

FOREWORD BY JEMAR TISBY

# FROM DROPOUT TO DOCTORATE

BREAKING THE CHAINS OF  
EDUCATIONAL INJUSTICE

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# CONTENTS

Foreword by Jemar Tisby	1
Introduction: When Roses Grow from Concrete	5
<b>1</b> The Incident	15
<b>2</b> The Fear of a Black Child	37
<b>3</b> Ain't Got No Pencil	53
<b>4</b> Dropout by Design?	72
<b>5</b> Without a Roof	89
<b>6</b> Fifth-Year Persister	103
<b>7</b> When Faith Confronts Trauma	117
<b>8</b> Work and Worthiness	133
<b>9</b> Redemption and the Healing Power of Community	152
<b>10</b> Safe Spaces and Comeback Stories	172
Epilogue: This Is Happening	189
Acknowledgments	197
Notes	203

## ONE

# THE INCIDENT

Certain childhood memories inform your life forever. For me, it was one of the first times I realized that I was a Black boy.

It was 1991, and I was nine years old. I had woken up early on a Monday morning to get myself ready for school. I did the normal things elementary school kids do when they really don't want to go to school, such as taking a long time in the bathroom and walking around the house aimlessly, hoping that somehow, miraculously, the weekend had extended itself into Monday morning. But this morning took a different turn. I overheard my mother, Connie, speaking on the phone with one of her friends in a tone filled with fear. The image of her fingers tightly gripping the long cord of our house phone and nervously shaking it until it swung rapidly is etched in my memory. It seemed she was using the motion of the cord to cope with the distressing news she was receiving.

“They did what to him?” she said.

Shortly afterward, she rushed into the only room in our house that had a television set and turned on the news. I stood by to hear more, but from her tone of voice, I knew it wasn't good. My mother turned on the television, and I immediately heard the commentators saying a name I'd never heard before: Rodney King. A few minutes later, I made my way into the room, and there were images of King being beaten by Los Angeles police officers: thirty-three blows and seven kicks. King's injuries included fractured bones, a broken right ankle, and numerous lacerations.

It was tough for me as a child to process what I was seeing. You can imagine that my mind was overwhelmed with curiosity, asking, “Why is this happening?” I came a bit farther into the room and continued to listen.

I was paralyzed with fear as she spoke on the phone about Rodney King and his unjust beating by police officers. She said, “I don’t know why they do us like that.” Those words were singed onto my mind. Although I didn’t fully understand the extent of what was being said, I knew she must have meant that these things happen to Black people. And even though I was hearing about this event by eavesdropping, my nine-year-old brain could tell from my mom’s voice that something was wrong, something beyond the usual talks she’d give me for getting dressed late or walking aimlessly around the house.

It was at that moment that I realized, for the first time in my life, that the color of my skin mattered and might bring about a different set of experiences in this world. I knew that not only would I be late to school but that this day would also remain with me for the rest of my life.

### INTERNALIZING THE RODNEY KING INCIDENT

When I was five, my mother had separated from my father, Tyrone. She was now a single parent to my sister, Ashley, and me.

On the day of the Rodney King incident, the ride to school felt different, as if I were carrying something heavy inside me—both the trauma from my family’s separation and the fear from realizing that something was different for me because I was a Black child. It was as if my mom’s tense, frightened words that morning had cast a cloud over the rest of my day. Now, I was being hit with the reality that I am a Black child growing up during a time when Black people were being targeted as a reaction to the civil rights movement. I knew this because my mother had spoken with me

about growing up as a Black boy in a world still littered with racism. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd crossed some invisible line into a new understanding of my world.

Looking back, it was the same world that six-year-old Ruby Bridges had experienced twenty years prior when she was escorted by federal agents and the army into William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision—which was a long-fought battle against educational injustice. A protester standing outside the school had held a sign that read, “All I want for Christmas is a clean white school.”<sup>1</sup> It was a different time from Ruby's, but I now carried an emotional burden of not only wondering why I had to move from place to place because my family broke up but also knowing something was different in our community. Each day going to school was more than just heavy; it was a reality check to the differences that set my life, experiences, neighborhood, and school apart from others—even going to an all-Black school because of the conversations I had with my mother. I had no clue that I was inheriting what I described in the Generational Trauma and Educational Inequity Framework as a world littered with the stains of trauma and oppressive social conditions experienced over generations.

