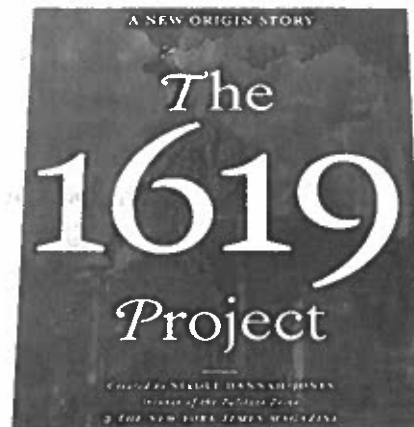




# Unpacking Our History Article Packet



## A New Origin Story Part 11: Justice and Beyond

**February 9, 2023**

**6:30 – 8:00 PM**

**Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353**

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**Critical Race Theory Part 1**

**April 13, 2023**

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"Justice"  
By NIKOLE  
HANNAH-JONES

Origin stories function, to a degree, as myths designed to create a shared sense of history and purpose. Nations simplify these narratives in order to unify and glorify, and these origin stories serve to illuminate how a society wants to see itself—and how it doesn't. The origin story of the United States that we tell ourselves through textbooks and films, monuments and museums, public speeches and public histories, the one that most defines our national identity, portrays an intrepid, freedom-loving people who rebelled against an oppressive monarchy, won their independence, tamed the West, advanced an exceptional nation based on the radical ideals of self-governance and equality, and heroically fought a civil war to end slavery and preserve that nation. This mythology has positioned almost exclusively white Americans as the architects and champions of democracy. And because of this, some have believed that white people should disproportionately reap the benefits of this democracy.

But as this book has shown, a truer origin story requires us to place Black Americans prominently in the role of democracy's defenders and perfecters. It is Black Americans who have struggled and fought, when many white Americans were willing to abandon the charge that "all men are created equal," to make those words real. It is Black Americans who have consistently made the case, even when they were utterly disenfranchised and forced out of the political process, that *all* citizens deserve equal access to the benefits of a country founded on a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The efforts of Black Americans to seek freedom through resistance and rebellion against violations of their rights have always been one of this nation's defining traditions. But the country has rarely seen it that way, because

for Black Americans, the freedom struggle has been a centuries-long fight against their own fellow Americans and against the very government intended to uphold the rights of its citizens. Though we are seldom taught this fact, time after time throughout our history, the most ardent, courageous, and consistent freedom fighters *within* this country have been Black Americans.

We see it in the 1739 Stono Rebellion, when about twenty Black men in South Carolina launched the largest revolt of enslaved people in the British mainland colonies before the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

We see it in Gabriel, who in 1800 conspired to lead an insurrection of the enslaved against their white enslavers, and whose failed plot included a plan to claim the rhetoric of white revolutionaries by purchasing "a piece of silk" for a flag on which to write the motto "Death or Liberty."<sup>2</sup>

We see it in David Walker, a free Black man who published his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* in 1829, calling on enslaved people to rise up and liberate themselves, as white Americans had done, through violence if necessary. He wrote, "I speak Americans for your good. We must and shall be free I say, in spite of you. You may do your best to keep us in wretchedness and misery, to enrich you and your children, but God will deliver us from under you. And wo, wo, will be to you if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting." These words demanding freedom proved so powerful that white Southerners banned the pamphlet; Walker was found dead a few months later.<sup>3</sup>

We see it in Ida B. Wells, who with her fiery pen condemned lynching and violent and legal efforts by white Southerners to deny newly freed Black Americans the vote, writing, "The reproach and disgrace of the twentieth century is that the whole of the American people have permitted a part, to nullify this glorious achievement, and make the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution playthings, a mockery and a byword; an absolute dead letter in the Constitution of the United States. . . . With no sacredness of the ballot there can be no sacredness of human life itself. For if the strong can take the weak man's ballot, when it suits his purpose to do so, he will take his life also."<sup>4</sup>

We see it in Fannie Lou Hamer, a Black woman in Mississippi, the most oppressive apartheid state in America, thrown off her land and beaten repeatedly for demanding the right to vote, who in 1964 said, "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"<sup>5</sup>

