

There Is a River

**The Black Struggle
for Freedom in America**

by Vincent Harding

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From the Shores of Africa

The Forerunners

. . . we stood in arms, firing on the revolted slaves, of whom we kill'd some and wounded many . . . and many of the most mutinous leapt over board, and drowned themselves in the ocean with much resolution . . .

John Barbot
Slave Ship Captain, 1701

It began at the edge of our homeland, where the verdant forests and tropical bush gave way gradually to the sandy stretches of the Guinea coast. It began at the mouths of the rivers, from that northern point where the Senegal and the Gambia pour their troubled streams into the waters around Cape Verde, down the thousands of miles of coastline to the place where the mighty river Congo breaks out into the ocean. On these shores near the mouths of these rivers, we first saw the ships.

There was no way to know it then, but their crews of men and boys came from many ports and many pasts to find the shores of Africa. They sailed from Amsterdam and Lisbon, from Nantes and La Rochelle, from Bristol and London, from Newport and Boston on ships with strange names. They came to us on *Brotherhood* and *John the Baptist*, on *Justice* and *Integrity*, on *Gift of God* and *Liberty*; they came on the good ship *Jesus*. But by the time our weary lines of chained and mourning travelers saw the vessels riding on the coastal waves, there could be but one name, one meaning: captivity. Thus it was on the edges of our continent—where some of us gulped down handfuls of sand in a last effort to hold the reality of the land—that the long struggle for black freedom began.¹

Struggle was inevitable for the captives, and preparations began early. There were many times when the forced marches from the interior or the long rides in the river canoes brought our people to their terrible rendez-

vous with slavery long before the *Morning Star* and *Mary* had arrived to receive them. Often, even when the ships were anchored in the bay, the involuntary black pilgrims were kept waiting weeks at a time until a slaver's full human cargo had been collected. Then, guarded by other Africans who had made a tragic choice, huddled together in rows of wooden shacks known as "baracoons" and "factories," forced into dungeonlike castles and forts which the Europeans had built on the coasts, or simply settled in open clearings by the riversides, a troubled and bewildered people had time to consider the past and the future, time to ponder this new captivity which dominated the present, time to grapple with the need to break free.²

As is so often the case with human struggles for liberation, the first stages of the baracoon-based movements toward black freedom required internal action, exertions of the will. In many places it was probably necessary to break through all the real and fancied barriers of each particular geographic, tribal, and national history represented in these first confused and unlikely pan-African assemblies. For within the flexible matrix of our continental oneness, over the long millennia of the ages, Africa has produced great diversity. Even in the relatively limited setting of the western portions of the continent, which supplied most of the men, women, and children who filled these prison spaces, there was a fascinating, compelling variety of human experience. Wherever they were gathered, in the slave castles at York, or at Cape Coast on Bena Island, or at Atim, or in scores of other places, the African captives were themselves a testimony to this multiformity. They had come from the ocean-tempered coastal area as well as inland forests, from the villages in the mountain shadows and from riverside towns. Some were the products of peoples and nations with long traditions of strong kings, elaborate courts, and well-defined civil services. Most of the others had heard of such things only through the stories of their traders; the sole kingdom they knew was that which encompassed their family, clan, and small tribe. As they identified themselves to one another and spoke their names in those dark prison places, the sounds of their tribes and nations must have tumbled like a waterfall out of the river of the past: Bambara, Malinka, Fon, Dinka, Ewe, Bakongo, Ibo, Yoruba, and hundreds more.

In the same way, the African people who waited against their will for the coming of the European ships were also living testimonies to the breadth and variety of the work and skills of their continent. Imprisoned now in the heart of the earth they had known so well were miners familiar with the long African traditions of iron, gold, and diamond mining. Blacksmiths, their companion artisans, were also captives. Weavers and potters; workers in bronze, copper, and gold; traders whose wide-ranging

movements had long ago put Africa in touch with Asia, Asia Minor, and Europe—all of them were now among the prisoners in these cramped and fetid waiting rooms of history. Here were herders, perhaps captured while pursuing their lonely, roaming occupation, and fishermen and fisherwomen. But surely no group was more fully represented in the baracoons than the vast body of farmers. And none was more essential to the life of the people than the priests and musicians who illuminated, intensified, and celebrated the ritual integument and vital religious center of African life. They too were in these terrible temporary settlements by the waters, and their prayers and songs for freedom must have filled the air like a bittersweet dust. Often they were among the natural leaders in planning the struggle to break free.³

For struggle was inevitable. Reflection on the great and varied African past was not sufficient. Now all these histories were jammed into one frightening present, and it was evident that we were being rushed forward into a new history, one which had no real precedent in the countless centuries of our past (except for the Moslems among us who told their stories of the captive people who had followed a certain Moses). So by the time the ships arrived, there could no longer be any doubt that we had been captured in our homeland to prepare us for a greater, uncharted, wholly terrifying captivity across the endless waters "far from [our] native clime / Under the white man's menace, out of time."⁴

From the European side, the way to this place of struggle had been ploughed by powerful movements of peoples and institutions. That relatively small continent was bursting with new cultural, political, and economic forces. Religious, civil, and commercial revolutions were creating new men and women, new institutions, new hungers for the riches of other people's lands which could only lead to harsh conflicts. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the recently established monarchies and national states, burgeoning commercial classes, trading companies, and adventurers were all drawn together. The common magnet was the search for gold and other precious goods, for the wealth and power these created, and the new trading routes to the Orient which led to them. At the same time, while their newly redefined religion and philosophy taught these men that human freedom had few limits for the strong, their advances in weaponry convinced them that there was no strength to match their own. Other technological developments, often borrowed by the way of North Africa and Asia Minor, gave them greater confidence on the ocean, new capacities to navigate its reckless wastes, stronger ships to carry them into the sun. Most often the kings, queens, and trading companies, as well as the new public treasuries, provided the capital for the bold explorations. Popes, bishops, and professors provided the blessing and the rationale

for their incursions into the lives and histories of other civilizations. Their developing nation states and national consciousness promised glory and recognition to the most successful conquerors and exploiters. Men and boys newly uprooted from the countryside and towns provided the crews and cannon fodder for fierce mutual warfare and for the larger European assault on the peoples of Africa and the Western Hemisphere.

