

# These Reenactments Put a Personal Face on the History of Black Protest

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By reimagining historic scenes of black struggle in Africa and around the world, artist Omar Victor Diop explores what unifies these fights for freedom.



Alabama, 1965 Voting rights supporters marching from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965 had to brave violent resistance from state troopers and white separatists. Omar Victor Diop's re-creation preserves this historical detail: Some marchers wore garlands given by a prominent Hawaiian clergyman as a gesture of solidarity.

This story is part of The Race Issue, a special issue of *National Geographic* that explores how race defines, separates, and unites us. Tell us your story with #IDefineMe.

In depictions by Senegalese artist Omar Victor Diop, the black struggle for freedom is as global as the history of protest yet as personal as each protester's story.

It's so personal, in fact, that Diop himself plays every male role in the photo series "Liberty," vignettes he created based on visual and written sources in Africa and the African diaspora. The scenes, set apart by time, geography, and scope, present a vibrant, visual chronology of these consequential events.

This story helps launch a series about racial, ethnic, and religious groups and their changing roles in 21st-century life. The series runs through 2018 and will include coverage of Muslims, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.



Left: FLORIDA, 2012 Minutes after George Zimmerman called Sanford, Florida, police to report “a real suspicious guy,” he shot Trayvon Martin, 17. The death fueled Black Lives Matter protests in which hoodies like the one the unarmed teen had worn, and the Skittles candy he carried, were symbols of resistance.



Right: ALINE SITOIE DIATTA, SENEGAL, 1944 French military forces in World War II seized crops in the Senegalese region. According to some accounts, Diatta, in her early 20s, led the resistance against French authorities. She was arrested by colonial administrators, and sent into exile in Timbuktu, where she is said to have died. Diop depicts her in death on a bed of hay, a symbol of the farmers’ rebellion.



**THE WOMEN'S WAR, NIGERIA, 1929** To protest oppression by British colonial rulers in southeastern Nigeria, women from the Ibo ethnic group rioted. After two months of unrest, the rulers agreed to reforms. Diop asked friend Khadija Boye to play the women in the photo series: “We have a striking physical resemblance, which sort of makes her look like my female alter ego.”



**THE DAKAR-NIGER RAILWAY STRIKE, WEST AFRICA, 1947** During an era of French occupation in West Africa, African railroad employees faced unfair and discriminatory working conditions, including worse pay and benefits than French railway workers'. A strike by African workers represented a turning point in the struggle against racism and colonialism on the continent.

The images in “Liberty” commemorate slave revolts, independence movements, social justice quests, and the events that sparked them. Subjects range from Queen Nanny and her brother,

Quao, who rebelled against British colonialists to establish a community of former slaves in 18th-century Jamaica, to Trayvon Martin, the unarmed African-American teen whose 2012 shooting by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman inspired the Black Lives Matter movement.



Left: NANNY AND QUAO, JAMAICA, 1720The pair of African-born siblings fled slavery on a Jamaican plantation to lead resisters known as Maroons. The two established a community of ex-slaves, called Nanny Town, in the Blue Mountains and helped liberate hundreds of slaves over several decades.

Right: THE SOWETO UPRISING, SOUTH AFRICA, 1976In the township of Soweto outside Johannesburg, thousands of black students staged an uprising to protest the introduction of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in local schools. The government response was harsh: More than 500 people are thought to have been killed, a tragedy now memorialized in a national holiday.

Diop composed scenes using multiple images of himself—but “the picture would be far from complete if it didn’t feature female characters,” he says. “Black women played a role as important as their male counterparts’ in the struggle.” His friend Khadija Boye poses as all the women in the series.



**THE FREEMAN FIELD MUTINY, INDIANA, 1945** The only black bomber group created during World War II was at Freeman Army Airfield in southern Indiana when its officers tried to integrate an all-white officers' club. More than a hundred men were arrested, and three were court-martialed. Historians consider it a significant turn in the campaign to end racial segregation in the U.S. military.

From his vantage in Senegal, Diop designed his latest project to draw a parallel “between the chronology of protest movements on the continent and that of similar movements in the diaspora happening at similar time periods.” He did so, he has said, in hopes of “trying to have a more universal reading of the history of black protest, in order to build bridges for a better understanding of the question.”



**THE SONACOTRA TENANTS' STRIKE, FRANCE, 1975-1980** Since the mid-20th century, immigrants to France—many from former French colonies in North Africa—had been concentrated in public housing run by the Sonacotra agency. For five years starting in 1975, dissatisfied residents waged a rent strike to demand better living conditions at lower cost and the right to represent themselves in talks with management.

Diop's images are rich with telling details, based on the careful study of historical clothing and textiles as well as the symbolism of local plants and flowers. The distinctions challenge the Western tendency to see Africa, and the lives of black people throughout the world, as monolithic—as an “abstract concept rather than a reality,” in Diop's words. His meticulous re-creations remind us that protests are more than physical actions. They're also cultural events in which clothing and style are a form of political expression, from the flower garlands worn by Selma marchers, a gift from a Hawaiian clergyman as a symbol of respect and solidarity, to the signature berets and leather jackets of the Black Panther Party in the United States.



Left: **BOUKMAN DUTTY, HAITI, 1791**In Jamaica, after priest Boukman Dutty taught himself and other slaves to read and write, he was sold to a master in Haiti. There, in August 1791, Dutty led a Vodou ceremony where slaves planned a rebellion. Historians have called the event a precursor of the Haitian Revolution and the founding of the first independent black republic.



Right: **THE BLACK PANTHERS' FREE BREAKFAST PROGRAM, CALIFORNIA, 1968**Protecting black neighborhoods from police brutality was a goal of the Black Panther Party, founded in 1966 in Oakland. The party's actions were political—it called for armed revolution—but also practical. It offered free medical care, legal aid, and meals. The apron worn in this portrait honors a signature Panther program: providing free breakfasts to schoolchildren.

By recasting history and posing as its subjects, Diop makes the past come alive in the present. He focuses on our collective humanity, affirming the debt we owe to the efforts of our ancestors. And he reminds us that historically, this activism didn't just affect the lives of participants—it altered the destinies of future generations.

Diop's meditations on the historic quest for freedom are at once sobering and exhilarating. Like the events that inspire them, these dramatic scenes are haunted by the specter of violence, murder, and oppression—but they also resonate with optimism and hope. In the end, "Liberty" celebrates the power of black resistance, in its many forms, to change the world.



THIAROYE CAMP, SENEGAL, 1944 African soldiers from the French Army's Tirailleurs Sénégalais units, returning home after being imprisoned by Germany in France during World War II, were promised back pay for their service. When France didn't fulfill its promise of payment, soldiers at a military camp in Dakar staged protests. Authorities responded by massacring scores of the soldiers.

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