It was the same trauma that caused the elders in my life—my grandmothers, grandfathers, and other guiding adults—to sometimes shamefully echo the sentiment, “Being Black is hard in this country because of everything we have had to overcome and are still striving to overcome.” Their words, steeped in the wisdom of lived experiences, painted a vivid picture of resilience amid trauma, mistreatment, poverty, and adversity. They shed light on the ongoing journey of overcoming that defines so much of the Black experience in America—one where each generation has had to deal with the residue of what hatred and oppression caused.

When I mention racial identity, I am talking about two parts that the National Museum of African American History and Culture mentions: one externally communicated through how you are perceived, the other an internalization of how you perceive yourself.<sup>2</sup> When the externally imposed racial identity loudly communicates a narrative that you are perceived a certain way because of the color of your skin, this can have a severe impact on your internal beliefs, which contributes to emotional and psychological trauma. During our morning commutes, I often found myself staring out of the window, pondering how being Black was frequently associated with being wrong or mistreated in the world.

### THE GRADIES

I was born a “Grady Baby,” at the Grady Hospital in Atlanta.<sup>3</sup> Being a Grady Baby implied much more than just being born in that particular location. It reflected the reality of growing up in a city with deep, seemingly impassable economic divides.

Grady plays a critical role in the community in which I grew up. It has long been the go-to medical facility for those without access to insurance or health care options, constituting a crucial part of Atlanta’s health care landscape but also, ironically, a reflection of the systemic poverty experienced by Black Atlantans. The history of Grady Memorial Hospital exemplifies this, with its origins rooted in racial segregation. Established in 1892 and named after journalist Henry W. Grady, who advocated for white supremacy post–Civil War in the form of public policy that discriminated against Black people, the hospital initially provided segregated and unequal services to Black and White patients in what was historically a Black community.<sup>4</sup>

The term “the Gradies” emerged from these segregated practices. Virtually every aspect of care at Grady continued to be

segregated by race until the mid-twentieth century. The opening of the “New Grady” in 1958 further solidified this legacy, with segregated wings for patients.<sup>5</sup> However, by the 1960s, civil rights activists, including the Atlanta Student Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., led protests that prompted judicial and legislative actions to integrate medical boards and public hospitals. Grady’s desegregation was officially marked by a memo from hospital superintendent Bill Pinkston on June 1, 1965, stating that all operations would be non-racial from that day forward.<sup>6</sup>

I was born in this hospital in 1982. It had been seventeen years since it was desegregated, yet the 1980s in Atlanta were still burdened with tension heightened by racial discrimination and deep social inequities. The city was growing and changing, but not all changes were for the better. The Atlanta Child Murders spanning from 1979 to 1981 cast a grim shadow over the city, instilling pain, fear, and uncertainty within its communities because children were the victims during the height of racial tension that lingered from the past. As the number of victims—primarily Black children and young adults—continued to rise, Atlanta was gripped by these murders of innocent children. The heartless and heinous crime not only robbed families of their loved ones but also shattered the idea of safety and security even more in the Black community.

Simultaneously, the emergence of the crack epidemic further compounded the challenges faced by the Black community in Atlanta.<sup>7</sup> The proliferation of crack cocaine often deeply affected whole neighborhoods, ravaged families, and fueled generations of addiction, violence, and despair in Atlanta and around the country. These twin crises, the child murders and the crack epidemic, along with racial injustice and poverty, hovered over the city alongside its national and global contributions and progress.

While Atlanta experienced economic growth and cultural vibrancy under the leadership of Maynard Holbrook Jackson Jr.,

the city's first Black mayor (in office 1974–1982 and 1990–1994), the pervasive influence of racial and economic injustice cast a dark cloud over progress. Even post-civil rights, systemic inequality persisted. Jackson, a trailblazer and attorney, became one of Atlanta's foremost political leaders addressing these issues and was a central leader in helping the city understand the urgent need for collective action to tackle the root causes of injustice, while helping to ensure that equal access and affirmative action were upheld for Black Atlantans, who had been left out of economic growth owing to past public policies.<sup>8</sup> According to Ronald Baylor, "The Atlanta of the 1970s and 1980s, still struggling with the problems created by earlier often race-based policy decisions, was very much a product of a past that had emphasized race."<sup>9</sup>

### CAMPBELLTON ROAD

One such "race-based policy decision that had emphasized race" affected literally every moment of my life as a child—it drew the roads and boundaries that marked out the neighborhood where I grew up. When my sister and I were children, we lived with our parents in a small brick house situated off Tell Road. Tell Road intersects with Fairburn Road, a crucial connector route leading to Campbellton Road. This single road serves as a vital link connecting numerous neighborhoods and giving rise to a distinctive, tightly knit community.

