Chapter Two: PROTECTION

Excerpt of Kellie Carter Jackson's *We Refuse: A Forceful History of Black Resistance* (2024)

While revolutions seek offensive solutions, protection is about a defensive stance. In other words, revolution breaks down the door of the oppressor and demands a new world order. Protection is about barricading the oppressor from the safe spaces that offer Black people reprieve. For Black people, the "war" against slavery, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy required a defensive strategy as much as an offensive one. The institutions of slavery and systemic racism were assaults on Black humanity; protection encapsulated the greatest expression of resistance to oppression because it is typically the first response to violence. Protection is like a reflex. It does not always require strategy or planning. Much like revolutions, protection can be violent, but it cannot be oppressive.[1] Self-defense cannot create powerful structures and systems that deprive people. It is not retaliation or revenge. Protection stems from urgency, the immediate need to strike down, hit back, or arrest an onslaught of terrorism. Accordingly, protection has been a constant method of survival from the days of the slave trade to today.

To be clear, protection is more expansive than self-defense because in the Black community protection is collective. Protection seeks to protect all vulnerable people and even entire communities. Protection has included sheltering fugitive slaves, writing, giving speeches, providing or withdrawing financial support, and offering legal services, and in extreme but necessary cases, it could involve the murder of a slave catcher or rapist. During slavery, Black vigilance groups did the work of protection; they patrolled Black neighborhoods in packs looking for slave catchers or suspicious people. They attempted to recover kidnapped people from the state. Among the enslaved, protection was about minimizing the violence of slavery: slowdowns, deceit, threats, poison, arson, destruction of property, and physical altercations were used against slaveholders to stunt the institution and secure protection for oppressed Black people. Even after slavery, similar tactics have been employed to shield Black people from the eroding and harmful effects of racism. For example, bystanders record police interactions with Black people. With protection, sometimes large groups protect individuals and sometimes individuals protect large groups. Protection is the antithesis of policing because it is about securing freedom, not denying it.

Authors Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson contend that "white supremacist logic has been so convincing that we oppressed people have largely come to believe that self-defense is violence."[2] Protection explains the collective defensive tactics taken up by Black abolitionists, activists, civil rights leaders, and ordinary folks in the Black community. It is a

collective act to defend the oppressed and the vulnerable, kin and the community. Protection is about stealing security and procuring safeguards that often circumvent the law and can build up to or on the work of revolution. Slave catchers, police officers, and white terrorists are always met with resistance. With protection, the corollary to white supremacy is not turning the other cheek but pivoting from a blow and even landing one in return.

This chapter is about how Black Americans sought protection during slavery and after emancipation. These examples of protection are especially useful for us to consider because slavery offered zero protection. A slaveholder could legally murder, rape, beat, or sell away their human property. Enslaved people, free Black people, and their allies had to circumvent the law often in order to secure their safety. The nineteenth century poignantly illustrates how protection worked around the law and how Black leadership forced politicians to create equal protection under the law. The activism and courage of the nineteenth century established a blueprint for the activism of the civil rights movement of the twentieth century and even today's social and political movements.

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During slavery, Black women recognized early on that their lives under and outside the law were not encased by the culture's "true womanhood" or deemed worthy of protection. Black women were never included in the nineteenth-century ideas regarding societal standards for women. This made them an easy target for violence. In history books and popular culture, we see enslaved women and fugitives risking everything to give themselves and their families better lives. Much less discussed are the free Black women who employed force and violence and risked their freedom, if not their lives, to ensure the freedom of others. Moreover, their resistance was specific: slave owners, slave catchers, snitches, and anyone who interfered in the pursuit of freedom was at risk of facing Black women's armed position. Violent resistance did not belong to men alone. Black women have never been afraid to use violent force to protect themselves and their loved ones. Inside and outside the institution of slavery, Black women had every reason to contemplate or resort to violence as a meaningful tool to combat their powerlessness. More often than not, instead of seeking protection, Black women positioned themselves as protectors.

