

158 RESOURCES TO UNDERSTAND RACISM IN AMERICA

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In a [short essay](#) published earlier this week, Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch wrote that the recent killing in Minnesota of [George Floyd](#) has forced the country to “confront the reality that, despite gains made in the past 50 years, we are still a nation riven by inequality and racial division.”

Amid escalating clashes between protesters and police, discussing race—from the inequity embedded in American institutions to the United States’ long, painful history of anti-black violence—is an essential step in sparking meaningful societal change. To support those struggling to begin these difficult conversations, the Smithsonian’s [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) recently launched a “[Talking About Race](#)” portal featuring “tools and guidance” for educators, parents, caregivers and other people committed to equity.

“Talking About Race” joins a vast trove of resources from the Smithsonian Institution dedicated to understanding what Bunch describes as America’s “tortured racial past.” From *Smithsonian* magazine articles on [slavery’s Trail of Tears](#) and the disturbing [resilience of scientific racism](#) to the National Museum of American History’s [collection of Black History Month](#)

6. Allyship and Education

Historical Context

Between 1525 and 1866,

served either to reassure worried Americans in a Cold War world, or uphold a white supremacist, sexist interpretation of the past.” Rather than referring to the [_Compromise of 1850](#), call it the Appeasement of 1850—a term that better describes “the uneven nature of the agreement,” according to Landis. Smithsonian scholar [Christopher Wilson](#) wrote, too, that widespread framing of the Civil War as a battle between equal entities [_lends legitimacy to the Confederacy](#), which was not a nation in its own right, but an “illegitimate rebellion and unrecognized political entity.” A 2018 *Smithsonian* magazine investigation found that the literal [_costs of the Confederacy](#) are immense: In the decade prior, American taxpayers contributed \$40 million to the maintenance of [_Confederate monuments](#) and heritage organizations.

To better understand the immense brutality ingrained in enslaved individuals’ everyday lives, read up on Louisiana’s [_Whitney Plantation Museum](#), which acts as “part reminder of the scars of institutional bondage, part mausoleum for dozens of enslaved people who worked (and died) in [its] sugar fields, ... [and] monument to the terror of slavery,” as Jared Keller observed in 2016. Visitors begin their tour in a historic church populated by clay sculptures of children who died on the plantation’s grounds, then move on to a series of granite slabs engraved with hundreds of enslaved African Americans’ names. Scatte

farmers and lived in “converted” [_slave cabins](#), was the impetus for the [_1919 Elaine Massacre](#), which found white soldiers collaborating with local vigilantes to kill at least 200 sharecroppers who dared to criticize their low wages.) By the time the Great Migration—famously [chronicled](#) by artist [_Jacob Lawrence](#)—ended in the 1970s, 47 percent of African Americans called the northern and western United States home.

Conditions outside the Deep South were more favorable than those within the region, but the “hostility and hierarchies that fed the Southern caste system” remained major obstacles for black migrants in all areas of the country, according to Wilkerson. Low-paying jobs, [redlining](#), restrictive housing covenants and rampant discrimination limited opportunities, creating inequality that would eventually give rise to the civil rights movement.

“The Great Migration was the first big step that the nation’s servant class ever took without asking,” Wilkerson explained. “... It was about agency for a people who had been denied it, who had geography as the only tool at their disposal. It was an expression of faith, despite the terrors they had survived, that the country whose wealth had been created by their ancestors’ unpaid labor might do right by them.”

Systemic Inequality

Racial, economic and educational disparities are deeply entrenched in U.S. institutions. Though the Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal,” American democracy has historically—and often [violently](#)—excluded certain groups. “Democracy means everybody can participate, it means you are sharing power with people you don’t know, don’t understand, might not even like,” said National Museum of American History curator [Harry Rubenstein](#) in 2017. “That’s the bargain. And some people over time have felt very threatened by that notion.”

Instances of inequality range from the obvious to less overtly discriminatory policies and belief systems. Historical examples of the former include [_poll taxes](#) that effectively

9 years old, he started building a sand castle during a trip to the [Connecticut shore](#). A young white girl joined him but was quickly taken away by her father. Lester recalled the girl returning, only to ask him, “Why don’t [you] just go in the water and wash it off?” Lester says., “I was so confused—I only figured out later she meant my *complexion*.” Two decades earlier, in 1957, 15-year-old [Minnijean Brown](#) had arrived at Little Rock Central High School with high hopes of “making friends, going to dances and singing in the chorus.” Instead, she and the rest of the [Little Rock Nine](#)—a group of black students selected to attend the formerly all-white academy after [Brown v. Board of](#)

which are introduced by lab staff and crowdsourced workers who program their own conscious and unconscious opinions into algorithms.