Racial and geographical division was common in Atlanta. The Atlanta History Center does a great job detailing not only the flourishing of the city but also its dark past that has been littered with white supremacy. In fact, within the city limits, various streets have two different names because White residents didn't want to live on the same street as Black residents: Moreland Avenue and Briarcliff Road, Boulevard and Monroe Drive, Parkway and Charles Allen Drives, and Central Park Place and Argonne

Avenue.<sup>10</sup> Campbellton Road was a microcosm of a larger story not just in the city of Atlanta but in every major US city that was heavily populated with communities of Black people.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1980s, Campbellton Road was one of Atlanta's most economically challenged communities. Poverty created barriers for Black families and perpetuated a cycle of social inequality. In 1980, 32.5 percent of the nation's Black population lived below the poverty line, compared to 25.7 percent of Hispanic people and 10.2 percent of White people.<sup>12</sup> The history of Campbellton Road isn't great either, reflecting a similar trend of economic hardship and systemic neglect. Originally Cherokee land, it was later used by Confederate soldiers as a connecting point to Atlanta. Campbellton is a former settlement named for Col. Duncan Campbell, and it was the focus of Campbell County, founded in 1828.<sup>13</sup> The colonel was known for negotiating the 1825 treaty in which the Creek Indians ceded their land in Georgia and Alabama. This treaty was later deemed fraudulent, and the 1826 Second Treaty of Washington also ended with the Creeks ceding their land in Georgia.<sup>14</sup>

Campbellton Road became concentrated with Black families due to the racial divide in the city of Atlanta. The implementation of segregation laws and discriminatory housing policies forced Black families into specific neighborhoods. These communities, like mine, were often overlooked. One of the reasons I know this historical discrimination lingered and had a social and environmental effect is because I lived there. I had friends whose parents would often talk about the Black struggle in front of us. I vividly remember one friend's mother talking to another parent after football practice, saying, "It's hard being Black because to be Black is almost guaranteed that you are poor. . . ." This statement has stuck with me since I was nearly ten years old. Similar to many American cities from the 1970s through the 1990s, Atlanta was predominantly populated by Black families who struggled with poverty.<sup>15</sup>

I remember my neighborhood, with its dilapidated buildings; the drugs on street corners being sold; peers who, like me, were raised in single-parent households; and targeted policing with the Red Dog unit, a group known for police brutality against oppressed groups.<sup>16</sup> Crime didn't seem out of the ordinary. It was simply the backdrop to my daily life and the world that I inherited. The absence of healthy food options because of the food deserts and the lack of thriving local businesses were common in my neighborhood and accepted as normal because we did not know anything else outside of the economic divestment.<sup>17</sup> This normalization of poverty and the acceptance of these wealth gaps as “just the way things are” speaks volumes about the insidious, enduring nature of systemic racism. There were times when I could tell that these issues deeply affected the pulse of the community because that is what scarcity does: it erodes anything in its path. And with this erosion, it was very easy for people to internalize these conditions.

The struggle in Black lives was reflected in the hip-hop music of the time, with artists like Tupac, Public Enemy, Kool Moe Dee, Queen Latifah, N.W.A, and A Tribe Called Quest using music to express the realities of Black lives. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's well-known songs depicted the horrid conditions of that time. One song, “The Message,” captures the raw essence of life in Black neighborhoods during the 1980s and speaks to the social living conditions that made the context of violence, drugs, and oppression visibly real and raw.<sup>18</sup> The song's imagery of “Broken glass everywhere / People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care” doesn't just sketch a scene; it screams of the abandonment and decay these neighborhoods endured, ignored by those who designed Black communities to be this way.

