

Audio Transcript: Fighting Dark

Kamau Ware:

My grandfather took some amazing photos during his service in the Korean War. On Veterans Day, I always think of him, and other Black veterans and imagine what they wanted for our country. On November 11 2020, I took three friends on a walk to discuss an often overlooked episode during the Civil War known as the Draft Riots, and what it meant for Black New Yorkers and Black veterans.

My name is Kamau Ware. I'm an artist/historian and the founder of the Black Gotham Experience. We illustrate the impact of the African diaspora through aesthetics and scholarship. By 1863, there had been multiple racially motivated riots in New York City.

As we headed up John Street to City Hall, I explained that what we call the Draft Riots was the greatest insurrection and domestic disturbance in the history of the United States. I referenced a police report by David Barnes that provides details about the riots that started on Monday, July 13, and continued into at least Thursday, July 16, 1863.

Part of what set off the riots that July 13 was the draft to enlist men for the Civil War. Since New York State did not allow colored troops, the fighting was left mostly to poor working-class white men. One of the key turning points of the riots was the attack on the Colored Orphan Asylum on Fifth Avenue about 4 pm on Monday.

The riots that started as a protest against the draft started around 9 am, but by 4 pm, things escalated. Based on David Barnes's report there were 11 colored victims.

[somber saxophone music]

We stopped by John Street Methodist Church and I pointed out how there is a marker acknowledging their Black parishioner, Peter Williams, who was enslaved by a loyalist that fled the country at the end of the American Revolution. Unlike this church, there are places where Black people were killed during the riots of 1863 that are not marked. A few blocks from Macy's, Augustus Stuart was beat to death running to a police precinct for protection.

[somber saxophone music]

The draft was stopped that Monday when people destroyed the drafting station. It was burned down, and then they began to turn their attention more toward Black people. Similar to the orphans that fled the asylum, police precincts was one of the main places Black people went for protection.

[saxophone music]

William Jones was lynched on Clarkson just a few blocks from Minetta where Black people used pistols and bricks to keep the rioters at bay, but Black people were spread out throughout the city and vulnerable to attack.

[saxophone music]

By 1860, New York City was mostly controlled by the Democratic Party that did not want to see Black people free from slavery. There were strong financial ties to the cotton industry in the South and the working-class whites were told that free Blacks would take away their jobs, fueling racial animosity.

We took a moment and looked at the fountain in City Hall Park made by Jacob Wrey Mould. He was born in 1825, which is the same year New York City mayor, DeWitt Clinton, completed the Erie Canal. I pointed out that New York State was one of the last Northern states to abolish slavery in 1827. So we pondered about the long-lasting effects of having major public works like the Erie Canal precede Black freedom.

[saxophone music]

Most of the city's papers were on Park Row, and many of them took sides on the issue of slavery throughout the Civil War. People like Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New York Tribune* was a Republican paper that pushed for the end of slavery. He was hunted during the riot, and also the *Tribune* was attacked by the rioters, right here across from City Hall. The Republican mayor at the time, George Opdyke, fled City Hall in fear for his life when the rioters gathered at City Park.

Hundreds of Black New Yorkers will flee to the Black community of Weeksville, which is located in Brooklyn. There were hundreds of Black families in Weeksville at the time that lived miles from New York, in particular for safety. Black families including Black children in New York were under constant threat during the riots.

[saxophone music]

The African Burial Ground behind City Hall was buried over in the 1800s and forgotten until bones were discovered there in 1991. Through civic engagement, a monument and memorial that acknowledges this burial site for Black people that dates back to the 1600s was established. When we think about those who were forgotten, we have to also include the Black people who were forgotten during the riots of 1863 who were never given proper burials.

[somber saxophone music]

Right across the street from the African Burial Ground is the *Triumph of the Human Spirit*, a monument dedicated to the millions of Africans who survived the Middle Passage from Africa to this hemisphere. It is important to reflect on the horrors of slavery while also remembering that the horrors did not end with the slave ships.

Around the *Triumph of the Human Spirit* are markers on the ground that reference American Indigenous, colonial, and early United States history. On the other side of the *Triumph* is another marker on the ground that references the Draft Riots, and also the poor neighborhood Five Points, but there is no real recognition about the level of violence exacted on Black people this week.