With the merchant marine of Portugal and Spain taking the lead, the men and the ships who carried the banner of this new Europe blundered into the Americas while seeking the way to China. At the same time, still looking for alternative routes to the Orient, searching out trading posts on the way around "the Dark Continent," they discovered Africa's gold and its people. So Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama, Bartholomeu Diaz and John Cabot went out in search of wealth, adventure, and a place in history, and they barged into the future on a rising tide of blood. As a result, by the end of the sixteenth century many Europeans realized that across the Atlantic they had found a sparsely populated hemisphere to conquer, exploit, and settle. South of their so often cold and crowded lives, they had also come upon a great, warm black continent to provide the slave workers who would create much of the wealth of the New World. That brutal connection between the vast, potentially profitable lands of the Western Hemisphere, and the apparently inexhaustible sources of captive labor in Africa, became the critical nexus in the minds of Europe's ruling and commercial classes, as they anticipated the wealth and power these human and physical resources would bring to them. Out of that combination of vision, enterprise, and avarice, the African slave trade was born.⁵

Of course long before the ships of Europe arrived, there was a form of human bondage in Africa, just as there was on most of the world's continents. But there is no evidence that the kind of chattel slavery which Europe was to perfect in the New World had taken root in West Africa. The slavery in existence was—as slavery goes—far more humane, since often it was only for prescribed periods of time, and involved no laws aimed at dehumanization. This slavery was not established by the Africans primarily for profit; it did not impose on the victims a mark of essential, intrinsic inferiority; and it was not necessarily passed on to the children of the bondsmen. When the ships came, they brought with them the European passion for profits, the European disease of racism, and the European fondness for power of arms. When these forces encountered all the weaknesses—all the tendencies to fear, deception, and greed—that Africans share with the rest of humankind, the earlier, more flexible patterns of African bondage degenerated into the African slave trade—

financed, fueled, and directed by the peoples of Europe, and all too often aided and abetted by African allies.⁶

Attempts had already been made in various places to use the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, as well as poor white prisoners and indentured servants from England and the continent, as slave workers in the Americas, but none of these experiments had proven successful. In the case of the Indians, escape was too easy on their own native ground. Besides, their numbers were limited, and few had any preparation for the heavy agricultural work and metal mining which European exploitation demanded. In many cases, when they resisted European demands for such slave workers, the native peoples were simply destroyed. On the North American continent—where the need for such work was focused—two other considerations emerged as well. The enslaving of Indians was a direct invitation to their armed retaliation against some of the isolated frontier settlements, which the Europeans did not readily invite. In addition, one important early source of income for the Europeans in North America was the fur trade with the Indians, which enslavement of the latter would endanger. For these and other reasons, the practice never developed beyond relatively isolated instances.⁷

On the other hand, even those whites brought out of the prisons of England and elsewhere to work as slaves or indentured servants often still had some link to the home countries. Consequently, knowledge of their permanent servitude could produce serious political problems at home for the colonizers of the royal territories, as well as stop the flow of other white servants to the colonies. Besides, the common color and culture that these white servant-slaves shared with other whites in the colonies created thorny social, religious, and psychological problems, and also rendered re-capture more difficult when they escaped. Perhaps even more important was the fact that, as in the case of the Indians, there were simply not enough of them, and they had not developed the natural immunities necessary to become the massive, intensive, often semi-tropical labor force required to satisfy the desire of the companies and monarchs for the largest profits in the shortest time.⁸

As a result, by the end of the seventeenth century, as England and other white-settler countries shifted their attention north from the Caribbean, established claims along the North American coast, and explored the wilderness, Africans became the chosen people for American slavery. Here they were far from home with no natural allies around them, and with no regular means for word of their fate to get back to any political centers which would affect the sources of supply. In most cases they had the needed agricultural experience and natural tropical immunities,

and the supply seemed inexhaustible. Then, too—surely of the greatest importance—they were an alien, non-Christian, nonwhite people, easily providing a negative source of identity and a negative rallying point for the New World's white society. And so they were chosen. We were chosen.

By this time England had established its hegemony over "the Trade," as its participants and others euphemistically referred to this commerce in human bondage. With the Royal African Company and scores of independent "adventurers" leading the way, the vessels called *Morning Star* and *Charity*, *Young Saint Paul* and *Good Intent* were making their laden way from the Guinea coast to Barbados and Jamaica, to Charleston and Norfolk, carrying the peoples of Africa into captivity. There were often impressive profits to be made now in the Trade itself, and especially in that great flowering of agriculture, shipping, and commerce which accompanied the colonizing of the New World, a world that the captive Africans built. Individual owners, trading companies, churches, monarchs—all shared in the wealth. Of course these financial gains were based on working hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of men, women, and children for their lifetime without pay. And so, beginning with their first experimental presence on the tobacco plantations of the Caribbean, Africans gave their involuntary labor to the creation of the new settlement. They blazed the trails, cleared the forests, built the dwellings, tilled the land, planted the seed, harvested the crops, dug the ore, kept the livestock, nursed the children, created and maintained the wealth of the New World—without pay. As a result, there were great profits in Barbados and Hispaniola, in Carolina and Virginia. Indeed, before the American War for Independence, one contemporary English economist would say, "The daily bread of the most-considerable part of our British manufacturers, are owing primarily to the labor of Negroes." That, essentially, is what Eric Williams, C. L. R. James, and Walter Rodney have told us since: Europe's Industrial Revolution, that engine of revolutionary change which released the social, economic, and political energies of the modern world, was built on the black and bloody foundations of our African forebears. That is why the ships continued to come to the coast of Guinea and to wait at the mouths of the rivers.⁹