When the lyrics go further—“Got no money to move out, I guess, I got no choice”—they speak to the entrapment of poverty

and the feeling of being stuck with no way out. When the song mentions “Rats in the front room, roaches in the back,” it’s not just talking about rodents but the pervasive, inescapable conditions that many were forced to call home. The cycle of poverty and crime is painted in their music with mentions of “Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat” and a man’s car being repossessed, a narrative too familiar in communities constantly under siege by drugs, facing the rise of the crack and heroin epidemic, and the crushing weight of financial despair. Finally, the phrase “Don’t push me / cause I’m close to the edge” captures how much struggle there was, how people could be on the brink of desperation, and how much emotional weight it takes to navigate these conditions. These lyrics capture what it meant to be Black in America and the fine line between surviving and breaking down.

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of growing up in Baltimore, “To be Black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear.”<sup>19</sup> Replace the word *Baltimore* with *Atlanta*, and you have an accurate description of my childhood. I was indeed “naked before the elements of the world.” And I would add, “naked in a world that I had inherited.” From my earliest days in Atlanta to my current reflections on its significance, one thing remains clear: the lessons learned and challenges faced in this city have far-reaching implications for our understanding of social justice and equity in America.

## FROM ATLANTA TO THE NATION

Growing up, I was exposed to the widespread injustice that many Black communities across the nation faced during that time and

still face to this day. In this environment, marked by poverty, I witnessed firsthand how families suffered, trauma unfolded, and scarcity caused real harm to my family and my peers as we all attempted to navigate the world we had inherited.

These challenges were not unique to Atlanta. Similar community challenges were evident in Baltimore, Los Angeles, Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, and other cities where pervasive poverty and limited upward economic mobility create structural roadblocks to social, personal, and educational pursuits. This was especially true for those of us who aspired to break free but lacked the necessary support and connections. As a child, grappling with these complex realities that were largely out of my control was overwhelming. Hearing adults discuss scarce resources, underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and low college attendance rates among Black people made it difficult to dream of a future beyond my immediate surroundings. In many ways, it felt like what my friends and I would call “the trap.”<sup>20</sup>

Every day, as my mom drove us to school, I couldn’t help but notice how our family wasn’t together. I was always acutely aware of our family separation and struggle. Witnessing my mother juggle multiple jobs caused me to be aware of how hard she was working to keep up with everything and how that meant that she would have to devote a lot of her time to work. This, coupled with the social climate, made me realize my own racial identity at a very young age—and made me realize that to be Black meant that you had to journey through a different set of social rules, which often meant that you were doing all you could to survive while navigating a world that viewed you as a social threat.

It was hard to understand the world that I was inheriting and what that meant for me in every social environment I was exposed to, whether it was the community, school, church (the times I went with my mother), or other environments. I began to

understand, though, that the environment around me seemed set in place to stifle dreams, bar the pathway to academic achievement, and make it harder for a child to have any aspirations beyond surroundings that contained these types of social conditions. This impacted and affected my self-esteem and confidence, making it challenging to envision a future where I could succeed or be anything more than what I saw in my environment. Emotionally, I felt a sense of hopelessness and frustration in my understanding of the world at such a young age.

### POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME

While numerous historical texts outline the broad strokes of racism's timeline in America, spanning from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans through the bloodshed of the Civil War into Reconstruction and across the pivotal civil rights movement, these texts—frequently written by White scholars—often paint a picture of closure, as if the deep-seated injustices of bygone eras had been conclusively addressed and relegated to history.<sup>21</sup> The pervasiveness of this whitewashing of history obscures the impact of what Dr. Joy DeGruy calls *post traumatic slave syndrome* and does little to advance understanding of the phenomena detailed in the framework I created to understand the educational and other challenges seen in urban centers.

DeGruy, an academic researcher, lecturer, and former professor of social work, writes powerfully on how trauma can be passed down generationally. She makes a fascinating connection between historical suffering and the transgenerational trauma that we see in the collective trauma experienced by Black people. She writes:

Contemporary social scientists might offer an explanation as to why an African American boy might feel disrespected

by a peer that simply looks at him. They may suggest that television, newspapers and magazines projecting negative images of black males as pitiable, ignorant, violent and criminal have contributed to the overall poor self-images of black boys. Black scholars might even point out that music videos and movies depicting masculine and feminine beauty neatly wrapped in fine white features and straight hair have further deteriorated the self images of black boys and girls, causing them to despise the reflection in the mirror.

