaped along the contours of white violence.

Ultimately, the question is not whether armed resistance is the most righteous or most effective tool to be applied to the ongoing pursuit of racial justice. Rather, the question is what we might learn from exploring—earnestly and openly—whether and how the use of armed resistance has preserved, empowered, and transformed African American communities in the past. In order to effectively challenge white supremacy in the present, we must understand how it has been effectively challenged in the past, and we must be willing to look beyond our limited views of Black armed resistance to do so.

The following pages will begin, then, with an examination of the underlying structures on which white supremacy is propped. Chapter One will establish the historical and inextricable connection between white supremacy and white violence, and therefore contextualize the notion that, throughout the Black Freedom Struggle, armed self-defense has provided one of the most direct and effective challenges to white violence—the central tenet on which this thesis rests. Chapter Two will then identify and discuss the historical function(s) that armed resistance has served within African American communities, in order to better understand its importance and centrality to the Black liberation process. More specifically, I will use Chapter Two to illuminate the role of armed resistance in creating alternative spaces, such as haven communities and maroons, and to suggest that these spaces have been instrumental in generating further organized resistance campaigns—particularly within the twentieth century Black Freedom Movement. Whereas Chapter Two focuses on the functional and material import of armed resistance as a means of enduring and undermining white violence, Chapter Three aims to examine the ways in which armed resistance has informed, transformed, and inspired expressions of Black agency, community, and empowerment. In other words, it seeks to appreciate the possibility that, while the tradition of Black armed resistance has certainly been about fighting *against* white violence, it has also been about fighting *for* a more just and inclusive society—of envisioning and pursuing more radical and democratic notions of citizenship. To accomplish this, I begin by examining the historical relationship between Black military service and articulations of individual and collective citizenship, and how, repeatedly injured and insulted during and after their service, Black veterans became both stalwarts of militant defiance and the impetus of the Black Freedom Movement. I also consider the broader evolution of Black armed resistance throughout the twentieth century, including its apparent decline during the Black Power Movement, in order to

better understand the challenges and conditions facing activists and organizers today. The conclusion, then, in addition to summarizing key insights and findings, attempts to apply the lessons gleaned from the histories of Black armed resistance to the ongoing Black Freedom Struggle. More specifically, it suggests that by centering and celebrating only the dramatic struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, and ignoring the more radical ideologies and events that have characterized other parts of the Black Freedom Movement, we have denied ourselves fertile opportunities for understanding both the evolution and structuralization of white supremacy, and the unique contemporary challenges we face in the ongoing pursuit of Black liberation.

Methodology and Key Terms

In many ways, the insights, arguments, and analyses that make up this thesis reflect a culmination of my undergraduate learning—within and beyond the classroom. I have drawn my source material from four general fields: 1) the historiography of slavery, which I encountered through an honors history seminar on slavery, and which includes the work of authors like Ira Berlin, Walter Johnson, Jeff Forret, and Sally E. Hadden; 2) civil resistance literature, much of which I encountered through an honors seminar on social movements and nonviolent power, and which includes the work of authors like Gene Sharp, Frances F. Piven, Kurt Schock, and Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan; 3) the growing body of literature that centers Black armed resistance and the Black tradition of arms, which I found through my independent research as a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, and which includes the work of authors like Akinyele Umoja, Charles E. Cobb, Jr., Gregory Mixon, and Robert F. Williams; 4) and lastly, prominent texts within the field of Black Studies, and specifically those that address the twentieth century

Black Freedom Movement, for which I largely consult the work of Manning Marable and Barbara Ransby.

As a student between the fields of Black Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies, I have embraced and employed an interdisciplinary approach—most heavily influenced by the disciplines of history and sociology. In fact, my approach can generally be understood as that of *historical sociology*, or “the systematic examination of the past to inform and reconstruct empirical findings and theories about the world... characterized by methodological pluralism, as well as a wide engagement with social-scientific questions of large-scale social change, the emergence and institutionalization of modern societies, and the epistemological foundations of social science history” (Wilson and Adams 2015, 27-30). In examining the historical foundations and evolution of Black armed resistance, I attempt to grapple with large questions surrounding Black (organized) resistance, (non)violence, and white supremacy; further, I do so in hopes of establishing a better understanding of the contemporary formations of both white supremacy and Black resistance.

It is also important to note that, while I have aspired to bring together and into conversation a diversity of scholarly fields and perspectives, my methods are dependent upon, and limited to, secondary sources. In other words, though I have done my best to draw from a well of exceptional texts and source material, I have relied upon the evidence and analysis of other scholars. My hope, however, is that in addition to offering valuable synthesis, reflection, and analysis, this thesis might illuminate various paths and questions deserving of future research.

Key Terms

There are a number of terms—and groupings of terms—that are fundamental to understanding the ideas and discussions developed throughout this thesis, and it will be useful to establish their specific uses and meanings before beginning. First, you will frequently encounter the terms *Black Freedom Movement* and *Black Freedom Struggle*; although the difference between these two terms is slight, they represent two very distinct and specific things. Similar to Akinyele Umoja, I use the term *Black Freedom Struggle* to encapsulate the whole of “the historic fight of African descendants for liberation and human rights” (Umoja 2013, 6)—a fight that began in the earliest days of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and that continues to this day. The *Black Freedom Movement*, though sometimes used interchangeably with the Civil Rights Movement, here refers to “a distinct era in the African American struggle for civil and human rights that began in the mid--1940s with a surge in public protest and ended in the mid--1970s with a shift in emphasis toward electoral politics” (Kwame Jeffries 2018, 22). In other words, the Black Freedom Movement denotes a specific period of organized resistance within the Black Freedom Struggle. The Black Freedom Movement itself, then, also comprises multiple distinct movements—namely the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. And while these two movements had considerable overlap, in both their timeline and objectives, the Black Power Movement can generally be understood as following the Civil Rights Movement.

Another important set of terms are *civil resistance* and *(strategic) nonviolent action*. In the context of this thesis, and within the field of Peace and Conflict Studies more broadly, these two terms can generally be understood to represent the same thing, to refer to the “general technique of conducting protest, resistance, and intervention without physical violence” (Sharp 2005, 547)—and in fact, I use them interchangeably throughout. There are a number of other

terms that are sometimes used to describe the same concept, such as nonviolent struggle and people power, but I have tried to limit myself to just these two: civil resistance, and (strategic) nonviolent action. Though Sharp himself has most often used just *nonviolent action*, without any descriptive qualifier, I tend to include the term “strategic” in order to more clearly distinguish it from the framework of principled nonviolence.

A Note on Positionality

Before beginning with an examination of the historical underpinnings of white supremacy, specifically as it was forged through the violent systems and structures of slavery, it is important to acknowledge that I do not come to this work as an objective or detached scholar—surely, no such thing exists. For just as everyone else is influenced and informed by their personal experiences, relationships, and beliefs, I, too, carry with me a specific worldview that has been shaped by my family, my upbringing, my education, and the many bold and brilliant individuals from whom I have taken inspiration. And, when it comes to matters as complex as race, and as political as violence, these biographical truths become even more material. As Charles Cobb shares in the introduction of *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed*,

how we understand violence, its use, and its place in United States history depends on what sort of violence is being described and who is describing it. My view of slave revolts, for instance, is certainly colored by the fact that I am a descendant of Africans who were enslaved. And my specific view of the place of slave revolts in the continuum of the black freedom struggle is affected by my own awareness and understanding of my forebears’ desire for freedom (Cobb 2016, 10-11).

Like Cobb, my perspective is also shaped by my experiences as an Afro-descendant person living in the context and conditions of the present-day United States, and of the deep learning this fact has inspired me to undertake. For years, I have immersed myself in the vast scholarship and literature of and concerning Black people, and I have found great strength and inspiration in

the lives and words of those that lived, loved, and fought before me. In many ways, the arc of my intellectual interest was decided the moment I first picked up a children's biography of Dr. King in the third grade—and it only solidified further every subsequent time I read the endearing, though surely imperfect, text. However, I also recognize that we are never done learning, and the infinite complexities of the Black experience continue to both deject and amaze me.

I cannot deny these personal connections, nor have I tried to do so throughout my work. I am fueled by a profound love for the African diaspora, for Blackness in its infinite manifestations, and for the chasmic wells of Black agency and resistance that have given rise to me, being here, today; and by this love, I am driven to better understand the intricacies of our individual and collective struggles.

CHAPTER ONE

Violence Begets Resistance: White Supremacy and Slavery

Introduction

The history and tradition of Black (armed) resistance within the United States cannot be separated from, or understood without, an examination of the history of white supremacy and white violence—and more specifically, the ways in which white supremacy first emerges from, and is subsequently dependent upon, a bedrock of white violence. Accordingly, any meaningful discussion of Black resistance, and of the white supremacist violence it often opposes, must begin with an examination of the “Peculiar Institution” on which the Nation was founded—of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and its influence and impact on the social and material fabric of the United States, as it exists today.

Though this discussion will maintain as its focus the specific context and conditions of slavery within the United States, including its colonial antecedents, it is important to also recognize the profound and immeasurable impact that the dealing of Black bodies has had on global history as a whole, particularly within the broader Afro-Atlantic world. However, this sweeping influence and legacy must not be taken to assume that the institution of slavery functioned the same in each and every context; rather, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was a complex and dynamic system that found unique forms—in terms of social, economic, and cultural structures, as well as its distinct systems of violence and brutality—everywhere it landed. Even within the context of the United States, from its colonial beginnings until its ultimate collapse in 1865, the institution of slavery functioned and evolved in incredibly diverse and distinct ways: not only across time, as is so effectively portrayed in Ira Berlin’s (2003) *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, but also across geographic

region, as can be seen clearly in Philip Morgan's (1998) *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*. For example, the "gang" system of labor in the Chesapeake, with its focus on tobacco production, and the "task" system of labor in the Lowcountry, with its focus on rice production, created two drastically different frameworks that shaped the daily lives and experiences of enslaved people. These differences find even greater meaning when considered beyond the scope of the United States, in the Caribbean and South America, for example, where distinct structures of violence and exploitation caused dramatic patterns and changes in demographics and the nature of cultural formation that are still seen today.

Despite the various and notable differences in the way slavery shaped—and was shaped by—different cultural and geographic contexts, its defining consistencies prove even more material. Above all else, the institution of slavery was a system predicated on domination and exploitation—on an expropriated dominion not only over the lives and labor of human beings, but over the broader natural world as well. In his masterful text *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Walter Johnson (2013) captures the harrowing story of slavery as a system of global exchange and exploitation, which relied as much on the ecological violence of transforming rivers into expressways and forests into croplands as it did on the violent transformation of complex and agentic human beings into an extractable and expendable reserve of free labor—a duality that is best illustrated by Johnson's discussion of the "hand," which was "the standard measure that slaveholders used when calculating the rate of exchange between labor and land" (Johnson 2013, 153). He writes:

Healthy adult men and women were accounted "full hand"; suckling women, "half-hands"; children in their first years of work, "quarter-hands"; and tiny children were no count at all. When hands fell short—when they were not "up to the task"—they were hectorated, threatened, tortured, or starved to make them work better and faster. In effect,

their senses, their muscles, and their minds were reeducated to suit their work. Measuring crops and slaves “to the hand” was an ecological as well as economic measure—an attempt to regulate the exchange between slaves and soil by prescribing benchmark measures for the process by which human capacity and earthly fertility were metabolized into capital (Johnson 2013, 153-54).

In other words, (the exploitation of) the Black body became the metric for agricultural and economic production, became the basis for producing and accumulating capital, thus laying the foundations for the system of racial capitalism that we face today—and that continues to rely upon the exploitation of Black and brown bodies. However, in addition to the economic and ecological conquest through which the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade expanded, Johnson also identifies a much darker project on which the entire violent institution rested: white supremacy, and the delicate racial hierarchy it sought to deepen and defend.

In order for the model of slavery to function, and for both the Southern slavocracy and their Northern enterprising compatriots to find success and security in the precarious business of unfree labor, it was imperative to construct a social order that affirmed their exalted positions as white men, while mapping onto Blackness a status of perpetual servitude and subjugation. Moreover, they had to continuously defend this social order as perfectly natural. However, no such natural order exists, and thus white Americans found themselves tasked with the challenge of denying an entire people their innate desire and God-given right to be free—a task that has only ever been achieved through immense and incessant violence.

Though the historical field, and popular culture more broadly, have largely moved beyond portrayals of the Slave Trade as a benign and symbiotic system rooted in benevolent paternalism, this historical revisionism (or, perhaps, simple honesty) often falls short of capturing just how violent the institution of slavery was—both in the United States and elsewhere. In fact, to overstate the hideous and pervasive brutality that marked the subjugation of enslaved persons would be a challenging, if not impractical, undertaking. Understanding the

breadth and magnitude of this violence is imperative to understanding not only the context and conditions from which various traditions of Black resistance emerged, but also the fundamental and inextricable relationship between white supremacy and white violence: the white supremacist project has *always* been dependent on extreme and persistent violence on behalf of white actors, and thus no successful examination of white supremacy—in its contemporary forms or otherwise—can be had without naming and centering the presence of white violence. In fact, central to this thesis is an understanding that white violence is the precipitating force for white supremacy, and that both the structural and ideological facets of white supremacy emerge and develop through white violence directly. The remainder of this chapter, then, will address the extensive mechanisms of white violence that sustained the institution of slavery, and attempt to elucidate the ways in which various traditions of Black resistance—and Black armed resistance especially—emerged along the contours of this white violence.

Much as the cultural, agricultural, and economic features of slavery varied across time and space, so too did its forms and structures of violence. Broadly speaking, however, white violence within the institution of slavery can be understood as serving two primary purposes: maintaining control, be it physical or psychological, and maximizing profit. The former presents itself most clearly in the interactions between bondpeoples and the Slave Power, which, though most directly represented by the slave-owning master-class, can be understood more broadly as including the courts, churches, drivers (who were often Black, and served to monitor and regulate plantation labor), overseers (who were always white, and often stood in place of absentee plantation owners), the public, and any other entity that acted as an extension of the individual slaveowner's rule. The latter, though certainly embedded within each of the aforementioned structures, presents itself most clearly in the conditions of deprivation and

distress on which the entire system was set—in the labor structures, the living conditions, and the malnutrition that was all-but-ubiquitous and maximized profit margins. Of course, these destitute conditions also functioned to deepen and extend the grip of white control, and likely reflect as much a propensity for cruelty among the master-class as their desire to optimize economic gain—a reality that Johnson speaks to when discussing the various ways that “planters used food to control their hunger slaves” (2013, 179).

Like Johnson, many other scholars have also sought to explore and expose the role, and necessity, of violence and deprivation within the institution of American slavery—often through vastly different frameworks, thus demonstrating the expansive multiplex structures of white violence and control within the system of slavery. Together, these scholars begin to expose the violent history through which white supremacy was established and upheld, and from which we have yet to free ourselves. For this discussion, I will focus on four texts: *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* by Jeff Forret (2015), *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* by Stephanie Jones-Rogers (2019), *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* by Sally E. Hadden (2001), and *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and ‘Race’ in New England, 1780-1860* by Joanne Pope Melish (1998). Though each of these texts grapples with complex and dynamic topics, from informal slave market economies in the American South to the shortcomings of the legal system in the North, they each also expose distinct features of the systems of violence that created and maintained the institution of slavery.

A System of Extreme Violence

Lauded as “the first-ever comprehensive analysis of violence among enslaved people in the antebellum South,” historian Jeff Forret’s *Slave Against Slave* aims to challenge notions of the slave community as a uniquely harmonious site. Building on the work of other scholars in the field, past and present, Forret seeks to investigate the unflattering forms of slave agency, namely intraracial violence, in order to explore and expose “the totality of bondpeoples’ humanity” (Forret 2015, 7)—something Forret suggests to have been missing from previous literature, which often “veered ‘dangerously close to replacing the mythical world in which slaves were objects of total control with an equally mythical world in which slaves were hardly slaves at all’” (2015, 6). In many ways, however, some of the book’s most informative features fall beyond its central focus on intraracial slave violence, such as its detailed portrayal of the extensive systems of white violence and control that defined so many aspects of the lived experiences of enslaved people. For example, in discussing the repercussions that bondpeople often faced following instances of intraracial violence amongst themselves, Forret reveals that the master often administered punishment himself, rather than involving the local court system (2015, 82). These punishments most often took the form of whippings (Forret 2015, 83), sometimes to the point of death (Forret 2015, 85), though other forms of punishment such as confinement, lynching, and various forms of physical torture were also used frequently (Forret 2015, 85). Forret even recounts one particular instance in which a slave, by the name of Alex Hunter, was bound and whipped nearly to death before having dogs let loose on him (2015, 85). Perhaps the most destructive punishment, however, and that which many bondpeople feared the most, was sale and separation from one’s family. As Forret writes, “however terrible to endure, whipping and incarceration were ultimately fleeting; sale from family and friends was permanent” (2015, 86).

Forret's text successfully captures, in detail, the unquestioned and often-brutal rule of the individual slave owner—he was, in fact, the judge, jury and executioner.

In instances when the local courts became involved, punishments were often even more extreme. For example, whipping and branding were commonplace, often used in conjunction with each other (Forret 2015, 121), and more brutal forms of public mutilation, such as ear cropping, were also regularly deployed (Forret 2015, 125-26). Court-ordered whippings also followed a set of extreme and methodical conventions, with some states ordering as many as five-hundred lashings (though Forret also reports one instance of a slave receiving 1,200 lashings) to be doled out in set increments. For example, in one particular Georgia county, “the customary sentence of 117 lashes was administered in 3 increments of 39 lashes each” (Forret 2015, 123). Of course, these forms of punishment were used only in instances when capital punishment was not, which could be carried out in any number of violent and tortuous ways. It is also important to note that, beyond the punishments themselves being cruel and inhumane, they were ordered and administered within a system that offered the enslaved little-to-no means of fair representation or appeal. In other words, a bondperson need not have committed any real crime for an all-white jury, comprising plantation owners exclusively, to find them guilty (Forret 2015, 114).

Even those sections of Forret's text that center various examples of slave-slave violence, from theft to murder, reveal a great deal about the violent structures of slavery, as they are always set within the context of, and often in response to, the conditions of torment and material deprivation that defined chattel slavery. If we are to understand white supremacy and the ongoing challenge it poses to true Black liberation, then we must first grapple with this history of wicked and routine violence through which it has been established—not as an abstract violence

of an institution as a whole, but as the intimate and incessant violence enacted by individual and collective white actors against other individual and collective Black persons.

Damning the Southern Belle: Gendered Violence and the Slave Mistress

Whereas Forret's text brings to focus the violent systems of control and punishment that characterized slavery, and substitutes for the abstract countless instances of real and recorded violence, Jones-Rogers' (2019) *They Were Her Property* asks us to reconsider the intimate and oft forgotten forms of white violence within the institution of slavery. More specifically, Jones-Rogers calls into question the notion that the plantation mistress was a passive figure trapped in a system of masculine violence, and suggests that white women not only took part in their husbands' dealings, but often owned and managed plantations themselves. *They Were Her Property* recounts numerous instances of female plantation owners in the antebellum South, and suggests that though these women could at times be more compassionate masters than their male counterparts, they were also just as capable of maintaining their rule through harsh and measured violence. More noteworthy than the role some white women played in owning plantations, however, is the active role many more played in slave-market activities—formal and informal. This oft-forgotten fact is made especially apparent in Jones-Rogers' discussion of wet nurses, and the informal networks of white women, and mothers especially, that both created and catered to the demand for enslaved wet nurses. Jones-Rogers also notes that the role of white women in orchestrating these human exchanges, and the very prevalence of wet nurses themselves, has traditionally been overlooked and understated by many historians (2019, 102-03).