Anti-Black Violence

In addition to enduring centuries of enslavement, exploitation and inequality, African Americans have long been the targets of racially charged physical violence. Per the Alabama-based [Equal Justice Initiative](#), more than [4,400 lynchings](#)—mob killings undertaken without legal authority—took place in the U.S. between the end of

homes of black residents, beating those unable to flee and lynching at least two people. Local authorities, argues historian [Roberta Senechal](#), were “ineffectual at best, complicit at worst.”

False accusations also sparked a [July 1919 race riot in Washington, D.C.](#) and the [Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921](#), which was most recently dramatized in the HBO series “[Watchmen](#).” As African American History Museum curator [Paul Gardullo](#) tells *Smithsonian*, tensions related to Tulsa’s economy underpinned [the violence](#): Forced to settle on what was thought to be worthless land, African Americans and Native Americans struck oil and proceeded to transform the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa into a prosperous community known as “Black Wall Street.” According to Gardullo, “It was the frustration of poor whites not knowing what to do with a successful black community, and in coalition with the city government [they] were given permission to do what they did.”

Over the course of two days in spring 1921, the [Tulsa Race Massacre](#) claimed the lives of an estimated 300 black Tulsans and displaced another 10,000. Mobs burned down at least 1,256 residences, churches, schools and businesses and destroyed almost 40 blocks of Greenwood. As the Sidedoor episode “[Confronting the Past](#)” notes, “No one knows how many people died, no one was ever convicted, and no one really talked about it nearly a century later.”

Economic injustice also led to the [East St. Louis Race War](#) of 1917. This labor dispute-turned-deadly found “people’s houses being set ablaze, ... people being shot when they tried to flee, some trying to swim to the other side of the Mississippi while being shot at by white mobs with rifles, others being dragged out of street cars and beaten and hanged from street lamps,” recalled Dhati Kennedy, the son of a survivor who witnessed the devastation firsthand. Official counts place the death toll at 39 black and 9 white individuals, but locals argue that the real toll was closer to 100.

A watershed moment for the burgeoning civil rights movement was the 1955 murder of 14-year-old [Emmett Till](#). Accused of whistling at a white woman while [visiting family members](#) in Mississippi, he was kidnapped, tortured and killed. Emmett’s mother, Mamie Till Mobley, decided to give her son an open-casket funeral, forcing the world to [confront the image of his disfigured, decomposing body](#). ([Visuals](#), including photographs, movies, television clips and artwork, played a key role in advancing the movement.) The two white men responsible for Till’s murder were acquitted by an all-white jury. A marker at the site where the teenager’s body was recovered has been [vandalized at least three times](#) since its placement in 2007.

The form of anti-black violence with the most striking parallels to contemporary conversations is [police brutality](#). As Katie Nodjimbadem reported in 2017, a regional [crime survey](#) of late 1920s Chicago and Cook County, Illinois, found that while African America

percent of the victims of police killings. Civil rights protests exacerbated tensions between African Americans and police, with events like the [Orangeburg Massacre](#) of 1968, in which law enforcement officers shot and killed three student activists at South Carolina State College, and the [Glenville shootout](#), which left three police officers, three black nationalists and one civilian dead, fostering mistrust between the two groups.

Today, this legacy is exemplified by [broken windows policing](#), a controversial approach that encourages racial profiling and targets African American and Latino communities. “What we see is a continuation of an unequal relationship that has been exacerbated, made worse if you will, by the mil

aspirations.” The group’s Ten-Point Program called for an “immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people,” as well as more controversial measures like freeing all black prisoners and exempting black men from military service. Per [NMAAHC](#), black power “emphasized black self-reliance and self-determination more than integration,” calling for the creation of separate African American political and cultural organizations. In doing so, the movement ensured that its proponents would attract the unwelcome attention of the FBI and other government agencies.

