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A NEW ORIGIN STORY

The
1619
Project

Edited by NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES, CAITLIN ROPER,
ILENA SILVERMAN, *and* JAKE SILVERSTEIN



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Democracy

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES

My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was sometimes chipped; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door might occasionally fall into disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the Black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace with a new one as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.

My dad was born into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Mississippi, where Black people bent over cotton from can't-see-in-the-morning to can't-see-at-night, just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before. The Mississippi of my dad's youth was an apartheid state that subjugated its Black residents—almost half of the population¹—through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more Black people than those in any other state in the country,² and the white people in my dad's home county lynched more Black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, for such "crimes" as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl, or trying to start a sharecroppers union.³ My dad's mother, like all the Black people in Greenwood, could not vote, use the public library, or find work other than toiling in the cotton fields or toiling in white people's houses. In the 1940s, she packed up her few belongings and her three small children and joined the flood of Black Southerners fleeing to the North. She got off the Illinois Central Railroad in Waterloo, Iowa, only to have her hopes of the mythical Promised Land shattered when she learned that Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon Line.

Grandmama, as we called her, found a Victorian house in a segregated Black neighborhood on the city's east side and then found the work that was considered Black women's work no matter where Black women lived: cleaning white people's homes. Dad, too, struggled to find promise in this land. In 1962, at age seventeen, he signed up for the army. Like many young men, he joined in hopes of escaping poverty. But he went into the military for another reason as well, a reason common to Black men: Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American.

The army did not end up being his way out. He was passed over for opportunities, his ambition stunted. He would be discharged under murky circumstances and then labor in a series of service jobs for the rest of his life. Like all the Black men and women in my family, he believed in hard work, but like all the Black men and women in my family, no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead.

So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this Black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused Black Americans, the way it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? My father had endured segregation in housing and school, discrimination in employment, and harassment by the police. He was one of the smartest people I knew, and yet by the time I was a work-study student in college, I was earning more an hour than he did. I didn't understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement, and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing Black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American struck me as a marker of his degradation, of his acceptance of our subordination.

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just twelve years after the English settled Jamestown, Virginia, one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth, and some 157 years before English colonists here decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought twenty to thirty enslaved Africans from English pirates.⁴ The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship whose

crew had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day mark the beginning of slavery in the thirteen colonies that would become the United States of America. They were among the more than 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War.⁵ Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage.⁶

Before the abolition of the international slave trade, more than four hundred thousand of those 12 million enslaved Africans transported to the Americas would be sold into this land.⁷ Those individuals and their descendants transformed the North American colonies into some of the most successful in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared territory across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice and to inoculate themselves against smallpox.⁸ After the American Revolution, they grew and picked the cotton that, at the height of slavery, became the nation's most valuable export, accounting for half of American goods sold abroad and more than two-thirds of the world's supply.⁹ They helped build the forced labor camps, otherwise known as plantations, of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract tens of thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy.¹⁰ They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even cast with their unfree hands the *Statue of Freedom* atop the Capitol dome.¹¹ They lugged the heavy wooden ties of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and carried the cotton picked by enslaved laborers to textile mills in the North, fueling this country's Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people in both the North and the South—at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island “slave trader.”¹² Profits from Black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. The relentless buying, selling, insuring, and financing of their bodies and the products of their forced labor would help make Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance, and trading sector, and New York City a financial capital of the world.¹³

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of Black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: it is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of Black people in their midst. A right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” did not include fully one-fifth of the new country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, Black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of Black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—Black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous, and patriotic efforts of Black Americans, our democracy today would look very different; in fact, our country might not be a democracy at all.

One of the very first to die in the American Revolution was a Black and Indigenous man named Crispus Attucks who himself was not free. In 1770, Attucks lived as a fugitive from slavery, yet he became a martyr for liberty in a land where his own people would remain enslaved for almost another century.¹⁴ In every war this nation has waged since that first one, Black Americans have fought—today we are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military.

My father, one of those many Black Americans who answered the call, knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That Black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true founding fathers. And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than we do.

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned those famous words:¹⁵ “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” For the last two and a half centuries, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty. As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master’s beck and call. His name was Robert Hemings, and he was the half-

Black brother of Jefferson's wife, Martha, born to her father and a woman he enslaved.¹⁶ It was common and profitable for white enslavers to keep their half-Black children in slavery. Jefferson, who would later hold in slavery his own children by Hemings's sister Sally, had chosen Robert Hemings, from among about 130 enslaved people who worked on the forced-labor camp he called Monticello, to accompany him to Philadelphia and ensure his every comfort as he drafted the text making the case for a new republican union based on the individual rights of men.¹⁷

At the time, one-fifth of the population within the thirteen colonies struggled under a brutal system of racial slavery that through the decades would be transformed into an institution unlike anything that had existed in the world before.¹⁸ Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of Black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status on to their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but were considered property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift, and disposed of violently. Jefferson's fellow white colonists knew that Black people were human beings, but over time the enslavers created a network of laws and customs, astounding in both their precision and their cruelty, designed to strip the enslaved of every aspect of their humanity. As the abolitionist William Goodell would write, "If any thing founded on falsehood might be called a science, we might add the system of American slavery to the list of the strict sciences."¹⁹

The laws, known as slave codes, varied from colony to colony, state to state, and over time. Some prohibited enslaved people from legally marrying; others prevented them from learning to read or from meeting privately in groups. Enslaved people had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold, or traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle, or behind storefronts that advertised NEGROES FOR SALE. Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, the enslaved held no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their "property" without legal consequence. In the eyes of the law, enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing, and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including those working for Jefferson. They could be worked to death, and often were, to produce exorbitant profits for the white people who owned them.

Yet in making the argument against Britain's tyranny, one of the colonists' favorite rhetorical devices was to claim that *they* were the slaves—to Britain. "One need not delve far into the literature of the Revolution to find out that,

of all words, the one that persistently, most contentiously, and most flexibly drove the era's rhetorical engine was slavery," writes Peter A. Dorsey, a scholar of literature of the American Revolution, in *Common Bondage*.²⁰ George Washington, in 1774, argued of the British that "those from whom we have a right to seek protection are endeavouring by every piece of Art and despotism to fix the Shackles of Slavery upon us."²¹ At the time he wrote those words, Washington derived his wealth and influence from the forced slave labor of more than 120 human beings, in addition to the men, women, and children that had been passed on to his wife after the death of her first husband.

