Of Shadows and Light: Stories of African American Resilience

A More Perfect Union Theme

This series on the modern African American experience explores the theme of resilience in the struggle against marginalization and exclusion that have historically shaped Black life. Collectively, these works not only give insight into the endeavor of trying to find a sense of place and belonging within American society, but also challenge us to reflect upon the meaning of the democratic ideals that bind Americans together.

Over the past century, African Americans have labored to shatter the crucible of racism. Presently, this incredible saga of Black resilience has become highly politicized. Learning about the African American experience can be painful, but it can also be enriching. It can be simultaneously unsettling and beautiful, familiar and yet, strange—but most of all it presents a deeper dimension to the American story as African American novelist Richard Wright (1941) pointed out. "We Black folk," he wrote, "our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*." Like all ethnic groups within the United States, African Americans have a unique history that contextualizes their experiences, both on an individual level and collectively. This history contains the legacies of slavery and segregation. Even though the tangible relics of slavery and Jim Crow have been retired to museums long ago, systemic racism and bigotry remain in the 21st century. Barriers to economic opportunity, inequities within the justice system, voting restrictions, ghettoization, failing educational systems, police brutality, and micro-aggressions persist as signposts of an earlier time in the nation's history. Yet, Black people have managed to make lives for themselves, to be creative, and to have the courage to remind the nation that "We, too, are America" with the same aspirations and dreams as everyone else. However, discussing the African American experience can be difficult because of the history of racism that envelops it.

Issues of "white guilt" and the potential for divisiveness have been raised as reasons for eliminating the African American experience from the larger American story or at least watering it down into a less "offensive" narrative. Framing the African American experience as dangerous—a threat to the ideals of American democracy—stands in complete opposition to what Black people have sought to achieve in the fight against anti-democratic practices and policies. They have sought liberty, justice, and equal opportunity. The goal to achieve these things never has been about the erosion of the ideals that comprise the American Creed, but to highlight those practices that undermine it. Nor has it meant the fostering of "white guilt." Guilt is a paralyzing emotion that perpetuates inaction and resentment more often than not, and it seldom creates bridges of understanding or the desire to advocate for justice and social change. Rather than

avoid this element of our history, it is important to explore what we can learn from the African American experience. *What can the African American experience teach us about the importance of democracy? What insights can it offer about the present-day dilemmas we see unfolding around us?*

Unfortunately, the Black presence in America always has been the proverbial "fly in the buttermilk," signifying the dissonance between the nation's ideals and the structural inequities that marginalize African Americans. Because of this dissonance, Black identity has been historically politicized in ways to legitimize the position of African Americans as subalterns within society. Conceptions of Black people derived from the 19th century theories about race and racial differences, used to defend the institution of slavery, have survived into the 21st century as stereotypes. These stereotypes label Blacks as inherently lazy, criminal, hyper-sexual, and cognitively deficient. More contemporary permutations of these constructions include the "welfare queen" and the "hoodied gansta." These constructions have become normalized fixtures in 21st century America, rationalizing police brutality, hyper-policing, and other structural inequities that are vestiges of the anachronistic caste systems that circumscribed Black life in pervious centuries. Instead, the socio-economic problems that affect the African American community are popularly and often politically attributed to a lack of individual initiative. This perceived failure to assimilate the model minority model has served to reinforce preexisting anti-Black stereotypes and patterns of exclusion.

Nearly 80 years ago, Swedish Nobel-laureate Gunner Myrdal identified this cycle of exclusion in the landmark study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). Myrdal described many of the problems that exist today: ghettoization, failing school systems, police brutality, and racial violence. His investigation revealed a vicious cycle between structural inequities, Black socio-economic underperformance, and anti-Black attitudes that legitimized Black marginalization because of their underperformance. Perhaps more importantly, he raised the question of what this meant for American democracy. Written against the backdrop of WWII in which the nation was embroiled in a global conflict to save democracy against the onslaught of Nazism and fascism, the existence of anti-democratic policies and institutions within the United States not only contradicted the fundamental principles of the American creed—the ideals of equal opportunity, justice, and liberty—but it also eroded democracy from within. For Myrdal, these ideals served as the ideological glue that solidified a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society into one American nation.

In recent years, we have seen what happens when that ideological glue becomes compromised. Black Lives Matter protests, controversies over Confederate monuments, the meteoric proliferation of white nationalist groups along with the absorption of their

ideologies into mainstream America represent a clash of ideas over the nature of American identity. What values should be privileged through it? What do these things say about the place of racial minorities within American society? But such controversies are not new. In fact, they are older than the nation and have convulsed and changed in varying degrees with the evolution of the United States. Throughout its existence, the nation has struggled to reconcile the ideals of its own creed with the social challenges within its own borders. For some, the BLM movement has become the new Civil Rights Movement, and the horrifying video of George Floyd's final moments on May 25, 2020, has come to symbolize what photographs of Emmett Till's body symbolized in 1955: the incompatibility of racism with democracy. For others, BLM protests, efforts to remove Confederate monuments, demands for police reform, and general attention levied at structural inequalities point to the fragmentation of American society and the erosion of American values.