And they would be right. However, what is not often addressed is the role our history has played in producing these negative perceptions, images and behaviors. We rarely look to our history to understand how African Americans adapted their behavior over centuries in order to survive the stifling effects of chattel slavery, effects which are evident today. I believe that the behaviors in the scenarios described above, as well as many others, are in large part related to trans-generational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression. I have termed this condition “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome,” or PTSS.<sup>22</sup>

Her work is brilliant in that she helps us to see that trauma can be experienced trans-generationally, when safe spaces have not been created to keep up with the layered effects of trauma or have not been cared for both personally and collectively at a mass scale. She makes a case that just because we see some people acquire fame, status, or success, the historical trauma born of oppression—in the form of systemic abuse, lynching, mistreatment, and denial of access to mental health support to process and work through that trauma (among many other horrific things that explain the conditions in which we see Black communities suffer)—does not just go away.

DeGruy continues:

So what is trauma? Trauma is an injury caused by an outside, usually violent, force, event or experience. We can experience this injury physically, emotionally, psychologically, and/or spiritually. Traumas can upset our equilibrium and sense of well-being. If a trauma is severe enough it can distort our attitudes and beliefs. Such distortions often result in dysfunctional behaviors, which can in turn produce unwanted consequences. If one traumatic experience can result in distorted attitudes, dysfunctional behaviors and unwanted consequences, this pattern is magnified exponentially when a person repeatedly experiences severe trauma, and it is much worse when the traumas are caused by human beings.<sup>23</sup>

That morning in 1991, when I saw the video footage of Rodney King's beating at the hands of the police, was when I first recognized that collective trauma was present because of the social climate. I didn't know what the term *trauma* meant at that time or even know that word at all. All I knew was that the Rodney King incident made me start questioning everything about the color of my skin and what kind of world we lived in—a world that accepted violence toward people who looked like me and a world that caused me to join the embodied collective trauma that we experienced as Black folks. I wondered what type of world I had inherited, and what had led to the fear I heard in my mom's voice as she tried to shield my sister, Ashley, and me from a reality too harsh for our young minds.

That fear, that sense of protectiveness, is something I still carry with me now more than ever as I try to guide my own children through these same realities after witnessing Black lives being claimed, like the Central Park Five, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Atatiana Jefferson, Elijah McClain, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Rekia Boyd, Korryn Gaines,

Michelle Cusseaux, Mya Hall, and others. The Rodney King incident wasn't just a news story. It was a heavy and brutal reality, a piece of a much larger puzzle tracing back to the remnants of Jim Crow laws—the harsh regulations that enforced racial segregation and stripped away the rights of Black Americans in the South from the late 1800s until the civil rights movements of the 1960s.

### TRAUMA'S ORIGINS

The post–Jim Crow era inflicted severe trauma on millions of Black people, particularly those who endured it firsthand, and their children, creating lasting generational burdens. In her dissertation “Jim Crow’s Legacy: Segregation Stress Syndrome,” Dr. Ruth K. Thompson-Miller writes:

The collective long-lasting psychological effects connected with the racial violence that occurred in the total institution are a critical aspect. In the interviews, African Americans shared how on a daily basis they found themselves dealing with anxiety, fear, humiliation, shame, and stress. The narratives were analyzed utilizing the extended case method. . . . [This thesis] explores symptoms of a “segregation stress syndrome” for the chronic, enduring, extremely painful experiences and responses to the total institution of Jim Crow that are indicated by numerous respondents in this research project. Preliminary findings indicate that the symptoms of “segregation stress syndrome” are similar to PTSD symptoms documented in psychiatric literature. However, “segregation stress syndrome” differs from PTSD because the traumatic experience was not a one-time occurrence; it was sustained, over time, in African American communities. In addition, the racial violence that occurred was a form of systematic chronic stress, the type that has been shown to have a detrimental impact on a person’s psychological well-being.<sup>24</sup>

This generational trauma affects millions of Black people because research shows that trauma travels through generations. I believe we also need to trace this trauma into educational spaces and unpack how it shows up as educational injustice. In fact, the 1992 Los Angeles riots sparked by the acquittal of the officers involved in King's beating brought to the forefront issues not just of police brutality but of the enduring impact of systemic racism, from chattel slavery to the hatred that showed up in public policy, known as Jim Crow laws.<sup>25</sup>

I once heard my grandfather say, "They took away some laws that discriminated, but they did not take it from the hearts of those who stood by the laws." The King incident captured on video for the world to see did more than just expose the brutality of the police and the racial tension in Los Angeles. It forced White people to confront a haunting question: Why, long after Jim Crow's shadow was supposedly lifted, was violence against Black and impoverished communities still so rampant in the 1980s and 1990s? Why did the very system that once sanctioned such hatred still perpetuate violence against Black people? Why does it still do so to this day?

