



# ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY®

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## 2023 Black History Theme Executive Summary: Black Resistance

African Americans have resisted historic and ongoing oppression, in all forms, especially the racial terrorism of lynching, racial pogroms, and police killings since our arrival upon these shores. These efforts have been to advocate for a dignified self-determined life in a just democratic society in the United States and beyond the United States political jurisdiction. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in the United States was defined by actions such as sit-ins, boycotts, walk outs, strikes by Black people and white allies in the fight for justice against discrimination in all sectors of society from employment to education to housing. Black people have had to consistently push the United States to live up to its ideals of freedom, liberty, and justice for all. Systematic oppression has sought to negate much of the dreams of our griots, like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and our freedom fighters, like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Septima Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer fought to realize. Black people have sought ways to nurture and protect Black lives, and for autonomy of their physical and intellectual bodies through armed resistance, voluntary emigration, nonviolence, education, literature, sports, media, and legislation/politics. Black led institutions and affiliations have lobbied, litigated, legislated, protested, and achieved success.

In an effort to live, and maintain and protect economic success Black people have organized/planned violent insurrections against those who enslaved them, such as in Haiti,, and armed themselves against murderous white mobs as seen in Memphis, TN (1892), Rosewood, FL (1923), and New Orleans, LA (1900). Additionally, some Black people thought that the best way to resist was to self-liberate as seen by the actions those who left the plantation system, of Henry Adams and Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, when they led a mass exodus westward in 1879 and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who organized emigration to Liberia.

Black faith institutions were spaces where Black communities met to organize resistance efforts, inspired folk to participate in the movements, and offered sanctuary during times of crisis. To promote awareness of the myriad of issues and activities media outlets were developed including radio shows, podcasts, newspapers (i.e. *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Bee*, *the Afro*, *The California Eagle*, *Omaha Star*, *the Crisis*, etc.). Ida B. Wells used publications to contest the scourge of lynching. These outlets were pivotal in sharing the successes and challenges of resistance movements.

Cultural centers such as libraries including George Cleveland Hall Library (Chicago, IL), Dart Hall (Charleston, SC) and social, literary, and cultural clubs, such as Jack and Jill, Phillis Wheatley Literary Societies, fraternal and sororal orders, associations (i.e. Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, National Association of Colored Women, etc.) worked to support the intellectual development of communities to collect and preserve Black stories, sponsor Black history and literature events, and were active in the quest for civil, social, and human rights.

Black medical professionals worked with others to establish nursing schools, hospitals, and clinics in order to provide spaces for Black people to get quality health care, which they often did (and do not) receive at mainstream medical institutions. For economic and financial independence businesses, such as Binga Bank, Johnson Publishing Company, Parker House Sausage Company, Soft and Sheen, etc., were developed to keep funds within the community. In order to resist inequality and to advocate for themselves Black men and women formed labor unions based on trades and occupations, some examples, include the Colored National Labor Union, Colored Musicians Club, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and Negro American Labor Council.



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Education, whether in elementary, secondary, or higher education institutions have been seen as a way for Black people and communities to resist the narrative that Black people are intellectually inferior. When Carter G. Woodson founded Negro History Week (NHW) in 1926, he saw it as a way to provide a space and resources to critically educate students about their history. The grassroots network of Black teachers used this week not only to lionize individuals and narratives, but also to teach students about racial progress, and as well as shared and collective responsibility. They developed assignments and curriculum to provide students with the tools to succeed. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), were developed by Northern white philanthropists, but they emerged as a space for the formation of activists, artists, business owners, educators, etc. and their continued operation have stood as testament to Black investment and creative thinking in the face of the changing landscape of higher education. Furthermore, students at HBCUs were at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movements, and social justice movements from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries.

African American spirituals, gospel, folk music, hip-hop, and rap have been used to express struggle, hope, and for solidarity in the face of racial oppression. Music has been used to illustrate societal issues including white and state sanctioned violence (i.e. Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*), sexual politics (i.e. Salt-N-Pepa's *Let's Talk About Sex*), as motivation, for strength against harassment, and to experience freedom. The Black artists, writers, photographers, and musicians who participated in the Black Arts Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Chicago Black Renaissance were the soundtrack and the visual representation of resistance movements. These individuals created art that supported the resistance movements, but also provided a space for Black people to express love and joy. Creatives used poetry, fiction, short stories, plays, films, and television to counter stereotypes and to imagine a present and future with Black people in it.

Sports are a world pastime, and it both brings people together and separates them. Black athletes have used sports as a way to advocate for social issues and for political agendas. Serena Williams, Flo Jo, Jesse Owens, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Jackie Robinson, Colin Kaepernick, Simone Biles, and many others have used their public forum to bring awareness to issues that affect society as they resisted the idea that they cannot or should not speak about political, cultural, or social issues. Black athletic activists have often suffered personal and economic consequences due to their stances, speech, and actions, but to them it has been worth it to see changes.

Historically and today in the 21st century, Black people have worked the political angle to seek their rightful space in the country. Where race is concerned, legislative or judicial action to deal with controversial issues has often come late. The historic Executive Orders 8802 and 9346 were responses to A. Phillip Randolph and the all-Black March on Washington Movement's threat to lead a 50,000-strong Black worker's march into Washington, D.C. And all three of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act were concessions to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Every advance, improvement in our quality of life and access to the levers of power to determine our destiny has been achieved through struggle. John Lewis advised, "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

Lewis' advice is true not just for the 21st century, but also during the antebellum period, as seen in the narratives of the enslaved, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, to testimonials about lynchings and ongoing police violence against African Americans. With the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, and thousands of other Black women, men, and trans people there are new movements (i.e. #Sayhername) and organizations (i.e. Black Lives Matter) that are pushing for the justice system to investigate police involved shootings and white supremacist vigilantes. Nearly 179 years ago, the Rev. Henry Highland Garnett proposed that the only path to freedom, justice, and equality; self-determination; and/or social transformation is resistance. In thunder tones, Garnett shouted, "Let your motto be resistance! resistance! RESISTANCE!"

By resisting, Black people have achieved triumphs, successes, and progress as seen in the end of chattel slavery, dismantling of Jim and Jane Crow segregation in the South, increased political representation at all levels of government, desegregation of educational institutions, the passage of Civil Rights Act of 1964, the opening of the

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Smithsonian National Museum of African American History in DC and increased and diverse representation of Black experiences in media. Black resistance strategies have served as a model for every other social movement in the country, thus, the legacy and importance of these actions cannot be understated.

As societal and political forces escalate to limit access to and exercise of the ballot, eliminate the teaching of Black history, and work to push us back into the 1890s, we can only rely on our capacity to resist. The enactment of HR 40, the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, the Breathe Act, and the closure of the racial wealth gap is not the end. They too will require us to mobilize our resources, human and material, and fight for “freedom, justice, and equality”; “self-determination”, and/or “social transformation”.

This is a call to everyone, inside and outside the academy, to study the history of Black Americans’ responses to establish safe spaces, where Black life can be sustained, fortified, and respected.

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