It's useful to remember the situation in the colonies at the time in order to understand why evoking slavery proved so powerful. The colonies had not yet united to form a new nation. They remained thirteen distinct jurisdictions with their own leadership and individual charters and relationships with Britain. They had differing economic, agricultural, and social practices—a white Bostonian did not naturally feel an alliance with a white South Carolinian. Yet in the period leading up to the Revolution, burdened by rising debt to the motherland, higher taxes, and an intermittent recession, many white colonists felt their status deteriorating.²² The wealthy, educated men who led the revolt against Britain needed to unify the disparate colonists across social class and region. For those leaders, the comparison to slavery constituted a powerful rhetorical tool. "The Crisis is arrivd when we must assert our Rights, or Submit to every Imposition that can be heap'd upon us; till custom and use, will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway," Washington warned in an August 1774 letter to his friend and neighbor Bryan Fairfax.²³

It was precisely because white colonists so well understood the degradations of actual slavery that the metaphor of slavery held so much power to consolidate their disparate interests: no matter a colonist's politics, background, or class, by being white, he could never fall as low as the Black people who were held in bondage. As the scholar Patricia Bradley puts it in *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution*, "Once transposed into metaphor, slavery could serve to unite white colonists of whatever region under a banner of white exclusivity."²⁴ The decision to deploy slavery as a metaphor for white grievances had devastating consequences for those who were actually enslaved: it helped ensure that abolition would *not* become a revolutionary cause, Bradley argues. Instead, the true institution of slavery would endure for nearly a century after the Revolution.

But Black people held their own ideas about freedom and independence and would become their own force in fomenting the Revolution. No one vol-

untarily submits to slavery. Enslaved people had always resisted. They broke tools, slowed down their work, and self-emancipated by stealing themselves away. They also did what the white colonists themselves advocated: they took up arms against their oppressors to secure their freedom. White colonists lived in constant fear of insurrections by the enslaved living among them, and with reason: the years leading up to the Revolution were defined by the frequent plotting and carrying out of revolts by enslaved people in the mainland and across the Caribbean. As tensions rose between the Crown and the colonists, the British exploited colonists' concerns about their "internal enemy," and the enslaved shrewdly exploited the fight between white colonists and their British rulers. The enslaved had but one loyalty: their freedom. And they used the conflict to organize and conspire against the colonists as early as 1774, running away to join British troops and presenting themselves at British forts.²⁵ Over the course of the war, thousands of enslaved people would join the British—far outnumbering those who joined the Patriot cause.

One act in particular would alter the course of the Revolution. The fighting had not yet reached the Southern colonies when, in April 1775, seeking to suppress the rebellion, Virginia's royal governor, John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, warned the colonists that if they took up arms there, he would "declare Freedom to the Slaves, and reduce the City of Williamsburg to Ashes."²⁶ Enslaved people did not wait for Dunmore to make good on that threat. By the hundreds they liberated themselves and ran to the British troops. One man, Joseph Harris, escaped in July and joined Dunmore, who had fled to a Royal Navy ship after his efforts to suppress the rebellious colonists put him in danger of being captured. Harris, prized by his enslaver as a pilot with considerable seafaring knowledge of the Chesapeake Bay, aided the British in their attack that fall in Hampton. It was there, directly across the water from the place where the first twenty to thirty Angolans had been sold into slavery in 1619, that enslaved fugitives joined the British in the first Southern battle of the American Revolution.²⁷ That next month, Dunmore issued a proclamation offering freedom to any enslaved person belonging to a Patriot if he fled his enslaver and joined Dunmore's "Ethiopian Regiment."²⁸

An enslaver himself, Dunmore was no abolitionist. He issued his proclamation as a war tactic, an approach Abraham Lincoln used again nearly ninety years later. Just as enslaved people during the Civil War fled to the side they thought offered the best chance of freedom and inspired the Emancipation Proclamation, enslaved people running away to the British during the Ameri-

can Revolution inspired Dunmore's proclamation, which, in turn, further provoked the actions of enslaved people in Virginia and elsewhere. Rumors of rebellions spread across the colony, many of them true as enslaved people plotted and sought their freedom.

Dunmore's proclamation infuriated white Virginians, making revolutionaries out of them. "All over Virginia, observers noted, the governor's freedom offer turned neutrals and even loyalists into patriots," writes the historian Woody Holton in *Forced Founders*.²⁹ Grievances against the British had already been stacking up for white Virginians. They'd opposed the Stamp Act and were angry at the Crown's efforts to restrict their taking of Indian lands and to tamp down on molasses smuggling intended to subvert a royal edict that forced the colonists to purchase the molasses they needed to make rum from Britain's Caribbean colonies. And their resentment had already been stoked by a British high court ruling about slavery three years earlier. In 1772, the court decided the case of James Somerset, an enslaved man from Virginia, who claimed freedom when his owner brought him to Britain. The British judge decided in Somerset's favor, proclaiming that British common law did not allow slavery on the soil of the mother country—even as Britain was investing in it and profiting from it in her Caribbean and North American colonies.

Though limited, the Somerset ruling sent reverberations through the colonies, where newspapers reported it widely. "Although the ruling did not apply there, colonial masters felt shocked by the implication that their property system defied English traditions of liberty," the historian Alan Taylor writes in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832*.³⁰ The colonists took the ruling as an insult, as signaling that they were of inferior status, and feared that it would encourage their most valuable property to stow away to Britain seeking freedom.

In early 1775, James Madison, who operated a slave-labor camp in Orange County, Virginia, reported hearing a rumor that British Parliament had introduced a bill to emancipate the colonies' enslaved. In addition, a report from the Virginia House of Burgesses accused British officials of contemplating a "most diabolical" scheme to "offer Freedom to our Slaves, and turn them against their Masters."³¹ Both further enflamed colonists already worried about the British encroaching on their "property" rights.

At first, founders such as Jefferson, Washington, John Hancock, and John Adams had constituted "restorers and not reformers," Holton told me. "There is a huge difference between being angry and joining a protest and wanting to declare independence. Two events in 1775 turn the rebellion into a revolution.

