

Black Is a Country

Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy

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The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK*

The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success . . . only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination.

—ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *SELECTIONS FROM THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS*

"Black" is a country.

—LEROI JONES, *HOME: SOCIAL ESSAYS*

Introduction: Civil Rights, Civic Myths

The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are deeply rooted in the whole structure of our society . . . and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., “A TESTAMENT OF HOPE” (1969)

Martin Luther King Jr. announced his opposition to the Vietnam War in the spring of 1967. In the court of public opinion, the response was swift—he was vilified. King’s decision to break his long silence about the war was overshadowed by his assassination one year later. But as the campaign against him in the press, in Congress, among civil rights leaders, and by the FBI showed, King was neither beyond a fall from grace nor immune to allegations of sedition. *Life* magazine called his antiwar statements “demagogic slander” fit for “Radio Hanoi.” Lyndon Johnson remarked that King was “destroying his reputation” and had finally “thrown in with the communists” (which FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had claimed all along). Many of King’s longtime supporters accused him of betrayal and wrong-headedness, saying, “Peace and civil rights don’t mix.”¹ The man who only a few years earlier had been charged with saving the soul of America was readily cast beyond the borders of acceptable discourse.²

King spoke “as a citizen of the world . . . aghast at the path we have taken” and “as an American to the leaders of my own nation.”³ In adopting this dual stance, King tied the U.S. extension of colonial war in Vietnam to the failure to achieve racial equality and justice at home. The fear of communism, he argued specifically, had distorted the American revolutionary tradition, transforming it into a counter-revolutionary animus.⁴ The costs of this animus were stark: an exhaustion of precious economic resources, an elevation of violence and

militarism as pre-eminent responses to human conflict, and a fatal loss of belief in the project of societal reform.⁵ "If America's soul becomes poisoned," King summarized, "part of the autopsy must read Vietnam." The patriotic conviction that had once driven him into the civil rights struggle now required him to go "beyond national allegiances."⁶

We can wonder whether, had King lived beyond 1968, his stature would have risen with the burgeoning peace movement, or whether he would have been diminished and eventually broken, like earlier black radicals such as Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois, by attacks that he was traitorous and un-American. King refused to see his antiwar stance in these terms or as inconsistent with his earlier views. The movement that he had come to personify was never limited to securing the rights of black people, he said. Black struggles for justice, dignity, and self-respect had always been about achieving a broader transformation of the United States into an equitable society. At the same time, where King had once extolled the uplifting power of the American Dream and cast himself in a long line of successful black strivers from Booker T. Washington to Ralph Bunche and Jackie Robinson, he now embraced the traditions of black dissidence.⁷ Struggling for justice as a black person in America, he said, was a calling that went beyond "race, nation or creed." In his last public address, King tellingly identified himself with Du Bois, as an activist for peace who had ended his life as an exile from the land of his birth.⁸

Embracing what he called "a world perspective" on violence and inequality, King could no longer avoid a decisive confrontation with the ethical and political shortfalls of U.S. power abroad and the truncation of reformist commitment at home. His subsequent sermons and speeches elaborating on these views were widely aired not in the United States, but in Canada, by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). King opened one of these addresses with: "Over and above any kinship of United States citizens and Canadians as North Americans, there is a singular historical relationship between American Negroes and Canada. Canada is not merely a neighbor to Negroes, in our struggle for freedom, Canada was the North Star." Here, King, the chief symbol of U.S. racial-national integration, consciously deconstructed the unifying term—"United States citizens"—emphasizing that "Negroes" had a separate existence within, and a tortured relationship to, the United States as a nation. This "singular" history,

he implied, made other sorts of allegiances and affiliations possible, even necessary. Indeed, King's own experience now seemed to bear this out.⁹

Today, no figure more fully embodies the notion that racial equality is a U.S. national imperative than Martin Luther King Jr. King's most cited rhetoric tied the fortunes of blacks to the status of the U.S. nation-state and to its dominant and defining systems of belief: Christianity, liberal-individualism, and democratic-capitalism. Civil rights reforms, he argued, were urgent matters of national redemption and moral regeneration that would open up a world for individual black achievement ("the content of our character") beyond the barrier of race ("the color of our skin"). At the 1963 March on Washington, King likened the black freedom movement to a person trying to cash a check that had been repeatedly stamped "insufficient funds," defining the fulfillment of black aspirations as litmus test for the United States as an affluent, consumer society.¹⁰ This is the King who is today remembered—even commemorated—with a national holiday, making him the only African American memorialized for the nation at large.