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The Fugitive Slave Law increased violence both along and far away from the borders of free and slaveholding states. Corporately, Black people were willing to risk their lives to ensure the protection of their communities, but the roles women played in protection societies were central. For example, in Cleveland, Black women made up four of the nine members of the all-Black vigilance committees. Their track record was impressive. Over the course of just

eight months, the committee assisted 275 enslaved people to freedom in Canada.[35] Boston and Detroit also had all-Black vigilance societies. In Boston, the New England Freedom Association existed only from 1842 to 1847, but during its short tenure, two of its seven directors were Black women, Judith Smith and Mary L. Armstead. The Black vigilance group in Detroit had tremendous success: during a two-week period in 1854, they aided fifty-three of their Black brothers and sisters in bondage. Over the course of seven months, from May 1855 to January 1, 1856, they assisted an additional 1,043 enslaved people.[36] One by one, free Black communities were undermining the planter's ability to retrieve his lost property.

During the 1850s, there were countless stories of Black women and their allies employing axes, pistols, rifles, and other weapons to combat slave catchers throughout the North. These groups were also run as a labor of love. Lack of sufficient finances was a constant impediment, and all their efforts placed them at significant risk, particularly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. But as domestic workers, many Black women in the North had the mobility to serve as the eyes and ears of the vigilance committees. During their daily chores, Black women could overhear conversations and keep tabs on suspicious southern visitors. Black women bore the burden of some of the most daring tasks: caring for and hiding fugitive slaves. Mary Myer, a Black woman living in Philadelphia, owned a bakery and used her business to conceal fugitives seeking temporary shelter until they could move farther north. Another Black woman, Henrietta Duterte, took over her husband's undertaking business when he died and aided fugitives by hiding them in caskets.[37]

The violence of the Fugitive Slave Law energized Black leaders across the country, but perhaps no one more than Harriet Tubman. The stories are true: she never lost a passenger on the Underground Railroad. Despite a traumatic brain injury as a child—she was hit in the head with an iron weight—Harriet had a brilliant mind. She knew how to read the stars for direction and identify plants that would quiet babies during long journeys. Tubman personified all of the attributes of protection. Moving along the eastern shore, she successfully rescued dozens of men, women, and children from bondage. She always kept a pistol on her and would not have hesitated to use it. Harriet threatened to shoot not only any slave catcher or dog but also any enslaved runaway who contemplated returning to the plantation and potentially spoiling her rescue efforts. In story after story, witnesses testified to Harriet's belief in the utility of forceful protection. During one rescue, when their odds of escape looked bleak, a man in the fleeing group said that he was going to return to his plantation. Harriet pointed her gun at the man's head and said, "You go on or die[…]"" Given these options, the man endured, and days later the group arrived in Canada.[42] Protection included preventing sabotage. As Eliza Parker had done during the Christiana Resistance by preventing her brother-in-law from surrendering, Harriet put the group above the individual.

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When the Civil War began, protection reached a new pinnacle for Black people. Throughout the war slave catchers were still plaguing Black communities. In fact, during Lincoln's first inaugural address, he upheld the Fugitive Slave Law. On March 4, 1861, the day Lincoln was sworn in as president of the United States, he declared, "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."[46] Lincoln was behind the curve: enslaved and free Black people had already decided that this was not a Civil War but an abolition war, a war that would once and for all end the institution of slavery. Enslaved people were presented with two options: flee or fight. Many enslaved people left. Hundreds of thousands abandoned their plantations, particularly during the absence of their masters. They fled to Union lines and sought safe haven where they could find it.

Those who chose to fight expanded definitions of protection. Warfare in this case was not solely meant to protect the oppressed from oppression; it was also used to protect the entire country from slavery. War was used to protect the nation and present it with the truest form of freedom, one that fervidly defended the idea that all men are created equal. The American Revolution had been incomplete, unfinished, because it did not include transformative, progressive change for all people. The Civil War was a chance to complete the promise of democracy. In this sense, protection also completes the work of revolution. Once liberation is obtained and power is forfeited and redistributed to the benefit of all, protection is needed to sustain progress. Protection is the guardrail of revolutionary change.

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"In early June 1863, Harriet led 150 African American soldiers of the Second South Carolina Infantry on an expedition. Moving along the Combahee River in Beaufort, South Carolina, Harriet managed to bypass Confederate mines and thwart their forces. She planned the entire effort, guided the men fighting against Southern soldiers, and destroyed any resources that would have aided the enemy. Perhaps her greatest feat was helping to lead nearly seven hundred enslaved people to freedom once Union soldiers liberated Confederate camps. With her leadership they left the plantation in droves, never looking back. In fact, there was such a feverish attempt to get aboard the three Union ships used in the raid that they almost capsized. Absconding slaves did not want to bank on any promise of returning ships—they wanted out now. Panic was rising. An officer turned to Harriet and pleaded with her to calm the people. Harriet stood in the bow of the boat. She stared out at all of the enslaved people. She was them. Though they were strangers, she knew them well. She started to sing:

"Of all the whole creation in the East

or in the West

The glorious Yankee nation is the

greatest and the best

Come along! Come along!