One of my professors once remarked that partial rights and citizenship for Black people in America didn't fully start to materialize until the 1970s. When examining an abbreviated timeline of Black history, it becomes clear what my professor meant and what Dr. DeGruy's work was trying to communicate. Since 1619—a timespan of 376 years—significant progress has been made, but my professor suggested it wasn't until Shirley Chisholm's name appeared on the ballot for president of the United States that we, as formerly enslaved Black people who had been—in US government counts determining representation in Congress—considered three-fifths of a person, truly began to claim an abbreviated version of citizenship.<sup>26</sup> And even then, we continued to face heightened racial tensions and discrimination.

Fast-forward, I am writing this during the second presidential term of Donald Trump, and we are witnessing a rapid erosion of constitutional protections meant to safeguard historically marginalized communities—especially Black and Brown ones. Through executive orders, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives have been targeted, with mandates being dismantled under the guise of eliminating “divisive concepts” and promoting “merit-based” systems and a “colorblind” society—in which color has always played a role in the way people where I am from were treated.<sup>27</sup>

A merit-based society is subjective and can be used to further discriminate because it relies solely on merit—but who gets to determine what constitutes merit? That determination itself is a form of power. Terms like *woke*, *DEI*, *critical race theory* (CRT), and *social justice* have become dog-whistle expressions used to target the fight for Black and Brown equity. The push for a meritocracy in a world structurally designed to disadvantage certain groups emboldens and empowers a society without guardrails, allowing exclusion to persist.

Trump’s immediate presidential actions in the first few days of office have not only affected federal policies but have also influenced major corporations like Target, Meta, Walmart, and McDonald’s to reduce or entirely eliminate their DEI efforts, signaling a retreat from equity-based commitments—where even the mention of the terms DEI and equity have been co-opted to somehow mean that Black and Brown people have not earned what we have achieved, and our progress has somehow been given to us unfairly. A recent meme circulating on social media claims that DEI stands for “Didn’t Earn It,” but Black people responded with a powerful counter message: “Definitely Earned It.”

The collective trauma of these rollbacks is deeply felt by communities already struggling against systemic inequities. Adding to this harm, the Air Force recently removed the Tuskegee Airmen from its curriculum, a deliberate erasure of Black excellence and

# A TIMELINE OF RACIAL OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

## From Enslavement to Los Angeles Riots

- 1619**—Slavery comes to North America: Enslaved Africans are brought to Jamestown, Virginia, marking the beginning of slavery in North America.
- 1793**—Rise of the cotton industry: Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin revolutionized the cotton industry, increasing the demand for enslaved labor and causing more harm to be done to Africans.
- 1831**—Nat Turner’s revolt: Nat Turner leads a rebellion of enslaved people resisting the enslavement of Africans and harm to Black bodies.
- 1831**—Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad: Abolitionists help enslaved Africans to escape through the Underground Railroad where Harriet Tubman’s liberating work became central to the freedom of those oppressed.
- 1857**—Dred Scott case: The Supreme Court’s decision in *Scott v. Sanford* denies citizenship and constitutional rights to all Black people, adding to the continued hardship of Africans in the United States.
- 1861–1865**—Civil War and emancipation: The Civil War led to the abolition of slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation being signed and the Thirteenth Amendment ratified, which was followed by Juneteenth for those enslaved in Galveston, Texas.
- 1865**—The post-slavery South and Reconstruction: The period after the Civil War, known as Reconstruction, involved efforts to integrate those who had been enslaved by white supremacy into the social, political, and labor spaces of society. This, however, was met with extreme resistance and was the catalyst and foundation for the formation and launch of the Ku Klux Klan.
- 1896**—“Separate but equal” doctrine established: *Plessy v. Ferguson* legitimized racial segregation through the doctrine of “separate but equal.”
- 1900s**—Rise of intellectual Black leaders: Leaders like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and George Washington Carver emerged, advocating for civil rights and education and speaking on behalf of the condition of Black people.