Yet this is also the King who has become part of a mythic nationalist discourse that claims his antiracist imperatives as its own, even as it obscures his significantly more complex, worldly, and radical politics. Indeed, just as King's antiwar stance has been minimized or forgotten, so has the steady incorporation of currents of democratic socialism and black nationalism into his thinking. By the end of his life, King viewed the idea of obtaining civil rights for black individuals as an inadequate framework for combating the economic consequences and cultural legacies of white supremacy. The latter, he believed, had powerfully skewed the economic and political structure of U.S. society, leading to a toleration of massive poverty at home and to an imperial arrogance in world affairs. To combat these, King argued, black people would have to "organize our strength into compelling power." This meant continuing the unfinished struggles for juridical protection and electoral influence. It also meant pursuing the more difficult project of valorizing and institutionalizing the forms of black "collective wisdom and vitality" that had accumulated through long decades of struggle.¹¹

In formulating these more challenging views, King drew inspiration from earlier black radicals, like Du Bois, who had been marginalized by Cold War politics even as he sought to open a dialogue with young,

black-power radicals who rejected his beliefs in nonviolent protest and racial integration, but who had difficulty formulating coherent theoretical or programmatic approaches to transforming society.¹² Rather than seeing the later King as quixotic or aberrational, we might recognize how for a brief moment he opened a bridge between past and future black radicalisms and their more expansive dreams of freedom. As King understood, black freedom dreams had a habit of exceeding the sanctioned boundaries and brokered compromises of the established political order. Recognizing their persistence and reclaiming their relevance as he did is one of the tasks of this book.¹³

Taking the disjuncture between King as a redemptive national icon and King as an unsettling figure in opposition to the nation-state seriously opens the door to a substantially different interpretation of the civil rights era and its contemporary legacy. The diverging views and conceptions of King typify the successes and failures of the civil rights era itself. On one hand, antiracism and a belief in black equality have attained wide legitimacy in the national public sphere. Overt and direct expressions of antiblack racism are unacceptable, and official public utterances and juridical practice must take account of formal black equality with respect to nationality. At the same time, the assumption that time-honored national norms and ideals have been the effective guarantors of racial justice has an air of unreality that continues to whitewash our history.

Perhaps because he approached, but did not attain (at least in his life), the status of citizen of the world, King has become a symbol of the universalizing force of American norms and institutions. The triumph of the civil rights movement under King's leadership is now said to reveal certain truths about the nation and how its values of tolerance and inclusive boundaries have been reconstituted in our own time.¹⁴ As Taylor Branch puts it, "His oratory gave King authority to reinterpret the core intuition of democratic justice. More than his words, the timbre of his voice projected him across the racial divide and planted him as a new founding father."¹⁵ King's democratic challenge, in other words, was powerful and recognizable insofar as it conformed to the retrospective illusion of shared national identity across time: appearing as "the fulfillment of a project" and as the "completion of a destiny."¹⁶ As a new founding father, the mythic King allowed Americans not only to celebrate their progress into a more inclusive and tolerant people, but also to tell themselves that this is who they always were.