As the "Black Gold" began pouring into the English colonies of the New World, new patterns of captivity, betrayal, and confusion were established on the continent. African nations like the Fulas, the Mande, the Susu, and the peoples of Dahomey devoted themselves to capturing and keeping other Africans for the slave trade. Ancient political balances and structures of power and alliances were shattered through the introduction of Europe's firearms into the hands of one side or another. Often the arms were used as bribes to encourage leaders to capture men, women,

and children from adjoining nations and tribes. Wars were declared for no other reason than to obtain prisoners. Villages were razed; hunting parties never returned home. Families and tribes, and centuries of traditions, were broken. And eventually the trails of the West African lands were beaten smooth by the bare feet of millions of our ancestors, as they made their way down to the rivers and the sea. For a long time the Europeans, sustained by their guns and Bible, and by arrogance and cruelty, were convinced that all things white and Christian were possible. For a long time, partly because of internal weaknesses among the non-white peoples, it seemed the Europeans were right—as if, for instance, all the lives and skills and names in those coastal African baracoons were to be annealed into a single hopeless being called Nigger and Slave.¹⁰

But this was only a part of reality, for in those early precincts of despair, beginning in baracoons and in oceanside forts, under multilayered surfaces of European domination and African betrayal, the struggle for black freedom was breaking out. This, of course, was to be expected. Men, women, and children who for generations had helped create families, tribes, nations, and empires—who had known no other land but the land of their fathers, no other rule but the rule of their African peoples—must have developed within themselves a powerful will to break free from this captivity. Even the Africans who had been prisoners, the disgraced, the twice-captured, must have recognized the desperation of their plight. Too much human life, too much human creativity, too much human hope was compressed in those castles and dungeons for the struggle to be denied.

And so, by the time the ships arrived out of the glaring mirror of sun-swept waters, or moved like a visitation of giant fireflies against the darkness of the sea—by the time *Integrity* and *Liberty* and *Black Boy* arrived at Whydah and Malemba—the issues and nature of those early stages of black struggle were starkly defined. At that moment in our history, as the ominous shadows hovered near the coasts, we fought to remain in our homeland, to continue in the experience and tradition our peoples had created, to build and protect the societies we had fashioned under the guidance of the spirits. Our struggle was to resist the breaking of our nations, our families, and the chain of our existence. Our struggle was to free ourselves from the already obviously brutal captivity which was spreading over the people like some cloud of foreboding and death, to free ourselves for the life that our forebears had willed to us and our children. Our struggle was to resist both the European captors and their African helpers, to challenge and seek to break their power to take us away from our homeland. In doing this, we denied the European right to hold us, to rule our lives, to control our destiny. We affirmed our own freedom, our own being.

large #
African farmers
slave

Struggle was inevitable, and captains of the slave ships knew that they must be prepared for our attempts to break free, especially while their vessels were still near the African coasts. On board an English ship in 1693 (was it *Brotherhood* or *Constant Mary*?—we no longer know) the captain wrote: "When our slaves are aboard we shackle the men two and two, while we lie in port, and in sight of their own country, for 'tis then they attempt to make their escape and mutiny; to prevent which we always keep centinels upon the hatchways, and have a chest full of small arms, ready loaden and primed, constantly lying at hand upon the quarter-deck, together with some granada shells; and two of our quarter-deck guns, pointing on the deck thence, and two more out of the steerage."¹¹

If chains and guns were necessary when Africans were stuffed down in the brutal darkness between the decks, then even greater force and threat of force were often deemed necessary when we came up on deck to eat. The captain continues: "They are fed twice a day, at 10 in the morning, and 4 in the evening, which is the time they are aptest to mutiny, being all upon deck; therefore all that time, what of our men are not employ'd in distributing their victuals to them, and settling them, stand to their arms; and some with lighted matches at the great guns that yaun upon them, loaden with partridge, 'til they have done and gone down to their kennels between decks." Such testimony from the men who manned the ships of black captivity was repeated hundreds of times throughout the centuries of the Trade. In spite of their names, many of the vessels were indeed meant to be "kennels" where human beings were forced to exist for weeks and months in condition not fit for animals. That is why so many hundreds of thousands of our ancestors were ravaged by disease, lying for days in their own excrement, dying in these cattle ships.¹²

Yet the ships were also prisons for humans. That was the meaning of the chains, the guns, and the fearful white men standing with lighted matches at the cannon. For ultimately they knew that we were more than animals, that the secret conversations of the baracoons and lower decks could turn into rebellion at any moment. So as in all prisons, an inordinate amount of the captors' time was spent in simply watching and guarding against any black movement toward freedom. And the life of the sailor guards, locked in a captivity parallel with our own, was often filled with sheer wretchedness.¹³

In the course of the struggles, it developed that the ships were even more than prisons. Ultimately they provided black people with an introduction to the Euro-American state, for they were mini-states with their own polity, their own laws and government; the common sailors were the ships' own indigenous oppressed class. When the Africans were

brought on board, much of the machinery of these floating miniatures of England and France, of Virginia and Massachusetts, could be geared toward our captivity, but the internal contradictions did not disappear. At the core of the mini-states, prisons, and kennels it was always possible to discover the social, economic, and political scourges rising out of Europe: racism, capitalism, and the deep human fears they engender. The tie of the ships to European capitalism was evident in the decision to call them "slavers," and in their relationship to the slave "factories," and to the industrial factories at home which made the goods that they brought to trade for humans. To maximize profits, the ships had to herd as many Africans aboard as possible, and to exploit their own white crews.