Though the implications of Jones-Rogers' work here are manifold, I will focus on two of particular relevance to this project: first, the gendered violence that permeated the institution of

slavery, and the ways in which Black motherhood was both exploited and prohibited at the expense of bondwomen; and second, the active role that white women played in the dealing of Black bodies and, consequently, their investment in white supremacy both during and after slavery.

It should come as little surprise that bondwomen were particularly vulnerable within the institution of slavery, as the constant threat of physical violence that marked the lives of all enslaved persons was augmented by the constant threat of sexual violence as well. Many scholars have noted the rampant sexual violence that bondwomen suffered at the hands of white masters and overseers, and this dynamic of abuse surely accounts for the vast majority of the sexual violence that transpired within the institution of slavery. It is also important, however, to acknowledge the ways in which bondmen themselves could also pose a threat to their enslaved women, sometimes in collusion with their white counterparts. In fact, the topic of sexual violence is among those discussed in *Slave Against Slave*, as Forret seeks to illuminate the ways in which masculine violence was leveraged and enacted not only by white plantation owners and overseers, but also within slave communities themselves. Despite Forret's contention that bondwomen "were better able to seize control of their sexuality and violently defend themselves" against sexual predators that were also enslaved (2015, 333), the commonalities between white and Black male violence surely overwhelm the differences: whether the innately nonconsensual process of 'breeding' slaves or the assertion of sexual domination by slave drivers and other bondmen in power (Forret 2015, 348), masculine violence, irrespective of race, occurred within a larger system that commoditized and dehumanized the bodies of enslaved women. This commoditization also appears in Forret's discussion of master-slave discipline, as he notes the tendency for more lenient punishments for female slaves to reflect how

“economically savvy slaveholders also would not have wanted their punishments to affect adversely the ability of female slaves to bear children” (Forret 2015, 84). In other words, some bondwomen might have been spared the full violence of the whip, but only in exchange for the far greater violence that accompanies having one’s body used to produce the future generations of enslaved laborers on which the system of slavery depended.

Jones-Rogers furthers this discussion of exploitation and commoditization, of the ways in which Black motherhood was persecuted within the institution of slavery, through her thoughtful and thorough investigation of the wet nurse practice. Speaking to the immense violence inherent to the practice of wet nursing, Jones-Rogers writes,

White women separated enslaved mothers from their children and placed their own infants at the breasts of these women. They compelled enslaved women to suckle their white children shortly after these mothers had lost their own. They denied enslaved women the right to publicly express their grief. In short, they perpetrated acts of maternal violence against these enslaved mothers, and the slave market made this violence possible (2019, 122).

The historical use of enslaved wet nurses is significant not only because it brings to light an often forgotten and ignored form and gendered violence that existed within the system of slavery, but also because it illuminates the active role that white women played in enacting this violence. In other words, slavery was not a white male project; it was a white project. Jones-Rogers eloquently captures this important reality in the concluding lines of her text, writing:

Former slave-owning women’s deeper and more complex investment in slavery help explain why, in the years following the Civil War, they helped construct the South’s system of racial segregation, a system premised, as was slavery, upon white supremacy and black oppression. Understanding the direct economic investments white women made in slavery and their stake in its perpetuation, and recognizing the ways they benefited from their whiteness, helps us understand why they and many of their female descendants elected to uphold a white-supremacist order after slavery ended. If we acknowledge that white women stood to personally and directly benefit from the commodification and enslavement of African Americans we can better understand their

participation in postwar white-supremacist movements and atrocities such as lynching—as well as their membership in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Southern white women’s roles in upholding and sustaining slavery form part of the much larger history of white supremacy and oppression. And through it all, they were not passive bystanders. They were co-conspirators (2019, 205).

In order to accurately understand and assess the practices—and visions—of Black resistance, especially as it functions to oppose white supremacy, we must first understand the expansive and unwavering systems of white violence to which it responds. In this way, Jones-Rogers helps us to expand our thinking, and to contextualize Black resistance within a more nuanced and comprehensive history of white supremacy—a history in which white women are agentic, engaged, and violent actors.

She also points to the years immediately following the Civil War as being of particular importance in the evolution of white supremacy, and so it is to this period that we shall turn next.

The Threat of Emancipation: White Fear and the Policing of Black Bodies

As was previously discussed, the system of slavery, a system designed to exploit Black labor in pursuit of social and material wealth, became inextricably entangled with the project of white supremacy—with the violent and precarious task of justifying and perpetuating the complete oppression of an entire people. However, the institution of slavery was unable to resolve the core contradictions that threatened the white supremacist project from its inception, namely that the very humanness that produced efficient labor also produced the will and desire to be free, to resist oppression, and to build community. Because of this, white supremacy has always been undergirded by white fear—by an anxiety that the forces of Black subjectivity might someday rise up and overcome their oppressed and unfree status, thus challenging the white monopoly on freedom against which Black subjugation is poised. In the years after the Civil

War, when the system of slavery could no longer be relied on as a means of controlling and limiting Black freedom and autonomy, this white fear was left to find alternative means of remediation. In order to preserve the social and material benefits procured under slavery, then, white Americans needed to find new ways to uphold white supremacy—new ways to control Black bodies and limit Black freedom.

Published in 2001 by historian Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* offers a detailed discussion and analysis of the evolution of slave patrols from 1700 to 1865. Hadden suggests that “by moving beyond the world of slave and master to include a third party—the slave patrols—we can better understand how the laws of slavery actually applied to slaves” (2001, 2). After identifying the origins of the slave patrol in the Caribbean, specifically the Barbadian slave code of 1661 (2001, 14), Hadden considers the ways in which differing geographies, demographics, and economic and political priorities within Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina all led to similar yet distinct systems of slave surveillance and control. She also stresses the important role of experimentation in the development of slave patrols, as well as the critical shift from voluntary to mandatory patrol duty that took place in each state (Hadden 2001, 17)—a shift that, both socially and functionally, made the policing of Black bodies integral not only to the formation of the individual white community, but also to the very construction of whiteness itself.

While undoubtedly an effective analysis of the importance and evolution of slave patrols within southern slave societies, *Slave Patrols* is also a powerful examination of white fear and insecurity. From the colonial era through the failure of Reconstruction, white Southern society—its structures and institutions—was largely governed by white fear, and the compulsion to deny this fear at all costs. Addressing this foundational dilemma, Hadden writes: “To admit that

danger existed was to concede the possibility of fear; to admit that slaves posed a threat could undermine confidence in an entire way of life” (2001, 138). Therefore, slave patrols were not simply a peripheral component of Southern slave society, but rather an integral and foundational structure of white violence and control that held everything else together, allowing whites to proceed under the illusion of safety and security—under the illusion that white supremacy was, in fact, the natural order. As Hadden writes, “slave patrols allowed Southern whites to overlook any day-to-day qualms they might have had about slave restlessness” (2001, 138). Thus, while white violence stands as the bedrock of white supremacy, white fear emerges as an orchestrating force that, responding to the possibility that their power and privilege *could* be lost, compels white individuals to enact more violence in an attempt to retain the white supremacist social order. It is through understanding this fear, as well as the central role of slave patrols in appeasing it, that Hadden is able to grapple with the legacy of slave patrols, and make sense of the various forms of white violence and control that continued well after the Civil War.

The tensions surrounding white control, which always swelled during times of unrest and uncertainty, experienced immense friction during Reconstruction. However, many of the systems through which this anxiety had previously been settled, such as patrols and plantation violence, were also under attack. Of the role of patrols at times of unrest, Hadden writes that “the patrol was no longer a small group carrying out one of many public tasks—patrollers performed the single most important community job whites could imagine, protecting the lives of white inhabitants by controlling slave behavior” (2001, 165). Thus, as Union troops and more inclusive Republican ideologies threatened the stability of Southern society, and previous control mechanisms such as slave patrols lost the unchallenged authority and immunity they once enjoyed, Southern whites turned to new forms of violence and control. Whether the extensive

Black Codes that functioned to limit Black social and physical mobility in the years after the war (198-99), or the agricultural clubs, gun clubs, and vigilante groups that served to uphold these racist laws and instill terror into newly-freed Blacks (Hadden 2001, 204-06), the post-war era was characterized by the swift and violent desire to reaffirm white supremacy. Plus, without the same level of economic investment in the bodies of freed Blacks, Hadden argues, white violence and terror could at times present themselves with even more brutality and perversion than within the structure of slavery (2001, 214). For example, the practice of lynching largely emerged in the years following the Civil War, as white supremacist actors sought to reinstitute and reaffirm the imperiled social order through extensive campaigns of extralegal racial terror.

Hadden's text, in addition to illuminating the structural and ideological changes that shaped white violence and white supremacy after the Civil War, also offers valuable insight into the ways in which these legacies of slavery continue to harm Black people today. And while Hadden is careful to discourage an unexamined equivalence between slave patrols and contemporary structures of public surveillance and policing, she does not shy away from exploring their commonalities. In tracing the history of slave patrols, including their legal dissolution and transformation during and after the Civil War, Hadden suggests that modern police, as well as their racist underpinnings, are fundamentally connected to patrols and other systems of violence and control originating within the institution of slavery. Just as before the war "white terror led to black terror as militia and patrol groups roamed the countryside looking for victims" (Hadden 2001, 146), white terror continued to beget Black terror during Reconstruction and beyond. For those previously enslaved, Hadden writes, "it may have seemed as if little had changed: white men still attempted to control their mobility" (2001, 191-92). Despite legal emancipation, the lives of Black Americans continued to be shaped and tormented

by white violence and terror long after the Civil War. Following the failure of Reconstruction, a failure induced through systems of immense white violence, the violent and white supremacist structures and ideologies of slavery cemented themselves into the essential fabric of American society, and have yet to be successfully extracted. Perhaps it should come as no surprise then, that just as enslaved parents informed their children of the dangers of the slave patrol (Hadden 2001, 116), Black parents today are forced to have a chillingly similar conversation, only “patrols” have been replaced by “police.”

The Myth of Regionality: Slavery and White Supremacy in the North

However, the white-supremacist project—and its systems of violence—does not originate in the American South exclusively; if we are to truly understand the historical context from which the traditions of Black resistance emerge, then we must also contend with the role that northern states had in creating and maintaining white supremacy, both during and following the formal institution of American slavery. Much like Hadden examines the ideological and structural changes that followed the emancipation of slaves in the South, Joanne Pope Melish (1998), in her *Disowning Slavery*, seeks to interrogate how northern states understood and responded to—and resisted—the emancipation of their enslaved populations. Pope Melish offers extensive commentary and analysis on the laws and practices of gradual emancipation, through which northern states slowly (and often reluctantly) weaned themselves from the system of forced slave labor. However, Pope Melish’s most compelling commentary comes in her discussions of race and racial ideologies, and the ways in which the violence and oppression of slavery was mapped onto the bodies of freed Blacks in northern states. She writes:

I argue that perceptions of difference, although they facilitated the subordination and enslavement of peoples of color in the fifteenth century, did not harden into notions of

permanent and innate hierarchy—that is, ‘race’—in the United States until the late eighteenth century, when they began to emerge in the course of the first northern implementation of systematic emancipation (Pope Melish 1998, 5).

In other words, though racism and white supremacy had existed, in practice and effect, well before the processes of gradual emancipation began, it was not until the prospect of Black freedom and mobility presented itself that we see race conceptualized and implemented as a tool for affirming and maintaining the white-supremacist social order that had taken root under slavery.

Elizabeth Pryor (2016) presents a similar argument in her book *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship Before the Civil War*, specifically in the first chapter, where she suggests that the n-word, which has in many ways become emblematic of racism within the United States, was first deployed in northern cities as a means of relegating free Blacks to their place at the bottom of the social order—often as an act of public humiliation. The racial epithet, then, became a stand-in for the extensive and ongoing legacy of racial violence, used to wield not just the memory of racial violence, but a direct and immediate threat of racial violence. Pope Melish powerfully encapsulates this very dynamic, writing:

By the end of the first decade or so of the nineteenth century, whites in New England had made a reluctant adjustment to the slow disappearance of slaves and the inexorable growth in the numbers of free people of color. But that adjustment consisted in large measure of reinscribing the practices of slavery and transferring their assumptions about the dependency and incapability of slaved to free persons of color. Therefore, the new entitlement of blacks to freedom was everywhere circumscribed by the persistence of whites’ imagined entitlement to control (Pope Melish 1998, 110).

Thus, just as the Emancipation Proclamation was met with white unease and a violent move to reassert white supremacy in the South, gradual emancipation in the North had elicited similar responses even years earlier. And though the cultural and material context differed between the

two regions, with the South being more deeply invested in the social and economic system of plantation slavery, their responses to the prospect of Black freedom and mobility were largely the same: they reaffirmed the white supremacist structures that had existed under slavery. More importantly, though, is the fact that they did so by invoking the same (threat of) violence and terror that had defined and perpetuated slavery, thus directly linking the postbellum systems of violent surveillance and control to those that preceded them.

Conclusion

Though frequently discussed in broad and amorphous terms, white supremacy must not—cannot—be separated from the very real and long history through which it has been violently formed, transformed, and defended. Consequently, any meaningful examination of Black resistance, of the ways in which African Americans have continuously pursued their freedom and safety in the face of such pernicious violence, cannot be had without also addressing this long history of white supremacy. Most pertinent to this paper is an understanding of the direct and requisite relationship between white supremacy and white violence, as well as the centrality of white fear and anxiety—real and imagined—that has served as a wellspring of continued white violence. For while white violence is certainly a reflection of white will and autonomy, it is also a direct reaction to Black subjectivity and the threat of Black freedom—which we see most clearly in the white fear that emerges from the innate precarity of white supremacy, which generates white violence in attempt to appease and overcome this fear. The story of white supremacy and its violence, then, is one in which Black individuals and communities are active, agentic, and consequential actors. In the face of these complex and far-reaching systems of violence and control, Black Americans—free and enslaved—refused to accept the totality of

their conditions, refused to accept such rampant violence and dehumanization passively; rather, they found ways to resist, some more direct than others, that allowed them to challenge and overcome white violence, and carve out of very little an existence that transcended the sum of its material parts. For the most part, this resistance manifested as covert forms of everyday resistance, such as work slowdowns and petty theft. However, in the face of extreme threats of violence, or when enacted by particularly bold and rebellious individuals, some of these early generations of free and enslaved Blacks turned to more forceful means, and took up arms in defense of their life and liberty.

While it is important to acknowledge and analyze other forms of Black resistance, of which there are many, acts of armed resistance might prove especially useful in understanding how Black people have *directly* challenged white violence, and thus directly undermined white supremacy. By examining the histories of Black armed resistance and armed self-defense, I hope to not only develop a better understanding of its importance and centrality to the broader Black liberation process, but also to expose a more complete and comprehensive remembering of white supremacy and the extreme forms of violence through which it has been persistently upheld. In fact, I posit that focusing solely on nonviolent action obfuscates a great portion of the historical arch and evolution of white supremacy, by excluding instances of Black armed resistance that make visible the totality—and severity—of white violence.

CHAPTER TWO

Resistance Begets Resistance: Creating and Defending Alternative Spaces

Introduction

The aim of this analysis is not to suggest that acts of armed resistance are more effective than their unarmed and nonviolent counterparts; rather, the goal is to analyze the various histories of armed resistance, specifically as it has operated within African American communities, so as to identify any trends in the features and functions of (armed) resistance events that have been successful in challenging white supremacy. Naturally, this discussion requires an open-minded examination not only of the impact and merit of different forms of resistance, including armed resistance and acts of armed self-defense, but also of the ways in which these different forms of resistance intersect and co-operate. In this way, the following analysis aims to address a gap in the literature of resistance studies, and to more thoughtfully consider the relationship between armed resistance and unarmed nonviolent resistance—both in theory and in practice.

Drawing on important and informative historical scholarship such as *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Hall 1992), *Death or Liberty* (Egerton 2009), *Show Thyself A Man* (Mixon 2016), and *We Will Shoot Back* (Umoja 2013), I will argue that armed resistance has been vital to every major success in the ongoing struggle for Black freedom and liberation, and that this vital role can be understood through three overarching functions: 1) creating and defending alternative spaces, designed to defend against and deter acts of white violence; then, from these new spaces, 2) enabling an increased acquisition of empowering and life-sustaining resources; and finally, bolstered by these newfound resources, and still possessing the ability to defend them from white reprisal, 3) promoting and enabling further resistance to transpire. However, this discussion is

also meant to do something a bit more specific, something that is presently missing in the field of resistance studies altogether, and that is to consider, with an emphasis on Black subjectivity, how acts of armed resistance have contributed to notions of empowerment and autonomy within Black communities themselves (the central focus of Chapter Three). Though the scope of this work is limited to Black resistance against white supremacy, specifically within the context of the United States, it might also allow for future discussions surrounding effective resistance to hegemonic forces.

Limiting the Threat of Violence

One of the primary objectives of white supremacy is to limit the chance of any successful Black revolt taking place. And, as is consistent with all structures and features of white supremacy, this has almost always been achieved through expansive and merciless systems of violence—which can be seen rather plainly in the histories of white violence and control as briefly discussed in Chapter One. In fact, one could argue that the systems of extreme violence and punishment were largely put in place to deter any forms of overt resistance, and to squash Black revolt before it could ever begin. The fear of Black rebellion appears alongside the inception of American slavery, when many slaveowners intentionally purchased enslaved Africans from different regions so as to limit their ability to communicate amongst each other, preventing the formation of cohesive language communities within and among plantations, and therefore decreasing the likelihood of successful rebellion (Hall 1992). The practice of separating families, beyond serving as a means of punishment, was also meant to limit the establishment of strong communities among bondpeople, as were other preventative measures such as the prohibition of travel between plantations. This cultural violence was paired with other

preventative structures of physical violence, as is most visibly represented by the overseer on horseback, surveilling the plantation with the constant threat of swift and violent punishment (Johnson 2013, 222-23). When these preventative measures failed to discourage acts of resistance and rebellion, the Slave Power had quick and crushing punitive response mechanisms in place, as was discussed in Chapter One. These structures of violence and surveillance did not end with slavery, however, as is so poignantly demonstrated by Sally E. Hadden (2001). Anti-black violence following the Civil War, whether Klan-sponsored lynching campaigns or beatings at the hands of corrupt sheriff departments, are similarly deployed to dissuade any form of Black rebellion, preserving the racialized social order that developed under slavery, and therefore upholding the white supremacist systems on which the nation was founded. One of the most important features of white supremacy, then, and that which the stability of the entire system depends upon, is the use of violence to prevent and punish any hint of Black rebellion.