This "King-centric" account of the civil rights era has become central to a civic mythology of racial progress in late twentieth-century America.¹⁷ Beginning with the decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, what might be termed the short civil rights era is imagined to have taken place primarily in the Jim Crow South from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, in a series of social movements to desegregate public life and register black voters. With a familiar cast, including a weary Rosa Parks, idealistic, well-dressed black students, and the charismatic minister, the movement is said to have culminated with the 1963 March on Washington, the passage of landmark national legislation and social policy, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, followed by Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. This brief period is now viewed as the apex of the historical arc of black struggles for citizenship in the United States: the moment when questions of black political participation and civic equality became central to U.S. civic identity; a long overdue vindication of what King once called "the amazing universalism" of the founding documents and the American Dream.¹⁸

But this is not the end of the story. Just as there is a rise, there is a fall; just as there is a hagiography, so there is a demonology. Around 1965, we are told, the civil rights movement turned north (and west), where it stalled in the face of intractable problems of black urbanity: residential segregation, chronic black underemployment, and seething ghetto resentment. These explosive conditions, suggested the Kerner Commission Report on the urban disorders of 1968, had in three short years left the progressive optimism of what some had called a Second Reconstruction in a shambles. America, the commission stated, was "two societies, separate and unequal."¹⁹ At this point a series of sudden, coincidental shifts are said to have occurred: from civil rights to black power; south to north; nonviolent to violent; tolerant to divisive; integrationist to black nationalist; patriotic to anti-American, all conspiring to fracture the movement, undermine political support, and create a widespread public backlash against what were now seen as excessive black demands.

If King has come to stand for the idea of an America in which racial equality has already been achieved, the image of black militancy born from a ghetto-underclass has both legitimized the withdrawal of public commitment to laws and social policies designed to promote racial equality and helped to renew an age-old racist imagination. The alleged descent from interracial coalition politics and nonviolent pro-

test to militant separatism and urban conflict fostered the public conception that black protest went too far in the 1960s, becoming illiberal in its means and ends. In turn, the civil rights movement—with King frozen in time before the Lincoln Memorial—is represented as part of an achieved national, political consensus, shattered only when blacks themselves abandoned the normative discourses of American politics.²⁰

This narrative is built on a number of misleading representations of modern U.S. racial history. It relies on an abbreviated periodization of the civil rights era, as well as fallacies about the South as an exception to national racial norms. It fails to recognize the historical depth and heterogeneity of black struggles against racism, narrowing the political scope of black agency and reinforcing a formal, legalistic view of black equality. It obscures a violent history of black opposition to white supremacy well underway in urban areas, particularly in centers of wartime production, since World War II. Indeed, interracial discord—particularly in northern cities—stimulated by both *de jure* and *de facto* racial hierarchies of state and private agencies in housing and labor markets, as well as by policing and criminal justice practices, was clearly manifest decades before the southern civil rights movement. The eruptions of black ghettos in the 1960s, far from being irrational, inexplicable phenomena, were the result of well-established patterns and recurrent racial conflict.²¹

After World War I black migration and the attendant racialization of city life began to undermine the Jim Crow-era rationalizations of racial division as a regional idiosyncrasy rather than an issue of national concern and import. Bracketed by Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's Great Society, what I call the long civil rights era was in this sense the product of a dual phenomenon: the Keynesian transformation of the liberal capitalist state during the 1930s and the emergence of black social movements that were urban, national, and transnational in scope and conception. The first created the conditions in which the classical liberal injunction to insulate market transactions from centralized state intervention was viewed as untenable, and in which nationalist principles of a social-democratic kind began to achieve an expanded purview over weakly integrated, racially stratified, state and local powers. The second constituted the social fact of racial inequality as a symbolic index against which the achievement of U.S. civic ideals could be measured and the legitimacy of U.S. global aspirations could be assessed.

The nationwide reform of society that began under the New Deal was augmented by the American rise to globalism at the end of World War II. During the war, black activists drew strong links between fascism, colonialism, and U.S. racial segregation that could not be wished away. With the onset of the Cold War, U.S. State Department officials routinely argued that white supremacy was the "Achilles heel" of U.S. foreign relations. From the highest levels of government and social policy, it appeared that the stability of the expanded American realm of action in the world was linked to the resolution of the crisis of racial discord and division at home.²² This fact accelerated the internal decomposition of the *de jure* racial order and the development of new intellectual and legal frameworks that reflected efforts to include black people in the nation by de-racializing institutions of government and civil society. Two decades of racial reform followed that saw the end of legalized Jim Crow; the securing of black political rights, representation, and social freedoms; the widespread entry of blacks into trade unions, the military, and the civil service; and the recognition of black artists, performers, and athletes at the center of a national popular culture.

