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INTRODUCTION
As World War II drew to a close the door of equality for African Americans was slowly being pried open. An executive order by Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 had banned discrimination in federal agencies and all unions and companies engaged in war-related work, though only after A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other African American leaders had threatened a march on Washington. Randolph was also behind the threat of mass civil disobedience that prompted Pres. Harry S. Truman to issue the executive order in 1948 that desegregated the military. The notable accomplishments of triumphant African American soldiers in World War II, as well as the sense of equality they had enjoyed while off-duty in Europe, led many to protest the varying degrees of racism, discrimination, and disenfranchisement they encountered upon their return to the United States. The nature of the prejudice African Americans experienced, however, depended on whether they faced the blatant segregation of the Jim Crow South or the more subtle discrimination of the North.

Since the arrival of the first slave ships in colonial America, freedom and equality have been the goal of African Americans, who, as a people, refused to accept institutionalized segregation and the unfulfilled promise of constitutionally guaranteed rights. The brutal struggle for abolition grew into the long battle for civil rights that crested in the 1950s and ’60s. In the process, setbacks and solidarity, injury and intestinal fortitude, upheaval and uplift ultimately led to tremendous political, social, and economic advancement and extraordinary accomplishment in arts and culture by African Americans. Readers of this volume will learn how events and individuals, both past and present, contributed the rich and diverse threads of African American history and culture that have been woven into the fabric of the American story and how a dream deferred has increasingly been delivered.

One of the first mid-20th century signposts on African Americans’ deliberate and persistent march toward civil rights was the sit-in at a Chicago coffee shop in 1942 staged by an organization that would become the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Founder James Farmer, a student of Mohandas Gandhi’s non-violent approach to political and social progress, was instrumental in organizing demonstrations that would ultimately eradicate public segregation in northern cities. Small, spontaneous acts of protest, such as Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on a bus in 1955, gave rise to larger organized actions, such as the

In the early 1960s, nonviolent responses to segregated lunch counters included sit-ins and picketing. In this 1960 photo, African Americans associated with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) picket the lunch counter of the chain store Grants in Norfolk, Va. Howard Sochurek/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images
Montgomery Bus Boycott, orchestrated by the young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. King, another disciple of nonviolent civil disobedience, helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 to coordinate future protests and civil rights actions.

Earlier decisions by the Supreme Court had already reversed previous rulings that permitted segregation and racial discrimination. During the 1940s and 1950s, the legal arm of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in particular future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, argued that separate meant inherent inequality in education. The Court’s landmark 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka rendered segregation in public schools unconstitutional. While this ruling legally ended de jure segregation in schools, it would take much longer to affect de facto segregation. Not until the 1971 Supreme Court decision to uphold Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education did the use of busing more effectively integrate public schools.

In the 1940s and ‘50s, the walls of segregation were being breached in other realms as well. Baseball icon Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier in the major leagues when he began playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Robinson—who four years earlier, as second lieutenant in the Army, had faced court-martial for refusing orders to sit in the back of a military bus—endured racist taunting and death threats with equanimity. He opened the door for an unending parade of great African American players such as Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Rickie Henderson, and Bobby Bonds.

As the National Basketball Association (NBA) began to integrate in the 1950s, the Harlem Globetrotters increasingly embraced showmanship and comedy after spending decades as the standard bearers for black basketball. Early African American NBA stars such as Elgin Baylor, Wilt Chamberlain, and Bill Russell went on to blaze the trail that by the 1970s and ’80s led to African American domination of the professional game. African American participation in football had followed a different arc. In their early stages, both collegiate and professional football were integrated to the extent that teams often had one or two black players. By World War II, however, the professional National Football League reverted to an “all-white” status. With the rising tide of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, however, black participation in both the college and the pro game increased rapidly.

African Americans were a major presence in boxing for much of the 20th century, especially after Joe Louis had captured the world heavyweight championship in the 1930s. Muhammad Ali not only dominated but politicized boxing during his reign as heavyweight champion in the 1960s and ’70s through his refusal, as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, to join the Army. Before
the spiritual and political awakening that led him to Nation of Islam and to adoption of his Muslim name, however, Ali had grown up in the 1950s in segregated Louisville, Ky., as Cassius Clay.

In the late 1950s sit-ins aimed at desegregating public facilities were conducted in more than a dozen American cities, but it was the sustained sit-in at a lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., in 1960, that sparked a wave of similar actions throughout the South. Forcing compliance with Supreme Court rulings that prohibited desegregation of interstate transportation was the goal of the Freedom Rides. In 1961, following the example of an interracial group of activists that had ridden together on a bus through the upper South in 1946, another group of Freedom Riders repeated the action in the Deep South, ultimately prompting the administration of Pres. John F. Kennedy to order the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce even stricter guidelines banning segregation in interstate travel.

In the 1950s African American literature reached ever wider audiences, especially as it continued on the path of urban realism explored by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. In 1950 poet Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize. In the theatre, A Raisin in The Sun, playwright Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 gritty portrayal of a family’s struggle with the economic and social reality of integration, earned her a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and the distinction of being the first African American woman to have her work produced on Broadway. Hansberry’s declaration that “all art is ultimately social” presaged the movement by African American writers, poets, and artists toward works that were more explicit in their social engagement. By the mid-1960s, with black nationalism on the rise, young African American writers such as Ed Bullins and Nikki Giovanni moved beyond social commentary and set as their purpose the promotion of self-determination, solidarity, and nationhood among African Americans.