For men like John Adams, it was the battles of Lexington and Concord. For men like Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, the Dunmore Proclamation ignited the turn to independence.”³²

Virginia’s slaveholding elite had grown paranoid. Fears of enslaved people plotting and executing revolts ran rampant, and an alliance between the British and the enslaved men and women who the white colonists already feared would seek every opportunity to slit their throats proved too much. White Virginians morphed from “restorers” to revolutionaries. “If we never had slavery, that takes away many of the things that push the South to independence,” Holton told me. “I think they would have done what other British colonies did, which was stay in the empire.” The specter of their most valuable property absconding to take up arms against them “did more than any other British measure to spur uncommitted white Americans into the camp of rebellion,” wrote the historian Gerald Horne in *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*.³³

And yet none of this is part of our founding mythology, which conveniently omits the fact that one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. They feared that liberation would enable an abused people to seek vengeance on their oppressors. In many parts of the South, Black people far outnumbered white people. The wealth and prominence that allowed Jefferson, at just thirty-three, and the other founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world came in part from the dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery. So they also understood that abolition would have upended the economies of both the North and the South.

The truth is that we might never have revolted against Britain if some of the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that the institution would continue unmolested. For this duplicity—claiming they were fighting for freedom while enslaving a fifth of the people—the Patriots faced burning criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English writer opposed to American independence, quipped, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”³⁴

The founders recognized this hypocrisy. As Jefferson sat down in that rented room in Philadelphia in 1776 to draft our founding document, he initially tried to argue that slavery wasn’t the colonists’ fault. Instead, he blamed the king of England for forcing the vile institution on the unwilling colonists, called trafficking in human beings a crime, and, in a reference to Lord Dunmore’s proclamation, railed against the Crown for stoking insurrections by

the enslaved. In the end, the other congressmen struck the passage, which many understood called unwanted attention to an unjust system that was already a source of division among the colonies.

Congress retained only one reference to slavery in the final version of the Declaration, which directly addressed the rebellions by enslaved people that the British, including Dunmore, were fomenting. It came at the very end of the long list of grievances against the king, insisting: "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us."³⁵ As several historians have pointed out, unlike modern writing, which often places the most important information toward the top, during the colonial period, listing this grievance last in the document indicated its importance.

"Thomas Jefferson spoke for other white Americans when he stated, in the largest and angriest complaint in the Declaration of Independence, that Dunmore's emancipation proclamation was a major cause of the American Revolution," Holton writes.³⁶ Or as the historian Michael Groth put it, "In one sense, slaveholding Patriots went to war in 1775 and declared independence in 1776 to defend their rights to own slaves."³⁷

"Having justified a bloody revolution on the grounds of a national belief in human freedom, Americans call their history a freedom story," the historian James Oliver Horton writes in *Slavery and Public History*. "For a nation steeped in this self-image, it is embarrassing, guilt-producing, and disillusioning to consider the role that race and slavery played in shaping the national narrative."³⁸ To address these discomfiting facts, we have created a founding mythology that teaches us to think of the "free" and "abolitionist" North as the heart of the American Revolution. Schoolchildren learn that the Boston Tea Party sparked the Revolution and that Philadelphia was home to the Continental Congress, the place where intrepid men penned the Declaration and Constitution. But while our nation's founding documents were written *in* Philadelphia, they were mainly written *by* Virginians.

White sons of Virginia initiated the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. The primary authors were all enslavers. For the first fifty years of our nation, Southerners served as president for all but twelve years, and most of them were Virginians. No place shaped the Revolution and the country it birthed more than Virginia. And no place in the thirteen colonies was as strongly shaped by slavery. At the time of the Revolution, Virginia stood as the oldest, largest, wealthiest, and most influential of the colonies. It was Virginia that introduced African slavery into

British North America, just twelve years after the first English settlers arrived. It was Virginia that first enshrined racialized chattel slavery into law, excluding Black people from all civic life and setting a precedent followed throughout the colonies. And it was Virginia tobacco, cultivated and harvested by enslaved workers, that was exported to help finance the Revolution.

Following Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, where an alliance of white and Black indentured servants and enslaved Africans rose up against Virginia's white elite, the colony passed slave codes to permanently enshrine legal and social distinctions between Black and white residents that ensured that all white people, no matter their status, permanently existed in a status above all Black people. These laws divided exploited white workers from exploited Black workers by designating people of African descent as "hereditary slaves" who would serve in bondage for life. "We normally say that slavery and freedom are opposite things—that they are diametrically opposed," the historian Ira Berlin said. "But what we see here in Virginia in the late seventeenth century, around Bacon's Rebellion, is that freedom and slavery are created at the same moment."³⁹

Virginia and the rest of the American South constituted one of just five "great slave societies" in the *history of the world*, according to the historian David W. Blight.⁴⁰ This meant that the colony did not simply engage in slavery as many nations had for centuries before; it created a culture where, as Blight puts it, "slavery affected everything about society," its social relationships, laws, customs, and politics.⁴¹ And that is why we simultaneously deify Virginians such as Washington, Madison, and Jefferson as champions of freedom while marginalizing the slaveholding region they came from as exceptionally backward, as not reflective of the real America.

By the period of the Revolution, white Virginian elites had traded their reliance on white laborers for the more economically profitable and less politically troublesome enslaved African labor. In 1776, Virginia held 40 percent of all enslaved people in the mainland colonies. As a result, white free laborers and tenant farmers numbered too few in Virginia to challenge the white men in power. The historian Edmund S. Morgan argues in his classic book *American Slavery, American Freedom* that well-off white Virginians, most of whom enslaved people, could champion a form of republican representative government defined by the absence of a formal ruling class or monarchy without threatening their own status as elites for one simple reason: they knew that the system of slavery meant that most of the poor in Virginia were enslaved, so they had no legal rights and could never participate in politics.

The slave codes helped to ensure that poorer white Virginians felt rela-

tively empowered. "Many of the European-descended poor whites began to identify themselves, if not directly with the rich whites, certainly with being white," the historian Robin D. G. Kelley said. "And here you get the emergence of this idea of a white race as a way to distinguish themselves from those dark-skinned people who they associate with perpetual slavery."⁴² Whiteness proved a powerful unifying elixir for the burgeoning nation. Whether laborer or elite planter, "neither was a slave. And both were equal in not being slaves."⁴³ And so it served the interests of both groups to defend slavery.