Even as an officially sanctioned apartheid was being dismantled, however, new structures of racial inequality, rooted in a national racial geography of urban ghettos and suburban idylls, and intractable disparities of black and white wealth and employment were being established. For three decades, reformist and putatively race-neutral social policies formulated in the New Deal era actually reinforced and expanded numerous racial disparities.²³ Those denied protection under the Social Security Act of 1935 were disproportionately black farm workers and black and female domestic workers living in the South. Despite institutionalizing collective bargaining and a host of new protections to trade unions, the 1935 Wagner Act did nothing to stop existing union practices of racial discrimination and exclusion. After the creation of the Federal Housing Authority in 1937, appraisers used race as an evaluative tool, expressly warning against extending a new generation of federally backed loans to central city areas they described as "honey-combed with diverse and subversive racial elements."²⁴

After World War II, government housing and highway policy encouraged the growth of lily-white suburbs, helping to build equity in property for generations of working-class and lower middle-class whites systematically denied to blacks. Urban renewal projects de-

signed to respond to the severe urban housing shortages faced by racial minority communities in the 1950s and 1960s catered instead to commercial, commuter, and business interests. These projects routinely bisected black neighborhoods with freeways and tramlines and invariably destroyed more housing than they created.²⁵ Finally, throughout this period, trade unions favored agreements that protected the benefits and seniority of organized, predominantly white workers and eschewed organizing efforts to end discriminatory hiring practices that might have resulted in more unorganized workers of color gaining union protection.²⁶

In the arena of foreign relations, the United States' struggle for global hegemony increased pressure on the federal government to abolish the formal vestiges of racial inequality, helping to advance the assault on the juridical underpinnings of racial segregation. At the same time, the imperatives of fighting the Cold War severely constrained domestic political dissent in conformity with the new doctrines of national and global security and in conjunction with an unprecedented reliance on U.S. military power in the world at large. A rigid test of anticommunist patriotism undermined the forms and expressions of radical antiracism that had reached their apogee in the 1930s in association with anti-imperialist and class struggles across the globe.²⁷ As King pointed out, the destructive nexus of racism, capitalism, and imperialism that tied the fates of the U.S. black revolution and the Vietnamese struggle for national liberation was not a new development, but was the return of what had been repressed within Cold War intellectual and political culture. That the state-sponsored civil rights imperative began to fade at this moment was less the result of popular anger at black deviations from a normative nationalist trajectory than of the difficulty surmounting accumulated national and global contradictions of racial-imperial history: what King called "the tragic evasions and defaults of several centuries."²⁸

The extant national narrative of racial progress and backlash in the short civil rights era obscures the more complex and contentious racial history of the long civil rights era. In particular, the notion of a backlash against the excesses of black radicalism willfully ignores historically entrenched opposition to even the most moderate civil rights reforms throughout the white South and much of the urban North across the entire post-World War II period. From the inception of New Deal liberalism, white Southerners were weakly committed to

the reformism of the federal state, viewing it as a threat to the prerogatives of white supremacy long defended under the auspices of states' rights. When the federal courts mandated school desegregation, whites across the South immediately began massive resistance campaigns and years of successful stalling tactics. Meanwhile, despite their historic support for New Deal liberal social policies, unionized, white ethnic, and working-class voters violently policed the racial boundaries of their neighborhoods and occupational sinecures for more than a generation. As revealed by the well-known scenes of white rioting in Cicero, a Chicago neighborhood, in 1966, the northward turn of the southern civil rights movement only stoked long-burning embers of urban racial conflict.