The racism was just as clearly there, as for instance in the shipboard public executions which usually followed the unending black attempts at resistance and rebellion. Certainly it was unmistakable in the words and intent of William Snelgrave, one of the more famous (because more literary) slaving captains, when in 1727 he reported on the execution of an African who had killed a white man in the struggle for freedom. Snelgrave had the black man hoisted as high as possible above the deck and shot to death in the presence of his fellow Africans. Then, he said, "I ordered the Linguist to acquaint the men-Negroes, 'That now they might judge, no one that killed a white Man should be spared.'" Snelgrave probably did not know it then, but even if he had hoisted the insurrectionary up into the clouds, the struggle would not have ended. Though few of their words survive, the actions of our fathers and mothers in those ships along the coasts declared that many of them were determined to carry on a relentless struggle for freedom. They wanted freedom from the status of animals, the role of prisoners, the domination of white Europeans. They wanted to continue in their people's long stream of history.¹⁴

In the early struggles on the ships in the coastal waters, the African captives used every available tool to strike for freedom. Sometimes they even broke their chains and transformed them into weapons. Near the end of the seventeenth century, off the shores of the Gulf of Guinea where the castle of Elmina stood, a Dutch captain underestimated the power of the will of his black captives. He fished up an anchor left behind by another ship, and put it down in the hold where the male Africans were being held. The anchor became a signal and a forge. A Dutch writer and a participant in the slave trade, William Bosman, wrote:

[the men,] unknown to any of the ship's crew, possessed themselves of a hammer; with which, in a short time, they broke all their fetters in pieces upon the anchor; after this they came above deck and fell upon our men; some of

whom they grievously wounded, and would certainly have mastered the ship, if a French and English ship had not fortunately happened to ly by us and immediately came to our assistance with chalops and men, and drove the slaves under deck: Notwithstanding which before all was appeased about twenty of them were killed.

The lessons then being written in the reddened coastal waters soon entered into the long history of the struggle: blacks have never lacked ingenuity, wisdom, courage, and a deep longing for freedom. But in captivity these were not sufficient: it was not enough to break the chains; it was necessary to master the ship.¹⁵

Along the African coasts, it was possible to hope for such mastery. So in spite of constant and costly defeats, the struggles for freedom went on. Often women took a crucial part, making full use of the special status and greater freedom of movement accorded them. While the men, except for prescribed times, were kept chained in the communal hole between the decks, the women were allowed to move around the upper decks by day, and not infrequently after the day had ended. Why? Partly because they were judged less dangerous than the men. Partly too because the captains, who considered themselves humane and Christian, often thought it necessary for the children to be on deck, and wanted the women to be able to care for them. But also, on many vessels, so that white men from the captain to the cook's helper could unleash their lust against them.¹⁶

Fortunately for the black struggle, many black women refused to submit to or be corrupted by this most personal of white invasions; instead, they turned the situation to the purposes of their people's fight for freedom. Samuel Waldo, the owner of the slaving ship *Africa*, which operated out of Boston, wrote to his captain in 1734: "For your own safety as well as mine, You'll have the needfull Guard over your Slaves, and putt not too much confidence in the Women nor Children lest they happen to be Instrumental to your being surprised which might be fatall."¹⁷

By the time of his letter there was much evidence to support such a warning, for black women were regular participants in the struggle for freedom. Their role was exemplified in the events on board the English ship *Robert* as it stood off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1721. Among the thirty captives on board was a man who called himself Captain Tomba, one of the earliest identifiable leaders of the struggle. He and several other African men and an unnamed woman had developed a plan to attack the crew, overcome them, and make their way back to the shore. The woman, because she had greater freedom of movement, was chosen to inform the men of the best time for the attack.¹⁸

One night as she roamed the deck, she noted that the number of sailors

in the night watch was small enough to make a surprise move feasible. After she managed to inform Tomba, he prepared to act immediately; but only one of the African men who had promised earlier to assist him was now ready to join Tomba and the woman. Nevertheless, these three moved to strike for their freedom. The smallness of their force and an accidental sounding of an alarm worked against them, so that after killing two of the crew they were overwhelmed by others, beaten to the deck, and placed in chains. The ship's doctor who preserved this story of black struggle also recorded its cost: "The Reader may be curious to know their punishment: Why, Captain Harding weighing the Stoutness and Worth of the two Slaves, did as in other Countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three others, Abettors, but not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel Deaths; making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of [the whites who was] killed." Such atavistic tendencies, such remembrances of their own tribal pasts, were constantly in evidence among the white exploiters.¹⁹

And what of the woman who chose the struggle for black freedom over her privileged bondage among white men? We are told that "the woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp'd and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died." And so, not far from the shores of the homeland, the swaying, bleeding body of a sister in struggle bore terrifying witness to the cost of the decision for freedom. Yet perhaps she would have considered this lonely vigil above the sea a better use of her body than any that the crew members had had in mind.²⁰

It is only by accident that we learn a name such as that of Captain Tomba, or even catch the disturbingly grand outlines of the woman from Sierra Leone. Most of those Africans who carried on the earliest phases of the movement toward justice are now nameless. This is unfortunate, yet not wholly so, for their very anonymity is a reminder of the broad basis of the struggle, an encouragement to see the relentless surge toward freedom as a movement from the outset belonging to the people.

