

# The Nature of

Herbert Aptheker

**T**he basic character of African-American history and society is radical. Certainly there is another component to that history—that of acceptance, with an element of pleading. This acceptance is garnished with insistence on the alleged absence of viable alternatives. It is embroidered, too, with moments of alleviation or even improvement but always with acceptance of a subordinate position, a stance epitomized in the career of Booker T. Washington. It earned him accolades from political chiefs such as American presidents and support from economic tycoons such as Andrew Carnegie.

A third position, often adorned with blazing language, is withdrawal from a society that is allegedly hopelessly committed to racism.

Whatever the language, this supernationalist effort amounts to giving up the struggle for freedom. Precisely because this position is a blind alley, it obtains very extensive publicity.

Since the reality of African-American life has been and continues to be exploitation and enforced subordination, that reality is also fundamentally *resistance*.

In the centuries of enslavement, the historical essence was resistance in myriad

forms—purchase of freedom (where and when permitted), suicide, assassination, infanticide (especially of female children), the use of poison (slaves prepared the food), arson (slaves provided the warmth), and flight—sometimes individual, sometimes collective, ever present, and involving many thousands.

Collective resistance permeated slavery's history. One form was the phenomenon of maroons—outlying, pugnacious groups of fugitives, offering a haven to those who would flee and constituting a persistent threat to slavery's stability. The highest form of slavery's rejection was, of course, insurrection. Magnificent resistance to slavery by groups of the enslaved was a permanent feature of the slave system in the United States, from the successful uprising in 1526, in what became South Carolina, to the massive conspiracy to rebel in Mississippi that resulted in the execution of at least forty slaves in 1861.

The essence of this resistance is in the slogan emblazoned on the flags of Gabriel's rebels in 1800—"Liberty or Death." It is in the challenge hurled at his captors in 1831 by an enchained Nat Turner—"Was not Christ crucified?"

# African-American History

As Gabriel and Turner epitomized the heart of pre-Civil War black history, so did Douglass and Du Bois and King epitomize the heart of that history since slavery's end. They brilliantly challenged the dominators of society, and they succeeded in creating a tradition and a reality of rejecting the status quo and projecting a United States wherein the words of the founding Declaration would be reality rather than delusion.

In the twentieth century, rejecting the surface reforms that protect fundamental inequities has been the essence of a black radicalism that is the heart of the African-American reality. It is not Walter White with all his honors but Du Bois with all his heart-break that represents the deepest reality of African-American experience. It is not Clarence Thomas with his Supreme Court robes but Paul Robeson with his enforced exile that represents the deepest reality of African-American experience. That reality challenges the United States as the nation enters a new century. Shall it become finally "one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all"? Monumental effort has brought us to the point when that question may be propounded seriously.

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One of the deeply hidden truths in the history of the slaves' resistance was the sympathy and even comradeship of some white people. The rebels who were tortured and executed in New York in 1741 were white as well as African-American; in New Orleans in 1811 a white man, Joseph Woods, was hanged for assisting slave rebels; in Virginia in 1816 George Boxley was in prison for conspiring with slaves and awaiting final judgment when with the aid of his wife, he escaped; in the great Vesey slave conspiracy in South Carolina in 1822 four white working men were sentenced to prison for avowing sympathy for the rebels; in 1831 the black insurrectionists led by Nat Turner carefully excluded poor whites from the list of victims. As the governor of Virginia wrote to the governor of North Carolina, those whites unharmed by Nat Turner were "no better than the slaves." The historic assault on the federal armory in Harper's Ferry in 1859 was made by a team of black and white revolutionaries. One of the former, John A. Copeland, on the way to the gallows, shouted (according to the *Baltimore Sun*), "If I am dying for freedom I could

not die for a better cause—I had rather die than be a slave!” To his brother, Copeland wrote, “Nor could I die in a more noble cause . . . believe me when I tell you, that shut up in prison under sentence of death, I have spent some happy hours here. . . . Let me tell you that it is not the mere fact of having to meet death, which I should regret . . . but that such an unjust institution should exist as the one which demands my life.”

In Richmond in 1860 fifteen people were imprisoned for assisting slaves to flee; of these, four were free black men, and eleven were white men, mostly native Southerners.<sup>1</sup>

It is certain that the idea of African-American placidity in the face of enslavement no longer has credence. But the idea of universality of racism among white people is false and as vicious as the earlier myth.<sup>2</sup>

When the twentieth century was very young Du Bois cried out,

We appeal to the young men and women of this nation, to those whose nostrils are not yet befouled by greed and snobbery and racial narrowness: Stand up for the right,

prove yourselves worthy of your heritage. . . . Courage brothers and sisters! The battle of humanity is not lost or losing. All across the skies sit signs of promise. . . . The morning breaks over blood-stained hills. We must not falter, we may not shrink.

Heaven knows he did neither. So must we now, at the close of this century and the birthing of a new one, neither falter nor shrink. Rather with tightened fist and clenched teeth we must renew and invigorate the battle for justice. Let the new century be one witnessing the fulfillment of Du Bois's call for righteousness!

### Notes

1. Of great value is the book *Slave Laws in Virginia* by Philip J. Schwarz (University of Georgia Press, 1996), from where this example is taken.

2. I made a beginning of unfolding this vital story of white sympathy for and assistance to black people in my *Antiracism in U.S. History: The First Two Hundred Years* (1992). If I have some additional years left I will complete a second volume, taking this story of the rejection of racism by white people to the post-Civil War period, ending in 1920.

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