Slavery was not a *necessary* ingredient for the founders' belief in Republican equality, Morgan writes, but in Virginia and the other Southern colonies, it proved *the* ingredient. It is, therefore, not incidental that ten of this nation's first twelve presidents were enslavers. In fact, some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.

Even so, the founders were deeply conflicted over slavery. So when it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word. In the key texts for framing our republic, the founders did not want to explicitly acknowledge their hypocrisy. They sought instead to shroud it. The Constitution contains eighty-four clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, as the historian David Waldstreicher demonstrates, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the "property" of those who enslaved Black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved people from Africa for a term of twenty years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved, and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had escaped and sought refuge there.⁴⁴

During the Constitution's ratification in the 1780s, a few bold Americans of both races sustained a new abolitionist movement. They considered the Constitution deceitful. "The words [are] dark and ambiguous; such as no plain man of common sense would have used," wrote the abolitionist Samuel Bryan. They "are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe, that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations."⁴⁵

This ambivalence about slavery would haunt the nation, as those both for and against slavery would seize on the hallowed document to justify their views. As Frederick Douglass would explain in 1849, the Constitution bound the nation "to do the bidding of the slave holder, to bring out the whole naval

and military power of the country, to crush the refractory slaves into obedience to their cruel masters.”⁴⁶ The nation’s most ardent and prominent abolitionist, Douglass had escaped slavery in 1838 and then spent the next three decades fighting to free the rest of his people. He characterized the Constitution as so “cunningly” framed that “no one would have imagined that it recognized or sanctioned slavery. But having a terrestrial, and not a celestial origin, we find no difficulty in ascertaining its meaning in all the parts which we allege relate to slavery. Slavery existed before the Constitution. . . . Slaveholders took a large share in making it.” Two years later, Douglass announced a “change in opinion,” believing that a stronger political argument could be made not by condemning our founding document for supporting slavery but by claiming that slavery was antithetical to the Constitution and that the Constitution was, in fact, as he would go on to argue, a “glorious liberty document.”⁴⁷

Indeed, when the South seceded from the Union, white Confederates believed *they* were the inheritors of the founders’ revolutionary legacy and upholders of the true Constitution. Jefferson Davis gave his second inaugural address as president of the Confederate States of America on George Washington’s birthday, vowing that the Confederacy would “perpetuate the principles of our Revolutionary fathers. The day, the memory, and the purpose seem fitly associated. . . . We are in arms to renew such sacrifices as our fathers made to the holy cause of Constitutional liberty.”⁴⁸

Even the fact that the Constitution allowed for Congress to prohibit the external slave trade after a twenty-year period, beginning in 1808, which is often held up as proof of the anti-slavery sentiment of the framers, can be seen in some respects as self-serving. At the time the Constitution was written, enslaved Black people accounted for about 40 percent of the population in Virginia, and in many places in the colony, the enslaved outnumbered white people. Many white Virginians fretted that continuing to import Africans would produce a frighteningly dangerous ratio for a white population well aware of the possibility of deadly insurrections.

These fears were borne out just a few years later in the Caribbean. In the 1790s, another successful revolution occurred, one that terrified rather than inspired the nation’s leaders: enslaved people in the colony of Saint-Domingue—which was the most lucrative colony in the world at the time and later became known as Haiti—rose up and overthrew their French enslavers in the largest and most successful rebellion of enslaved people in the history of the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁹ What would become known as the Haitian Revolution financially devastated Napoleon and, amid a sea of slave colonies, established the first free Black republic in the Americas.⁵⁰

Further, years of tobacco growing had depleted the soil, and landowners like Jefferson were turning to crops that required less labor, such as wheat. That meant they needed fewer enslaved people to turn a profit. White Virginians, therefore, stood to make money by cutting off the supply of new people from Africa and instead filling the demand in the Deep South for enslaved labor by selling their surplus laborers to the cotton and sugar forced-labor camps in Georgia and South Carolina.

Jefferson himself considered the people he enslaved in the coldest economic terms, saying he calculated that a "woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm. What she produces is an addition to capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption."⁵¹

So, in 1808, during Jefferson's presidency, when the Constitution's prohibition on banning the international slave trade expired, Congress had already voted to outlaw the trade and the new law took effect immediately. But cutting off the importation of Africans created a horrific second Middle Passage in which hundreds of thousands of enslaved people were sold from the Upper South to the Lower. The domestic human trade tore apart about one-third of all first marriages between the enslaved and, over time, ripped millions of children from their parents. Between the 1830s and the Civil War, Virginia alone sold between 300,000 and 350,000 enslaved people south, nearly as many as all of the Africans sold into the United States over the course of slavery.⁵²

With independence, the founding fathers could no longer blame slavery on Britain. The sin became this nation's own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it.⁵³ The shameful paradox of continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a further consolidation of whiteness across class, religious, and ethnic lines, and a hardening of the racial caste system. American democracy had been created on the backs of unfree Black labor.⁵⁴ Blackness came to define whiteness—and whiteness defined American democracy prior to the Civil War.

This ideology, reinforced not just by laws but increasingly by racist science and literature, maintained that Black people came from an inferior race, a belief that allowed white Americans to live with their betrayal. By the early 1800s, according to the legal historians Robert J. Cottrol, Raymond T. Diamond, and Leland B. Ware, white Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, "had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of Black inferiority."⁵⁵ While liberty was the unalienable right of the people who would be considered white, enslavement and subjugation became the natural station of people who had any discernible drop of "Black" blood.

Racist justifications for slavery gained ground during the mid-nineteenth century. The majority of the Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, declaring that Black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a “slave” race. This made them permanently inferior to white people and, therefore, incompatible with American democracy. Democracy existed for citizens, and the “Negro race,” the court ruled, was “a separate class of persons,” one the founders had “not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government” and who had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”⁵⁶ This belief, that Black people were not merely enslaved but a slave race, is the root of the endemic racism we cannot purge from this nation to this day. If Black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the “we” in the “We the People” was not a lie.

On August 14, 1862, a mere five years after the nation’s highest court declared that no Black person could be an American citizen, President Abraham Lincoln met with a group of five esteemed free Black men at the White House. It was one of the few times that Black people had ever been invited to the White House as guests. The men, part of Washington’s small Black elite, had been selected by their religious and civic organizations to represent Black Americans.⁵⁷ The Civil War had been raging for more than a year, and Black abolitionists had been pressuring Lincoln to end slavery. Entering the White House, these men must have felt a sense of great anticipation and pride.