Don't be alarmed."

A wave of silence went through the crowd. The people listened intently. No one would be left behind, and no one would be harmed. In response to her singing, the enslaved began to shout out praises. "Glory!" they called out. Salvation had come. The boats managed to make several trips, dropping off enslaved people with Union soldiers and heading back to pick up more. "I kept on singing until all were brought on board," Harriet later recalled.[47] Hundreds of men, women, and children found freedom that day, and about one hundred of them decided to fight for the Union army.[48] What is so powerful about protection is that protected people protect people.

A reporter for the Wisconsin State Journal witnessed the raid. He saw the Union gunboats returning to their home base with Harriet at the helm. Perhaps he was unaware that he was watching Harriet Tubman. He merely wrote, "A Black woman led the raid."[49] The story went out across the nation and Franklin B. Sanborn, a Bostonian and friend of Harriet, realized it was her. As an editor for the Commonwealth newspaper, Sanborn rewrote the story to let the world know that the Black woman who led the raid was Harriet. He wrote,"

> "[Three hundred] Black soldiers under the guidance of a Black woman, dashed into the enemy's country, struck a bold and effective blow, destroying millions of dollars worth of commissary stores, cotton and lordly dwellings, and striking terror into the heart of rebeldom, brought off nearly 800 slaves and thousands of dollars worth of property, without losing a man or receiving a scratch. It was a glorious consummation.... The colonel was followed by a speech from the Black woman who led the raid and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted. For sound sense and real native eloquence her address would do honor to any man, and it created a great sensation." [50]

Harriet was setting the world on fire. But when she returned from the raid, she was less concerned about credit and more concerned about continuing the mission to win the war in clothes that would allow her to run. Tubman requested that Sanborn let it be "known to the ladies" that she needed a "bloomer dress" so that she could run without tripping. During the raid she had fallen after stepping on her dress while trying to corral an enslaved person's pigs.[51] Through it all, Harriet was practical: for her, even fashion served a protective purpose."

Notes

1. A note on the meaning of violence is important. I am examining the utility of violence in the broadest definition possible; thus violence is not merely physical but also rhetorical, emotional, and destructive. In my own work, Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence, I define violence as a political language, a way of communicating to oppressive forces when traditional avenues for reform, such as the ballot, are not available. See also Ella Forbes, "'By My Own Right Arm': Redemptive Violence and the 1851 Christiana, Pennsylvania Resistance," Journal of Negro History 83, no. 3 (1998): 159–167. Forbes rightly argues that "the use of a rhetoric of redemptive violence was designed to exhort African-Americans to resist oppression but more importantly, it sought to establish the African's right to resist" (163)."
2. Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson, As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2018), 78.

35. Julie Roy Jeffrey, The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 183.

36. Liberator, December 12, 1845; George DeBaptiste to Douglass, November 5, 1854, in Frederick Douglass' Paper, November 17, 1854; Provincial Freeman, May 31, 1856; Frederick Douglass' Paper, January 26, 1855; Quarles, Black Abolitionists, 153.

37. Jeffrey, Great Silent Army, 182.

42. Catherine Clinton, Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom (New York: Little, Brown, 2004), 90–91.

46. Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, Chicago Tribune, pamphlet, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/president-lincoln%E2%80%99s-first-inaugural-address-1861.

47. Alice George, "Why Harriet Tubman's Heroic Military Career Is Now Easier to Envision," Smithsonian Magazine, June 8, 2020, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/why-harriet-tubmans-heroic-military-career-now-easier-envision-180975038/.

48. George, "Why Harriet Tubman's."

49. George, "Why Harriet Tubman's."

50. Franklin B. Sanborn, Commonwealth (Boston, MA), July 10, 1863. See also Earl Conrad, “General Tubman,” HarrietTubman.com, accessed October 10, 2023, http://www.harriettubman.com/tubman2.html.

51. George, “Why Harriet Tubman’s.