Thus, the first step in successfully challenging white supremacy is limiting the immediate threat of white violence. However, because most public spaces and institutions have historically reflected the will of white supremacy, effectively limiting the threat of white violence has often depended on the ability to create—and defend—alternative spaces.

Haven Communities: Creating and Defending Alternative Spaces

In his groundbreaking text *We Will Shoot Back*, Akinyele Umoja illuminates the role that armed self-defense played in enabling and defending the Mississippi Freedom Movement. Among the central ideas presented in the text, Umoja highlights the importance of *haven communities* (Umoja 2013, 99) to the mid-twentieth century struggle for racial justice and freedom. These communities, which appeared most concentrated in the rural South but existed

throughout the country, comprised small groups of local Black people who took up arms in defense of their families and communities, often organized on and around plots of Black-owned land. And yet, despite their prevalence and importance to the successes of the Black Freedom Movement, the history of these haven communities has been largely erased from our national memory. Umoja does suggest that “insurgent actions and consciousness were often not visible and public but covert” (2013, 25), and that, “unable to rely upon law enforcement and the courts, Black southerners were forced to develop clandestine networks for protection and survival” (2013, 26). However, the discrete nature of these resistance events only accounts for part of their absence from popular historical records; the ubiquitous neglect of this history also reflects a broader unease surrounding Black armed resistance, and a desire to construct a pacified narrative of racial progress that might effectively preclude the diversity of tactics deployed by activists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—which very much included, and largely embraced, the use of armed resistance and armed self-defense. Before discussing the social and cultural significance of our disparate remembering of Black resistance, then, we must first come to more fully understand the historical features and functions of armed resistance within African American communities—beginning with an examination of its role in creating and defending alternative spaces.

Though we often think of southern cities as the nucleus of the Civil Rights Movement, such a limited understanding excludes a large and critical portion of this prolific period of resistance—a period that some have come to identify as “The Second Reconstruction” (Marable 2007). By limiting the story of the Civil Rights Movement to the urban center, we not only privilege the voices of the few, of charismatic and eloquent orators such as Dr. King and Malcolm X, which reinforces both classed and gendered perceptions of leadership and

movement building, but we also disregard the voices and stories—and resistance—of rural and working-class Black folks. The work of scholars like Charles E. Cobb Jr. (2016) and Akinyele Umoja (2013) aims to puncture this inaccurate and incomplete telling, and in the process, reveals a complex and compelling story of the prominent role armed self-defense played in building one of the most celebrated and successful periods of Black mobilization and resistance.

In Chapter 3 of *We Will Shoot Back*, titled “‘Can’t Give Up My Stuff’: Nonviolent Organizations and Armed Resistance,” Umoja highlights a number of proud and daring individuals who relied upon armed self-defense to protect themselves and their families from the white terroristic violence of mid-twentieth century rural Mississippi. For example, Amzie Moore (Umoja 2013, 55-56) and Hartman Turnbow (Umoja 2013, 73-76) are remembered for their willingness to brandish, and deploy, personal firearms to protect themselves and those close to them, while individuals like E.W. Steptoe (Umoja 2013, 59-63) and Vernon Dahmer (Umoja 2013, 65-66) similarly called upon the Black tradition of arms to defend and preserve their many acres of farmland, which served as an invaluable resource for the community as a whole. Perhaps more importantly, however, Umoja recounts how integral and indispensable this rural tradition of Black armed self-defense was to the young activists and organizers who, many of whom born in northern cities and arriving in Mississippi through their involvement with SNCC, found themselves unprepared for the virulent and terroristic racial violence of the rural South. Once viewed by folks like Moore, Steptoe and Dahmer as simply a natural and necessary means of self-protection, the value and importance of armed self-defense—organized and organic—took on new meaning with the arrival of young Civil Rights activists in the early 1960s. Both Dahmer and Steptoe opened their homes to traveling activists, creating haven communities of their farmland. And though many of the SNCC volunteers expressed their disapproval and discomfort

surrounding the use of armed resistance, “it was difficult for young, nonviolent activists to challenge the practice of armed self-defense in Black Mississippi communities,” as “many of the activists from organizations committed to nonviolence depended on Black people who were immersed in the ‘eye for an eye’ tradition for survival and protection” (Umoja 2013, 82).

For example, when two young SNCC activists were sent to Forrest County, Mississippi to support voter registration efforts, they stayed in the Dahmer family’s home, where Vernon Dahmer and his wife, Ellie, provided the young organizers both economic support and protection, even “[taking] turns sleeping at night to watch for intruders in response to anonymous threats received from White supremacists (Umoja 2013, 66). One of the SNCC activists, Hollis Watkins, even reported that Dahmer would often use his guns as a form of preemptive deterrence: “to warn potential nightriders of his preparedness for attackers, Dahmer would ‘every so often, as he would go about his property...just take one of his guns and shoot in the air, just to let folks know he was alive, well, and intended to protect his property’” (Umoja 2013, 66). Clearly, both Dahmer and the young activists understood the importance and impact of guns in undermining white supremacist violence. And, through the countless other stories and examples recounted by both Cobb and Umoja, it becomes rather difficult to discount the efficacy of armed self-defense in these communities.

Though Umoja recognizes the tradition of armed self-defense as drawing on southern Black folk culture, on both the overt resistance of the “Bad Negro” and the deceptive resistance of “Bruh Rabbit” (2013, 21-26), the contents of his text, alone, would largely suggest that the emergence of organized armed resistance occurred in the mid-twentieth century. And yet, there exist well researched and recorded examples of both organic and organized armed resistance as early as 1521 (Stone 2013). As Cobb reflects:

Armed self-defense (or, to use a term preferred by some, 'armed resistance') as a part of black struggle began not in the 1960s with angry 'militant' and 'radical' young Afro-Americans, but in the earliest years of the United States as one of the African people's responses to oppression. This tradition, which culminates with the civil rights struggles and achievements of the mid-1960s, cannot be understood independently or outside its broader historical context. In every decade of the nation's history, brave and determined black men and women picked up guns to defend themselves and their communities (2016, 1-2).

I argue that one of the central functions of armed resistance in the African American tradition, and that which helps explain both its enduring use and its apparent efficacy, is its ability to create and defend alternative spaces—to limit the immediate threat of white violence, and therefore undermine the central lynchpin of white supremacy as a whole. By examining another historical phenomenon that shares many characteristics and functions with the haven communities of 1960s Mississippi, and that was similarly facilitated by the willingness of its members to deploy tactics of armed resistance in defense of Black life and liberty, I might better elucidate this argument, and also begin to discern from the thread of history a unique tradition of Black armed resistance.

Maroon Communities

Maroon communities, or communities of runaway slaves that established free settlements in secluded and geographically-arduous areas such as swamps and mountainsides, lend themselves to a rich and revealing comparison with haven communities. For though both maroon and haven communities varied greatly in their size, duration, objectives, and distinct cultures and characteristics, as well as in the social and cultural context within which they emerged, they share a number of notable similarities. First, both types of communities arose in direct response to white violence, or to the threat of white violence, and both were organized around the

principal goal of increasing the safety—and subsequently the freedom—of their members. Second, both maroon and haven communities emerge primarily in the rural setting, due to its relative geographic latitude as well as the tendency to spawn more untamed and virulent forms of white violence. And lastly, in both communities, the willingness to take up arms was not only common, but often characteristic, and frequently necessary for the community's survival. It is also important to note that both maroon and haven communities contributed directly to an otherwise-unlikely or impossible accumulation of resources, and that both are documented as playing pivotal roles in the development of broader organized resistance movements. Before addressing these final two points, however, it will be useful to first discuss the phenomenon of maroon communities in greater depth and detail, and to explore the three main points of parallel between maroons and havens as outlined above.

In the broader scholarly conversation surrounding maroon communities, there exists a tendency to focus on Latin America and the Caribbean, with less sustained attention given to the historical phenomenon as it occurred in the geographical bounds of the present-day United States. This scholarly bias is not entirely unfounded, as both the geography of these regions as well as their distinct models of slavery more easily gave way to the formation of maroons. Of course, Haiti stands as the most notable and consequential legacy of marronage, as maroon communities were at the center of the violent—and successful—revolution that won the island its independence (Dubois 2005). However, there are numerous examples (Bodek and Kelley 2020; Hall 1992) of marronage within the context of the U.S. as well, and their close examination reveals a great deal about not only the historical role and tradition of Black armed resistance, but also its tendency to precede and prefigure subsequent revolts and resistance campaigns of even greater size and significance.

In her seminal text *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Gwendolyn Hall (1992) constructs a comprehensive and compelling telling of the American origin story, and of the central and determinative role that enslaved Africans—and their descendants—played in shaping the culture, infrastructure, and economy of the American colonies. Among the many ways that Hall seeks to return power and agency to these early generations of bondpeople, she masterfully illuminates how, amidst the immense precarity and social instability of colonial Louisiana, where class distinctions often proved more material than racial ones, slaves leveraged and exploited their various positions and abilities to secure freedom for themselves and their loved ones.

One form of resistance, which Hall suggests to have been particularly injurious to slave owners in and around colonial New Orleans (Hall 1992, 142), was the common practice of runaway slaves. Often citing excessive violence and punishment, material deprivation, and physical exploitation as the reason for their fleeing (Hall 1992, 142), slaves would take matters into their own hands by fleeing from their respective plantations and establishing settlements in the surrounding cypress swamps. In fact, the practice was so common that it even became embedded in the structure and formation of the slave family, with families often fleeing as whole units, and sometimes as “a ritual of courtship” (Hall 1992, 145). Once escaped, “runaway slaves hid out for weeks, months, and even years on or behind their masters’ estates without being detected or apprehended” (Hall 1992, 203). But the formation of maroon communities in the swamps of Louisiana was not an introverted endeavor, nor was it achieved through quiet or peaceful means exclusively. Rather, marronage often became a source of resistance that threatened entire communities of plantation owners, and that was established and sustained

through both calculated (most often in the form of killing nearby livestock for sustenance) and defensive violence. Speaking to both of these points directly, Hall writes:

Although the maroons were denounced as brigands and murderers, their violence was almost entirely defensive. The danger they posed to the colony was more profound. They surrounded the plantations. Slaves remaining with their masters were in constant contact with them. Slaves would leave, or threaten to leave, if their masters or overseers tried to impose discipline on them. They did not have far to go, and they found old, familiar faces: family and friends who preceded them...The runaways left in families, and there were substantial numbers of women and children among them. They did not distance themselves from the plantations and towns; they surrounded them (1992, 203).

Other scholars have identified similar structures and dynamics in other regions of the South as well.

In “‘Mingled Fear and Ferocity’: A Glimpse into the Maroon Communities of the Great Dismal Swamp,” historian J. Brent Morris (2020) similarly emphasizes the profound influence and impact that maroon communities often had on the structures and dynamics of southern slave societies, focusing his exploration on the Great Dismal Swamp specifically. Morris reflects how “each obstacle that kept whites comfortably outside the swamp and frustrated their attempts to subdue it served to protect those who sought their freedom in the swamp’s depths,” and that “once maroons had established themselves in the swamp, the nearby plantation country was a convenient target for plunder, resistance, and liberation of brothers and sisters still in bonds” (2020, 6). Morris also suggests that independent maroon settlements within the Great Dismal Swamp often had networks of communication and collaboration amongst each other, which they not only used to raid plantations for stock, but also to provide guerilla support for Union troops during the Civil War (2020, 19) And, he makes clear the consistent role of arms in marronage, writing that “military reports of raids from the swamp frequently cite firearms, swords, knives, and pikes within the possession of maroons” (Morris 2020, 11). Thus, the emergence of haven

communities in the mid-twentieth century, and the essential role that armed self-defense had in forming them, is clearly building upon a much longer history and tradition of Black armed resistance—a tradition that presented itself in the maroons of Louisiana, Virginia, and North Carolina, again in the havens of Mississippi, and in countless other temporal and geographic spaces in between. In each case, enslaved Africans and Afro-Americans took up arms to create alternative spaces, to escape the threat of white violence and increase safety for themselves and their loved ones, and in the process, they undermined the system of white supremacy in profound ways. However, both Hall and Morris also highlight another important role of maroon communities, one that very much aligns with the role of haven communities in the 1960s, and that is their ability to generate and promote further resistance.

From the Haven Flows: The Precursor to Organized Resistance

Though both haven and maroon communities have immense value in and of themselves, as spaces in which the Black mind and body are able to find a degree of freedom and safety rarely afforded in white spaces, they are also significant in their ability to spawn and fortify other, successive, forms of resistance. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, which represents but a brief moment in the overlong struggle for Black liberation, the importance of armed resistance cannot be overlooked. As Umoja argues in the beginning pages of his text, “armed resistance was critical to the efficacy of the southern freedom struggle and the dismantling of segregation and Black disenfranchisement,” and “without armed resistance, primarily organized by local people, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists would not have been able to organize in Mississippi”

(2013, 2). By directly challenging—and often overcoming successfully—the immediate threat of white violence, the use of armed resistance by everyday Black people throughout the South was able to undermine the central pillar on which white supremacy rests, and in doing so, it created new spaces from which Civil Rights activists and organizations could launch organized and concerted resistance campaigns. Additionally, those who were prepared and willing to take up arms in pursuit of racial justice were often, themselves, strong proponents of nonviolent methods, further rejecting the notion that Black armed resistance stood at odds with the broader organized movement. Capturing the unique relationship between armed self-defense and strategic nonviolence, Cobb writes: “Simply put, because nonviolence worked so well as a tactic for effecting change and was demonstrably improving their lives, some black people chose to use weapons to defend the nonviolent Freedom Movement” (2016, 2). However, if we are to truly grasp the historical significance of Black armed resistance, then we must not limit our analysis only to those instances in which it worked to promote nonviolent resistance campaigns. Rather, we must also consider the ways in which armed resistance has functioned to promote violent resistance campaigns—and we must be willing to grapple with the efficacy and legitimacy of those campaigns as well.

Returning now to the discussion of maroon communities, it becomes clear that the creation of alternative spaces does not inherently favor the promotion of nonviolent resistance campaigns, as was commonly seen in the Civil Rights Movement. As Hall reveals in the context of colonial Louisiana, and Morris in the context of antebellum Virginia and North Carolina, maroon communities, though often favoring discrete forms of subversion, did engage in more violent forms of resistance as well—both in the way of defensive violence, but also through more calculated and aggressive modes of resistance. In fact, one of the most noteworthy and impactful

roles of maroon communities, besides the immediate threat they posed to the system of slavery, was their utility and effectiveness in harboring nascent slave revolts and rebellions. And though Haiti may be the only slave revolt to have achieved ultimate success, resulting in the demise of slavery and the island's securing its independence, countless other slave revolts succeeded in undermining, albeit only temporarily, white supremacy and the institution of slavery—and maroon communities often played an essential role. As Morris writes:

Into the first years of the nineteenth century, maroon raids originating from the Dismal Swamp very likely coordinated with larger insurrection attempts, including the Easter Rebellion, or Sancho's Rebellion, of 1801–1802.²¹ Maroons continued their raids from the swamp through the 1820s, and whites feared that the swamp was becoming a point of assembly for nearby slaves, a base and goal for concerted slave insurrection in the upper South (2020, 7).

In fact, the relationship between maroons and potential slave revolts was so well-known that some initial reports of the Nat Turner rebellion suggested it was orchestrated by Dismal Swamp maroons; and “although this was not the case, fugitives from the defeated insurrection and its aftermath did flee to the Dismal Swamp, and some succeeded in their escape to the maroons” (Morris 2020, 7).

Beyond acknowledging the positive relationship between the creation of alternative spaces and the development of organized resistance campaigns, violent and nonviolent, it is also important to more critically reflect on the *why*. Why do these spaces promote further resistance, and how might they do so in a way distinct from other communities and organizing spaces? In examining examples of both haven communities and maroons, it becomes clear that their importance—and their propensity to foster organized resistance campaigns—can largely be explained by their ability to directly prevent, challenge, and at times rival white violence, and

therefore undermine the central lynchpin of white supremacy. However, the value and power of these alternative spaces also extends beyond their limiting physical violence.

Acquiring, Protecting, and Mobilizing Resources

In the case of both the havens of Mississippi and the maroons of Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia, it is made clear within the existing scholarship that the ability to acquire, protect, and mobilize resources plays a fundamental role in the influence and impact of these alternative spaces. This dynamic is especially visible in the context of maroon communities, as the system of slavery was largely built and dependent upon the deprivation of the enslaved. Thus, fleeing to and/or establishing a maroon settlement was one of few ways that bondpeople could overcome the perpetual deprivation under which they were held. Of course, not all slaves had the option to escape to marronage, but those who did were often able to acquire resources that were largely unavailable within the confines of the plantation. For example, Hall provides insight into how maroon communities in the cypress swamps of New Orleans were able to leverage their freedom and mobility for material gain, to the point of even creating robust production economies, writing:

Although some of the maroons continued to raid plantations and kill cattle, there was a move toward production and trade for economic survival. They cultivated corn, squash, and rice and gathered and ground herbs for food. They made baskets, sifters, and other articles woven from willow and reeds. They carved indigo vats and troughs from cypress wood. And...they gathered berries, dwarf palmetto roots, and sassafras, trapped birds, hunted and fished, and went to New Orleans to trade and to gamble (Hall 1992, 203).

In addition to highlighting the ecological knowledge and ingenuity that allowed bondpeople to adapt to their surroundings, and that, in many ways, allowed the fledgling colonies to endure the

unforeseen hardships of the New World,² Hall also illuminates the value and importance of space—and land, specifically—in overcoming the material deprivation of slavery.

Access to land not only meant the ability to grow life-sustaining food crops, which had profound cultural and material implications for the enslaved, but also the ability to create internal economies of trade. In fact, land access becomes especially pressing in the wake of slavery, when many freed Black are excluded from broader markets due to both racial discrimination and a lack of monetary capital, and has continued to be of great concern and consequence for African Americans till this day—especially those who remain entrenched in the agrarian tradition of the South. It should come as no surprise, then, that the haven communities of the 1960s were primarily situated on and around Black-owned farmland, as land access and ownership offered an essential degree of self-sufficiency and insulation from whites. In fact, many vital and foundational Black institutions, from schools and churches to entire Freedom Colonies (also known as freedmen’s towns), have their origins rooted in Black-controlled land—whether controlled by force, or by official transaction. Thus, the creation of alternative spaces has often underlain the creation of alternative institutions, which have been instrumental in cultivating both Black resistance and other means of cultural and material development. It should also come as no surprise, then, that Black landowners have consistently been the target of white terrorism, as these land-owning individuals pose a threat to the resource monopolization on which white supremacy has historically depended. The relationship between white supremacy and land access, as well as the relationship between land access and wealth, cannot be overlooked or forgotten within the historical context of the United States. In fact, a land-based lens proves

² One of the most compelling points of *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (1992) is Hall’s discussion surrounding embodied African knowledge, and the fact that bondpeople’s ecological wisdom and experience with rice cultivation are largely responsible for the survival of the early colonies.

incredibly telling not only in tracing and understanding the histories of racial violence and subjugation, but also in accounting for the immense wealth and power disparities that persist still today.