In the late 1960s, Richard Nixon's political strategist, Kevin Phillips, predicted that these two constituencies—white southerners and urban white ethnics—would propel a dramatic political realignment away from New Deal liberalism and toward a new republican majority.²⁹ While neither group of working-class whites especially sympathized with the market-fundamentalism and antistatism of conservatives like Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, a new conservatism constructed much of its political identity through displays of hostility to what it called black "special pleading" in the marketplace and black misbehavior in the public square. Even before Nixon deployed Phillips's Southern Strategy to win the 1968 election, Ronald Reagan pioneered these tactics as California's governor, when he opposed fair and open housing legislation as a violation of market freedoms. Reagan not only defended the rights of "homeowners in a 'free society' to 'discriminate against Negroes if they chose,'" he also promised a crackdown on what he would characterize as unlawful and subversive activities in Berkeley, Oakland, and other hotbeds of radical, anti-racist activism.³⁰

The historical shift represented by the Reagan presidency of 1980–1988 was condensed in the fateful shift from the 1960s War on Poverty to the 1980s War on Drugs. A signal accomplishment of these years was the reinvention and renewal of discredited racial logics of the past. When Reagan, a short fifteen years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, launched his 1980 presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, calling himself a states' righter, and George H. W. Bush eight years later made a furloughed, recidivist black rapist and murderer named Willie Horton into the face of liberal-induced

social decay, they engaged the power of unreconstructed, if increasingly well-coded, racist appeals. Such coding of course was not without precedent in an American racist discourse that long favored innuendo, inside jokes, and conspiratorial hysteria over the direct public disclosure of racist intent and feeling. Invidious racial imagery of a black underclass—comprised of wild youths and welfare queens—became an effective right-wing tool to advance broad attacks on tax-supported government services and transfer payments aimed at ameliorating the social conditions of the working poor and unemployed. Insofar as urban black existence remained a concern of government during this period, it was largely in the realm of criminal justice. During these years black incarceration rates quadrupled; today, more than one million black persons are in prisons and jails, making blacks approximately 50 percent of the entire U.S. prison population.³¹

Yet perhaps the greater success of post-civil rights conservatism was its ability to co-opt the discourse of civil rights liberalism and to make its arguments about racial conditions without endorsing racial inequality. Basing resistance to black calls for social justice on a defense of market individualism and national unity, rather than on claims of black inferiority, conservatives changed the debate about race from an argument about how to best redress the economic and political injuries of racism to one that equates ending racism with eliminating racial reference within juridical discourse and public policy. Reagan appointee and conservative U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia put it best in 1995: "In the eyes of the government, we are just one race here. It is American."³²

Scalia's invocation of the idea of an American race underscores a dogmatic vision of national unity—one whose power has arguably increased after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—that expressly precludes more complicated histories of racialized national identity. For the majority of blacks, the consequences of this have been severe. Since the 1990s, a form of antiracism that is seen as equivalent to American nationalism has been the rationale for overturning policies and programs once deemed essential to fulfilling an antiracist national agenda. The pretext for reform in one period has become the basis for abandoning it in another. Race now means racism, especially when it is used to define or defend the interests of a minority community. Meanwhile, "civil rights" has been appropriated as the slogan of statewide ballot initiatives to end race- and gender-

based hiring and college admissions provisions that are said to violate principles of abstract national equality.

In a sweeping rollback of civil rights-era jurisprudence, in the 1990s the U.S. Supreme Court overturned minority-business set-aside programs, minority voter redistricting efforts, and court-ordered desegregation mandates. Meanwhile, the new Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton went his predecessors one better, promising to "end welfare as we know it." Both the legal decisions and the policy shift were filtered through a logic of neoliberal discipline that vehemently opposes government intervention into the "natural" workings of the marketplace, implicitly reopening an expanded field for the play of "private" racist beliefs and practices. Emboldened by the Supreme Court, voter initiatives and legal challenges to affirmative action have been successful in California, Washington, and Texas, and at the time of this writing are being advanced in several states. The now widely held view that any race-based amelioration constitutes a form of reverse discrimination indicates that the public effort to secure social, civil, and political redress for racially aggrieved communities has reached an historic impasse, if not end.³³