Even without the faces or the names, what begins to be clear is the stunning, perhaps frightening power resident in those early struggles. For instance, we know only that in 1730 the captive Africans of the Massachusetts schooner *William* conspired together and killed almost all the crew, then made their way back to the nearby shores. On another Massachusetts ship of the same period, "the Negroes got to the powder and Arms, and about 3 o'clock in the morning, rose upon the whites; and after wounding all of them very much, except two who hid themselves; [the blacks] ran the Vessel ashore a little to the Southward of Cape Lopez and made their escape." So too, near the end of 1732, a contemporary account reported that a group of captives from Guinea on board a Bristol

slaving ship "rose up and destroyed the whole crew, cutting off the Captain's Head, Legs and Arms."²¹

The sheer ferocity of such confrontations makes it clear that some of the men and women who battled in the coastal waters anticipated the violent future ominously as when, in 1735, the captives on the English ship *Dolphin* "overpowered the crew, broke into the powder room, and finally in the course of their effort for freedom blew up both themselves and the crew." In February 1759, in the Gambia River, a battle on board a New England ship produced a similar outcome. When the vessel had taken on its captives, it was attacked by other Africans from the shore. According to a contemporary white account, the crew "made a good defence; but the Captain finding himself desperately wounded, and likely to be overcome, rather than fall into the Hands of such merciless Wretches, when about 80 Negroes had boarded his Vessel, discharged a Pistol into his magazine, and blew her up; himself and every living soul on Board perished."²²

In spite of the constant danger of such suicidal white defense, black men and women continued to resist. Still, there were always captains and other white men who claimed to be surprised at such persistent struggle. On another occasion a group of Africans fresh from the Gold Coast attempted an uprising while the ship of the familiar Captain Snelgrave was still near the shore. The fifty white men in the slaver's crew were healthy and well armed; black resistance had not been expected. When the revolt had been crushed, Snelgrave had his translators ask what had induced them to mutiny. According to his own account, the Africans told him that he was "a great Rogue to buy them, in order to carry them away from their own Country, and that they were resolved to regain their Liberty if possible."²³

It is likely that the version of either the translators or the captain was much milder than the original sentiment; nevertheless, both the words and the deeds of the rebellious Africans were significant, and their meaning was not lost. The captives were challenging the justice, authority, and legitimacy of their captors. Their words, which surely represented the speeches—and the screams—of many other men and women on those voyages, were among the earliest forms of what we shall call the Great Tradition of Black Protest. As such, the speakers and others like them were the first bold face-to-face petitioners against slavery. But they were more besides, for if those European ships indeed represented the rising white racist nation-state and its developing systems of economic and cultural exploitation, then the black voices of the Gold Coast were also part of a beginning tradition of radical challenge to such a state. Albeit unwittingly, they called into question the very roots of the mechanisms

of white power and control. Essentially, they declared that for them this system had absolutely no legitimacy; they persistently acted accordingly and often took the consequences. This was black radicalism at the outset.²⁴

Everywhere, though, the joint tradition of protest and radicalism raised problems which needed to be solved—harsh questions involving both the goals of the struggle and the nature of the men and forces which opposed black freedom. How could black struggle best break the power of men who were at once driven and imprisoned by the glittering promises of commercial wealth, and blinded by the racism and fear which burrowed deeply within their lives? When such white men were in possession of the ships and weapons, when they had access to the self-destruction levers, what was the proper path of a struggle, what was the goal of the radical movement toward freedom?

While the battles were still being waged in sight of the homeland, at least some issues and answers seemed clear. Africans had shared no significant history with those masters of the slave ships, which were meant to be our prisons and our kennels, providing a brief and horrible introduction to the civilization of the European world, its laws, its impulses, and its conception of our place. Near the coast our challenge was clear, fundamental, and radical in its essential nature: our total struggle on each ship was a total challenge to the control of the white captors, a movement to smash their power, to repossess our history and our future. We wanted their little ships only long enough to return us to our vast continent. Indeed, sometimes we spared their crews if they did not hinder our homeward flight. So for the most part, black struggle and black radicalism were at the beginning a single stream encompassing both words and action.

But what happened on those ships, those thousands of ships which took us out into the ocean, away from the sights and smells of our land, beyond even the far-ranging flight of our birds? What did black struggle for freedom mean out in the vast and seemingly endless arena of that ocean? Was any struggle possible? In such situations African men and women must surely have asked, why challenge the captains and crews, why risk the certainty of death for the uncertainty of the land beyond the ocean, why fly in the face of the eternal east wind?