It is appropriate and important here to also acknowledge the emotional, psychological, and spiritual harm that white violence imposes on the Black mind and body, and to appreciate the value of alternative spaces—and consequently the armed resistance through which many of these spaces were formed—in alleviating these harms. For not only have alternative spaces such as maroons and havens proven themselves capable of limiting the threat of white violence, which inherently reduces the psychological harm endured under white supremacy, but they have also proven invaluable in another critical way: their ability to foster and protect Black family and community. Just as these spaces contribute to the accumulation of material resources, they also facilitate and nourish the cultural and spiritual resources inherent to Black family-building and community-making—both of which have been directly and deliberately disrupted through white violence and the construction of white supremacy.

The Politics of Violence: Black Fear, White Fear

According to Umoja, central to the importance and success of armed resistance within the Black Freedom Movement was its ability to overcome Black fear (2013, 2); a fear that had been forcibly ingrained in the Black psyche through centuries of brutal violence and incessant white terror, and that served to pacify the Black community out of fear of reprisal. Black armed resistance challenged this fear, refused to seek in inaction the fictitious promise of safety, and in doing so, empowered individual activists and communities of otherwise-ordinary Black people to pursue their freedom and justice with pride and militance. The efficacy of Black armed

resistance, however, cannot be explained in terms of Black fear alone. Rather, armed resistance also mobilized white fear in a distinct and decided way, which, in many instances, functionally and effectively deterred white violence. Recalling the importance of armed self-defense in protecting Black activists and institutions, John R. “Hunter Bear” Salter, an Afro-Indigenous professor at Tougaloo Southern Christian College in the 1960s who routinely bore arms, is remembered saying, “We guarded our campus—faculty and students together... We let this be known. The racist attacks slackened considerably. Night-riders are cowardly people—in any time and place—and they take advantage of fear and weakness” (Cobb 2016, 6). This sentiment is not unique to Salter, as many activists and scholars have recalled tales of Black armed self-defense successfully ending white terror at the hand of local vigilantes and white supremacists.

Thus, armed resistance exposes an important duality in the mechanisms of white fear, and one that will be necessary to understand and contend with in contemporary and future organizing. And it is this dynamic of fear, I argue, that represents one of the important distinctions, in terms of function, between armed resistance and civil resistance. Armed resistance, in contrast to civil resistance, imposes a real and immediate cost for white violence. For while nonviolent action, at its most disruptive, does seek to levy costs on the oppressive systems and regimes, often in the form of noncompliance and noncooperation (e.g., workers strikes, boycotts, etc.), it largely relies upon undermining the perceived morality and legitimacy of the oppressor. In some circumstances, such as those campaigns that seek the removal of an oppressive political regime or dictator, these nonviolent methods might be sufficient in creating widespread dissensus, thus creating the opportunity for a new regime to enter the political matrix. However, hegemonic forces such as white supremacy do not operate or behave in the same manner as corrupt regimes, as they are not expressed exclusively—or even primarily—

through state actors. Therefore, undermining the legitimacy of the state does not seriously threaten the system of white supremacy, though it certainly does compromise aspects of it, as non-state actors remain free to continue acting in oppressive and violent ways. In fact, civil resistance has often precipitated increased racial violence and terror within the United States, as highly visible forms of Black resistance tend to trigger the corrective response mechanisms of white violence that seek to reassert and uphold the system of white supremacy.

To effectively challenge white supremacy, then, the potential cost of white repressive violence (death or harm from Black self-defense) must be more imposing than the perceived cost of Black advancement itself. As Cobb writes, reflecting on the apparent efficacy of armed self-defense,

remarkably few shootouts of any kind involved organized groups, and those that did take place did not last long. Fear explains this fact. Few if any white terrorists were prepared to die for the cause of white supremacy; bullets, after all, do not fall into any racial category and are indiscriminately lethal... in place after place, a few rounds fired into the air were enough to cause terrorists to flee (2016, 241).

Armed resistance and armed self-defense leverage the very real fear of death and bodily harm that all people innately possess, thus imposing a price for white violence that trumps the perceived price of Black social and political advancement. In other words, white fear is made to duel itself, and the more primal fear of harm often emerges victorious. This dynamic of fear has been most successfully leveraged in opposition to extralegal white supremacist actors such as Klansmen and nightriders, though it has certainly proven capable of deterring violence from state actors as well.

Conclusion

The tradition of Black armed resistance must be examined and appreciated not only because of its historical relevance and consequence, but also because it offers very real and invaluable insights regarding the functions of white supremacy, white violence, and Black resistance that persist still today. By limiting the immediate threat of white violence, whether through escape and seclusion, direct confrontation, or a combination of the two, armed resistance has demonstrated profound importance and success in its ability to create new and alternative spaces—be that physical, psychological, or cultural. From these new spaces, from the swamps of New Orleans and the farmlands of Mississippi, communities of bold and ingenious Africans and African Americans have launched forceful rebellions and resistance campaigns in pursuit of their individual and collective freedoms.

While it is necessary and important to analyze the relationship between Black armed resistance and white violence, and to identify the ways in which armed resistance has been used to create and defend new spaces, to make accessible invaluable resources, and to promote future and further resistance, it is important that we don't understand Black armed resistance in response and relation to white violence exclusively. For even though the tradition of Black armed resistance is unavoidably intertwined with the history and preservation of white supremacy, it is also a reflection of the dreams, desires, and future visions of Black people themselves. Thus, it is imperative that we draw from these histories of resistance not just their factual and material function, but their cultural and ideological one as well—that we search for and honor the ways in which Black communities themselves have understood and experienced their own actions, and how these resistance events have shaped notions of Black freedom, agency, and empowerment.

CHAPTER THREE

The Black Tradition of Arms: Empowerment and the Search for Inclusion

Introduction

What is Afrocentrism? And what does it mean for someone, or *something*, to be Afrocentric? Before continuing on with the discussion of Black armed resistance, it is important to first address these questions, and to consider the meaning and significance of *Afrocentrism* (also referred to as Afrocentricity). For though I do not attempt or claim to employ an Afrocentric lens, I have drawn from aspects of its theoretical underpinnings—especially in my efforts to center and celebrate Black subjectivity.

Though Afrocentrism, as an idea and practice, existed long before its contemporary study and academic theorization, the term became popular in the latter half of the twentieth century—inspired by the cultural and intellectual legacies of the Black Freedom Movement and the resurgence of Pan-Africanism. Among this first generation of Afrocentric theorists is Molefi Kete Asante, who is often attributed with coining the term in his text *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, which he published in 1980. Asante has since solidified himself as a foremost thinker and theorist of Afrocentrism, especially with his 1987 publication of *The Afrocentric Idea*. Reflecting on his work and position as an Afrocentric scholar, Asante writes:

My objective has always been to present a critique that propounds a cultural theory of society by the very act of criticism. In other words, to provide a radical assessment of a given reality is to create, among other things, another reality. Furthermore, any criticism of society is, definitionally, a criticism of the ruling ideology of that society. I have the insight that comes from having been born black in the United States. That fact puts me in a critical mood within the intellectual and social milieu I share with Eurocentricists. As the critic, I am always seeking to create a new world, to find an escape, to liberate those who see only part of reality... The crystallization of this critical perspective I have named

Afrocentricity, which means, literally, placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior (1998, 2).

While Asante is far from the only scholar to theorize around the idea of Afrocentrism or Afrocentricity—and, in fact, the term has been interpreted and deployed in a range of competing, contested, and controversial ways—I believe that he captures three foundational and compelling aspects of what it might mean, and look like, to be Afrocentric: 1) the centering of African and Afro Diasporic beliefs and ideals, which in turn; 2) presents and proposes a critique of the ruling or dominant ideology, which often reflects a Eurocentric perspective, in order to; 3) create and imagine an alternative reality moving forward. It is important to note that, by doing the first of these three steps, we necessarily—and almost automatically—begin the remaining two processes as well. In other words, the Afrocentric always begins with a (re)centering of the Black subject and perspective, and with embracing and celebrating the agency and humanity so often withheld from us as individuals and communities. As Asante writes, his “aim in writing *The Afrocentric Idea* was to inject the agency of Africans into the equation of social and political transformation” (1998, 20). Thus, while I do not attempt to employ an Afrocentric lens in this thesis, I do aspire to center and explore Black subjectivity and its diverse historical dimensions, and I believe that Asante provides a valuable framework for how this might be achieved.

By examining the ways in which African American communities themselves have recounted, remembered, and reflected on the tradition of armed resistance, we might better understand the meaning and effect it has had within the everyday lives, experiences, and *minds* of Black people themselves—better understand its cultural and ideological import and impact. Beyond simply analyzing its utility and efficacy as a means of resistance against white supremacy and white violence, then, we might also consider the ways that armed resistance has informed, transformed, and inspired notions of Black agency, community, and empowerment.

And thus, we might also uncover alternative notions and metrics of movement success, which is of particular relevance to African American and Afro-descendent people everywhere, whose struggle for freedom and justice has waged on for centuries—and will likely wage on for generations more. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to explore how Black folks themselves have expressed their own notions and ideals of freedom, empowerment, and citizenship, and how, in understanding these aspirational impulses that have guided and informed the Black tradition of arms, we might also better understand the perils facing Black life—and resistance—today.

Beyond White Violence: Transcending the Boundaries of Black Fear

One of the central arguments put forth by Umoja in *We Will Shoot Back*, and that which underlies the text's central assertion that "armed resistance was critical to the efficacy of the southern freedom struggle and the dismantling of segregation and Black disenfranchisement" (Umoja 2013, 2), is that armed resistance allowed southern Black communities to overcome the fear and intimidation on which white supremacy depended. Umoja writes, "armed self-defense had been a major tool of survival in allowing some Black southern communities to maintain their integrity and existence in the face of White supremacist terror," and that "by 1965, armed resistance, particularly self-defense, was a significant factor in the effort made by the sons and daughters of enslaved Africans to overturn fear and intimidation and develop different political and social relationships between Black and White Mississippians" (Umoja 2). In other words, armed resistance allowed these communities to challenge the threat of white violence and terror, refusing to be forced into fearful passivity, which therefore created new spaces and opportunities for Black organizing and political mobilization. Whereas I have pointed to the creation of

alternative spaces as a key function of armed resistance within African American communities, Umoja suggests that these spaces were made possible because armed resistance allowed Black communities in the rural South to overcome their fear and intimidation. Thus, Umoja introduces and centers within this conversation the psychological value of Black armed resistance.

Within the field of civil resistance studies, various scholars have emphasized the importance of overcoming fear to building successful social movements and resistance campaigns. For example, Sharp writes that “a prerequisite of nonviolent struggle is to cast off or to control fear of acting independently and of the potential sufferings” (2005, 364). Of course, this same theory also suggests that strategic nonviolence is typically more effective at overcoming fear and promoting movement participation than armed resistance, as it poses fewer barriers to participation and often elicits less violent repression—though the opposite, one could argue, seems to have been true in many southern Black communities. Still, mapped onto the history of armed resistance in African American communities, as told by Umoja, Cobb, and others, this framework allows us to better understand the psychological import that armed self-defense had within these communities, as white supremacy has always depended on the ability to inculcate Black fear through white violence. Thus, Umoja’s emphasis on the psychological aspects of white violence and Black resistance are incredibly important, and help to explain why armed resistance proved so invaluable within the southern freedom struggle. And yet, this framework still views and makes sense of Black agency and political organizing in relation to white violence—still positions Blackness in resistance to whiteness. But what if we were to understand this history of Black organizing not only as resisting the violent forces of white supremacy, but also as envisioning and pursuing an alternative future? What if we ask ourselves not what Hartman Turnbow or Vernon Dahmer were running from, but rather what they were

running towards? The remainder of this chapter will seek to employ this lens, and to uncover from these stories of resistance the forgotten hopes and dreams of the Black imagination.

The Black Militia: Freedom, Citizenship, and Masculinity

In order to fully grasp the cultural and ideological import—and origins—of armed resistance within African American communities, particularly as it emerged in the context of the twentieth century Black Freedom Movement, it is important to first acknowledge the historical connection between Black military service and the quest for liberation. For not only does this history allow us to understand the distinct role of Black veterans as catalysts for political organizing, but it might also inform how we interpret these later resistance events as expressions of the Black imagination—as articulations of empowerment, freedom, and citizenship. One moment in which this relationship between military service and notions of freedom can be seen most clearly is in the years during and following the Civil War.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, with the promise of a more inclusive freedom bringing both hope and dismay to the American South, millions of formerly enslaved African Americans searched for ways to make meaning of their newfound freedom—sought to gain access to the safeties and liberties of American citizenship. And yet, ensnared in the social and economic turmoil of the postbellum South, and lacking the capital and resources to make material meaning of their newfound freedom, many of these individuals found themselves sowing and reaping the same fields that had confined and terrorized them under slavery—only now they worked these familiar lands as sharecroppers. At the same time that freedmen were searching for ways to make meaning of their freedom, hoping to gain access to the promises of Reconstruction, the nation as a whole was also in a moment of profound tension and uncertainty. Southern states and their

supporters sought to preserve their endangered way of life, which meant exploiting Black bodies and preserving their source of unfree labor, while Union forces and the newly-formed radical Republican Party hoped to make good on their promises of racial inclusion and democratic governance. And while the hopes and promises of Reconstruction were ultimately defeated by waves of immense white supremacist violence and terror in the South, and ill-disguised complicity in the North, this did not prevent Black Americans from pursuing their own visions of a just and inclusive republic.

In his text *Show Thyself A Man: Georgia State Troops, Colored, 1865-1905*, Gregory Mixon (2016) explores the ways in which freedmen in postbellum Georgia sought to make meaning of their newfound freedom, specifically through their active involvement and service in militias. In the wake of the Civil War, and amidst the volatile social and economic conditions that defined the Reconstruction Era, militias offered Black Americans a way to both stake their claim to citizenship, and defend themselves against the looming threats of white supremacist terror. Summarizing what he views as the three primary functions of Black militia service during the nineteenth century, Mixon writes:

Throughout the Americas, black militiamen used sustained militia service as a vehicle that would, first, secure them recognized citizenship and a more stable place in society; second, provide them with access to respectability and status within white-controlled institutional structures; and third, help black men realize their definitions of manhood, through military service to the state and to their race, with an accompanying feeling of belonging as a member of the colony or new nation-state (2016, 22).

Mixon's analysis and discussion of Black militiamen is instructive, as it allows us to better understand the relationship between Black military service and the pursuit of unrestricted citizenship—a relationship that, I'll argue, can be seen at play within the other forms of armed resistance discussed thus far. And, in considering the ways in which this relationship has

changed over time, we might also come to understand not only the historical evolution of the so-called “Black tradition of arms,” but also its present-day implications and complexities.

Importantly, Mixon also invites us to consider the gendered aspect of military service and armed self-defense, which has profound relevance and significance to both historical and contemporary expressions of Black resistance.

Before examining the specifics of Mixon’s argument, however, it is important to recognize that the relationship between armed service and notions of Black citizenship predates the postbellum era, as thousands of free and enslaved Blacks took up arms during both the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, in hopes of securing their freedom. For example, in his text *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America*, Douglas R. Egerton constructs a powerful story of Black influence and political activity, emphasizing the ways in which, throughout the Revolutionary period, “blacks waged their own struggle for independence” (Egerton 2008, 11). In addition to articulating their own demands and ideals of freedom, often quick to recognize the inconsistency between the emerging republican ideals and their own enslavement (Egerton 2008, 49-50), these Black revolutionaries also pursued their freedom in more forceful ways: thousands of slaves, recognizing a unique opportunity, joined British troops in order to seize their promised freedom (Egerton 2008, 200-01). In fact, the history of Black military service begins in the earliest moments of Western colonial expansion, from anti-pirate defense in seventeenth century Mexico (Mixon 2016, 12) to anti-slavery resistance in early-nineteenth century Cuba (Mixon 2016, 15-16); as Mixon suggests, “Black militiamen serving in wars in defense of Western European colonial possessions and in civil wars for independence in the Americas offered their military service in exchange for freedom and the recognition of their status as citizens within a newly emergent nation-state or as subjects of colonial imperial power”

(2016, 11). In the case of the United States, informal Black militias were often formed—reluctantly—to support white soldiers in times of need, and independent Black militias began to emerge in northern states by 1848 “in response to ‘a combination of legal exclusion, the need for self-defence, and the expansion of American slavery’” (Mixon 2016, 34-35). And while these Black soldiers and militiamen were often denied their promised freedom and political inclusion, “their actions shaped the societies they sought to serve” (Mixon 2016, 11).

Of course, the draw of military service for Black Americans only increased during the Civil War, as the prospect of Black liberation hung in the balance of the war’s outcome in more certain terms. As Mixon writes, “Black men therefore fought to end slavery and inequality in the United States just as their Western Hemisphere counterparts has done during the nineteenth century,” which “empowered black Americans to seek a more intimate role in politics, institution and community building, and community leadership” (Mixon 2016, 35). And while these histories of militia- and military service certainly reflect the self-preservative and opportunistic ingenuity with which Black Americans have pursued their individual and collective freedoms, they also reveal a deeper current of optimism and constructive patriotism that flows beneath the surface of Black resilience and political consciousness.

Mixon also makes apparent the fact that gender influenced how freed Blacks acted upon and interpreted their freedom—both by determining their access to social and political opportunities, and by shaping their social and ideological attitudes. Thus, because Black women were excluded from militia service, and because the prevailing patriarchal structures largely functioned irrespective of race, militias and other public service spaces became an arena through which Black *men* were able to envision and enact the meaning of social and political freedom. And while it is important to recognize the harm that such notions and expressions of masculinity

have had within Black communities, especially as they victimize and paternalize Black women, it is also important to appreciate the ways in which Black masculinity has been persistently undermined and attacked under white supremacy. Thus, militias created a space where Black men could formulate new frameworks of manhood and masculinity, in which they could protect their loved ones and communities from the pain of white violence while also engaging in institutional processes of shaping broader sociopolitical discourse and dynamics—both things that were limited under the conditions of slavery. Acknowledging the gendered nature of (Black) military service, historically and continuing still today, is essential to accurately assessing the meaning and influence of armed resistance within African American communities, as it has shaped not only who has been able to engage in specific forms of resistance, but also whose voices are privileged in recounting and documenting these historical moments.

Still, Mixon's examination of Black militias in postbellum Georgia, supported by the writing of scholars like Egerton (2008), illuminates an important impulse that has guided the Black tradition of arms, and that is the desire to realize more inclusive and democratic notions of nationhood and citizenship. Thus, even in state-sponsored militias, where Black militiamen organized in defense of their nation rather than their own communities, the message was largely the same: Black Americans fully intended to lay claim to their newfound citizenship, and to participate in the social and institutional roles necessary to create a safer, more just and inclusive world for themselves, their loved ones, and their communities. In this way, Black militia- and military service can also be understood as a form of armed resistance. For whether an act of self-defense or a display of patriotism, the Black tradition of arms has always been about sociopolitical mobilization and empowerment—about staking one's claim to the freedoms and securities promised to them as citizens of the United States. Thus, the very practice of Black

armed resistance undermines white supremacy even when it does not strictly or directly oppose white violence, as it challenges the exclusive notions of freedom, safety, and citizenship around which the nation has been constructed, as well as the right to pursue these ideals with vehemence and force. In fact, the Black tradition of arms symbolizes a profound source of empowerment regardless of whether or not the weapons are ever wielded defensively, as the empowerment stems from simply knowing that one has the ability to protect themselves and their loved ones *should they need to*—a basic right so often absent under the violent conditions of slavery.