By the end of World War II, the revolutionary bebop style had taken hold and created a schism in the jazz world, reshaping the music harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically. Jazz fans split dramatically into three groups: those who remained loyal to the ever-popular swing; those who gravitated toward the emerging new breed of vocalists that included Nat King Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billy Eckstine; and those who made the leap to bebop, whence extraordinary musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and Charles Mingus took jazz in exciting but complex new directions. That way ultimately laid the rules-breaking free jazz, pioneered in the late 1950s by Ornette Coleman.

While Coleman and the free jazzmen were liberated musically, the struggle for social, political, and economic equality
was reaching a crescendo. In the wake of the massive March on Washington in 1963, Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson signed the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act into law. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which abolished poll taxes for federal elections, was also ratified in 1964, and in 1965 the Voting Rights Act removed the longstanding barriers that had prevented African Americans from exercising their constitutional right to vote. Change, however, was neither welcomed by segregationist defenders of the status quo nor implemented fast enough for some of those who sought it. Violent reaction took the form of police repression, vigilante terror, murder, and bombings; and urban upheaval encompassed rioting, arson, and looting. Within the civil rights movement, frustration led to fracture. Only a few short years after King had received the Nobel Peace Prize, Stokely Carmichael, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), altered the direction of the civil rights movement for many with a new phrase, “black power.” The Black Panther Party, originally organized as a protective unit against police brutality, took a turn toward Marxist revolutionary tactics.

Dramatists and writers such as LeRoi Jones joined the new black aesthetic movement, which espoused separatism as it promoted the relevance of African history and culture; Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka in 1968 to signal his commitment to the movement. Other writers, such as Margaret Walker and Ernest J. Gaines, used somewhat more personal voices to broaden the concept of “blackness” in literature. African American women, in particular, experienced a renaissance, both in visibility as artists as well as in self-perception. Leading the way was novelist Toni Morrison, whose eponymous female protagonist in *Sula* (1973) and Aunt Pilate in *Song of Solomon* (1977) mirrored the dual liberation of African American women through the civil rights and women’s movements.

Keeping pace with the evolving concept of black consciousness, black music also underwent a radical makeover, with the rhythm and blues of an earlier era taking an ever more impassioned and often political tack as soul music in the 1960s and ’70s. Recording for talismanic labels such as Atlantic Records and Stax/Volt, vocal powerhouses James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, and Wilson Pickett set the standard. African American entrepreneur Berry Gordy, Jr., and his highly successful Motown imprint brought soul a wider crossover audience with an array of immensely talented and polished performers that included Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Martha and the Vandellas, the Supremes, the Temptations, the Four Tops, and Stevie Wonder. Among the African American artists who most prominently took on the issues of the day were Curtis Mayfield, the prime mover of Chicago soul, who urged civil rights activists to “Keep on Pushing” (1964), and Motown’s Marvin Gaye, who questioned American involvement in the Vietnam War as well as political unrest at home in his powerful
What’s Going On? (1971). Later, the pride of soul music was absorbed into the pulsating rhythms of 1970s funk, the stomping ground for artists such as Sly and the Family Stone, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Kool and the Gang.

As a direct benefit of the Voting Rights Act and the subsequent voter registration drives, African Americans were elected to public office in ever increasing numbers, at both local and national levels. In the mayoral elections in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s, African Americans took office in major cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, as well as former bastions of segregation such as Birmingham, Atlanta, and New Orleans. On the national level, too, African American men and women became federal officials and office holders in increasing numbers.

Accolades and recognition continued to accrue for African American writers. Charles Gordone became the first black playwright to win a Pulitzer Prize, for his 1969 play *No Place to Be Somebody*. The first Pulitzer for fiction awarded to an African American woman went to Alice Walker in 1983 for her popular novel *The Color Purple*, which was later adapted for film and stage. In 1988 Toni Morrison claimed a Pulitzer for *Beloved*. In 1993 she became the first African American writer to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Dramatist August Wilson looked backward to record the changing nature and commonalities of African American life in his historical cycle of plays, winning Tony and Pulitzer prizes for his accomplishments.

Born on the streets of the South Bronx in New York City in the late 1970s, hip-hop and rap had become the dominant form of African American musical expression by the 1980s and grew in popularity through the rest of the century and into the next. Along the way, rappers began to differentiate themselves into the “old” and “new” school. By the 1990s gangsta rap, which presented a violent, often graphic portrayal of inner city life, had become hip-hop’s most notable genre. But as the 20th century flowed into the 21st, hip-hop had diversified further to encompass just about any subject matter or approach imaginable.

The African American journey to equality has been long and arduous, and it has been different from that experienced by any other American ethnic group by virtue of its grounding in slavery. It is a story of deep tragedy and tremendous triumph. Undeniably some disadvantages still exist for African Americans in terms of educational, economic, and social opportunity, which are a result of lingering racism, but the election of an African American, Barack Obama, to the highest office in the land points to the great distance African Americans and America have come.