- 1909**—Founding of the NAACP: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was established to fight racial discrimination and advocate for civil rights among those who were being attacked by the legal system.
- 1920s**—Harlem Renaissance: An intellectual, social, and artistic explosion was centered in Harlem, New York City, during the 1920s. This movement celebrated Black cultural expressions and advocated for a new identity among Black people, encouraging a new racial consciousness and cultural pride.
- 1930s–1940s**—Redlining and racial segregation in housing: The Federal Housing Administration’s practice of redlining in the 1930s and 1940s institutionalized and legalized racial segregation in housing. This excluded Black people from accessing mortgages and increased the wealth gap between Black and White people.<sup>1</sup> This practice significantly limited a Black family’s ability to own a home and build wealth for the generations that would come after them.
- 1940s**—Exclusion and segregation of Black soldiers: Despite serving in World War II, Black soldiers faced segregation within the US military—only being viewed as less-than. Upon returning home, they were also excluded from many of the benefits provided by the GI Bill due to discrimination.
- 1954**—Brown v. Board of Education: This Supreme Court decision declared school segregation unconstitutional, beginning the process of integration in schools, which was met with White resistance in many states.
- 1955**—Emmett Till’s murder and Montgomery Bus Boycott: The brutal murder of Emmett Till, a young Black boy who was abducted in the middle of the night while visiting family, then tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending a White woman, Carolyn Bryant, fueled outrage. And Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat to a White man led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a pivotal event in the civil rights movement.
- 1963**—Birmingham church bombing: The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by White supremacists murdered four young Black

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<sup>1</sup>Leonard E. Egede et al., “Modern Day Consequences of Historic Redlining: Finding a Path Forward,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 38, no. 6 (February 6, 2023): 1534-37, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9901820/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9901820/).

girls, which revealed the deep hatred and the violent resistance to integration and left a traumatic mark on the Black community.

- 1963**—“I Have a Dream” speech: Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a transformative speech during the March on Washington advocating for civil and economic rights and an end to racism, which was at the core of his triple evil theory.
- 1964**—Civil Rights Act passed: A landmark legislation outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin was enacted under President Lyndon Johnson.
- 1965**—Selma to Montgomery marches: These demonstrations brought thousands of Black people together to take a stand against discriminatory voting practices, leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- 1965**—Voting Rights Act enacted: This legislative act prohibited racial discrimination in voting.
- Late 1960s**—Black power movement: This movement reminded Black people of their worth and heritage and advocated for racial dignity, self-reliance, equity, and equality for Black people.
- 1968**—Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.: MLK Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel while taking a stand against poverty in Memphis, Tennessee, alongside sanitation workers.
- 1968**—Fair Housing Act: Law passed to ensure equal and equitable housing opportunities for Black people and making it a federal crime to discriminate based on race, creed, or national origin.
- 1972**—Shirley Chisholm runs for president: Shirley Chisholm became the first major-party Black candidate and the first-ever woman candidate for president of the United States seven years after the Voting Rights Act was passed.
- 1978**—Bakke decision and affirmative action: The Supreme Court upheld affirmative action but struck down racial quotas in college admissions.<sup>2</sup>
- 1982**—The “War on Drugs” enacted: This year during the Reagan presidency marked the continuation of a series of policies initiated by Richard Nixon (1973) that aimed at combating drug use. These

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<sup>2</sup>Richard A. Posner, “The Bakke Case and the Future of ‘Affirmative Action,’” *California Law Review* 67 (1979): 171-89, [https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2812&context=journal\\_articles](https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2812&context=journal_articles).

policies disproportionately affected the Black community, filling prisons with Black people who committed nonviolent crimes.

- 1983**—“A Nation at Risk” published in April: The National Commission on Excellence in Education was established by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell in 1981. The report warned that the “educational foundations of American society had been eroded by the rising tide of mediocrity.”<sup>3</sup> These reforms often led to more standardized testing and strict accountability measures, which ended up hurting schools in Black communities the most.<sup>4</sup>
- 1984**—The Comprehensive Crime Control Act: This act established mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses. It greatly impacted the Black community because of the War on Drugs campaign that targeted communities of color.<sup>5</sup>
- 1986**—The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986: The act established an imbalance and sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, disproportionately impacting Black communities because of the prevalence of crack cocaine in urban areas.
- 1992**—Los Angeles riots: Riots in Los Angeles reflected ongoing racial tensions following the acquittal of police officers charged in the beating of Rodney King.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Anya Kamenetz, “What ‘A Nation at Risk’ Got Wrong, and Right, About U.S. Schools,” *NPR*, April 29, 2018, [www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/29/604986823/what-a-nation-at-risk-got-wrong-and-right-about-u-s-schools](http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/29/604986823/what-a-nation-at-risk-got-wrong-and-right-about-u-s-schools).