However, the story of Black militias is important not only because it illuminates the ideological and aspirational ideals that drew so many African American men to armed military service, but also because it allows us to better understand the evolution of the Black tradition of arms—to trace the ways in which the forces of segregation and white violence, augmented by broader shifts in national and international politics, pushed Black Americans to pursue their right to uninhibited citizenship through increasingly forceful and grassroots channels.

In addition to recounting the changing dynamics of post-Civil War militias, specifically the emergence of Black militias as a way for freedmen to lay claim to the promises of citizenship, Mixon also details the evolution—and eventual discontinuation—that the postbellum militia model underwent as the turn of the century neared. Due to discriminatory practices in the funding and authorizing structures of militias, and worsened by a growing segregationist will throughout the South, Black militias struggled to maintain equal footing with their white counterparts (Mixon 2016, 267-68). And though Black militiamen remained committed to the project, and remained firmly established as keepers of their communities and advocates for Black empowerment, they would soon find out, much like their Revolutionary-era predecessors, that

the rights to citizenship would not be so fairly granted—a fact that, Mixon suggests, became painfully clear with the dawn of the Spanish-American War. He writes,

The war of 1898 provided a very public moment for black and white people to establish their identity and self-esteem. Military service provided a way to do both. Fighting, at the risk of dying, for your country was the ultimate avenue to achieve citizenship with all its rights and privileges. Combat service would also allow black men to ‘achieve the full height of manhood,’ thereby giving the race an unambiguous standing as true citizens of the nation... In that context, participation as a citizen in the defense of the nation should result in racism’s eradication. War against the Spanish in Cuba provided blacks in general but African American men specifically with the chance to prove their patriotism, demonstrate their military acumen, and gain respect for an entire people. It was for these reasons that... African Americans across the United States put so much energy into trying to be a part of the war in Cuba (Mixon 2016, 281-82).

Despite these hopes, however, Black militiamen were largely barred from foreign military service, and excluded from the validating and valorizing capacities promised to American soldiers. Further, the dawn of the 20th century brought profound changes to the structure of the U.S. military as a whole, including the creation of the National Guard, which resulted in the disbandment of nearly all the surviving Black militias (Mixon 2016, 292-950). Thus, the hope of wartime racial progress “was lost as African Americans watched their citizenship disappear in the wake of American imperial expansion abroad and the rise and legalization of Jim Crow segregation at home while white racial superiority engulfed both the foreign and domestic spheres” (Mixon 2016, 286). Mixon’s recognition of this social and political moment as important to the story of Black armed service is exact, as the moment not only reflects the dashing hopes and dreams of generations of African Americans, but also actuates the course of Black political organizing in the century to come.

Disillusionment: The Ambivalent Legacy of Black Military Service

Despite the pushback Black militiamen faced during their attempts to join the U.S. armed forces in the late-nineteenth century, and despite the increasingly hostile attitudes toward Black soldiers that pervaded broader national discourse, Black military service would see exponential growth in the first half of the twentieth century—and with this growth came an increase in the willingness and ability of Black individuals and communities to defend themselves. Building on a legacy of skillful and valiant military service that predated the nation itself, and that included every major war and armed conflict since and including the American Revolution, African Americans, and African American men in particular, continued to demonstrate a deep commitment to both their own empowerment and enfranchisement, and the growth and success of the nation as a whole. And yet, the relationship between military service and the quest for Black liberation underwent profound transformations between the nineteenth and twentieth century, and Black Americans began articulating these changes with the advent of World War I.

The First World War was an incredibly transformative moment in the shaping of Black identity, culture, community, and political ideology, and it laid the groundwork for the decades of social and political organizing that followed. For despite both tacit and explicit attempts to bar Black participation, nearly 400,000 African American men served in the First World War—practically doubling the number of those who had served in the Civil War (Salter 2019, 51, 71). Once again, driven by the desire to establish themselves as engaged and productive members of the growing nation, and to disprove the pernicious mythologies cast upon them by their white counterparts, Black politicians, intellectuals, and soldiers alike expressed and affirmed the unassailable relationship between military service and the right to citizenship. Perhaps most notable among these advocates for Black military service was W.E.B. Du Bois, who, despite

initially condemning the war as a form of violent imperial conquest and expansion, bought into its potential to promote social and political mobility for Black Americans—which he made publicly known in various editorials published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, which Du Bois himself had created only years earlier (Williams 2018). In addition to its public proponents, World War I also engaged a broader portion of the Black community. Whereas previous wars had largely excluded female involvement, Black women found ways to contribute to the wartime efforts as well, including training and volunteering as nurses and aiding in transporting troops within the States (Budreau 2019, 60).

History would, however, repeat itself. For despite the wartime sacrifices made by so many Black Americans, both at home and abroad, the war did not become the watershed moment for racial equality and Black citizenship that many had hoped it would. Instead, it continued and deepened the forces of segregation, repaying patriotism with injury and insult, and ushered in an era of white supremacist violence mirroring the Redemption³ period four decades earlier.

The years leading up to and during World War I were marked by extreme white supremacist violence, including extensive lynching campaigns and countless anti-black race riots that pillaged Black communities and left thousands dead (Morrow, Jr. 2019, 99). While many Black Americans hoped that their service and sacrifice in the war would begin to alleviate these racial tensions, the opposite proved to be true. Fearing that Black veterans would empower and encourage their communities to resist oppression, and responding to the dramatic increase in Black employment opportunities that resulted from wartime labor shortages, white Americans launched a brutal and extensive assault against Black life—which, having worsened throughout

³ In his book *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*, Nicholas Lemann (2006) captures the incomprehensible white supremacist violence that unfolded throughout the South following the defeat of Reconstruction, during a period known as the “Redemption” that began in the 1870s and continued into the first decades of the twentieth century—though his text focuses specifically on events in Mississippi and Louisiana between 1873 and 1875.

the war, came to a head in the Red Summer of 1919. Whereas previous anti-Black violence campaigns had often been organized and orchestrated by white supremacist terror groups and organizations, many of these attacks were carried out by mobs of ordinary white civilians and veterans, determined to restore order and maintain the structures of white supremacy. Perhaps the most horrific of these events transpired in Elaine, Arkansas, where five hundred Army soldiers descended upon a community of partially-armed sharecroppers, resulting in the murder of at least two hundred Black civilians (Uenuma 2018).

But, despite its shortcomings and disappointments, the war had influenced the hearts and minds of many Black Americans. Historian John H. Morrow, Jr. reflects: “

The Red Summer of 1919 witnessed race riots in some fifty cities across the United States, as white mobs attacked Black workers and soldiers and invaded black neighborhoods to burn black businesses and homes. This time, however, black Americans fought back. The soldiers who returned from fighting for the freedom of Europeans now fought for their lives and communities against white citizenry determined to keep them segregated and treated as second-class citizens” (2019, 129).

The story of World War I and its ensuing racial violence is important not because “ordinary” white citizens carried out the attacks, nor because some Black communities chose to fight back in defense of their lives and livelihoods, as both of these things have happened repeatedly throughout history. Rather, this story is important in that it represents a moment of profound Black reckoning and political awakening, and by understanding this moment, we can better understand the historical thread and evolution of the Black tradition of arms—and, perhaps more importantly, the various ways in which the hopes and dreams of Black citizenship have (been) transformed over time.

The fallout from the First World War, especially with regards to race relations in the United States, was vast. Violent forces of white supremacy and segregation were once again

sweeping the nation, with a vengeance much like that of the Redemption, and Black life was under attack on all fronts. The years during and after the war also catalyzed the First Great Migration, as southern Blacks migrated to northern cities by the hundreds of thousands—a phenomenon sparked by a boom in industrial labor opportunities for African American men, caused by wartime demands for military manpower, as well as the unceasing reign of racial violence that terrorized Black communities in the South. Thus, as Black communities in the South were being fractured by white violence and waves of Black exodus, new communities were forming in northern cities. And none of these changes came without their challenges. For southern Blacks, the question was one of survival, of defending their homes and communities without the networks of Black militias on which they had previously depended, and enduring the social and economic turmoil that marked twentieth century life in the South. For northern Blacks, the question was very much the same; for while they had the benefits of their increased employment opportunities, they had to learn to adapt to their new environment, including its distinct structures of white violence and oppression, and to endure these challenges without the deep community networks that so many had left behind. And while the process of adapting to and overcoming these changes took different forms in northern and southern Black communities, the burgeoning tradition of Black armed resistance proved essential to both.

Disaffection: Black Veterans, Segregation, and Self-Defense

Despite an increasingly empowered and politicized Black population, and an emerging Black working- and middle-class in many northern cities, the period between the First and Second World War saw little in terms of mass rebellion and organized resistance. The fervor of social and political mobilization that had characterized the early years of Reconstruction had

been effectively crushed by decades of incessant white violence, and, in the aftermath of World War I and the horrific reign of white supremacist terror that followed, the struggle for Black liberation entered a seemingly dormant state. As Cobb writes:

World War I and the presidency of Woodrow Wilson are part of a period in post-Civil War black life in America that has come to be called 'the nadir.' Stretching roughly from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the end of World War I in 1918 (and, some would say, several decades beyond that), these were years in which race relations in the United States were at their lowest ebb (2016, 68).

Thus, in the years following the war, as Black veterans returned home to find their communities under constant threat of violence, betrayed by a federal government seemingly fixed on ushering in another era of racial apartheid, it seemed as though the spirit of militant defiance had been defeated. And, as waves of Black migration continued to change the structure and context of Black life in America, with more and more Blacks settling in northern cities, the Black tradition of arms underwent an apparent transformation. Whereas Black militias had once represented a very real and reliable source of empowerment and protection, such structures and practices of organized armed self-defense were largely absent from Black communities. However, as scholars like Cobb and Morrow make clear, more organic and isolated instances of armed resistance still occurred—especially in communities with a strong presence of World War I soldiers and veterans.

For example, Cobb details one instance of Black armed resistance that took place in Houston, Texas, in the summer of 1917. After two Black soldiers were beaten and arrested for defending a local housewife and mother, who had herself been harassed and arrested by two white policemen, a group of nearly two hundred Black soldiers engaged in a shootout with local police—as well as the group of armed white civilians who had joined the police in attacking the mass of soldiers. Discussing the actions of those two-hundred Black soldiers, Cobb writes, “

Their anger over the virulent racial hostility of Houston's white residents had been simmering since their arrival, and they had little trouble believing two rumors spreading through their ranks: that Baltimore [one of the arrested Black soldiers] had been shot and killed and that a white mob was on its way to attack them. The soldiers stole guns from the camp and, ignoring the orders of officers, marched into the city toward the police station. As they passed through Houston's all-white Brunner neighborhood, whites attacked the column, and the troops defended themselves. As they marched, they shouted protests... A white mob formed and joined the police in the street. A shootout ensued. Of the twenty people who died in the exchange of fire, only two were black troopers; the other were five white policemen... and thirteen white civilians (2016, 75-76).

As Cobb points out, however, such bold displays of resistance were rare, and the aftermath of the confrontation only worked to ensure that: following the uprising, 163 of the soldiers were arrested and jailed, and 54 were ultimately convicted of murder and mutiny—13 of whom were hanged, and the remaining 41 were given life sentences (2016, 76). This fear of violent white reprisal gripped many Black communities through the first half of the twentieth century, and effectively inhibited the development of organized and overt resistance campaigns. Still, the Black tradition of armed self-defense, ingrained in many communities throughout the South and championed by veterans returning home from the war, served a critical role in preserving and protecting Black land and community—against white supremacist organizations in the South, like the Ku Klux Klan, and against increasingly violent civilian mobs and corrupt police departments in the North. It was not until the years following World War II that Black armed resistance would, once again, begin to take more organized and overt forms.

The Black Veterans of World War II

In many ways, the story of World War II mirrored that of World War I, with Black sacrifice and patriotism being met with forceful discrimination and pervasive racial violence. Accordingly, the Second World War also precipitated a surge of racial violence against Black

veterans and their communities, which both motivated and reacted to another Black exodus, the Second Great Migration, during which millions more southern Blacks fled the South in search of safety and employment in northern cities. An estimated two million Blacks left the South between the First and Second World Wars, with another three million migrating north (and increasingly west) in the two decades following the end of World War II—nearly six million total between 1910 and 1970 (National Archives). Thus, the postwar period of World War II continued and cemented a seismic shift that had begun some thirty years earlier, and that had profound impacts not only within Black communities themselves, but within the broader geopolitical fabric of the nation as a whole. However, unlike those returning from World War I, the Black veterans who returned from World War II had the benefits of their forebears political awakening, of an increasingly globalized and politicized Black consciousness and collective, as well as a federal government more willing to engage with calls for racial justice—even if only symbolically. For while the years following the First World War did see a decrease in Black political organizing and large-scale resistance campaigns, they also witnessed profound developments elsewhere in Black communities and cultures. As Cobb emphasizes, “it would be a mistake... to think that blacks’ anger and ambitions were abandoned at the war’s end. Strong underground currents of thought and activism flowed with greater force in and from black communities in the aftermath of the war, eroding the white-supremacist order” (2016, 77).

In his seminal text *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, Manning Marable (2007) tracks the important changes that occurred within African American communities during the first half of the twentieth century, writing:

In 1940, 22 percent of all blacks lived in the North, compared to 10 percent in 1910. This major demographic shift produced dramatic changes in the labor patterns of blacks...

The small, black middle class which emerged after slavery has begun to multiply. The number of black public and private schoolteachers more than doubled from 1910 to 1940. The number of black-owned businesses between 1904 and 1929 grew from 20,000 to over 70,000. Between 1900 and 1914, 47 black-owned banks were established. The percentage of black youth between the ages of 5 and 20 enrolled in school increased from 33 in 1890 to 65 fifty years later. In the same period, black illiteracy dropped from 61 percent to 15 percent. The migration from the rural South to the urban Northeast and Midwest, and the growth of a black urban working class throughout the nation, brought an improvement in health care, education, economic and political life for millions of black people. Nevertheless, the substantial gap between the socio-economic and political status of whites and blacks still existed and was reinforced across the nation by the rule of Jim Crow (10).

These changing dynamics and factors together, combined with a growing global movement against fascism and authoritarianism, meant that many World War II veterans returned even more willing and ready to fight than those before them. And, whereas World War I veterans had primarily engaged in individual and organic acts of armed self-defense, Black veterans of the Second World War proved increasingly willing to imagine and invoke armed self-defense as a collective form of organized resistance.

Community Catalysts for Change

In *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, Charles Cobb, Jr. (2016) suggests that Black veterans returning from World War II became the impetus for the Civil Rights Movement, providing both the courage and know-how necessary to challenge white supremacist forces throughout the South. He writes that, “although most black veterans of the world wars would not become civil rights leaders, they generally returned home unwilling to surrender their humanity and dignity by submitting to the old codes of behavior demanded by white supremacy” (Cobb 2016, 80). Having put their lives on the line to fight white supremacy and authoritarianism abroad, these Black veterans recognized the potential—and need—to fight for freedom and

justice at home as well. Of course, many acts of armed resistance still occurred irrespective and independent of any broader organized campaign for racial justice, particularly as Klan violence and white race riots continued to provoke acts of personal and collective self-defense; others, however, recognizing the changing tides both within Black communities themselves and in national politics, contributed themselves to the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.

Robert F. Williams, for example, who was both celebrated and denounced for his public call to arms, established himself as a forceful advocate for Black armed self-defense. Williams (2006), writing himself in *Negroes with Guns*, says that “when I got out of the Marine Corps, I knew I wanted to go home and join the NAACP. In the Marines I had got a taste of discrimination and had some run-ins that got me into the guardhouse” (50-51). Williams then, assuming the president position of a dying Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the NAACP, “began a recruiting drive among laborers, farmers, domestic workers, the unemployed and any and all Negro people in the area” (Williams 2006, 51). With his new membership, many of whom were “returned veterans who were very militant and didn’t scare easy” (Williams 2006, 51), Williams organized a number of local protest campaigns to integrate public facilities, beginning with the local libraries. Reflecting on their successes, Williams writes:

We moved on to win better rights for Negroes: economic rights, the rights of education and the right of equal protection under the law. We rapidly got the reputation of being the most militant branch of the NAACP, and obviously we couldn’t get this reputation without antagonizing the racists who are trying to prevent Afro-Americans from enjoying their inalienable human rights as Americans (2006, 51-52).

Williams was known to carry multiple firearms in his car and on his person for self-defense, and his willingness to challenge white violence with force proved indispensable not just to the integration efforts, but to his own survival as well.

He shares one particularly striking story in which he was run off the road by “an old stock car without windows,” which had attempted to overturn his vehicle on a highway lined with “two or three thousand people,” including police officers (Williams 2006, 45). After being surrounded by the white crowd, who accused him of hitting the white driver and began chanting racist death threats, Williams brandished an Italian carbine rifle he kept stowed in his car. Two of the nearby police officers, after seeing Williams draw the weapon, rushed his vehicle. One of the officers attempted to grab Williams, and was struck in the face and held at gunpoint. The other, not knowing there were multiple firearms within the vehicle, approached Williams from the side and began to draw his revolver, “hoping to shoot [him] in the back” (Williams 2006, 46). Seeing the second officer approach, “one of the students... put a .45 in the policeman’s face and told him that if he pulled out his pistol he would kill him” (Williams 2006, 46). Fearing that Williams and the student would fire on the officers and the surrounding crowd, a city councilman instructed the police chief to clear the highway and allow them to leave. The picket continued, white mobs continued to form and threaten the Black protestors, and Williams refused to surrender his weapons—threatening to shoot anyone who tried to harm him or the protestors. Ultimately, fearing that tensions would escalate to rampant violence, the pool was closed for the summer, and two police cars escorted the picketers away from the crowd—which “was the first time this had ever been done” (Williams 2006, 48). Reflecting on the profundity of the event, Williams writes: “As a result of our stand, and our willingness to fight, the state of North Carolina had enforced law and order. Just two state troopers did the job, and no one got hurt in a situation where normally (in the South) a lot of Negro blood would have flowed” (Williams 2006, 48).

The resistance of Robert Williams—and other similar figures, like Amzie Moore and the Evers brothers—is significant not only because it demonstrates a willingness to confront white supremacist actors head on and with force, which countered the then-preferred accommodationist approach to political organizing, but also because it illuminates the aspirational impulse that continued to guide armed resistance well into and throughout the Black Freedom Movement. Again, we see African American communities taking up arms not strictly in response to white violence, but in pursuit of their political freedom and the unfulfilled promises of citizenship. Williams called upon the tradition of Black armed resistance not simply to escape or prevent white violence, but to protect and defend the local movement in its demand for justice.