I pointed out that there was a Black community called the Land of the Blacks that started in 1643 before New York City was even created. Right around the corner from the *Triumph* where the notorious intersection that made the five points was once the land of Domingo Anthony. Similar to the historic markers of the riots of 1863, the Land of the Blacks is also unmarked, leaving many New Yorkers to forget the presence and impact that Black people have had on the city.

[saxophone music]

Bri Laboss:

It starts with the children, so I think, it's a pretty good colonial tactic to frighten and scare the children, if not kill and erase them all together.

[somber saxophone music]

Pythagore Antoine:

There's history all around us in every part of Brooklyn or in New York. Certain things like you can't put into words, but you can just, words or thoughts, or whatever, but you can just feel it.

Julien 'OG' Richardson:

Black resilience has taught me so many things. I don't even know where to start or where to end. Reinforced the idea of knowledge of self, because it's hard to be resilient when you're wavering in the wind.

Kamau Ware:

One of the outcomes of the race riots is that New York finally made way for Black men to fight in the Civil War. In December 1863, the 21st Regiment of Colored Troops was formed. They were ready to fight for their freedom.

Unnamed Speaker:

And I learned the depth of Black resilience through studying the stories and lives of African Americans in the 1800s.

Unnamed Speaker:

Because triumph is in my DNA. Triumph over the Middle Passage. Triumph over unspeakable horrors of slavery.

Unnamed Speaker:

Black resilience is the capacity of Black people to straighten their backs and hold their heads high in the midst of political economies of misery.

Unnamed Speaker:

Black resilience is the history of arts, culture, and extraordinary achievement created despite the reality of oppression faced by the Black diaspora.

Unnamed Speaker:

Resilience is making sure I get up one more time That I get knocked down.

Unnamed Speaker:

And we manifest our goals, and try to progress each day.

Unnamed Speaker:

They passed on something to create who I am today that keeps me going, and I feel like for me that's my definition of Black resilience.

Unnamed Speaker:

Black resilience has taught me that we are the originators. We are the source.

Unnamed Speaker:

And to say that the beauty that the world offers I deserve, and I am strong enough to claim it.

Unnamed Speaker:

Black resilience is homemade biscuits to feed a family of 10.

Unnamed Speaker:

And what I've learned from Black resilience is just resourcefulness like we really have to take very little at many times and turn it into a lot.

Unnamed Speaker:

I see Black resilience as a focus. As place to rest your dreams.

Unnamed Speaker:

You know we created a people on our own and on our own terms here in the US, and throughout the diaspora.

Unnamed Speaker:

I am more than the struggle.

Unnamed Speaker:

Black resilience is to be as courageous as John Lewis, as outspoken as Maxine Waters, as unyielding as Martin Luther King, as selfless as Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman. Black resilience is the humor of Dick Gregory. The poetry of Maya Angelou. The grace of Alvin Ailey. The style of Myles Davis. The strength of Muhammad Ali and vision of Barack Obama. Black resilience is continuing after burying your child unjustly murdered by authority. Black resilience is the sheen of our skin, the sheen of our souls.

Cyrus Aaron:

In all the Earth refuge breaks through in twisted paths of a tattered past. Shattered bones crawl to escape in dark bodies of water. There are bodies in the water. Reflections of indiscretions. Fire by way of war and famine. These diseased hearts we hold close. In the stubborn old flames across from the family trees a God communes with his people. He points a path from the promise back to the hunched shoulders of a sophisticated and sordid shanty. Ridden with hand-me-down grief and worn windows not worth wishing out of his heart has never left his first home, where lack circles the walls, where the appetites are heard circling bodies, where even the sun looks hungry. His temple, one without simple times humble as the bush, but full of fertile soil and resilience is the seed sown. He sings a song synonymous with tomorrow,

convinced by what will be tomorrow, all will be well with tomorrow. Well, tomorrow a carved space within a carved space. A place imagined to exist freely, and without need, but there is always a present need when in danger. A need for a God to protect and to provide. For what is a savior who does not serve the people he watches over? Vulnerable, bare, exposed, because someone cut down all the trees. And the lack of reach just might be a good thing, a land where children can outgrow the length of a knotted rope, where everyone is bleeding, everywhere is fair game, and healing the wound means facing the blood. Everything that is began with blood, fire, and brimstone. Everything that was, can no longer be, but something must become, must be done, and they know it. They know it, 'cause God made it in the same breath he made them.

[cars honking]