The debate unfolding today about the nature and substance of American history taught within educational settings connects to these concerns; it affects all racial minorities within the United States and particularly African Americans. Fear that a culturally diverse curricula encourages social fragmentation and the erosion of American values extends back to the controversies from the 60s and 70s over multicultural education. One of the most prominent arguments against multiculturalism was levied by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1992). In it he argues that the purpose of education is to perpetuate the assimilation of traditional Anglo-American values from which the nation's identity originates. Multiculturalism—or as Schlesinger refers to it—the *cult of ethnicity* "presents a threat to the brittle bonds of national identity that hold this diverse and fractious society together." Within this cult of ethnicity, he specifically singles out African American history and culture as perhaps the most potent threat to this "brittle bond." Though ironically, he admits that "deeply bred racism [has] put Black Americans, yellow Americans, red Americans, and brown Americans well outside the pale" of the American melting pot. For him, the histories of non-Anglo Americans have little value within the American story. Thirty years later, Schlesinger's flawed arguments have been resurrected and implemented into public policy.

Unfortunately, we Americans seem to repeat the problems from our past as it relates to issues of exclusion. Perhaps this occurs because we fail to digest history's lessons or because we have misappropriated the words of Thomas Paine, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." So, we redact, omit, or reconstruct the past out of fear that the story of America's evolutionary struggle to abolish structural inequities restricting the extension of the American credo to all Americans diminishes the nation's greatness or fosters divisiveness. This perspective fails to recognize this evolution as a

sign of America's greatness. It fails to recollect those moments, typically of tragedy, when we are able to see ourselves in the faces of others regardless of difference. It also fails to acknowledge the resilience of those who have labored through those growing pains or of those individuals—past and present—who have reminded the nation of the values and ideals fundamental to the sustainability of American democracy. Democracy is fragile and Black people have experienced the extent of democracy's fragility.

Literary texts from African American authors Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Zora Neal Hurston, Claudia Rankine, and James H. Cone are presented within this theme on the African American experience. These works encompass the genres of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Each text foregrounds the theme of Black resilience within the major topics addressed through the African American literary tradition: identity, oppression, and Black culture. Their work not only amplifies Black voices—giving insight into Black life often neglected by history and too often reduced into a series of demographic statistics for scientific inquiry—but also extends the opportunity to learn about the American experience through the lens of Black life and what those lessons teach us about the social challenges we face presently. In substantive ways, the books within this LTAI series should provoke readers to think about racism's impact not just on Black people, but on the national ideals that make a nation of many into one people.

A Matter of Black and White: The Autobiography of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher
by Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher

Ada Fisher's *A Matter of Black and White* begins this theme over the Modern African American Experience because Fisher's life embodies the concept of resilience and because it offers a message of hope.

In 1946, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma School of Law. Her application directly challenged segregation laws within the state and provided the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) an opportunity to further its campaign against the constitutionality of segregation within education. Fisher volunteered to be a test plaintiff. Her legal victory in the nation's highest court resulted in the desegregation of University of Oklahoma graduate programs, and it provided a critical precedent for the landmark US Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). She completed her studies at the University of Oklahoma and went on to practice law within Oklahoma. But her story does not begin nor does it end with her battle to end educational segregation.

Written while battling cancer and published after her death, Fisher reminds us that anyone can make a positive difference in society. She says, "Perhaps through this book, they will learn something of *Sipuel*. If they do, I want it to be a lesson that includes more

than a decision in a single lawsuit. I want that lesson to include some sense of how Black folks lived under Jim Crow. I want to give them some awareness of the things that people both famous and obscure endured to end it. I want to leave them some perception of the way that family, community, faith, and conviction can come together to make history, even in the case of a skinny little girl born on the wrong side of the tracks in a little town like Chickasha, Oklahoma."

Between the World and Me
by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Context is essential in exposing a paradox especially to a teenager. How do you explain to a young teenage boy that his skin color can be a threat to some people? How do assuage his fear and anger over possibly being the next Michael Brown? How do you teach him to feel good about himself and not internalize the poison of racism? Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* is a work of nonfiction rooted deeply in the African American literary tradition that grapples with these questions. Written to his son, Samori, Coates uses an epistolary format to share his experiences exploring themes of race, racism, fear, systemic oppression, identity, survival, and father-son relationships. Reminiscent of James Baldwin's essay in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," Coates, like Baldwin, gives testimony over the inherent contradictions between American ideals and the social realities that destroy Black lives. Both men rely on history to establish a context for understanding the repetitive cycle of violence and the civil rights crisis that mushroomed around them. But fifty-two years separate the publication of the books. *Between the World and Me* offers a transcendent vision for dealing with the painful history of racism within the United States and frames a path on how to relinquish its heavy burdens.