Still, the early years of the Black Freedom Movement were largely defined by organized campaigns of strategic nonviolence, with armed self-defense primarily offering clandestine networks of protection for otherwise nonviolent organizers. As the movement dragged on, however, and segments of the Black community grew increasingly impatient and disillusioned with the slow pace of progress, many of the younger organizers, inspired by movement veterans like Charles Evers and Robert Williams, began advocating for more open and aggressive forms of armed resistance. As Umoja reflects, “prior to 1965, Black activists in Mississippi practiced armed self-defense but did not openly advocate its exercise... Robert Williams was the exceptional Black southerner who openly declared that African Americans should meet ‘violence with violence’... After 1964, Mississippi Movement leaders openly embraced armed resistance” (Umoja 2013, 122). Thus, before concluding this chapter, it is necessary to address the apparent radicalization of Black armed resistance in the latter half of the twentieth century—namely the increasing prevalence of Black urban riots and the emergence of Black Power—and to consider

the ways in which these changes might be contextualized within the broader historical trajectory of Black political organizing and the Black tradition of arms.

Defiance: The Rebirth of Black Militias

Although the First and Second World War deepened the Black tradition of arms in seemingly positive and productive ways, emboldening Black veterans and empowering whole communities to resist subjugation and defend themselves from white violence, the dynamics of Black armed resistance underwent profound changes in the latter half of the century. Umoja, reflecting on these changes, discusses the emergence of paramilitary groups in the final years of the Civil Rights Movement:

Previously, Mississippi Movement activists and supporters functioned as a civilian militia, participating in armed defense on an ad hoc basis in times of emergency or when information was provided of a potential threat... On the contrary, paramilitary groups, by definition, are also composed of civilians, not professional military personnel, but are organized similarly to the formal military or law enforcement and possess a specific chain of command... Unlike previous informal defense networks in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, paramilitary organizations were organized with a clear chain of command and viewed themselves as filling a vacuum left in the African American community by federal, state, and local law enforcement that was either sympathetic to or neutral about White supremacist violence. The function of armed defense was often placed in the hands of a paramilitary group whose role in the Movement was the protection of its leaders, demonstrations, and the Black community in general in the years following Freedom Summer (2013, 122-23).

Umoja goes on to discuss how the presence of these Black paramilitary groups—often real, though sometimes rumored—served to “instill confidence in the African American community and fear among White supremacist, the local White power structure, and other enemies of the Movement” (Umoja 123). In many ways, the proliferation of Black armed resistance can again be linked to an increase in white violence and terror. In fact, one of the key factors that

contributed to the rise of paramilitary groups like the Natchez Deacons for Defense and Justice was a resurgence of white supremacist terror groups, specifically the rise of the United Klans of America (UKA) in the mid-1960s (124). However, Umoja also asks us to appreciate the ways in which this evolution of Black resistance reflects a change in Black culture, consciousness, and political strategy. For while the central purpose of groups like the Deacons for Defense was to provide protection for the movement and its masses, they served other functions as well, like creating and enforcing structures of accountability *within* the movement; referred to as “enforcer squads” (139-42), these offshoots of the paramilitary structure became integral to southern Black organizing in the years after the Civil Rights Movement. And, as organizations like the NAACP became increasingly accepting of and dependent upon the protection offered by the Deacons, the model of Black organizing and resistance underwent a significant transformation. Umoja shares that

The development of paramilitary organizations in the Mississippi Black Freedom Struggle signaled a new day in Black community throughout the state... The Natchez model, combining economic boycotts with paramilitary defense and the potential for retaliation, proved more effective in winning concessions and social and cultural change on the local level than nonviolent direct action or voter registration campaigns depending on federal protection (2013, 142-43).

Once again, the Black tradition of arms is defined not only in opposition to white violence, but also in pursuit and demand of a more just, inclusive and democratic society. And, this new model of Black resistance did not limit itself to the rural South as the tradition of organized resistance often had, but rather captured the hearts and minds of Black Americans everywhere. For while militant Black activists and organizers in the South continued to challenge and undermine the white power structure through economic boycotts and armed resistance—which, in addition to defending against white violence and maintaining movement discipline, had begun to manifest in

increasingly retaliatory ways—the tides of Black Power were growing throughout many northern cities.

In the summer of 1966, the integrationist and accommodationist ideals that had dominated national discourse and campaign strategy fell to the sway of Black nationalism, and the Black Freedom Movement entered a new era characterized by the cries of Black Power—a transition largely symbolized by the March against Fear, “considered ‘the last great march of the civil rights years’” (148), where a young Stokely Carmichael forced the contentious two-word slogan into public discourse. As Umoja notes, “the inclusion of the ‘Black Power’ slogan represented a more nationalist shift in the ranks of SNCC, CORE, and particularly the younger generation of the Movement” (148). Understanding the emergence of Black Power is critical to understanding the historical arc and evolution of Black resistance, and of Black armed resistance especially, as it reflects a number of profound changes in the structures and conditions of white supremacy and racial injustice in the United States—structures and conditions that we continue to contend with today. To conclude this chapter, then, I will briefly analyze and discuss the Black Power movement, and the moment of hope, tragedy, and immense disillusionment it symbolizes in the ongoing pursuit of Black liberation.

Disruption: Black Power and State Violence

Though the tenets of Black Power were championed by many organizations and individual activists in the South, and were, in fact, born among the young radical flanks of groups like SNCC and CORE, the values of the Black Power movement are perhaps best exemplified by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). As Manning Marable writes, “the most provocative challenge to white liberal politics was generated by the Black Panther

Party, founded in Oakland, California, in October 1966, by two black college students, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale” (Marable 2007, 106). The Black Panthers were unique not only because they emerged as the most influential Black nationalist organization within the Black Power movement (Marable 108), but also because they emblemize the profound structural and contextual changes that overcame both white supremacy and Black resistance in the latter half of the twentieth century. Thus, emergence and ascension of the Black Panthers—as well as their tragic dissolution—signals a new chapter in the struggle for Black freedom, as well as an evolution in the Black tradition of arms.

The Black Panthers are often remembered as a radical and militant Black nationalist organization that, carrying long guns and sporting black leather jackets and matching black berets, brought violence and hostility to cities throughout the country. And yet, this caricatured remembering of what was, at the time, “the most influential revolutionary national organization in the U.S.” (108), obfuscates their true vision and legacy. For while the Panthers did promote many of the principles of Black nationalism, and certainly embraced and employed the tradition of armed self-defense, both their organizing efforts and political philosophy were much more inclusive than many other groups at the time. Marable reminds us that “in late 1967 the Panthers initiated a free breakfast program for black children, and offered free health services to ghetto residents,” and that “unlike many nationalists, the Black Panthers quickly established organizational and programmatic relations with radical whites, and sought to lead a progressive coalition of Third World and white groups to battle the ‘Establishment’” (107-08). In other words, while the Panthers did embody and exemplify a certain tradition of Black nationalism and radical militancy that has always existed alongside—though often in the margins of—the more popular accommodationist and integrationist approach to Black organizing and resistance, they

also proved willing and determined to pursue Black liberation in inclusive, cooperative, and comprehensive ways. And, whereas previous organizing had often centered and opposed issues of segregation and disenfranchisement, the Black Panthers articulated and pursued Black liberation in much more diverse terms: they advocated Black autonomy, deplored police brutality and the expansion of a carceral state, demanded fair trials and equal justice under the law, and called for improvements in Black housing, education, healthcare, and land ownership. In fact, Marable suggests that “remarkably few black nationalists and Black Powerites had advocated violence against white-owned property, the subversion of authority, or the seizure of state power,” and that “most Black Power spokespersons came from upwardly mobile working-class or middle-class backgrounds, were trained at universities, and had been groomed for ultimate assimilation into the existing system” (108).

And yet, despite their reformist approach and their willingness to work alongside a diverse coalition of activists and organizers, the Black Panthers and other Black Power organizations were met with—and ultimately defeated by—extreme state repression. Recounting this violent repression, Marable writes:

SNCC was the first radical black group targeted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the U.S. Justice Department for surveillance, disruption, and suppression. In late 1960, FBI agents began to monitor SNCC meetings. Johnson’s attorney general, Nicholas Katzenbach, gave approval for the FBI to wiretap all SNCC leaders’ telephones in 1965. In August 1967, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover ordered the extensive infiltration and disruption of SNCC, as well as other Black Power-oriented formations, such as the Militant Revolutionary Action Movements, the Deacons of Defense, and CORE... FBI agents were sent to monitor Carmichael and Brown wherever they went, seeking to elicit evidence to imprison them... Local police and federal marshals raided Black Panther offices across the country. By July 1969, the Panthers had been targeted by 233 separate actions under the FBI’s COINTELPRO, or Counter Intelligence Program. In 1969 alone, 27 Black Panthers were killed by the police, and 749 were jailed or arrested. Whenever possible, the FBI provoked violence between cultural and revolutionary nationalists. In 1969, the FBI was directly or indirectly responsible for engineering several murders,

shootings and bombing attacks between US and the Black Panther Party. In Hoover's words, any illegal acts of suppression were justified, because the Panthers were "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." The federal authorities would resort to political assassinations and any other gross violations of civil liberties to "prevent a coalition of militant black nationalist groups" and to "prevent the rise of a messiah" who could lead the black masses (2007, 109-10).

Understanding the Black Power movement, as well as the full-force assault the U.S. government waged against its most prominent leaders and organizations, is critical to understanding the changing dynamics and dimensions of white supremacy—and Black resistance—in the final years and aftermath of the Black Freedom Movement; in fact, the diminution of the Black Power movement, in many ways, marks the end of the Black Freedom Movement—of what Marable has deemed the Second Reconstruction. And, a thoughtful analysis of this historical moment yields invaluable insight, both for the evolution of the Black tradition of arms, and for the state of racial violence and oppression today.

First, the decline of the Black Panther Party largely symbolized the end of organized armed resistance self-defense within Black communities, especially given that groups like the Deacons for Defense had declined years earlier. And while the Panthers had, once again, demonstrated the aspirational and imaginative impulse that so often guided the practice of Black armed resistance, their fate also proved that the context and conditions of racial violence and injustice had changed. For rather than coming up against a system of white violence that primarily acted through the extralegal channels of white supremacist terror groups, militant activists and organizers during the Black Power era were confronted by the savvy and forceful repression of large and well-funded police departments, the FBI, and the U.S. government writ large—a federal response that surely merits critical thought and inspection, which I will attempt to provide in the conclusion. For now, however, it is simply important to note that, in this new

context, the tradition of Black armed resistance would struggle to maintain the role or efficacy it had previously held. Still, the Black Power movement was characterized by a forceful pursuit of the promises of freedom and citizenship, and armed resistance, again, proved to be fundamental to notions of Black empowerment and political agency.

In addition to a change in actors and amplitude, however, the form and nature of white violence itself changed as well. Though the Black Freedom Movement had successfully toppled the apartheid system of Jim Crow, it became clear in the final decades of the twentieth century that desegregation would not bring with it the holistic racial justice and equality that many had hoped it might—a truth that many Black Power activists had come to recognize, and that only became more apparent in the years following the “Second Reconstruction.” As Marable writes,

Desegregation within the economic structures of capitalism created symbols of racial progress and cultural interaction, without the transfer of power to blacks as a racial group or the deconstruction of many manifestations of vulgar racist ideology and discourse. Jim Crow no longer existed, but in its place stood a far more formidable system of racial domination, rooted within the political economy and employing a language of fairness and equality while simultaneously eroding the gains achieved by blacks during the Second Reconstruction (2007, 187).

In other words, the context and conditions of white supremacy had evolved, and, accordingly, the mechanisms of white violence changed as well—which, in addition to the militarization of white repression, helps to explain the decline in Black armed resistance. For whereas armed resistance could previously confront the dominant forces of white violence (white supremacist groups, white mobs, and other forms of direct physical violence) directly, the increasing structuralization of white violence made it much more difficult, and much less effective, to challenge and undermine white violence head on and with force. To be sure, white supremacy had always been structural at its core; however, it had also relied upon explicit white violence and terror—as well as openly racist rhetoric and discourse—as a tool for racial subjugation. As the backdrop of

Black life became increasingly urban, and the demands of the Civil Rights Movement proved that Black support would be critical to political success, the once-explicit language and structure of white supremacy adopted a more tacit and furtive approach. And, in fact, we begin to see this realization in the organizing and political philosophy of groups like the Black Panther Party, as is reflected in their increasing focus on issues of public and social welfare, as well as in the personal and political philosophy of prominent figures like Dr. King. As Michelle Alexander recalls, “at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, activists and others began to turn their attention to economic problems, arguing that socioeconomic inequality interacted with racism to produce crippling poverty and related social problems” (Alexander 2012, 38). Thus, while white violence continued to be the lynchpin of white supremacy, the form and nature of this violence had become much more sophisticated, elusive, and hard to reach. And, in many ways, these dynamics have only deepened since the end of the Black Power era.

Unfortunately, the story of the Black Power Movement is often misinterpreted, grossly mischaracterized, or left out from broader public discourses of the Black Freedom Movement. And though the forces driving this erasure are diverse—in social/political affiliation and motive—the effect is largely the same: we miss a crucial moment in the evolution of Black resistance, organizing, and political consciousness. Though many seem to assume that the Black Power Movement was either 1) a fringe and radical sub-movement within the broader Civil Rights Movement or 2) separate and distinct from the Black Freedom Movement altogether, neither of these assumptions reflect the truth. As Umoja notes, “the Civil Rights Movement was a fight for first-class citizenship and basic human rights. The Black Power Movement included activist fighting for pluralism and citizenship rights, but also the desire for an independent Republic of New Africa, the socialist transformation of U.S. society, and pan-African

revolution” (Umoja 2013, 6). Thus, the Black Power Movement represents a distinct and profound transformation in the hearts and minds of many Black Americans, fundamentally and undeniably situated within the final years of the Black Freedom Movement, and it must not be overlooked.

Inspired and empowered by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, yet responding to a growing matrix of challenges facing Black communities, Black Power activists and organizers began to envision and articulate the meaning of freedom and citizenship in very different terms than those that had guided the Civil Rights Movement. And while many older generations of activists were quick to dismiss these young and radical organizers, claiming that their impatience and combative nature would deter support from white liberals and impede future reform, the impulse to dismiss Black Power activists is myopic and misguided. In fact, the emergence of Black Power was not only understandable, given the growing disillusionment among many Black communities, but it was also necessary. For just as the militant defiance of many Civil Rights activists in the South signified an evolution in the Black Freedom Struggle, recognizing that unrestricted citizenship could not be won through military service or good behavior, the rhetoric and strategy that defined the Black Power Movement signified yet another evolution, as Black folks came to realize that legal inclusion in public spaces and institutions would also fail to bring the safety, justice, and opportunity that so many had hoped it would. In other words, the ideas and concerns expressed by these young radical activists were not a regression, were in no way less informed or insightful than those of their predecessors, but rather they reflected and responded to the changing structures of racial violence and oppression that had begun to manifest throughout America's ghettos.

Of course, there are legitimate critiques of the Black Power Movement, with scholars like Manning Marable noting the ways in which the movement struggled from internal dissent and a lack of clearly defined objectives. However, to dismiss the important ideological and strategic questions that arose during the Black Power Movement would be to disregard a transformative moment within the history of the Black Freedom Struggle—a moment which, as I’ll argue in the conclusion, is of particular relevance today.

Conclusion

By looking beyond the basic functional characteristics of armed resistance in African American communities, and tracing the ideological thread buried within these moments of resistance, it becomes clear that, historically, the Black tradition of arms has always been about more than simply challenging and overcoming the immediate threat of white violence. Rather, embedded in the very act of taking up arms is a deep commitment not only to fighting *against* white supremacist violence and terror, but also to fighting *for* the promises of citizenship—for a nation in which the ideals of freedom and democratic excellence become material and accessible for all Americans. However, the story of Black social and political organizing—and certainly the story of Black armed resistance—has never been without tragedy. Due to extreme repression from state and federal forces, worsening conditions within Black communities themselves, and a familiar pattern of political complicity and compromise, the Second Reconstruction ended much like the First, and with it, the Black Freedom Struggle—and especially the Black tradition of arms—entered a tragic moment of uncertainty from which it has yet to emerge. Of course, many important victories had been won, and new channels of social and political engagement created new opportunities for Black mobility. And yet, still, white violence continued to shape and

shorten the lives of too many Black Americans—no longer challenged by the forces of Black armed resistance, and transformed to mask the will of white supremacy. If we are to ever overthrow the forces of racial oppression, we must find a new way to, again, challenge the systems and structures of white violence, as they have always been the lynchpin of white supremacy. What, then, might we learn from these histories of violence, resistance, and profound social transformation? And how might the lessons gleaned from the history of Black armed resistance—from the visions of safety, justice and inclusion, and the militant will to achieve them—inform and empower Black resistance moving forward?

CONCLUSION

Before addressing the contemporary relevance and import of these oft-neglected (hi)stories of Black armed resistance, it will be useful to highlight the central themes and lessons that have emerged throughout my research.

The Lessons of Black Armed Resistance

The first key lesson, and that which in many ways forms the foundation of this thesis, is that the nonviolent/violent binary has never been accurate, or functional, in the lived experiences of African American communities. Armed resistance, and armed self-defense especially, has been both present and indispensable in every major chapter of the quest for Black liberation, and has often been inextricably linked to more dominant and celebrated forms of organized resistance—including strategic nonviolent action. Thus, there is a present need to move away from the violent/nonviolent binary, and to both acknowledge and appreciate the diverse and complementary ways in which Black communities—and many other oppressed peoples around the world—have forcefully and *successfully* pursued their own liberation. The importance of transcending the current binary conceptualization of (non)violence cannot be overstated, though it has different implications in different discursive communities. For academics and activists, and especially those who have committed themselves to studying and deploying civil resistance as a transformative—and even revolutionary—tool, understanding and grappling with these histories of successful and effective armed resistance is critical to accurately assessing the potential of strategic nonviolence. These histories are also of utmost consequence to broader public discourses and dialogue, specifically regarding social movements, resistance, and the historical arc of Black organizing. And, with the emergence and explosion of the Movement for Black

Lives, how we understand, discuss, and envision Black resistance in the context of white supremacist violence is of increasing consequence. As Cobb (2016) concludes in *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, reflecting on the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement,

the way forward remained unclear, as it does today. The freedom struggle continues, in ways at once more subtle and more urgent than the efforts of activists in the 1960s. And although the questions of nonviolence and armed self-defense may seem to have receded into the past, they endure in our conceptions of both the civil rights movement and the activism that followed Carmichael's call for Black Power (237).

Thus, regardless of whether one ultimately accepts or approves of the tradition of Black armed resistance, it must at least be acknowledged if we are to truly understand the historical arch and contemporary relationship between conflict, (organized) resistance, and peacebuilding.

However, the lessons of Black armed resistance must extend beyond the simple—though surprisingly radical—recognition that strategic nonviolence was often supported by armed self-defense, or that armed self-defense in and of itself proved important and effective in pursuing Black liberation. In addition to appreciating the most basic function of armed resistance in Black communities, as a means of surviving and confronting white violence, it is also critical that we recognize the aspirational and imaginative components of Black armed resistance as well—that we center not just Black subjects, but Black subjectivity. As Umoja writes in the concluding paragraphs of *We Will Shoot Back*, “without due attention to the role of armed resistance in Mississippi, either the agency of Blacks in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements is denied or an inaccurate account of the Struggle is offered” (Umoja 2013, 259). In other words, while these histories of armed resistance and self-defense are important to understanding the structures and dynamics of white violence, as well as the struggle to overcome this violence, they are also instrumental to recovering the depth of Black agency and empowerment.