Most recently the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the legality of affirmative action while narrowing the technical means of its application. In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court upheld the principle of race-based admissions at the University of Michigan Law School on the grounds that the social management of diverse institutions (in particular the U.S. military) requires that pathways to leadership are "open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity." At the same time, in *Gratz v. Bollinger* the court struck down the more expansive policy that applied extra points for race in awarding admission to the University of Michigan's College of Arts and Sciences. Together these decisions encapsulate a societal context in which race remains conceptually available as a tool for elite governance under neoliberalism, and at the same time a wedge issue that effectively limits broader, democratic redistributions of social goods.³⁴

In sum, the prevailing common sense of the post-civil rights era is that race is the provenance of an unjust, irrational ascription and prejudice; while nation is the necessary horizon of our hopes for color-blind justice, equality, and fair play. While this view has critics, including those who advocate multicultural educational and social policy agendas attentive to the particular needs, concerns, and social

locations of minority populations, it is ascendant in American law, politics, and public intellectual discourse. Though nominally anti-racist, the rise of what might be called color-blind universalism conspicuously coincided with the dramatic rollback of federal civil rights enforcement during the Reagan and first Bush presidential administrations, massive cutbacks in federal aid to cities, and the recoding of black existence in urban areas as a major threat to public safety and political virtue (that is, the moral panics over crime and welfare).³⁵

In the post-civil rights era, the rising incomes that characterize the partial integration of a black middle-class into the circuits of U.S. prosperity remain weakly related to the accumulated propertied wealth of generations (and thus are more vulnerable to economic downturn). Meanwhile, the lower-middle-class fractions of this class continue to depend on a diminishing realm of public-sector and manufacturing jobs. Blacks without a college education, who comprise the far higher percentage of the working and workless poor, are not only overrepresented in U.S. prisons and in the U.S. Army, but also in the low-wage, nonunionized economic sectors that have seen slow growth and stagnant wages since the early 1970s. Despite a decline in biological arguments for black inferiority, the belief that blacks are culturally deficient—less intelligent, less industrious, and less patriotic than whites—remains widespread.³⁶ The soft racism of bootstrap survival still marks the stories of black social ascent, even as black achievement becomes condescending proof that race no longer matters. Meanwhile, racism's hard edge remains very much alive in the spatial isolation, hair-trigger profiling, and incarceration of underemployed urban black youth, whose social and economic repression returns (as it always has) in the racial fantasies of our national, popular culture.³⁷

N The unraveling of the social and political consensus that enabled the limited reforms of the earlier period has exposed the shaky political, institutional, and ideological foundations on which much racial progress has been built. The contemporary reversals of prior movements toward racial equality reveal the gains of the short civil rights era as provisional codifications of a more complex social reality, temporary achievements of longer-fought and still-persisting social conflicts. More than the pronouncements of presidents and the courts, a history of black subaltern struggle, white resistance, and open and surreptitious racial discord shaped the uneven transformations in

post-World War II U.S. racial formation.³⁸ For a brief period, the demands and critiques of black intellectuals, activists, and masses of black people who took to the streets could not be ignored by a nation-state intent on legitimizing its claims to global power and domestic consensus. Yet, in the crucible fired by the clash of black protest and white supremacy and cooled by the workings of political administration and juridical response, national integration, let alone racial justice and equality, has been the exception more often than the rule.

Prominent black neoconservative and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas gives voice to much of current political wisdom when he asserts that the long and cruel history of racial differentiation and inequality in the United States will be overcome once whites and blacks are "blended into a common nationality."³⁹ Yet the historical and political process of translating black difference into normative, national subjecthood in the United States remains poorly understood, even as it seems to have been deferred once again. What is generally overlooked in formulations such as Thomas's is the fact that this nation-state has been a powerful mechanism for at once instituting racial division and domination and enabling universalistic visions of inclusion and opportunity. Yet, as King recognized at the end of his life, the redemptive investment in the force of American universalism may not be so easy to sever from histories of U.S. force and violence in which blacks have stood among the casualties and victims.