We see it in LaTosha Brown, who co-founded Black Voters Matter and spent 2020 successfully organizing Black voters across the South against

voter-suppression efforts in order to try to rescue this democracy, saying, “The Constitution says we the people and that the power is supposed to go to the people. . . . How do we really deal with racism and sexism and all those other things that keep us from tapping into the brilliance and the power of the people that are in this country and how do we form this more perfect union [so] that literally we can get life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”<sup>6</sup>

In this centuries-long tradition of protest there have been hundreds of uprisings in segregated Black communities. In the last century, some have produced substantive change. After the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, rebellions erupted in more than one hundred cities, and fear that the country teetered on the brink of civil war broke the congressional deadlock over the Fair Housing Act.<sup>7</sup> The bill, which prohibited housing discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or religion, among other categories, made it illegal to deny people housing simply because they descended from those who had been enslaved. Though King had fought hard for the bill, white congressional representatives from the North had joined with representatives from the South to block its passage. Many considered the proposed law the “Northern” civil rights bill, because racial segregation in the North had largely been accomplished through housing discrimination. Seven days after King’s death, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the act into law from the smoldering capital, which remained under the protection of the National Guard.<sup>8</sup>

Just weeks before King’s assassination, Johnson’s Kerner Commission, which he had created to study the root causes of the many Black rebellions that had swept through Detroit, Newark, and cities across the nation in the mid-1960s, had issued its report, which recommended a national effort to dismantle segregation and structural racism across American institutions. It was shelved by the president, like so many similar reports, and instead white Americans voted in a “law and order” president, Richard Nixon.

This sort of backlash has been the typical response to Black resistance. The following decades brought increased police militarization, more law enforcement spending, and mass incarceration of Black Americans. And despite continued protests, organizing, and uprisings in Black communities in response to police or vigilante white violence, those movements seldom prodded enough non-Black people—or, more important, enough politicians—into pushing for and enacting substantial change.

In 2020, something changed. The collective witnessing of what must be described without hyperbole as a modern-day lynching by an agent of the state propelled a global protest that would become the largest movement for civil rights in American history. Even as the nature of George Floyd’s death

shocked us—a white law enforcement officer taking part in the extrajudicial killing of a Black person, nonchalantly pressing the life out of him in plain view of more than a dozen onlookers—it also reminded us that we had not banished this barbaric part of our history.

Yet unlike so many times in the past, in which Black people mostly marched and protested alone to demand recognition of their full humanity and citizenship, in 2020, a multiracial and multigenerational protest army braved a pandemic and took to the streets. The protesters gathered in all fifty states in places big and small, from heavily Black big cities to small, almost entirely white towns.

At first the changes wrought by those protests seemed to come shockingly swift. The weeks of demonstrations finally moved lawmakers in some places to ban chokeholds by police officers, to consider stripping law enforcement of the qualified immunity that has made it almost impossible to hold responsible officers who kill, and to discuss shifting significant parts of ballooning police budgets into funding for social services. Soon the outrage over police violence morphed into something broader. Protesters who understood that police officers are simply the enforcement mechanism of a vastly unequal society maintained by historic and systemic racism took a stand against monuments to enslavers and bigots from Virginia to Philadelphia to Minneapolis and New Mexico, defacing or snatching down statues and pushing local and state politicians to locate the moral courage to realize that they indeed did have the power to purge from public spaces icons to white supremacy.

A rainbow coalition of white, Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous voters swept Trump out of office and helped Democrats retake the U.S. Senate, while also electing Kamala Harris as the first Black, the first Asian, and the first female vice president in the history of this country. Those voters also managed to push Joe Biden, a man whose decades-long political career epitomized the moderate Democrat, to the left, and from the first days of his presidency he incorporated racial justice into his rhetoric.

George Floyd, a father, a brother, a regular man who just wanted to live a life free of struggle, did not choose to be a martyr to racial justice. This nation had no right to choose that for him. Yet his death helped spawn an awareness of racial suffering and a willingness to excavate how this nation’s racist past deforms our present that I had never before seen in my lifetime.