In tracing the Black tradition of arms, it becomes clear that, throughout history, Black men and women have taken up arms not only to defend themselves and their communities against the violent forces of white supremacy, but also to pursue and move toward a more just and inclusive society—to lay claim to the safeties and liberties of unrestricted citizenship. Time and time again, Black organizers committed themselves to pushing the nation toward its unrealized ideals of inclusion and democratic excellence; Black militiamen made good on the unkept promises of equal protection; Black activists mobilized in pursuit of equal justice; Black veterans risked their lives for the promises of freedom and justice abroad, and again once they returned home. In even the darkest moments, Black Americans have often been the true champions of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—the keepers of the nation’s founding principles. However, “the Black Freedom Struggle and armed resistance cannot be confined to the fight for ‘full citizenship and full American-ness’” (Umoja 6). For the tradition of Black (armed) resistance, while shaped by the forces of white supremacy, cannot be understood fully within the terms of Western state-building and colonial expansion. Rather, it has its own guiding values and impulse, “has diverse ideological currents, ranging from assimilation to pluralism to autonomy to radical transformation to nationalism” (6). And, without including the story of armed resistance, without including the militant visions and actions of radical revolutionary nationalists, we compress these diverse dimensions of Black agency, empowerment, and social and political consciousness. Thus, as much as Black resistance has been shaped by history, it has also shaped history. And, perhaps more importantly, it has shaped the hearts and minds of generations of Black Americans—has connected them to a tradition much older than the nation itself. As Charles Cobb, Jr. writes, “each generation of black people carries a memory of the

struggles taken on by the generations that preceded it, and that memory settles in the collective soul and becomes the foundation for the struggles of one's own generation" (Cobb 2016, xi).

Still, while it is important to appreciate the historical role and importance of armed resistance, and the present resurgence of the Black tradition of arms, it is also important to recognize the fact that strategic nonviolence has often been, and continues to be, the predominant form of *organized* resistance. And, due to an ever-increasing force potential among repressive State actors, and fundamental changes within the structures of both Black communities and white violence itself, as discussed earlier, this is likely to prove even more true moving forward. Of course, those willing to take up arms in defense of themselves and their communities, especially in a public-facing display of resistance, have always been a relative minority within the broader Black Freedom Struggle; however, as discussed in Chapter Three, the role of armed self-defense as an integral component of organized resistance campaigns declined drastically in the latter half of the twentieth century. And, despite the few Black militias that have emerged amidst a much broader national resurgence of white paramilitaries in recent years,⁴ it seems rational to believe that the future of organized Black resistance will be largely unarmed and nonviolent—but, who is to tell what the future could bring, especially as more Black Americans continue to embrace the Black tradition of arms amidst growing racial unrest and an increase in white supremacist violence.⁵

⁴ The most noteworthy and prominent contemporary Black militia is called the Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC), which garnered national attention during the summer protests of 2020, when hundreds of heavily armed members donning all-black tactical clothing and equipment began to show up “at protests over Confederate monuments and over the killing of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia; at protests over the police shooting of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky; and at protests over the police shooting of Trayford Pellerin in Lafayette, Louisiana” (Wood 2021). Led by “Grandmaster Jay,” NFAC’s leader, the group has been incredibly disciplined, avoiding any violent confrontations with both law enforcement and the white paramilitaries they often oppose. And, overwhelmed and intimidated by the numbers NFAC has been able to amass in such a short amount of time, many well-established white paramilitaries have taken notice of the group, and attempted to avoid confrontations (Wood 2021).

⁵ Since the start of the pandemic, national gun sales have skyrocketed, with an influx of first-time buyers accounting for 40 percent of all sales in 2020 alone (Fowler 2021). Even more noteworthy, however, is the fact that gun

Even Cobb, who highlights that “there was a time when people on both sides of America’s racial divide embraced their right to self-protection, and when rights were won because of it,” and who suggests that “we would do well to remember that fact today” (Cobb 2016, 237), urges that “organizers should incorporate a discussion of nonviolence into the contemporary language of struggle” (Cobb xxi). Cobb’s opinion is, in part, responding to an increase in deadly violence within Black communities themselves—a tragic phenomenon with which we must contend. However, the implications are largely the same: due to the contemporary structures of white supremacy and racial injustice, including their destructive legacy and influence within many Black communities themselves, the future of Black liberation will necessarily require nonviolent strategies.

In many ways, the Movement for Black Lives has brought the first period of sustained mass protest against racial injustice since the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, and it unquestionably signals the newest chapter of the Black Freedom Struggle. Thus, before concluding with a hopeful and imaginative discussion of what it might mean, moving forward, to effectively resist and undermine white supremacy and the violence of racial capitalism, it will be helpful to first analyze the Movement for Black Lives thus far—specifically as it relates to the broader field and theory of Peace and Conflict Studies.

purchases among Black Americans saw a 56 percent increase in 2020, representing the fastest growing demographic of gun owners (Fowler 2021). And, while some of these individuals cited similar reasons for purchase as their white counterparts, namely the uncertainty and insecurity that the pandemic has induced, many have suggested that they were compelled to become gun owners by the increase in white supremacist violence and rhetoric across the country.

Black Lives Matter: Mass Protest and Structural Violence

The Black Lives Matter⁶ movement (BLM), which was born in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, has been critical in shaping twenty-first century activism and organizing. Primarily addressing police brutality and the killing of unarmed Black people, BLM has galvanized a resurgent and sustained struggle for racial justice, inspiring a wave of mass protests and uprisings across the U.S. and elsewhere. However, despite successful mass mobilization and organizing efforts, the movement has often failed at achieving its most fundamental goal: justice for the wrongful deaths of unarmed Black Americans, and legal accountability for their killers. Why, then, despite robust organizing efforts and successful mass mobilizations, has BLM been largely unsuccessful in prompting officer convictions? I will first attempt to analyze and explain the shortcomings of the Black Lives Matter movement through the lens of civil resistance theory, primarily grounded in the work of Gene Sharp and those who have drawn inspiration from his scholarship. However, I will argue that the existing literature does not provide all the necessary answers—especially with regards to the overwhelmingly violent repression that has been brought down upon largely peaceful BLM protests. Turning back to the lessons we have gleaned from the histories of armed resistance in Black communities, then, I hope to provide insight into some of these unanswered questions. In doing this, I also hope to take the first step in bridging the gap between scholars of Peace and Conflict Studies and those who have studied the history and tradition of Black armed resistance, as there has yet to be significant overlap or dialogue between these two groups—at least within the confines of academia.

⁶ Technically, Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a single organization, while the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) signified the broader coalition of organizations—including BLM—that have come to constitute and orchestrate resistance efforts. For this thesis, however, I have chosen to use both terms synonymously, since the majority of people are most familiar with BLM as the term used to describe the movement as a whole.

In order to effectively analyze the efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement, including the movement's inability to successfully push for the convictions of guilty law enforcement officers, it is necessary to first understand where and how movements harness social and political power. In her 2006 book *Challenging Authority*, Frances Piven contends that “protest movements are significant because they mobilize disruptive power” (Piven 2006, 20), and that *disruptive power* stems from the ability of all individuals to withhold cooperation from the complex systems of social interdependence that constitute society (Piven 23). The concept of “disruptive power” is similar to Gene Sharp’s “social view of power,” in that both stem from the basic idea that political power is rooted in systems and networks of interdependence—though Sharp’s “pillars of support” are rather unique. Thus, while Sharp and Piven have different frameworks regarding resistance methods, they both build upon the broader framework of consent theory. In *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*, Sharp suggests that regimes acquire their power solely through the resources and institutions that support them, and that because these supporting structures are dependent on the willing cooperation and obedience of individuals, “all government is based upon consent” (Sharp 2005, 34). The *social view of power*, then, simply recognizes that State power is neither monolithic nor inevitable, and that “rulers or other command systems, despite appearance, [are] dependent on the population’s goodwill, decisions, and support” (Sharp 28). Thus, while their specific frameworks and terminology differ slightly, both Piven and Sharp arrive at the same conclusion: because political power stems from the people and institutions that underpin State leadership, rather than from the State leaders themselves, social movements are able to mobilize power by simply withdrawing consent and cooperation from oppressive regimes.

In addition to the broader dynamics of political power, Sharp also identifies its six specific sources: *authority*, *human resources*, *skills and knowledge* (of supporting persons and institutions), *intangible factors* (ideological and psychological), *material resources*, and *sanctions* (Sharp 29). The success of a movement, then, is largely dependent on its ability to influence and undermine these various sources of political power. In order to achieve this task, it is imperative that movement organizers and nonviolent actors are able to effectively identify and target critical institutional leverage points—that they find ways to undermine the resources and “pillars of support” on which all governments rest (Engler 2016, 91). For while individuals may possess an inherent potential or interdependent power, political power is effectively organized and mobilized through societies’ various institutions, which in turn “provide the structural basis for the control of rulers” (Sharp 2005, 35).

Gene Sharp also identifies three general categories of nonviolent action methods: *nonviolent protest and persuasion*, *noncooperation*, and *nonviolent intervention* (Sharp 2005, 19). And while all three classes of nonviolent methods can, and should, be successfully employed by social movements, they do not carry the same power potential. Sharp suggests that while methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion are often the most utilized, “methods of noncooperation are much more powerful,” as they have the ability to “reduce or sever the supply of the opponents’ sources of power” (2005, 44). The Black Lives Matter movement, while certainly utilizing an array of nonviolent methods, has overwhelmingly relied on methods of *nonviolent protest and persuasion*.

Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watchman who shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013, peaceful protests emerged in cities throughout the country. These demonstrations, which often took the form of vigils and

rallies, began what would become an ongoing struggle against police brutality and the killing of unarmed Blacks at the hands of law enforcement in the United States. Since the killing of Trayvon Martin, numerous other instances of police brutality and racial violence have occurred. In fact, recent data suggests that the prevalence of fatal police shootings continues to increase annually, and that these shootings disproportionately target Black Americans (Tate et al 2022). And while few of these killings receive media attention, and even fewer lead to protest actions, a select number of cases have prompted periods of notable social unrest, and contributed to the growth of the BLM movement. The first three periods of prolonged unrest, following the emergence of the BLM movement in 2013, took place during the summers of 2014, 2015, and 2016. While organizing efforts and nonviolent actions flowed steadily for much of those years, responding to the seemingly endless new cases of police brutality and unarmed shootings, protests came to head each summer. The death of Eric Garner in July of 2014 initiated widespread BLM organizing, and when Michael Brown was killed the following month, his body left uncovered in the street for hours after the shooting, protests erupted throughout the country in what would become a defining moment in the BLM-era. The summer of 2015, while far from reaching the magnitude of the previous summer, saw significant movement organizing following an act of white supremacist terrorism inside a Black church in South Carolina, and around the death of Sandra Bland the following month. The pattern would continue the following summer, when the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, just one day apart, again led to national uprising against police brutality and systemic racism. The summer of 2016 concluded with various professional athletes kneeling during the national anthem—most infamously Colin Kaepernick—which has become yet another defining moment of BLM.

The Black Lives Matter movement, and the questions of racial injustice and police violence that it has forced into ongoing (inter)national discourse, has undeniably been an important and powerful social force. And yet, despite incremental changes to legislation and law enforcement policy, the killers of all the aforementioned victims were acquitted. One must wonder then, why these moments of national outrage and extensive organizing efforts have repeatedly failed at achieving their most fundamental goal? Why have calls for legal justice, that which is often the focus of public outcry, fallen on deaf ears? The answers to this question undoubtedly necessitate discussions of white supremacy and the deeply racist origins of law enforcement agencies—many of which I have tried to address throughout this thesis; however, it is also important to consider the ways in which the movement itself might preclude success. Some journalists and scholars have suggested that the current movement for racial justice is simply too amorphous (Blake 2016), while others believe that the lack of prominent leadership and the rejection of principled nonviolence have limited the movement's effectiveness (Reynolds 2015). However, as Sharp has emphasized, nonviolent action does not gain its power from moral suasion (Schock 2005, 8-10), but rather from its ability to undermine State power and authority, and to force oppressive regimes to respond to movement demands with or without their goodwill. In fact, Sharp suggests that conversion, or the success of nonviolent action by changing the outlook and ideology of the opponent, is the least likely path to success (Sharp 2005, 415-17). Therefore, the shortcomings of BLM might be better understood within the foundational principles of nonviolent action, and of political power itself.

Methods of mass protest and assembly, which have become characteristic of the BLM movement, do little to undermine the power sources of the State. For while they may display public disapproval, therefore compromising the perceived legitimacy (or *authority*) of an

oppressive regime and subduing feelings of fear among protesters (*intangible factors*), they do not directly undermine the other sources of political power. So, while thousands of protesters gathering outside of a state or local government building might bring unwanted attention to politicians and officials, and serve to galvanize support amongst a broad movement base, these actions on their own, like most other methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion, do little to leverage or threaten the institutional structures—the pillars of support—on which governments depend. As Sharp writes:

Unless combined with other methods, the methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion usually remain expressions of a point of view, or an attempt in action to influence others to accept a point of view or to take a specific action. This attempt is distinguished from the social, economic, or political pressures imposed by noncooperation or nonviolent intervention (2005, 399).

It would seem then, that the overreliance on methods of protest and persuasion during the BLM-era, though certainly useful in mobilizing large numbers of people, is a significant limiting factor in the transformational power of the movement as a whole. And yet, despite the fact that recent uprisings have rarely caused a substantial shift in the dynamics or positions of power, and that mass protest itself does not significantly threaten or undermine the sources of political power, BLM protests continue to elicit incredibly violent and crushing repression. But why?

Unfortunately, existing literature, while offering valuable insight into the nature of violent repression and which movement characteristics are more or less likely to elicit violent responses more broadly, does not adequately explain why we've seen such violent repression emerge in response to seemingly symbolic and overwhelmingly peaceful protests.⁷ For without

⁷ A study published by Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman (2020) suggests that of the “7,305 events in thousands of towns and cities in all 50 states and D.C., involving millions of attendees... police were reported injured in 1 percent of the protests,” and only “3.7 percent of the protests involved property damage or vandalism.” In other words, regardless of one’s conceptualization of violence, nearly all of Black Lives Matter protest events have been both nonviolent and peaceful.

properly addressing and accounting for the historical legacies of white supremacy—as a hegemonic force with extensive structural, systemic, and ideological import, as well as particular mechanisms of violence—we fail to appreciate the unique challenge represented by the Movement for Black Lives, in comparison to some other movement types. Thus, by incorporating the scholarship of individuals like Charles Cobb Jr. and Akinyele Umoja, and by adding to our analysis a deep understanding of white supremacy and its historical underpinnings, often made visible by the challenge embodied in the Black tradition of arms, we might better illuminate the challenges facing the current efforts of the Black Freedom Struggle.

Let us first turn to a discussion of repression. Repression, as both a tool employed by oppressive regimes and an obstacle encountered by organizers, has been a topic of great interest within the field of Peace and Conflict Studies—especially as it relates to strategic nonviolent action. Though there is yet to be true consensus on the topic of repression, there are a few points that have been widely accepted. The first, and the most fundamental, is that social movements should expect to encounter repression, as repression arises as an attempt to demobilize and neutralize threats to the dominant regime. In fact, Gene Sharp suggests that repression can—and should—be viewed as an affirmation of a movement’s potential power, as it indicates that the movement is perceived as a legitimate threat to the status quo (Smithey and Kurtz 2018, 6). The second point of relative agreement is that there exists what has become known as *the paradox of repression*, or “when repression creates unanticipated consequences that authorities do not desire” (Smithey and Kurtz 1). At its most basic, the paradox of repression recognizes the fact that “repressive coercion can weaken a regime’s authority, turning public opinion against it,” and that sometimes, “paradoxically, the more a power elite applies force, the more citizens and third parties are likely to become disaffected, sometimes inducing the regime to disintegrate from

internal dissent” (2). Certainly, these dynamics have been seen within the Black Freedom Struggle—especially during the Civil Rights Movement, though also within the Movement for Black Lives. We have clearly seen the ways in which State repression has sparked further outrage and mobilization within the BLM movement, as well as the domestic and international condemnation it has elicited from third party actors and observers.

However, whereas the Civil Rights Movement did succeed in achieving many of its goals, seemingly capitalizing on the paradox of repression, the material gains of BLM have been limited. Some may argue that these discrepancies can be explained by differences within the structure or organization of the movement’s themselves, such as the fact that BLM is more decentralized, which has resulted in less movement discipline and a less appealing image overall (Reynolds 2015). And, civil resistance scholars might agree, as Erica Chenoweth herself claims that “a hierarchical organization seems to increase the likelihood of an ally’s withdrawal of support for the opponent regime,” and that “this finding challenges the commonly held view that decentralized structures are better suited than more hierarchical organizations to achieving success” (Chenoweth 2018, 30-31). In other words, the decentralized and amorphous nature of BLM, though perhaps more inclusive and egalitarian in theory, might also be at fault for the movement’s inability to bring about meaningful and material change. Surely, the decentralized leadership model of BLM could play a role in the movement’s challenges; however, I believe there is much more to the story. In fact, I believe that much of the existing theory fails to accurately account for the shortcomings of the Movement for Black Lives, including its apparent inability to capitalize on the paradox of repression, and I will attempt to explain why.

There is a tendency now, much as there was among more moderate progressives during the Black Power Movement, to idolize the Civil Rights era as the pinnacle of effective

organizing and resistance. Accordingly, many scholars and activists have attempted to examine and explain the shortcomings of BLM through a Civil Rights lens—just as they did during the years of Black Power. To be sure, the Civil Rights Movement was an incredible moment of Black organizing, and it deserves to be celebrated, revered, and analyzed for its successes. However, this tendency to compare the ongoing struggle for racial justice with the Civil Rights Movement obscures a number of important differences. First, The Civil Rights Movement was largely positioned against legal segregation and disenfranchisement, which, as has been discussed, presented a much clearer formation of racial oppression than that which we see today. Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement also unfolded primarily in the South, where the context, conditions, and dynamics of racial violence and oppression were much different than those that we encounter today. Without acknowledging and accounting for the structural and contextual changes that distinguish the mid-twentieth century from today, a differentiation that is too often absent from these conversations, we limit our ability to accurately or effectively compare the movements. Thus, a more apt comparison would be to situate BLM alongside the Black Power Movement—a comparison which, I believe, better illuminates the shortcomings and challenges we've seen in the Movement for Black Lives thus far.