Indeed, when seen in this light it becomes possible to re-examine King's duality and hence his paradigmatic status. Even before his controversial stand on Vietnam, King declared that "there is no more civil rights movement . . . President Johnson signed it out of existence when he signed the voting rights bill."⁴⁰ But this was far from an admission on his part that the struggle against white supremacy had ended. Civil rights, King argued, were just the beginning of a struggle that revolved around housing, employment, and economic justice, the root struggles of the long civil rights era. Lest we forget, King's last visit to Memphis was to support a strike of predominantly black sanitation workers. As he recognized in his radical last years, "justice for black people will not flow into society merely from court decisions nor from the fountains of political oratory."⁴¹ "It is time that we stopped our blithe lip service to the guarantees of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . . equally native to us is the concept that gross exploitation of the Negro is acceptable, if not commendable."⁴²

Attacking the presumptions of the “amazing universalism” of the American dream he had championed only a few years before, King argued that the U.S. nation-state was neither a stable mediator of social antagonisms nor the ultimate horizon of black hopes for justice. In doing so, he drew on an intellectual and historical tradition of black protest that dramatically exceeded the terms of normative U.S. social, economic, and political discourses. King may have rejected what he regarded as a misconceived and dangerous emphasis on violence by younger black militants, but he largely accepted their argument, which linked the racism, poverty, and inequality concentrated in black urban areas to “world perspective” on U.S. force and violence used to maintain global inequalities. King, in other words, rejected the view of racial justice now attributed to him: that all that was required was to cross the threshold in which domestic racial differences and divisions were apprehended as the commonalities of some great national abstraction (that is, the state, the founding documents, our nation’s ideals). “The implications of true racial integration,” he wrote, “are more than national in scope.”⁴³

If we are to better understand the successes and failures of official efforts and insurgent struggles to transform black people from a subject population into citizen-subjects in our own time, we must respect these insights. One of the tasks of this book is to remember the long history in which black global dreams have founded on the shoals of America’s racial dilemma. In light of the new round of schemes to perfect the world in America’s image, the legacies of America’s racial dialectic casts a healthy skepticism on the notion that there exists an universalizing tendency within this nation that inevitably wins out, and instead shows how exclusions of the past are reproduced and transferred to the present. Perhaps it will only be by recognizing the limits of U.S. nationalist traditions as a source of justice for all that we will begin to approach once more the possibility of an effective antiracism and a renewal of progressive politics in our own time.

CHAPTER ONE

Rethinking Race and Nation

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be . . .
(America never was America to me.)

—LANGSTON HUGHES, “LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN” (1937)

A recent career retrospective exhibition commemorating the life work of black artist Jacob Lawrence included Lawrence’s mid-1950s series, “Struggle . . . From the History of the American People.” The series of paintings focuses on the establishment of democratic rights in American history from the revolutionary period to the present. Paintings depict scenes from black history, from slave resistance to civil rights marches: founding national events, like the Boston Massacre, where Crispus Attucks became the first black person killed in the American Revolution, as well as the signing of the Declaration of Independence, where no blacks were present. The museum catalogue singled out this series as one in which Lawrence “went beyond African American history to deal with the American experience as a whole.”¹ Such a description is characteristic in the history of black arts and letters. It suggests that universal expression or representation in art or social thought necessarily transcends what is an implicitly narrow racial or minority experience. Lawrence’s ability to depict the progress of democracy must, in this view, derive from an expansive, national historical experience, rather than from the confines of a racialized one.²

It’s unclear, however, whether this is an adequate way to understand the relationship of black struggles for equality to the constitution of national democratic norms and foundations. Is the relationship really one of racial particularity to a national universality? Could we not turn this on its head and recognize how, from Lawrence’s