Many of the protests now viewed as emblematic of the fight for racial justice took place in the 1960s. On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people gathered in D.C. for the [March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom](#). Ahead of the 50th anniversary of the march, activists who attended the event detailed the experience for a *Smithsonian* [oral history](#): Entertainer Harry Belafonte observed, “We had to seize the opportunity and make our voices heard. Make those who are comfortable with our oppression—make them uncomfortable—Dr. King said that was the purpose of this mission,” while Representative John Lewis recalled, “Looking toward Union Station, we saw a sea of humanity; hundreds, thousands of people. ... People literally pushed us, carried us all the way, until we reached the Washington Monument and then we walked on to the Lincoln Memorial..”

Two years after the March on Washington, King and other activists organized a march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery. Later called the [Selma March](#), the protest was dramatized in a 2014 film starring [David Oyelowo](#) as MLK. ([Reflecting on Selma](#), Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch, then-director of NMAAHC, deemed it a “remarkable film” that “does not privilege the white perspective ... [or] use the movement as a convenient backdrop for a conventional story.”)

Organized in response to the manifest obstacles black individuals faced when attempting to vote, the Selma March actually consisted of three separate protests. The first of these, held on March 7, 1965, ended in a tragedy now known as [Bloody Sunday](#). As peaceful protesters gathered on the [Edmund Pettus Bridge](#)—named for a Confederate general and local Ku Klux Klan leader—law enforcement officers attacked them with tear gas and clubs. One week later, President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) offered the Selma protesters his support and introduced legislation aimed at expanding voting rights. During the third and final march, organized in the aftermath of Johnson’s announcement, tens of thousands of protesters (protected by the National Guard and personally led by King) converged on Montgomery. Along the way, interior designer CTm(gt)4(on)] TJ

education contributed to the uprising, but police brutality was the driving factor behind the violence. By the end of the riots, 43 people were dead. Hundreds sustained injuries, and more than 7,000 were arrested.

The Detroit riots of 1967 prefaced the seismic changes of [1968](#). As Matthew Twombly wrote in 2018, movements including the Vietnam War, the Cold War, civil rights, human rights and youth culture “exploded with force in 1968,” triggering aftershocks that would resonate both in America and abroad for decades to come.

On February 1, black sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker died in a gruesome accident involving a malfunctioning garbage truck. Their deaths, compounded by Mayor Henry Loeb’s refusal to negotiate with labor representatives, led to the outbreak of the

The **Black Lives Matter** marches organized in response to the killings of George Floyd, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, **Michael Brown** and other victims of anti-black violence share many **parallels with protests of the past**.

Football player **Colin Kaepernick's** decision to kneel during the national anthem—and the unmitigated **outrage it sparked**—bears **similarities to the story of boxer Muhammad Ali**, historian **Jonathan Eig** told *Smithsonian* in 2017: “It’s been eerie to watch it, that we’re still having these debates that black athletes should be expected to shut their mouths and perform for us,” he said. “That’s what people told Ali 50 years ago.”

Other aspects of modern protest draw directly on uprisings of earlier eras. In 2016, for instance, artist **Dread Scott** updated an anti-lynching poster used by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1920s and '30s to read “**A Black Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday**.” (Scott added the words “by police.”)

Though the civil rights movement is often viewed as the result of a cohesive “grand plan” or “manifestation of the vision of the few leaders whose names we know,” the American History Museum’s Christopher Wilson argues that “the truth is there wasn’t one, **there were many and they were often competitive**.”

number of directions, and sometimes, from all of them. So if a black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from discrimination from any or

What Does This Moment Mean for America?” and “#Words Matter: Making Revolution Irresistible.” As *Smithsonian* reported at the time, “It was somewhat of a refrain at the [symposium](#) that [mus](#), within which visitors [can] wrestle with difficult and complex topics.” Then-director Lonnie Bunch expanded on this mindset in an interview, telling *Smithsonian*, “Our job is to be an educational institution that uses history and culture not only to look back, not only to help us understand today, but to point us towards what we can become.” For more context on the museum’s collections, mission and place in American history, visit *Smithsonian*’s “[Breaking Ground](#)” hub and NMAAHC’s [digital resources guide](#).

Historical examples of allyship offer both inspiration and cautionary tales for the present. Take, for example, [Albert Einstein](#), who famously criticized segregation as a “disease of white people” and continually used his platform to denounce racism. (The scientist’s advocacy is admittedly complicated by travel diaries that reveal his [deeply troubling views on race](#).)

Einstein’s near-contemporary, a white novelist named John Howard Griffin, took his supposed allyship one step further, darkening his skin and embarking on a “human odyssey through the South,” as Bruce Watson [wrote](#)