But those heady days of promise soon gave way to the grim reality that the racist systems that have undergirded our society for four hundred years do not collapse after a few months of protest. The number of voters supporting Trump, a white nationalist president, *increased* when he ran for a second term.<sup>9</sup> And when Trump lost, his supporters led an insurrection in the nation’s

Capitol, seeking, just as white mobs had done repeatedly during Reconstruction, to overturn and delegitimize an election won by a multiracial coalition of voters. Then, in response to well-organized Black, Latino, and Indigenous voters helping turn heavily Republican states such as Georgia and Arizona blue, Republicans began a coordinated effort to introduce and pass hundreds of bills that would make it harder for millions of Americans to vote.<sup>10</sup> Some have called these efforts—which came not even a year after the death of the civil rights icon John Lewis, who in the 1960s nearly lost his life to secure voting rights for Black Americans—the worst attacks on voting in more than fifty years. And just as a jury found Derck Chauvin guilty on all three counts against him, including two of murder—the rarest of outcomes—news broke of another police killing, and another, and another.

It is unclear what substantial and transformative change will come from the reckoning that began in 2020 or, distressingly, if whatever changes occur will lead to more freedom and equality or less. But by reading to the end of this book, you have gained a sense of the stark reality we must confront: even if we pass wide-ranging policing and voting reforms, on their own, these cannot bring justice to America. Resolving the policing issue would save precious Black lives and help preserve the dignity Black Americans still must fight for. It would make Black Americans safer and dismantle a tool of social control with a lineage that stretches back to slavery. But it would leave wholly intact the primary culprit of Black suffering today. If we seek to truly make this a transformative moment, if we are indeed serious about creating a more just society, we must go much further than that. We must get to the root of it.

**Fifty years after** the bloody and brutally repressed protests and freedom struggles of Black Americans brought about the end of legal discrimination in this country, so much of what makes Black lives hard, what takes Black lives earlier, what causes Black Americans to be vulnerable to the type of surveillance and policing that killed Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, what steals opportunities is the lack of wealth that has been a defining feature of Black life since the end of slavery.

Wealth, not simply securing equal rights, is the means to security in America. Wealth—assets and investments minus debt—is what enables you to buy a home in a safer neighborhood with better amenities and better-funded schools. It is what enables you to send your children to college without saddling them with tens of thousands of dollars of debt and what provides money for a down payment on a house. It is what prevents family emergencies or

unexpected job losses from turning into catastrophes that leave you homeless and destitute. It is what ensures what every parent wants: that your children will have fewer struggles than you did. Wealth is security and peace of mind. It's not incidental that wealthier people are healthier and live longer. Wealth is, as a 2019 Yale study titled "The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality" states, "the most consequential index of economic well-being" for most Americans.<sup>11</sup> But wealth is not something most people create solely by themselves; it is accumulated across generations.

While unchecked discrimination still plays a significant role in circumscribing opportunities for Black Americans, it is white Americans' centuries-long economic head start that most effectively maintains racial caste today. As soon as laws began to ban racial discrimination against Black Americans, white Americans created so-called race-neutral means of maintaining political and economic power. In a country where Black people have been kept disproportionately poor and prevented from building wealth, rules and policies involving money can be nearly as effective for maintaining the color line as legal segregation and disenfranchisement. For example, in the late 1800s, soon after the Fifteenth Amendment granted Black men the right to vote, white politicians in many states, understanding that recently freed Black Americans were of course impoverished, implemented poll taxes.<sup>12</sup> And so, when the civil rights movement made explicit discrimination illegal, White Americans understood that they did not have to maintain laws forcing segregated housing and schools if, using their intergenerational wealth and higher incomes, they could simply buy their way into expensive enclaves with exclusive public schools that are out of the price range of most Black Americans.

This has worked with impressive efficiency. Today Black Americans remain the most segregated group of people in America and are five times as likely as white Americans to live in high-poverty neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup> Not even high earnings inoculate Black people against racialized disadvantage. Black families earning \$75,000 or more a year live in poorer neighborhoods than white Americans earning less than \$40,000 a year, according to research by John Logan, a Brown University sociologist.<sup>14</sup> Another study, by the Stanford sociologist Sean Reardon and his colleagues, shows that the average Black family earning \$100,000 a year lives in a neighborhood with an average annual income of \$54,000.<sup>15</sup> Black Americans with high incomes are still Black: they face discrimination across American life. But it is because their families have not been able to build wealth that they are often unable to come up with a down payment to buy in more affluent neighborhoods, while white Americans with lower incomes often use familial wealth to do so.