Already it was evident that from place to place, time to time, and setting to setting, the nature of our struggle was to be transformed and the questions reshaped. So it was on the ocean, as we moved further from the black shores into the agonies of the middle passage. Under those new, unprecedented circumstances the only possible struggle for most captives was to stay alive—an arduous task on many ships, usually demanding all our energies. On too many vessels the focus of this struggle for survival

was the food, stingily apportioned by the captains or the owners, while Africans and their children slowly starved. Sometimes our attention was focused on filth and on the disease it engendered, as well as on the strange new diseases brought from the wharfs of Bristol or London—and from the captains' bedrooms—and insinuated into our bodies just as arrogantly as the boats moved into the rivers of our land. Often the focus was on the extended suffering of countless hours in chains, lying on our backs and sides in spaces made for narrow, rigid corpses. But it is likely that for most of us the heart of the new darkness was imprisonment itself. Most of us had not experienced it before—neither the physical imprisonment of kennels, chains, and guns, nor those mental dungeons that white fear and disdain now created around us. In many instances, the shock they induced proved fatal.²⁵

It was a long journey to the Western Hemisphere—usually from one to three months, depending on tides and storms, and on the points of departure and landing. Under these circumstances, when even the birds of the homeland could no longer be seen, survival was an understandable obsession, and it was not always possible to perceive the meaning or purpose of any other struggle. In the midst of the journey, on many ships they made us sing and dance. But like so much of our singing and dancing at white command ever since, the activity was not primarily for our benefit or entertainment, but for white profits, ordered because dancing was considered therapeutic, was supposed to ensure us against the “melancholy” that drove countless thousands of Africans to suicide in the course of the middle passage. It was also supposed to help prevent scurvy, though as some observers noted, dancing “was a useless torture for men with swollen limbs.” Nevertheless, “while sailors paraded the deck, each with a cat-o'-nine-tails in his right hand, the men slaves ‘jumped in their irons’ until their ankles were bleeding flesh.” The men and women often danced separately, their music supplied by a fellow captive who beat on a broken drum or played on the upturned kettle which was, and would continue to be, so ubiquitous in our cultures.²⁶

And what were the songs that we sang? One doctor who served on the English ship *Young Hero* probably spoke with great accuracy when he said, “They sing, but not for their amusement. The captain ordered them to sing, and they sang songs of sorrow. Their sickness, fear of being beaten, their hunger, and the memory of their country . . . are the usual subjects.” Then late at night, after the songs were over, from the darkness of the lower decks of the *Young Hero* and a thousand other ships, the sailors often could hear “an howling melancholy noise, expressive of extreme anguish.” On one such occasion, the ship's doctor said that he asked his black female interpreter to go inquire the cause

of the wailing noise. According to the doctor, “she discovered it to be owing to their having dreamt that they were in their own country, and finding themselves when awake, in the hold of a slave ship.” At every period of our history, in every place of our captivity, men and women have dreamed that long collective dream of home and then awakened to the brutal reality of the endless night.²⁷

On many ships in the Atlantic, out of sight of the shores, there were other awakenings as well. Even in such desolate places, where all cause for hope seemed destroyed, many Africans awoke and insisted on the continuing reality and necessity of struggle. Again, some of the oppressors knew of the black commitment to carry on the fight for freedom, even when the distant homeland was only a dream in the darkness. Thus one white participant in the slave trade wrote: “When we are slaved and out at Sea, it is commonly imagined, the Negroes ignorance of Navigation, will always be a Safeguard; yet, as many of them think themselves bought to eat, and more, that Death will send them into their own Country, there has not been wanting Examples of rising and killing a Ship's Company, distant from Land.” They knew the captives would fight, but these Europeans did not think we would struggle against them simply because we knew that we did not belong to them, simply because many African men and women considered any fate better than the continued subjugation they had already experienced briefly among Europeans. Therefore the whites said they could not understand those apparently reckless last stands which often ended with death in the ocean.²⁸

One of many such desperate battles took place near the beginning of the eighteenth century on the English ship *Don Carlos*, which had sailed up the Congo River and down again, and was now out to sea. Several crew members had died on the river and others were sick. Nevertheless, in an act of careless overconfidence, the crew had given knives to many of the black men. In addition, the captain later wrote:

others had pieces of iron they had torn off our fore-castle door, as having premeditated a revolt, and seeing all the ship's company, at best but weak and many quite sick, they had also broken off the shackles from several of their companions feet, which served them, as well as . . . all other things they could lay their hands on, which they imagined might be of use for their enterprize. Thus armed, they fell in crowds and parcels on our men, upon the deck un-awares, and stabb'd one of the stoutest of us all, who received fourteen or fifteen wounds of their knives, and so expir'd. Next they assaulted our boat-swain, and cut one of his legs so round the bone, that he could not move . . . others cut our cook's throat to the pipe, and others wounded three of the sailors, and threw one of them overboard in that condition.²⁹

Before long, however, the ship's company rallied behind the ever-present firearms. As the captain later reported, "We stood in arms, firing on the revolted slaves of whom we kill'd some, and wounded many: which so terrified the rest, that they gave way, dispersing themselves . . . between decks, and under fore-castle; and many of the most mutinous, leapt over board, and drowned themselves in the ocean *with much resolution, showing no manner of concern for life.*"³⁰

What was the basic goal of such desperate struggle, and what manner of men and women were these who threw themselves into the ocean "with much resolution," rather than submit to slavery a long way from home? Obviously, the captain's answer is not that of the black people. The captors and the captives never have the same answers to the basic questions of struggle; most often, not even the same questions. Those who threw themselves resolutely into the ocean in fact had great "concern for life." That was why they fought so relentlessly in a seemingly hopeless situation, driven by a vivid urgency that only those who face bondage can know. They were incited by a wild and terrible hope which winds its way through all the history of our struggle against white domination. They lost the battle to live and be rid of their captors, but they won the struggle to die and be free.³¹