Their Eyes Were Watching God
by Zora Neal Hurston

Zora Neal Hurston (1891-1960), known as the "darling of the Harlem Renaissance," was a prolific author, filmmaker, and a trained anthropologist who recorded southern African American folk traditions and voodoo practices in Haiti and Jamaica. Her most popular work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, tells the story of Janie Crawford and her journey of self-discovery. Rather than being trapped by the social conventions that defined womanhood during the early twentieth century, Janie, through trial and error eventually finds love in the arms of a younger man who empowers her to enjoy life and embrace the beauty of her inner self. It is a journey of self-liberation.

When *Their Eyes We Watching God* was published in 1937, Richard Wright derided it as a "type of coon show" or minstrelsy written for the entertainment of whites who believed in the inherent inferiority of Black people. Because the novel did not focus on the theme of racism *and* she employed Black dialect through her characters, Wright felt that the novel was not only worthless but harmful. He indicated that it had "no theme, no message, no thought." Ironically, Wright failed to see the simple act of portraying the complexities of Black life in human terms was a political gesture, directly challenging the dominant paradigms of Black representation. The book was dismissed and eventually fell into obscurity, much like Hurston. Through the efforts of Alice Walker and Robert E. Hemenway, Hurston and her work resurfaced. Reissued after being out of print for nearly thirty years, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of the most widely read and highly acclaimed novels within the canon of African American literature. The power and timelessness of this novel stems from how Hurston frames the universal struggle of women to lay claim to their own hearts and bodies through the African American experience.

Citizen: An American Lyric
by Claudia Rankine

Rankin's *Citizen: An American Lyric* combines prose poetry and visual images to create a series of lyric essays that probe the realities of everyday racism within the contemporary setting where legalized forms no longer exist. Rankin focuses on those residuals of the racial caste system that survive in micro-aggressions, police brutality, stereotypical assumptions of Black identity, and other forms that have been normalized in American society, which neither educational attainment nor class shields. Rankin demonstrates how encounters with these residuals of racism bounce around within the imagination challenging the ever-changing contexts of self-understanding in a "post-racial America," and she provides insight into the high emotional cost of surviving this maze. The snapshot-like imagery of *Citizen* shifts between reality, the moment of perception, memory, reaction, and reflection in an almost frenzied pace. These fragmentary moments of life collide, fade, or exist in sharp relief at the boundary between the conscious and pre-conscious self. Place and time have little significance. By crafting the text in this way, she creates a type of disorientation allowing the non-Black reader to better understand certain aspects of systemic racism in which the distinction between what Rankin refers to as her "self self" and her "historical self" are often blurred and conflated.

In many respects, *Citizen* embodies the type of existential crisis W.E.B. DuBois discussed in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) with the concept of double consciousness. The laws and customs that protected racial caste systems within American society created a social boundary through which African Americans, though American citizens, could never fully

be Americans or citizens. Rankin reminds her readers that this negative legacy still has voracity within 21st century America. As such she raises questions about the meaning of citizenship and justice.

The Cross and the Lynching Tree
by James Cone

James H. Cone (1938-2018) was an African American theologian, who shaped America's theological conversation on race for over 50 years. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is a historical and theological reflection. It brings together two powerful symbols to examine Christian identity through the African American experience in the United States. According to Cone, "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' Black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy." The gospel of Jesus Christ, Cone argues, identifies with the dispossessed and seeks to uplift the oppressed. In order to practice the teachings of the gospel in daily life, the oppressed and the violence against them must be seen, acknowledged. Sight exists as a metaphor within the text as well as serving as a structuring element, taking the reader on a path from the "unseen/ unacknowledged" to being able to see and acknowledge what has been in plain view. Rather than erase those elements in American history that paint the nation in a less than flattering light, Cone suggests that it is imperative from a spiritual position to explore how racial violence has stained the soul of the nation. By "seeing" and acknowledging the lynching tree as a site of suffering and despair, it, like the cross, offers the hope of redemption.

Additional Reading:

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.
Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.
DuBois, W.E.B. *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). New York: Dover Publications, 2016.
Frederickson, George M. The *Black Image in the White Mind: Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914.* New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: Crossing Press, 1984
Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Credits

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"Of Shadows and Light: Stories of African American Resilience" was developed by Dr. Tonnia L. Anderson. Dr. Anderson is an Associate Professor of History and American Studies at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. She is the founder and director of the Dr. Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher Center for Social Justice and Racial Healing at USAO. Having worked as a Scholar/Intern at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change under the tutelage of Civil Rights icons like Rosa Parks, Andrew Young, and Coretta Scott King, Anderson has spent much of her adult life working to promote social justice concerns through education and direct advocacy.