The war was not going well for Lincoln. Britain was weighing whether to intervene on the side of the Confederacy, and the Union struggled to recruit enough new white volunteers. Meanwhile, enslaved people were fleeing their forced-labor camps, serving as spies, sabotaging Confederate installations, and pleading to take up arms for the Union cause as well as their own. Inspired by Black Americans’ self-emancipation, the president decided he was going to issue a proclamation to emancipate all enslaved people in the Confederate states as a tactic to deprive the Confederacy of its labor force.

But Lincoln worried about the consequences of the radical step toward abolition. Like many white Americans, he opposed slavery as a cruel system at odds with American ideals, but he also opposed Black equality. And he feared that a proclamation calling for the emancipation of enslaved people in the rebel states would alienate white moderates who supported a war to maintain the Union but were not willing to fight over slavery. His political

career had shown him the limits of what white American voters would tolerate. During the 1850s, Lincoln never could have won election in Illinois, a virulently racist state, had he embraced racial equality. Prior to becoming president, as a lawyer and politician in Illinois, Lincoln himself had believed that free Black people amounted to a “troublesome presence” incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people. “Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals?” he had asked just a few years before the Civil War. “My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.”⁵⁸

And so, Lincoln decided that the same document that would emancipate millions of enslaved people in rebel territory would also call for them, once free, to voluntarily leave their country and resettle elsewhere. This idea, known as “colonization,” had been circulating since the 1790s, and counted among its proponents presidents such as Jefferson and James Monroe. In 1816, a group of white enslavers and politicians in Washington, D.C., created the American Colonization Society (ACS) to promote the removal of free Black people, who would be encouraged to leave the United States and resettle in West Africa. The ACS soon had chapters in much of the country, alongside other local colonization organizations. It drew many adherents who were fearful of the growing population of free Black people following the American Revolution. They believed colonization could rid the nation of free Black people while protecting the institution of slavery. But some who opposed slavery embraced colonization, too. Many white Americans across the political spectrum believed Black people held no place in American society as free citizens, and some abolitionists—Black and white—did not think free Black people would ever know real freedom here.

Lincoln had first publicly voiced support for colonization in 1852, and as president, in 1861, he’d asked his secretary of the interior to research a plan to colonize Black people on the western coast of what would become Panama.⁵⁹ By 1862, as the Union struggled, he’d begun to worry that he would lose support for emancipation, a necessary war strategy, if he did not pair it with a colonization scheme. That day in August, as the five Black men arrived at the White House, they were greeted by the towering Lincoln and a man named James Mitchell, who eight days before had been installed in the newly created post of commissioner of emigration. One of Mitchell’s first tasks in that role had been to call the meeting with a delegation of Black leaders, some of whom supported colonization, to sell the idea. After exchanging a few niceties, Lincoln informed his guests that Congress had appropriated funds—some \$600,000—to ship Black people, once freed, to another country.

"Why should they leave this country? This is, perhaps, the first question for proper consideration," Lincoln told his visitors. "You and we are different races. . . . Your race suffers very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side."⁶⁰

You can imagine the heavy silence in that room as the weight of what the president had said settled upon these Black men. It was 243 years to the month since the first of their ancestors had arrived on these shores—before Lincoln's family, long before most of the white people insisting that this was not their country. The Union had entered the war not to end slavery but to keep the South from splitting off, yet Black men wanted to fight to restore the Union and liberate their people. And now Lincoln was blaming them for the war, and urging them to persuade the Black population to leave their native land. "Although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other . . . without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence," the president told them. "It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated."⁶¹

As Lincoln closed the remarks, Edward Thomas, the delegation's chairman, informed the president that they would consult on his proposition.⁶² "Take your full time," Lincoln said. "No hurry at all."⁶³

Black Americans denounced the meeting. Frederick Douglass, perhaps the greatest American this country has ever produced, called Lincoln's colonization scheme "a safety valve . . . for white racism" and said that the meeting "expresses merely a desire to get rid of" Black Americans. That August meeting was the only time Lincoln took his colonization proposal directly to Black Americans. The next month, in September 1862, he issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that advocated colonization, and in his annual address to Congress in December, he called for a constitutional amendment to aid colonization, which became Lincoln's last known public call to colonize Black Americans.

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the final version of the Emancipation Proclamation. It no longer included the mention of colonization, and it also provided for something Black leaders had long advocated for: the ability for Black men to enlist in the Union and fight for their freedom. Eventually, some two hundred thousand Black Americans would serve in the Union, accounting for one in ten Union soldiers. An astounding 78 percent of free Black military-age men living in free states would serve in the Union army, even as they faced greater risk than white soldiers. Confederate troops often killed Black soldiers rather than capture them and also enslaved Black war captives.⁶⁴ Thousands of Black women also contributed to the war effort, serving as cooks and nurses and spies, and withdrawing their valuable labor from

Confederates by escaping to Union lines. About one in five Black soldiers died in the war, mirroring the percentage of white soldiers, and Lincoln acknowledged that Black contributions helped turn the tide in favor of the Union.⁶⁵

That's because enslaved people knew something about resistance and revolution. The cost to Black soldiers who fought in the war, like the cost to white ones, proved great. But for the former, this cost has often been unrecognized. "They expected to have to fight for their freedom. They expected that the brutality that accompanied the making of slavery would accompany its undoing. They knew many would suffer and die before any of them experienced freedom, that their families, despite their best efforts, would again be torn apart," says the historian Thavolia Glymph. "As they fled alone to Union lines, in family units, or as communities to Union lines or resisted from within Confederate lines, they knew they were in 'for harder times,' one Union officer wrote." Glymph adds, "The American Civil War was not exceptional in these regards but the history of the slaves' war within the Civil War remains to be fully told."⁶⁶

In our national story, we crown Lincoln the Great Emancipator, the president who ended slavery, demolished the racist South, and ushered in the free nation our founders set forth. But this narrative, like so many others, requires more nuance. Douglass would never forget that the president initially suggested that the only solution, after abolishing an enslavement that had lasted for centuries, was for Black Americans to leave the country they helped to build. More than a decade later, organizers asked Douglass to eulogize the assassinated president at the unveiling of a new memorial for Lincoln and the freedmen in Washington, D.C. The abolitionist, whose mother had been sold away from him when he was a young child, had met with Lincoln a few times during his presidency and had repeatedly prodded Lincoln in his writings and speeches to emancipate the enslaved.⁶⁷

Early in his speech in D.C., Douglas called the president "a great public man whose example is likely to be commended for honor and imitation long after his departure to the solemn shades, the silent continents of eternity." But he soon made clear that he hadn't come to simply promote the narrative of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator who set his people free. "Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. . . . He was preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. . . .