The question then arises: after the struggle to break the oppressors' hold upon our lives is stymied, is suicide another form of battle against that domination? Thousands upon thousands of Africans—we cannot know the number—took that path. For many, of course, it was the traditional pathway back to the homeland, for they believed that death would deliver them to the unseen but well-remembered shores. Sometimes, after the firearms had overwhelmed them, black men and women moved resolutely back into the hold and methodically, unwaveringly—in spite of knives ripping them and hot coals placed at their mouths—starved themselves to death. Others, countless others, took some new occasion to leap over the side of the vessels. This response was so common that the watch was constantly on guard, and special nettings were rigged up to baffle such attempts. Still, this black action was so often successful that schools of sharks followed the vessels.³²

Consistently, even the reluctant white witnesses spoke of the active resoluteness of the suicides, and at times perceived suggestions of ecstasy in their daring acts. On the French ship *Le Rodeur*, which had left Bonny Town on the Guinea Coast and was several days at sea, there was a sudden commotion. The Africans began charging across the decks in every direction. Eluding the flailing arms of the crew, avoiding the nettings, they hurled themselves into the ocean. An eyewitness later wrote: "The Negroes . . . who had got off, continued dancing about the waves, yelling

with all their might, what seemed to me a song of triumph and they were soon joined by several of their companions still on deck. Our ship speedily left the ignorant creatures behind; their voices came fainter and fainter upon the wind; the black head, first of one, then another, disappeared, and then the sea was without a spot; and the air without a sound." On another ship the captain declared—typically—that he would fight the epidemic of suicides among the Ibos on board by public beheadings of all who attempted it. At one of these white rituals several Africans tried again to break loose and leap overboard, and one succeeded. A crew member was lowered to catch him, but the man swam and floated away, and as he went he "made signs which words cannot express [testifying to] his happiness in escaping. He went down and was seen no more."³³

Once again, the history of the slavers was inadequate to capture the meaning of black struggle. It could not bear the terrible significance of such "songs of triumph," sung in magnificent unity by those Africans on the deck and those moving into the depths of the water. In European eyes these singers could only be "ignorant creatures" whose lives were to be forever blotted from the pages of the world's real history. Even in our own time more recent versions of conventional wisdom would relegate such black action to the category of unfortunate, ineffectual escapism, or of limited passive resistance at best. Contrary to such opinions, both the songs and the singers remain embedded in the black freedom movement in America. No struggle against oppression is ignorant and to label it escapist is in itself an evasion, an escape from the meanings of the long battle. These forerunners who fought and sang, who starved themselves to death in the darkness of the ships' holds, have forced their way into the ever-flowing river of black struggle. To call such acts "passive resistance" is to deny the existence of vast realms of the spirit, to count resistance only by its outward physical modes. Anyone who has seriously contemplated suicide or attempted fasting surely understands what tremendous action of the will was performed by those men and women who leaped voluntarily into the waters, or who refused food until they died. There was nothing "passive" in such decisions and deeds.

Their form of resistance again challenged and denied the ultimate authority of the white traders over their lives and their spirits. Their actions were unmistakable attacks on the system of slavery and the slave trade, for they refused the system some of its profits, some of its parts—perhaps even threatened some of its self-righteousness of spirit. Whatever else they did, these men and women made a radical break with the situation of their captivity, denying that their lives could belong to any man, especially to the representatives of Europe. Doing so, they took charge of their future, joining it with their own past. Out on the Atlantic, such

an action was often the highest form available to many persons who found themselves far from the sands of Africa's shores, far from the birds of the mainland, under the white man's menace, but determined to be free.

☞ Suicide was a last resort. Before its final word was spoken, all the other possible avenues of struggle were often attempted; just as they had been attempted near the shores. The movement never abated, and we are told by a major authority on the subject that from the third decade of the eighteenth century to the end of the slave trade, "tales of mutinies abound in the literature of the slave trade. . . . There is little question but that they became more common as the trade fell into the hands of independent traders, who probably were more careless in their supervision of the negroes, and who carried smaller crews in comparison with the size of their cargoes than had the company vessels." This was a strange but telling testimony, not only to the determined resistance of the forefathers, but to the way in which the very racism and greed for profits which fueled the trade created openings for new struggle and revolt. For this carelessness was a form of disdain for the Africans' love of freedom, a disbelief in their willingness to strike when the opportunity arose. And the smallness of the crews was a way of saving on the initial investments, so that the profit might be even higher. Out on the ocean the captives took advantage of both of these circumstances wherever possible.³⁴

In 1727 the English ship *Ferrers* was ten days out from the Guinea Coast. Its captain, surely considering himself liberal and humane, regularly sat among the African captives while they ate their main meal on deck. One day, we are told, the Africans "laid on him, and beat out his Brains with the little Tubs, out of which they eat their boiled Rice." Nor was this an unplanned, impetuous act.

This mutiny having been plotted amongst all the grown Negroes on board, they run to the forepart of the Ship in a body, and endeavored to force the Barricadoe on the Quarter-Deck, not regarding the Musquets of Half Pikes, that were presented to their Breasts by the white Men, through the Loop-Holes. So that at last the chief Mate was obliged to order one of the Quarter-deck Guns laden with Partridge-Shot, to be fired amongst them; which occasioned a terrible destruction: For there were near eighty Negroes killed and drowned, many jumping overboard when the Gun was fired. This indeed put an end to the Mutiny, but most of the Slaves that remained alive grew so sullen, that several of them were starved to death, obstinately refusing to take any Sustenance.³⁵

Eventually, after another attempted uprising, the *Ferrers* was lost in a hurricane off the coast of Jamaica.