The difference between the lived experience of Black Americans and white Americans when it comes to wealth—along the entire spectrum of income from the poorest to the richest—can be described as nothing other than a chasm. According to research published in 2020 by scholars at Duke University and Northwestern University, the average Black family with children holds just one cent of wealth for every dollar held by the average white family with children.<sup>16</sup>

As President Lyndon Johnson, architect of the Great Society, explained in a 1965 speech, titled “To Fulfill These Rights”: “Negro poverty is not white poverty. . . . These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the Negro they are a constant reminder of oppression. For the white they are a constant reminder of guilt. But they must be faced, and they must be dealt with, and they must be overcome; if we are ever to reach the time when the only difference between Negroes and whites is the color of their skin.”<sup>17</sup>

We sometimes forget—and I would argue it is an intentional forgetting—that the racism we are fighting today was originally conjured to justify working unfree Black people, often until death, to generate extravagant riches for European colonial powers, the white planter class, and all the ancillary white people, from Midwestern farmers to bankers to sailors to textile workers, who earned their living and built their wealth from that free Black labor and the products that labor produced. The prosperity of this country is inextricably linked with the forced labor of the ancestors of more than 30 million Black Americans, just as it is linked to the stolen land of the country’s Indigenous people. Though our high school history books seldom make this plain, slavery and the hundred-year period of racial apartheid and racial terrorism known as Jim Crow were, above all else, systems of economic exploitation. To borrow a phrase from Ta-Nehisi Coates, racism is the child of economic profiteering, not the father.<sup>18</sup>

Innumerable legal efforts to strip Black people of their humanity existed to justify the extraction of profit. Beginning in the 1660s, white officials ensured that all children born to enslaved women would also be enslaved for life and would belong not to their mothers but to the white men who owned their mothers. These officials passed laws dictating that the child’s status would follow that of the mother, not the father, upending European norms and guaranteeing that the children of enslaved women who were raped or sexually coerced by white men would be born enslaved—not free, as they would be if their status followed their father’s.<sup>19</sup> It meant that profit for white people could

be made from Black women’s wombs. Laws determining that enslaved people, just like animals, had no recognized kinship ties ensured that human beings could be bought and sold at will to pay debts, buy more acres, or save storied universities like Georgetown from closing.<sup>20</sup> Laws barred enslaved people from making wills or owning property, distinguishing Black people in America from every other group on these shores and assuring that nearly everything of value Black people managed to accrue would add to the wealth of those who enslaved them. At the time of the Civil War, the value of the enslaved human beings held as property added up to more than all of this nation’s railroads and factories combined.<sup>21</sup> And yet, enslaved people saw not a dime of this wealth. They owned nothing and were owed nothing from all that had been built from their toil.

**Freed people, during and after slavery,** tried to compel the government to provide restitution for slavery, to provide at the very least a pension for those who, along with generations of their ancestors, had spent their entire lives toiling for no pay. They filed lawsuits. They organized to lobby politicians. And every effort failed.

The closest the country ever came to delivering on reparations was in the immediate aftermath of slavery’s demise, during a moment that offered this nation the chance for redemption. Out of the ashes of sectarian strife, we could have birthed a new country, one that recognized the humanity and natural rights of those who had helped forge this nation, one that attempted to atone and provide redress for the unspeakable atrocities committed against Black people in the name of profit. We could have finally, one hundred years after the American Revolution, embraced its founding ideals.

And, oh so briefly, during the period known as Reconstruction, we moved toward that goal. The historian Eric Foner refers to these twelve years after the Civil War as this nation’s second founding, because it is here that America began to redeem the grave sin of slavery.<sup>22</sup> Congress passed amendments abolishing human bondage, enshrining equal protection before the law in the Constitution, and guaranteeing Black men the right to vote. This nation witnessed its first period of biracial governance as the formerly enslaved were elected to public offices at all levels of government. Millions of Black people, liberated with not a cent to their names, desperately wanted property so they could work, support themselves, and be left alone. They understood that land in this country has always meant wealth and, more important, independence. Black people implored federal officials to grant the land confiscated from en-

slavers who had taken up arms against their own country to those who had worked it for generations. They were asking, as the historian Robin D. G. Kelley puts it, to “inherit the earth they had turned into wealth for idle white people.”<sup>23</sup>