<sup>4</sup>Valerie Strauss, “The Landmark ‘A Nation at Risk’ Called for Education Reform 35 Years Ago. Here’s How It Was Bungled,” *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/04/26/the-landmark-a-nation-at-risk-called-for-education-reform-35-years-ago-heres-how-it-was-bungled](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/04/26/the-landmark-a-nation-at-risk-called-for-education-reform-35-years-ago-heres-how-it-was-bungled).

<sup>5</sup>Ranya Shannon, “3 Ways the 1994 Crime Bill Continues to Hurt Communities of Color,” *Center for American Progress*, May 10, 2019, [www.americanprogress.org/article/3-ways-1994-crime-bill-continues-hurt-communities-color](http://www.americanprogress.org/article/3-ways-1994-crime-bill-continues-hurt-communities-color).

<sup>6</sup>Condensed from “Black History Milestones: Timeline,” *History.com*, October 14, 2009, updated January 24, 2024, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones). While not comprehensive, this timeline provides insight into the enduring struggle through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s for Black people, offering a backdrop to better understand the educational challenges I’ll explore rooted in poverty and trauma. I added additional events not included in the *History.com* timeline.

resilience in the face of institutional racism. And later they had to add it back when backlash began forming against the unjust removal of this important history.<sup>28</sup> These actions represent a troubling regression, illustrating how the fragile progress made in recent decades is being unraveled, leaving us to wrestle with the lingering question of how personhood, equity, and justice will survive under such a political assault.

Consider the abbreviated timeline, which doesn't even do justice to the atrocities that were experienced.

The hardships endured by the Black community, such as poverty, housing discrimination, and educational resource scarcity, are a direct connection to the hardships of the past and help us to understand the linkage between generational and educational disparities that we see in urban centers.

Long before I had any real knowledge about Black history and struggle, I would often ask my teachers at my school, Mary McCloud Bethune Elementary and Chapel Hill Elementary, why Black people had to suffer like Rodney King. Unfortunately, we weren't learning much about Black history in school. While my teachers would occasionally, briefly point toward Black people who broke through the oppression, these lessons were not in-depth enough to help my young mind understand why oppression needed to be broken through. Despite the teachers' efforts to identify people who had overcome the injustices of racism, I still felt like something was off—I couldn't fully grasp the weight of history. And while I believe educators shielded me and my peers from the full truth, it ultimately contributed to burying history and keeping me unaware. All I knew was that those barriers were established long before I arrived.

And furthermore, if this was the landscape that I had to navigate, what about the other Black or Brown children who, like me, were born into poverty in the 1980s and stepped into a world already steeped in such deep-seated challenges? My childhood,

sprinkled with dreams and innocence, was also shadowed by a cloud of history that contained systemic injustice, trauma, terror, and fear. Every blow Rodney King took felt like a collective blow to the Black community, each reminding those who watched about the mountains and hurdles we were still facing simply because of the color of our skin. As a child immersed in poverty, the full weight and complexity of this history journeyed with me every single day as I attempted to break the chains of systemic injustice and not get caught up in the cycle of the New Jim Crow.<sup>29</sup>

### A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Reflect on your experiences. If you are Black: Have you fully processed history in a way that has allowed you to heal from the discrimination, poverty, or other systemic challenges you may have faced as a result of this history? How has this impacted your life? Have you ever felt the weight of these barriers within your community or the one you emerged from? Did you grow up in blighted neighborhoods where urban hassles were present or part of the social landscape? To have lived during this time was to know firsthand what it meant to be Black after Jim Crow and civil rights, but it was also a time of great pride in being Black. Despite generational trauma, discrimination, and systemic barriers, it is possible to rise to your full potential.

If you're not Black: Consider the many barriers discussed in this chapter that you may have been unaware of—barriers that exist right from the start and keep those experiencing them from feeling they could achieve their personal or educational dreams. How does this new understanding change your perspective? How can this knowledge help you better understand and support those who face these challenges?

Engaging with these questions can lead to a deeper awareness and a shift in perspective, starting a journey of healing, or helping to create a more equitable society. All of these reflections can help prepare you for the lenses that you are about to put on.

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