Meanwhile the struggles of the forerunners continued on the Atlantic, out beyond the birds of the coasts. In the spring of 1730 the Rhode Island vessel *Little George*, with ninety-six Africans on board, had left the Guinea Coast almost a week behind. Somehow the African men slipped out of their chains and overpowered the crew. Throwing some crew members overboard, the captives gained control of the ship. The remaining crew took refuge in a cabin, holing themselves up there with as much of the firearms and gunpowder as they were able to gather. If the white men expected that the Africans would eventually become frustrated with running the ship, they were sorely disappointed. For although it took them nine days to make a six-day voyage, they returned the ship to the shores of their homeland and left it there—captain, crew, gunpowder, and all.³⁶

As the eighteenth century wore on, an increasing number of ships from the North American colonies were taking part in the Trade. Owned and commanded by the rising patriots of New England, they bore down on the continent from ports like Boston, Portsmouth, and Newport, entering the rivers, befouling the shores, to carry black people as slaves for the rising patriots of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Maryland. Our fathers and mothers made no distinctions between those slave ships whose owners were fighting for "freedom," "liberty," and "independence" at home, and the ones who were not; there was no cessation in their struggles when they were herded aboard the North American vessels in the time of freedom's ferment. In 1765 a ship from Providence, Rhode Island, had filled its lower decks with captives and was on its way to the high seas. According to one account, soon after they left the coastal area extensive sickness among the crew forced the captain "to permit some of the Slaves to come upon the Deck and assist the People." An invidious distinction between "Slaves" and "People" had obviously been impressed upon the minds of the Americans, but not the Africans. Indeed, we are told that "these slaves contrived to release the others, and the whole rose upon the People, and endeavored to get Possession of the Vessel; but was happily prevented by the Captain and his Men, who killed, wounded and forced overboard Eighty of them, which obliged the rest to submit."³⁷

Meanwhile, the ironies and contradictions built up. So, in the spring of 1776 Thomas Jefferson, representing the cause of American freedom, wrote into his draft of the Declaration of Independence a sharp attack on the English crown for supposedly forcing the colonists to participate in the African slave trade in order to fill the mother country's coffers. At the same time, these Americans seemed to be unreluctant slave traders and slave owners and were actively engaged in suppressing shipboard re-

bellions carried out in the cause of black freedom. For instance, that fall of Independence, there was word of another African uprising, this time on the Rhode Island-based vessel *Hope*. The ship's doctor told the story:

We had the misfortune to lose 36 of the best slaves we had by an Insurrection; this unlucky affair happened . . . when there was only the Boatswaine, Carpenter, 3 White people and myself on board. . . . We had 160 Slaves on board and were that day let out of the Deck Chains in order to wash, about 2 O'Clock. . . . They began by seizing upon the Boatswain . . . but he soon got disengaged . . . after receiving a wound on his breast and one under his Chin. . . . They continued to throw [sic] Staves, billets of wood, etc., and in endeavoring to get down the Baricado, or over it for upwards of 40 minutes, when finding they could not effect it all the Fantee and most of the Accra Men Slaves jumped over board.³⁸

At the end of his narrative, this doctor found it difficult to account for the struggle: "The only reason we can give for their attempting any thing of the kind, is, their being wearied at staying so long on board the ship." But these captives knew why they struggled, and it had nothing to do with the boredom of the ship. Like the independence struggles of the American colonists—indeed, *more than* the white battles in America—the issue was simply freedom.³⁹

Sometimes, of course, other related matters were involved. On June 6, 1796, the captain of the *Mary* out of Providence, Rhode Island, wrote in his log: "This morning found our women slave apartments had been attempted to have been opened by some of the Ship's crew, the locks being Spoiled and Sundered." Four days later the African men attempted an uprising. They failed, but they knew why they rose.⁴⁰

Struggle was inevitable.

We do not know how many battles were actually won in those days of the forerunners, or how often the Africans were able to take over the ships and return to the homeland. Similarly, we do not know how many repossessed their own lives by means of suicide. But we do know that the struggle continued relentlessly, from the river Gambia to Charleston's bay, filling the waters and lining the ocean floor with the bones of those first many thousands gone. Of course we also know that the large majority of uprisings failed, because of the overwhelming fire power of the captors. Nevertheless, even in their failure these battles often led the most honest among the white men to marvel at the unyielding determination of the Africans. In 1790, such testimony emerged from the simple reportage of the English sailor, William Richardson, whose crew had gone to the aid of a French vessel where the Africans were rebelling: "I could not but admire the courage of a fine young black who, though his partner in irons lay dead at his feet, would not surrender but fought with his billet of

wood until a pistol ball finished his existence. The others fought as well as they could but what could they do against fire-arms?"⁴¹

What the learned medical doctor had not been able to see, an ordinary sailor saw clearly. And the question and the issue remain with us through all our history. As the sailor rightly sensed, the issue was never—nor is it now—a matter of superior white cultures, more satisfying ways of life, democracy, free worlds, or higher civilizations. Always, beneath these shibboleths of oppression lurked the demonic forces of white racism and Euro-American capitalism, and deep human fears, fueled and protected by the engines of destruction and warfare ("what could they do against fire-arms?"). It is against that backdrop that we assess the struggles of our fathers and our mothers in the slave ships of Europe. It is in such a setting that we recognize the amazing image of our brother, chained to a dead comrade, facing the bullets of Europe with a piece of wood in his hand. That vision from the past becomes a symbol and a source of the truths we seek for the future. It reminds us that only in the light of the historical realities of our captors, and in the presence of our people's amazing endurance, can we properly understand the river of our struggle and help to guide its continuing movement toward freedom.