And for a fleeting moment, a few white men listened to the pleas of Black people who had fought for the Union and helped deliver its victory. In January 1865, as the Civil War raged toward its final battle, twenty Black leaders, most of whom were ministers who had been born into slavery, gathered in Savannah, Georgia, for a meeting with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Union general William Tecumseh Sherman. During his famed “March to the Sea” through Georgia a couple of months earlier, Sherman had largely treated as a nuisance the estimated ten thousand poor and desperate people who’d abandoned their enslavers and begun to follow behind his troops. Many who ran to the Union lines seeking freedom and protection had instead died of starvation and sickness. But a turning point came after a Union brigadier general serving under Sherman ordered his troops to remove a pontoon bridge from Ebenezer Creek before the Black refugees trailing his unit could cross. Confederate scouts began shooting at the refugees and many ran into the icy river and drowned. Others were killed in the stampede and some were likely shot to death. The Confederates re-enslaved those who did not manage to make it across the creek.<sup>24</sup> The tragedy evoked widespread outrage and condemnation in the North, and alarmed the administration in Washington. In response, Stanton traveled to Savannah and called a meeting between Sherman and the Black leaders to pose what at the time was a radical question for white Americans to ask Black ones: “What do you want for your own people?”<sup>25</sup>

The Black delegation’s leader, Reverend Garrison Frazier, a sixty-seven-year-old man who had spent fifty-nine years in bondage before purchasing his wife’s and his own freedom eight years earlier, asked for the same thing most white Americans wanted. “Slavery is, receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the [Emancipation] proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.” The key to that, Frazier said, was land. “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare. . . . We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.”<sup>26</sup>

Remarkably, with millions of Black Americans just weeks past being re-

leased from generational slavery, they did not seek a government “handout”—even though getting land that they’d worked in order to produce wealth for others could hardly be considered one. They simply asked for land to work until they could earn enough money to purchase it.

Four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Order 15, providing for the distribution of hundreds of thousands of acres of former Confederate land in forty-acre tracts to newly freed people along coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. This became known as “forty acres and a mule.” Sherman was neither a humanitarian reformer nor a man with any particular concern for Blacks,” Eric Foner writes in his groundbreaking book *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*. “Instead of seeing Field Order 15 as a blueprint for the transformation of Southern society, he viewed it mainly as a way of relieving the immediate pressure caused by the large number of impoverished Blacks following his army.”<sup>27</sup> And yet, Foner writes, the “prospect beckoned of a transformation of Southern society more radical even than the end of slavery.”<sup>28</sup> One of the ministers at that meeting, Ulysses L. Houston, organized one thousand Black residents and claimed land in Skidaway Island, Georgia, where they founded a self-governing Black community. Some forty thousand freedpeople staked their claim to four hundred thousand acres of “Sherman land” in a region, Foner writes, “that had spawned one of the wealthiest segments of the planter class.”<sup>29</sup>

President Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, on April 10, 1865, given the day after the final major battle of the Civil War, asked his fellow Americans to consider what the nation owed the enslaved. Speaking of the Union and the Confederacy, Lincoln said, “Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.” Yet, he continued, “if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”<sup>30</sup>

Just four days later, an assassin shot Lincoln, who died the next day. Andrew Johnson, the racist, pro-Southern vice president who took over, immediately reneged upon this promise of forty acres, overturning Sherman’s order. Many white Americans felt that Black Americans should be grateful for their freedom, that the bloody Civil War had absolved them of any debt. The

government confiscated the land from the few formerly enslaved families who had started to eke out a life away from the white whip and gave it back to the traitors. And with that, the only real effort this nation ever made to compensate Black Americans for 250 years of chattel slavery ended.

We still live with the legacy of this choice. As the scholar Henry Louis Gates writes, "Try to imagine how profoundly different the history of race relations in the United States would have been had this policy been implemented and enforced; had the former slaves actually had access to the ownership of land, of property; if they had had a chance to be self-sufficient economically, to build, accrue and pass on *wealth*. After all, one of the principal promises of America was the possibility of average people being able to own *land*, and all that such ownership entailed."<sup>31</sup>

But the formerly enslaved did not give up, and neither have their descendants. During Reconstruction, Black men serving in the U.S. Congress for the first time in history pushed for reparations in the form of federal aid for Black schools.<sup>32</sup> By the late 1800s, Reconstruction had been abandoned and violently concluded and many formerly enslaved people, their bodies debilitated by decades of punishing manual labor for the enrichment of others, by poor nutrition, and by lack of healthcare, were struggling in poverty, often without even enough money to bury their dead. A woman named Callie House, herself born into slavery, widowed in adulthood, and working as a washerwoman in Tennessee, began organizing freedpeople in the early 1900s under the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association.<sup>33</sup> Through this grassroots association, House organized tens of thousands of formerly enslaved people to push Congress to pass a bill to provide "slave pensions," just as the federal government paid pensions to Union soldiers.