You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity.”

Douglass then launched into a breathtaking litany of Lincoln’s shortcomings, referring in part to that White House meeting with Black leaders in 1862: “Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost . . . when he strangely told us that we were the cause of the war; when he still more strangely told us that we were to leave the land in which we were born.” However, though the Union was worth more to Lincoln than enslaved people’s freedom, Douglass said, “under his wise and beneficent rule we saw ourselves gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood.”⁶⁸

Douglass understood that Lincoln existed as both an “astute politician and a man of principle,” according to Christopher Bonner, a historian and the author of *Remaking the Republic: Black Politics and the Creation of American Citizenship*. Bonner says that Douglass’s perspective is vital for understanding Lincoln. “We would do well to listen to Douglass,” he told me. “Douglass knew Lincoln, Douglass knew slavery, and Douglass knew the nineteenth-century United States, and so he is a great source for us to understand Lincoln’s complexity.” Douglass understood that Lincoln’s ideas about Black people changed over the course of the war. The president had been deeply moved by the valor of the Black men who’d helped save the Union and had been influenced by Black men such as Douglass, whom he held in high esteem. Though the first version of his Emancipation Proclamation advocated colonization, by the end of the Civil War, Lincoln had abandoned these efforts and advocated for the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery. In his final speech before his assassination, Lincoln expressed an openness to enfranchising a limited number of Black men—particularly educated men and those who’d fought in the war.

“That last speech calling for partial inclusion of Black Americans, that’s an evolution, and among the many tragedies of Lincoln’s death is that he did change so much in such a short period of time,” Bonner said. “Still, the final stage of Lincoln is still a person who only believes in partial Black inclusion and who is only advocating for inclusion of certain Black people on certain terms. It’s valid to expect that he would have continued to evolve, but what we do know is that in the unfortunately short period of his presidency, Lincoln wasn’t an advocate for full equality.”⁶⁹

Nearly three years after Lincoln met with those men in the White House, General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, effectively ending the Civil War and suddenly freeing four million Black Americans. Few were inter-

ested in leaving the country. Instead, most would have fervently supported the sentiment of a resolution against Black colonization put forward at a convention of Black leaders in New York some decades before: "This is our home, and this our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers. . . . Here we were born, and here we will die."⁷⁰

That the formerly enslaved did not take up Lincoln's offer to abandon these lands is an astounding testament to their belief in this nation's founding ideals. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries."⁷¹ Black Americans had long called for universal equality and believed, as the abolitionist Martin Delany said, "that God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth."⁷² Liberated by war, then, they did not seek vengeance on their oppressors, as so many white Americans feared. Rather they did the opposite.

During this nation's brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process. The role Black Americans played in bringing about Reconstruction has often been overlooked, because until 1870 and the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which finally granted Black men the right to vote, no Black people had ever been allowed to serve in any elected office in the U.S. Congress or in most states and so their names do not often appear in the political histories.

But that absence can be misleading. Through speeches, pamphlets, conferences, direct lobbying, and newspaper editorials, Black Americans pushed an all-white Congress to enshrine equality into the Constitution, powerfully shaping what the country would be like after its second founding. Once the Constitution had been "shorn of its proslavery features" with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the historian Eric Foner writes, Black people moved to recast it to reflect the liberatory assertions of the Declaration of Independence, a document they had long admired and looked to for inspiration.

Within months of slavery's end, in fall of 1865, a Black newspaper called the *New Orleans Tribune* put forth a radical plan for an America that had been purged by fire. The paper called for suffrage for Black men, equality before the law, the redistribution of land from the former labor camps to the formerly enslaved, and equal access to schools and transportation. The plan advocated that the Constitution be amended to prohibit states from making "any distinction in civil rights and privileges" based on race.⁷³

Black activists like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Martin Delany, Douglass, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, as well as a small group called the Radical Republicans—rare white men such as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner who truly believed in Black equality—viewed Reconstruction as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to purge the republic of the legacy of slavery.”⁴ Thanks to their efforts, the years directly after slavery saw the greatest expansion of human and civil rights ever witnessed in this nation. A year after Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment, outlawing slavery, Black Americans, exerting their new political power, lobbied white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the nation’s first such law and one of the greatest pieces of civil rights legislation in American history. The law codified Black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination, and provided all Americans the legal right to buy and inherit property, make and enforce contracts, and seek redress from courts.⁵

In 1868, Congress ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, ensuring citizenship to Black Americans and all people born in the United States. Foner has written that “no change in the Constitution since the Bill of Rights has had a more profound impact on American life.”⁶ Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here, and all their progeny thereafter, gains automatic citizenship. The Fourteenth Amendment also, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed equal protection and codified equality in the law. Ever since, nearly all other marginalized groups have used the Fourteenth Amendment in their fights for equality (including the 2015 successful arguments before the Supreme Court on behalf of same-sex marriage). Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, establishing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship—the right to vote—to all men regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

With federal troops tempering widespread white violence, Black Southerners started branches of the National Equal Rights League—one of the nation’s first human rights organizations—to fight discrimination and organize voters. They headed in droves to the polls, where they placed other formerly enslaved people into seats their enslavers had once held. The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with Black Americans elected to local, state, and federal offices. Some sixteen Black men served in Congress—including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first Black man elected to the U.S. Senate in 1870. (Demonstrating just how brief this period would be, Revels and Blanche Bruce, who was elected four years later, would go from being the first Black men elected to the last for nearly a hundred years, until Edward Brooke of Massachusetts took

office in 1967.) More than six hundred Black men served in Southern state legislatures, and hundreds more in local positions.⁷⁷

These Black officials joined with white Republicans, some of whom came down from the North and believed that abolition would also expand the rights of white Americans, to write the most egalitarian state constitutions the South had ever seen. They helped pass more equitable tax legislation and laws that prohibited discrimination in public transportation, accommodations, and housing. Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of that most democratic of American institutions: the public school.⁷⁸