A comparison of the Black Power Movement and the Movement for Black Lives proves incredibly fruitful, not only for how we analyze and discuss movement efficacy, but also for how we understand the contemporary features of both white supremacy *and* Black resistance. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, both Black Power and BLM rest against a very similar backdrop, primarily unfolding within major cities throughout the Northeast, West Coast, and Midwest regions of the country. Even more notably, however, though likely reflecting their contextual similarities, is the fact that both movements are largely driven by a call against state violence and

police brutality. To be sure, both BLM and the Black Power Movement respond to and address a number of issues, and, in the case of Black Power, even begin as an ideological shift within a preexisting movement. However, at the height of its organizational activity, led and exemplified by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Black Power Movement was centered around the growing problem of police brutality—which, as we know today, is the founding and guiding impetus behind BLM. And it is by understanding *this* similarity, by understanding the central goals and grievances that connect the Movement for Black Lives to the Black Power Movement, that we can begin to more accurately assess and discuss their limited success in comparison to the Civil Rights Movement.

Returning now to the discussion of repression, I hope to illuminate—and hopefully begin to overcome—the limitations in existing literature *as it relates to the Black Freedom Struggle*. Again, while this analysis is grounded in the scholarship and theory of Gene Sharp, I believe that these central ideas and critiques apply to much of the civil resistance scholarship that composes the field. According to Sharp’s “social view of power,” and his explication of the three classes of nonviolent actions methods, the inability of the Movement for Black Lives to succeed in pushing for officer convictions and meaningful police reform can be explained, largely, by an overreliance on methods of *nonviolent protest* and *persuasion*—as discussed earlier. For without effectively targeting or undermining the pillars of support on which political power depends, “methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion usually remain expressions of a point of view, or an attempt in action to influence others to accept a point of view or to take a specific action... distinguished from the social, economic, or political pressures imposed by noncooperation or nonviolent intervention” (Sharp 2005, 399). Considered on its own, Sharp’s theory seems to accurately reflect the dynamics we have seen in BLM thus far, and I do believe that an

overwhelming reliance on forms of symbolic protest and mass mobilization has certainly contributed to the outcomes—or lack thereof—that we have seen. And yet, there is a profound discrepancy between the actual threat that the Movement for Black Lives poses, according to civil resistance theory, and the magnitude of repression it has provoked—a discrepancy that merits more attention, and that, upon thoughtful examination, yields valuable insight.

I believe that to understand the violent repression we have seen emerge in response to the Movement for Black Lives, we can begin by turning to the Black Power Movement. As outlined in the final sections of Chapter Three, there were a number of key changes that marked the transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement. Ideologically, Umoja suggests that “the emphasis on self-determination is what primarily distinguishes the Black Movement from the Civil Rights Movement” (Umoja 2013, 6), which is reflected in the many articulations of Black nationalism. Of course, I’ve also emphasized the important geographic and demographic shifts that marked the transition, as the struggle for racial justice left the South and moved increasingly into cities across the north, west, and midwest. Surely, there are also a number of economic and political changes, taking place outside of the movement itself, that could both highlight and explain further differences. However, one of the starkest differences between these two chapters of the Black Freedom Movement was the form and level of repression they encountered. Though we often picture iconic confrontations between Civil Rights marchers and police when we think about anti-black violence in the 1950s and 60s, it is important to remember that the most forceful agents of repression were white supremacist terror groups and civilian mobs—non-state actors who, often unchecked or in alliance with corrupt police and sheriff departments, persecuted Black resistance with relative impunity. Thus, while state and federal forces have always been complicit in anti-black violence, they typically served

a more passive and concealed role, engendering, empowering, or simply ignoring violent white supremacist actors.

In response to the Black Power Movement, however, the source and dynamic of anti-black violence changed. As detailed in Chapter Three, the Black Panthers and other prominent Black Power organizations were met with a full-force counterinsurgency campaign coordinated and executed by state and federal forces. And yet, because we have misremembered and mischaracterized the Black Power movement, and ignored the role of armed resistance throughout the Civil Rights Movement, we have falsely explained this repression as a natural response to violent Black insurgency. But, the Black Panther Party was not the volatile and thuggish group that many have tried to suggest they were, and in fact, employed the tradition of armed self-defense in a way similar to the Deacons for Defense and other Black paramilitary groups in the Civil Rights Movement—groups that never received the same level of federal concern or attention. So then how do we explain the disproportional repression that Black Power activists faced? Why were the Black Panthers, in the words of Hoover, “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” (Marable 2007, 110)?

Learning from those that had fought and fallen short before them, the young and radical thinkers of the Black Power era had begun to understand and envision Black liberation and the pursuit of racial justice in more comprehensive and expansive terms—had come to understand that “equality in social and material terms goes far beyond the confines of the political process, to the very heart of social-class divisions embedded within the fabric of the social order” (Marable 2007, 203). And, by turning their focus to the materiality of racial injustice, to structures of disparate violence rather than symbols of equality, they posed a much more

profound and fundamental threat to white supremacy. Manning Marable eloquently captures the guiding impulse of the Black Power Movement, writing:

The idealistic teenagers of 1960 had become the steely veterans of racial reform. If white liberals blocked proposals for gaining a decent material life for the masses of poor blacks, then they would have to leave our organizations. If Johnson persisted in sending off young black men to die in an Asian war, his administration would have to be toppled. If nonviolence could not win the white racists to biracial democracy and justice, then their brutal terror would be met, blow for blow. If equality was impossible within the political economy of American capitalism, that system which perpetuated black exploitation would have to be overturned. No more compromise; no more betrayals by Negro moderates. Rebellion would supplant reform (2007, 83).

The disillusionment that followed the Civil Rights Movement led activists and organizers to identify the true source of white supremacy, to turn their attention to white violence in both its physical and structural forms, and to attack it directly. Thus, the Black Power Movement, which we often remember as a fringe and cultural wave of Black nationalism, had a revolutionary thrust distinct from earlier periods of the Black Freedom Struggle—incomplete, incoherent, and at times nihilistic, but revolutionary nonetheless. In fact, Black Power activists were not the only ones who turned their attention to the intersections of race and class, as many movement veterans had also begun to change their tone and approach. For example, while King had spent most of his political career pushing for legal inclusion and advocating for nonviolent tactics, perhaps it is telling that he was killed while visiting Memphis to support a workers strike—“organizing militant black urban workers, building a national poor people’s march, and defying a president. He had come a long way; so had his vision for reconstructing America” (Marable 2007, 102). And while the militant and imaginative organizers of the Black Power Movement—and their radicalized movement elders—attempted to usher in this new era of racial justice and economic equality, they were ultimately unable to overcome the manifold mechanisms of white violence that have always, at their core, been most fearful of an organized and inclusive Black rebellion.

In fact, physical anti-black violence has most often been used, historically, to protect and preserve the violent *structures* of white supremacy; and thus, by posing a more direct threat to these structures of violence, Black Power activists and organizers consequently elicited greater threats of physical repression. And thus, we uncover one of the preeminent problems that arose in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, and that is how to effectively challenge the structures of white supremacist violence—specifically within a new geopolitical context that precludes successful (armed) self-defense. For not only were the demands and ideals of the Black Power Movement a greater threat to the white supremacist social order, which triggered immense repression from both the state and overtly white supremacist actors, but the movement had also lost its ability to protect itself as it had done for decades before. And I believe it is this problem, exactly, that continues to define the Black Freedom Struggle. Much like the Black Power Movement, the Movement for Black Lives has positioned itself not against symbols of exclusion or inequality, but against the structures of violence that continue to terrorize Black communities—against police brutality, hyper criminalization and mass incarceration, environmental racism, and the systems of racial capitalism that continue to disproportionately harm and dispossess poor Black and brown communities. And, much like the Black Power Movement, the Movement for Black Lives has been confronted by a distinct and disproportionate repressive response that both affirms its guiding impulse, and poses a challenge for which we have not yet found an answer. Thus, while the intuition and inclination to look backward in hopes of finding answers for the problems of today is commendable, we have to look at the right place.

By reflecting only on the Civil Rights Movement (and a distorted, pacified, incomplete, and compressed version at that), and ignoring the final years of the Black Freedom Movement,

we have missed the most important part of the story. Similarly, by celebrating only the most visible and symbolic components of the Civil Rights Movement, and ignoring the more radical and militant strategies that emerged before, during, and immediately after the mass protests of the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, we have misled ourselves to believing that we must replicate a limited model of organizing and resistance that never truly existed. We have not grappled with the issues of class and gender that permeated the Civil Rights Movement, nor fully appreciated the internal class divisions that have deepened within Black America in the past half century. We have not considered the value of space-now-lost in offering safety and security to southern Blacks, nor the new space that now increasingly separates middle- and upper-class Blacks from their poor and working-class counterparts as we continue to witness waves of Black flight (Marable 2007, 188). We have not yet contended with the very real fact that a militarized police state poses a vastly different challenge to activists and organizers than the mid-twentieth century structures of law enforcement, especially when considered alongside the aforementioned dynamics. And while the Civil Rights Movement undoubtedly has valuable lessons to offer, I believe it is the parts of the story that we have left out—the histories of Black armed resistance—that perhaps offer the most valuable insights for today.

On (White) Violence

While my thesis is largely an examination—and celebration—of a certain tradition of Black (armed) resistance, it is also a historical account of the evolution of white supremacy, and of the structures of white violence on which it depends. And while I have made a point to center the agentic and proactive aspects of Black resistance, to explore and uplift the richness of Black subjectivity, I cannot dismiss the basic fact that Black resistance has always emerged within the

matrix of (white) violence. I put “white” in parentheses not to suggest that there is any doubt or uncertainty regarding the centrality of white supremacy in orchestrating the multiplex forms of violence that presently harms Black communities, but to acknowledge that the enactors of this anti-black violence must not always be white themselves. In fact, one cannot discuss white supremacy and white violence without also addressing the proliferation of violence within and among Black communities. As Marable writes,

The most disturbing social characteristic within black America in the post-segregation period was the upward spiral in the rate of homicide. Trapped in the urban ghettos of America’s decaying inner cities, plagued with higher unemployment rates, disease, bad housing, poor public schools, and inadequate social services, young blacks were filled with a sense of anger, self-hatred, and bitterness... In the wake of the demise of militant black nationalism, and with the flight of the black élite into the safe havens of suburbia, the ghetto’s black rage was unleashed against itself (2007, 152).

Unfortunately, America’s inner cities continue to confront a gun violence epidemic that disproportionately sees young Black men as both victims and perpetrators. While many conservative thinkers and politicians often point to this “black-on-black” crime as evidence that the contemporary cries against white supremacy and systemic racism are misplaced, or fabricated altogether, such a stance simply exposes a lack of historical knowledge. Of course, it is both necessary and instructive to critically examine the enduring gun violence crisis that plagues many urban Black communities today, and to grapple with the historical relationship between arms, violence, and (Black) masculinity. In fact, it would seem remiss to overlook the very real possibility that this devastating phenomenon might represent a tragic legacy of the Black tradition of arms—a possibility that deserves further consideration and research. However, as Marable illuminates, to view this present and ongoing crisis in isolation, without situating it in the history of racial oppression and dispossession, is to conceal the primacy of white violence in constructing the very spaces we now view with fear and condemnation. It is also necessary to

recognize that there is a broader pervasive and historical culture of violence within the United States, and the Global North in general, and it would be illogical to assume that this dominant cultural tendency could somehow miss marginalized subcultures entirely—or at all, for that matter. As Cobb reflects, “we have also become more warlike as a nation, and as individuals. Regardless of race or social status, we are now more likely than we once were to settle arguments or react to frustration with violence” (2016, 243).

Still, white violence is the bedrock of racial capitalism, and its ensuing structures continue to criminalize, dispossess, and destroy Black life with impunity. The onus of creating a more peaceful society, then, is upon those white individuals and institutions—and their various and multiracial accomplices and supporters—that continue to preserve and perpetuate white supremacy, to uphold the legitimacy of white violence as a necessary and productive change-making tool. And yet, as the histories discussed throughout this thesis have made very clear, white supremacy will not cede easily, nor will its violent structures fall without force. Thus, until (white) violence ceases to define the everyday experiences and life chances of Black communities, and until the institutional structures and channels of our nation are able to offer just, genuine, effective and accessible avenues through which Black Americans can both lay claim to and make meaning of their freedom and citizenship, which will necessarily include reckoning with and recompensing the nation’s ugly past as is deemed appropriate, organized grassroots resistance will continue to be an essential tool in the pursuit of safety, liberation, and unrestricted citizenship. Of course, arriving at that point will undoubtedly require a diverse array of familiar protest and resistance methods, including but certainly not limited to methods of strategic nonviolent action. However, it will also require that we exercise and encourage our imaginative capacities to envision new forms of resistance.

Looking Forward: (Re)imagining Resistance in the Face of Racial Capitalism

A revolution is first and foremost a movement from the old to the new, and needs above all new words, new verse, new passwords—all the symbols in which ideas and feelings are made tangible. The mass creation and appropriation of what is needed is a revealing picture of a whole people on their journey into the modern world, sometimes pathetic, sometimes vastly comic, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, but always vibrant with the life that only a mass of ordinary people can give. - C.L.R. James

At its core, revolutionary resistance is an imaginative act. Certain only that the present conditions are unviable, and that the necessary changes cannot arrive within the existing structures, the revolutionary activist moves toward an uncertain future guided by hopes and dreams for a reality they've likely never experienced. And yet, resistance is also learned, in that its methods, aspirations, and guiding values are passed down between generations. As Barbara Ransby (2003) writes in her masterful biography of Miss Baker's life, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, "the young activists of the 1960s did not invent either the radical antiracist ideas they espoused or the confrontational tactics they embraced; rather, they inherited and reconfigured them" (216). Thus, while we may not know exactly what or where we are moving towards, we might learn from the insights and struggles of those before us. In the case of the Black Freedom Struggle, the most pressing question remains how, given the historical structuralization of white supremacy, we might effectively challenge the structures of violence on which it depends? And while Black communities and their allies have been confronting this violence for generations, in its manifold forms and in increasingly diverse ways, we have yet to figure out how to do so through concerted grassroots uprising—have yet to usher in the Third Reconstruction that is so desperately needed. There is, however, a history of bold and militant Black Americans who forcefully and persistently undermined white violence, who understood its

centrality in preserving white supremacy, and I've attempted to tell their story throughout this thesis. The tradition of Black armed resistance has always, necessarily and directly, targeted the very sources of white violence on which white supremacy depends; and while the viability and practical value of organized armed resistance may have diminished, we might learn from the historical role it has played in protecting and empowering African American communities. Thus, perhaps the (hi)stories discussed throughout this thesis can offer some valuable insight into what we should look for in envisioning and enacting future forms of resistance.

One of the primary functions that armed resistance has served throughout the Black Freedom Struggle is eliminating, or at least decreasing, the immediate threat of white violence. In the past, this was often achieved by creating and forcefully defending alternative spaces, such as maroons and haven communities; however, due to the changing structures of white violence, and the now-urban configuration of many Black communities themselves, this task will likely have to look very different today. Rather than Black individuals and communities distancing themselves from white violence, today, decreasing the immediate threat of white violence will likely mean removing the sources of white violence from Black communities. For example, demilitarizing and demobilizing law enforcement within urban Black communities—and, ideally, dismantling the carceral police state altogether. In this way, the Movement for Black Lives is already targeting one of the pillars of white supremacy, and recognizing the principal importance of protecting Black lives to the process of revolution. However, equally as important is uprooting the other sources of white supremacy as well, particularly as they are embedded in the *structures* of violence that harm so many poor Black and brown communities—for example, ensuring that communities have access to secure and affordable housing, reliable healthcare, safe employment opportunities, and quality education are all integral to decreasing the threat of

violence. In addition to weakening white supremacy, such structural remediations will also decrease the prevalence of violence within Black communities themselves, further empowering the fight to dismantle the carceral police state. Additionally, while it may be more difficult for communities to physically distance themselves from white violence, there are still ways we can create alternative spaces—both as a means of promoting physical and psychological safety and well-being, but also as a means of establishing alternative structures and institutions through which we might begin to address the multifaceted challenges facing the Black community, all while also freeing ourselves from the oppressive and exploitative systems that continue to pervade our society. For example, investing in and supporting Black-owned businesses, developing economic co-ops and other forms of community-based financing, establishing community gardens, and investing in parks and other shared public spaces; subtextual to all of this, however, is a realignment of the Black middle- and upper-class with their lower- and working-class counterparts, as such projects simply cannot be undertaken without addressing the ongoing exodus of capital from poor inner-city neighborhoods.

In addition to uprooting and undermining sources and structures of white violence, it is also important to acknowledge the other ways that armed resistance has functioned within the Black Freedom Struggle, particularly as a source of personal and collective empowerment. For while armed resistance has certainly enabled communities to overcome their fear of repressive white terror, it has also provided a productive channel through which Black folks, and Black men in particular, could express their pain and frustration (Johnson 2013, 239-40)—often to the benefit of themselves and their communities. For example, Marable suggests that the militant Black nationalism of “Black Power provided unemployed black youth with an opportunity to vent their collective anger into a political act of defiance,” and that without this channel, “the

ghetto's black rage was unleashed against itself' (2007, 152). In other words, fostering and promoting forms of empowerment is essential not only to building social movements, but also to allowing communities to endure the challenges of their daily lives—especially in the absence of meaningful opportunities for political engagement. And while current circumstances and the prevalence of gun violence may dissuade a renewed embrace of the Black tradition of arms as a form of empowerment, perhaps there are other forms of Black militancy and radical rebellion that could serve a similar function—and we would be wise to pay any such alternatives more attention. For while nonviolent protest and strategic nonviolent action is certainly a powerful and capable tool for social uprising, I question its ability to channel the deep wells of disillusionment and anger that fester in the hearts and minds of many Black Americans, as it has never done so single-handedly.

Because of my own interests and personal connections, and because I believe that the historical underpinnings of the United States have bred a distinct form of white supremacy worth considering on its own, I have centered the experiences and struggles of African Americans throughout this thesis. I recognize, however, that this work has never been, and will never be, simply a race issue. For the same systems and structures that have terrorized and tormented Black communities for decades now harm poor rural white communities, immigrant communities, and even working- to lower-middle-class whites. And it is these same systems and structures that continue to brutalize poor people around the world, particularly in the Global South. So, while the brunt of the burden will continue to fall disproportionately on Black and Indigenous communities for the foreseeable future, particularly within the context of the United States, the violence of racial capitalism cannot be contained to these communities alone. Thus, the struggle against the violent forces of white supremacy cannot be waged as an anti-racist

project limited to the boundaries of the United States; rather, this project must necessarily answer to the decolonial and anti-imperial cries around the world, and it must be multifaceted in all respects—multiracial, multiethnic, multinational, etc.

And yet, this project cannot be achieved all at once, nor will it suffice to envision revolutionary change in only broad and abstract terms. To conclude, then, I will return to the radical democratic vision of Miss Ella Baker, who understood as well as anyone that revolution is a process, rather than an event—that “transformation has to occur at the societal and institutional level, but also at the local and personal level” (Ransby 2003, 192). For Baker, large-scale change always and necessarily begins at the local level, with the “little people” and “uncouth masses.” And “although she knew full well that racial inequality was structural, to her it was not an abstract system to be tackled indirectly. People themselves had to make a change by challenging inequality concretely, as they encountered it in their daily lives” (Ransby 2003, 285). So perhaps we can learn from Miss Baker’s vision, draw strength and inspiration from the generations of Black Americans who pursued their freedom with fearlessness and force, and begin to chart the radical and militant path necessary to arrive at a more just and inclusive future.

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