Public education effectively did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The white elite sent their children to private schools, while poor white children went without an education. But newly freed Black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education, which they saw as integral to true liberty. So Black legislators successfully pushed for a universal, state-funded system of schools—not just for their own children but for white children, too. Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, Black and white, were now required to attend schools, the way their Northern counterparts did. Just five years into Reconstruction, every Southern state had enshrined the right to a public education for all children into its constitution.⁷⁹ In some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, small numbers of Black and white children, briefly, attended schools together. Remarkably, in 1873 the University of South Carolina became the only state-sponsored college in the South to fully integrate, becoming majority Black—just like the state itself—by 1876. (When white former Confederates regained power a year later, they closed the university. After three years, they reopened it as an all-white institution; it would remain that way for nearly a century, until a court-ordered desegregation in 1963.)⁸⁰

For the fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress, and the nation, seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could birth the multiracial democracy that Black Americans envisioned, even if our founding fathers had not.

But it would not last.

“Tyranny is a central theme of American history,” the historian David Brion Davis writes in his 2006 book, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, and “racial exploitation and racial conflict have been part of the DNA of American culture.”⁸¹ So, too, is the belief, articulated by Lincoln, that Black people constitute the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with widespread and coordinated white resistance, in-

cluding unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud, and even, in extreme cases, the violent overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments. Faced with this violent recalcitrance, the federal government once again settled on Black people as the problem and decided that for unity's sake, it would leave the white South to its own devices. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes, in order to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull the remaining federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic white suppression of Black life proved so severe that this period between the 1880s and the early twentieth century became known as the second slavery or the Great Nadir, a phrase taken from the work of the historian and public intellectual Rayford W. Logan.

Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century.

White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws Black people had championed, experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced Black people back into quasi-slavery. As Waters McIntosh, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, "It was the poor white man who was freed by the war, not the Negroes."⁸²

Georgia pines flew past the windows of the Greyhound bus carrying Isaac Woodard home to Winnsboro, South Carolina. After serving four years in the army in World War II, where he had earned a battle star, he had received an honorable discharge earlier that day at Camp Gordon and was headed home to meet his wife. When the bus stopped at a small drugstore an hour outside Atlanta, Woodard asked the white driver if he could go to the restroom and a brief argument ensued. About half an hour later, the driver stopped again and told Woodard to get off the bus. Crisp in his uniform, Woodard stepped from the stairs and saw white police waiting for him. Before he could speak, one of the officers struck him in the head with a billy club, then continued to beat him so badly that he fell unconscious. The blows to Woodard's head were so severe that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just four and a half hours after the soldier's military discharge. At twenty-six, Woodard would never see again.⁸³

There was nothing unusual about Woodard's horrific maiming. It was part of a wave of systemic violence that had been deployed continuously against Black Americans for decades since the end of Reconstruction, in both the

North and the South. As the racially egalitarian spirit of post-Civil War America evaporated under the desire for national reunification, Black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation's failings. White America dealt with this inconvenience by constructing a savagely enforced system of racial apartheid that excluded Black people almost entirely from mainstream American life—a system so grotesque that Nazi Germany would later take inspiration from it for its own racist policies.⁸⁴

Despite the guarantees of equality in the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court's landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 declared the racial segregation of Black Americans constitutional. With the blessing of the nation's highest court and no federal will to vindicate Black rights, Southern states passed a series of laws and codes starting in the late 1800s meant to make slavery's racial caste system permanent by denying Black people political power, social equality, economic independence, and basic dignity. They enacted literacy tests to keep Black people from voting and created all-white primaries for elections. Black people were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court against a white person. South Carolina prohibited white and Black textile workers from using the same doors. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths. Memphis had separate parking spaces for Black and white drivers. Baltimore passed an ordinance outlawing Black people from moving onto a block more than half white and white people from moving onto a block more than half Black. Georgia made it illegal for Black and white people to be buried next to each other in the same cemetery. Alabama barred Black people from using public libraries that their own tax dollars were paying for. In the North, white politicians implemented policies that segregated Black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-Black schools, operated white-only public pools, and held white and "colored" days at the county fair. White businesses regularly denied Black people service, placing WHITES ONLY signs in their windows. States like California joined Southern states in barring Black people from marrying white people, while local school boards in Illinois and New Jersey mandated segregated schools for Black and white children.⁸⁵

White Americans maintained this caste system through wanton racial terrorism. And Black veterans like Woodard, especially those with the audacity to wear their uniform, had since the Civil War been the target of a particularly gruesome violence. This intensified during the two world wars because many white people understood that once Black men had gone abroad and experienced life outside the suffocating racial oppression of America, they were unlikely to quietly return to their subjugation at home. As Senator James K.

Vardaman of Mississippi said on the Senate floor during World War I, Black servicemen returning to the South would “inevitably lead to disaster.” Giving a Black man “military airs” and sending him to defend the flag would bring him “to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.”⁸⁶

Many white Americans saw Black men in the uniforms of America’s armed services not as patriotic but as exhibiting a dangerous pride. Hundreds of Black veterans were beaten, maimed, shot, and lynched. We like to call those who lived during World War II the Greatest Generation, but that allows us to ignore the fact that many of this generation fought for democracy overseas while brutally suppressing democracy for millions of American citizens. During the height of racial terror in this country, Black Americans were not merely killed in mob attacks and lynchings but castrated, burned alive, and dismembered, with their body parts displayed in storefronts and strewn across lawns in Black communities. This violence was meant to terrify and control Black people, but perhaps just as importantly, it served as a psychological balm for white supremacy: you would not treat human beings this way. The extremity of the violence was a symptom of the psychological mechanism necessary to absolve white Americans of their country’s original sin. To answer the question of how they could prize liberty abroad while simultaneously denying liberty to an entire race back home, white Americans resorted to the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers had used at the nation’s founding: that Black people were an inferior race whose degraded status justified their treatment.

This ideology did not simply disappear once slavery ended. If the formerly enslaved and their descendants became educated, if we thrived in the jobs white people did, if we excelled in the sciences and arts, then the entire rationale for how this nation had allowed slavery would collapse. Free Black people posed a danger to the country’s idea of itself as exceptional in its creed of freedom and equality; they held up a mirror into which the nation preferred not to peer. And so the inhumanity visited on Black people by every generation of white America justified the inhumanity of the past and the inequality of the present.

Just as white Americans feared, World War II ignited what became Black Americans’ second sustained effort to democratize this nation. As the editorial board of the Black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, “We wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who will enslave us.”⁸⁷ Woodard’s blinding is largely seen as one of the catalysts for the decades-long rebellion we have come to call the civil rights movement. But it is useful to pause and remember that this was the second mass movement for

Black civil rights, after Reconstruction. As the centennial of slavery's end neared, Black people were still seeking the rights they had fought for and won after the Civil War: the right to be treated as full citizens before the law, which was guaranteed in 1868 by the Fourteenth Amendment; the right to vote, which was guaranteed in 1870 by the Fifteenth Amendment; and the right to be treated equally in public accommodations, which was guaranteed by the Civil Rights Act of 1875.⁸⁸ In response to Black demands for these rights, white Americans strung them from trees, beat them and dumped their bodies in muddy rivers, assassinated them in their front yards, firebombed them on buses, mauled them with dogs, peeled back their skin with fire hoses, and murdered their children with explosives set off inside a church.

For the most part, Black Americans fought back alone, never getting a majority of white Americans to join and support their freedom struggles. Yet we never fought only for ourselves. The bloody freedom struggles of the civil rights movement laid the foundation for every other modern rights struggle. This nation's white founders set up a decidedly undemocratic Constitution that excluded Black people and did not provide the vote or equality for most Americans. But the laws born out of Black resistance guarantee the franchise for all and ban discrimination based not just on race but on gender, nationality, religion, and ability. It was the civil rights movement that led to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which upended the racist immigration quota system intended to keep this country white. Because of Black Americans, Black and brown immigrants from across the globe are able to come to the United States and live in a country in which legal discrimination is no longer allowed. It is truly an American irony that some Asian Americans, among the groups able to immigrate to the United States in large numbers because of the Black civil rights struggle, have sued universities to end programs designed to help the descendants of the enslaved.

No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it. And to this day, Black Americans, more than any other group, embrace the democratic ideals of a common good. We are the most likely to support programs like universal healthcare and a higher minimum wage and to oppose programs that harm the most vulnerable. For instance, Black Americans suffer the most from violent crime, yet we are the group most strongly opposed to capital punishment. Our unemployment rate is nearly twice that of white Americans, yet we are still the most likely of all groups to say that this nation should take in refugees who others claim will be a drain on American institutions.⁸⁹

The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of Black resistance and visions for equality. Our founding

fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but Black people did. As the scholar Joe R. Feagin put it, "Enslaved African-Americans have been among the foremost freedom-fighters this country has produced."⁹⁰ For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.

They say our people were born on the water.

When it occurred, no one can say for certain. Perhaps it was in the second week, or the third, but surely by the fourth, when they had not seen their land or any land for so many days that they had lost count. It was after fear had turned to despair, and despair to resignation, and resignation to an abiding understanding. The teal eternity of the Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely from what had once been their home that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, as if everything and everyone they cherished had simply vanished from the earth. They were no longer Mbundu or Akan or Fulani. These men and women from many different nations, all shackled together in the suffocating hull of the ship, they were one people now.

Just a few months earlier, they'd had families, and farms, and lives, and dreams. They'd been free. They had names, of course, but their enslavers had not bothered to record them. They had been made Black by those people who believed that they themselves were white, and where they were heading, Black equaled "slave," and slavery in America required turning human beings into property by stripping them of every element that made them individuals. This process was called seasoning, in which people stolen from western and central Africa were forced, often through torture, to stop speaking their native tongues and practicing their native religions.

But as the sociologist Glenn Bracey writes, "Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves."⁹¹ For as much as white people tried to pretend, Black people were not chattel. And so the process of seasoning, instead of erasing identity, served an opposite purpose: in the void, we forged a new culture all our own.

Today, our very manner of speaking recalls the Creole languages that enslaved people innovated to communicate with both Africans who used various dialects and the English-speaking people who enslaved them.⁹² Our style of dress, the defining flair, stems from the desires of enslaved people—shorn of all individuality—to assert their own identity. Enslaved people would wear

a hat in a jaunty manner or knot a head scarf intricately. Today's avant-garde nature of Black hairstyles and fashion displays a vibrant reflection of enslaved people's determination to feel fully human through self-expression.⁹³ The improvisational quality of Black art and music comes from a culture that rejected convention in order to cope with constant disruption. Black naming practices, so often impugned by mainstream society, are themselves an act of resistance. Our last names often derive from the white people who once owned us. That is why the insistence of many Black Americans, particularly those most marginalized, to give our children names that we create, that are neither European nor from Africa, a place we have never been, is an act of self-determination. When the world listens to quintessentially American music, it is our voice they hear. The sorrow songs we sang in the fields to soothe our physical pain and find hope in a freedom we did not expect to know until we died became American gospel. Amid the devastating violence and poverty of the Mississippi delta, we birthed jazz and the blues. And it was in the deeply impoverished and segregated neighborhoods where white Americans forced the descendants of the enslaved to live that teenagers too poor to buy instruments used old records to create a new music known as hip-hop.

Our speech and fashion and the drum of our music echo Africa but are more than African. Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation's most significant original culture. In turn, "mainstream" society has coveted our style, our slang, and our song, seeking to appropriate the one truly American culture as its own. As Langston Hughes wrote in 1926, "They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed— / I, too, am America."⁹⁴

For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the "Negro problem." They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of Black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and college attendance as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that Black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free.

As a woman in my forties, I am part of the first generation of Black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which Black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally "free" for just fifty. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there

never having been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, Black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.

What if America understood, finally, now, at the dawn of its fifth century, that we have never been the problem, but the solution?

When I was a child—I must have been in fifth or sixth grade—a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation's flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other Black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no "African" flag. It was hard enough being one of two Black kids in the class, and this assignment would be just another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher's desk, picked a random African country, and claimed it as my own.

I wish now that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.

December 1662

Virginia's House of Burgesses passes a new law holding that "all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother." This doctrine, known as *partus sequitur ventrem* ("that which is brought forth follows the belly"), is a departure from English tradition, in which a child's status followed that of the father. The law incentivizes the rape of enslaved Black women by their white enslavers.