After years of organizing failed to pay off with Congress, in 1915, House took an extraordinary step for a Black, formerly enslaved woman living in the Jim Crow South: she retained Cornelius Jones, one of a tiny number of Black lawyers practicing in Washington, D.C., and sued the federal government for reparations.<sup>34</sup> In the suit, Jones argued that the U.S. Treasury owed Black Americans \$68,073,388.99 for the taxes it had collected between 1862 and 1868 on the cotton enslaved people had grown. The federal government had identified the cotton and could trace it, and the suit argued that this tax money should be paid in the form of pensions for those who against their will had grown, picked, and processed it.<sup>35</sup>

The audacity of a Black woman demanding payment for her stolen labor and the stolen labor of millions of others, even if it would come directly from proceeds of the cotton they'd picked, brought down the full wrath of one of the

most powerful governments in the world. The Treasury Department, under President Woodrow Wilson, first issued a press release insisting the United States owed nothing and that formerly enslaved people, if they had a claim at all, should seek reparations from "their masters."<sup>36</sup> A federal court then rejected the claim, citing government immunity—which says that the government must consent to being sued—and the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the decision.

Not content with crushing the lawsuit, the government went after both Jones and House, accusing them of mail fraud for soliciting funds from formerly enslaved people to help the effort with promises that reparations were coming. The same government that refused to give freedpeople a dime of financial assistance for their enslavement accused those trying to get them aid of "going through the country collecting hard-earned money from poor negroes."<sup>37</sup> Newspaper coverage perpetuated the basest stereotypes of people who'd spent a significant part of their lives working for free for the benefit of white people: "The members of the race have been prone from time immemorial to strive to get something for nothing," an article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* announced.<sup>38</sup> The federal government never produced any real evidence that showed that House had defrauded anyone, according to the historian Mary Frances Berry in her book *My Face Is Black Is True*, but it did not matter. Jones, a respected and well-connected civil rights attorney, was not convicted. House, a poor Black woman, was convicted then and sentenced to prison, where she served a year. "Mrs. House lacked Jones's status of black male respectability," Berry writes. "Mrs. House was just a black woman with the audacity—and no money—to stand firmly on claims of citizenship rights for herself and freedmen and -women."<sup>39</sup>

Black Americans would never give up their quest for reparations—for restitution and repayment for the centuries of stolen labor and robbed opportunities. The Black nationalist Marcus Garvey would call for reparations in the 1910s and for Black Americans to leave this country and resettle in a Black one. Like Callie House, Garvey found himself targeted by the federal government for mail fraud. He was imprisoned and then deported.<sup>40</sup> In the 1950s, the activist "Queen Mother" Audley Moore launched a movement for reparations, appealing to the United Nations in 1957 and 1959. In 1968, activists formed the Republic of New Afrika, which claimed that since the United States had renegeed on its promise of forty acres, Black Americans should be given territory in the Southeastern United States to form their own Black nation.<sup>41</sup> Malcolm X called for reparations in 1963.<sup>42</sup> In 1987, Adjoa Aiyetoro and Imari Obadele helped found the National Coalition for Reparations in America, known as N'COBRA.<sup>43</sup> And in 2021, the last three survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre,



all centenarians, testified in Congress in support of a reparations bill for the survivors and their descendants, one hundred years after the slaughter that destroyed the prosperous Black neighborhood of Greenwood and killed hundreds,<sup>44</sup> and some twenty years after a state commission recommended reparations that were never given.<sup>45</sup>

None of these efforts succeeded. To this day, the only Americans who have ever received government restitution for slavery were white enslavers in Washington, D.C., whom the federal government compensated after the Civil War for their loss of human property.

**We are often** taught in school that Lincoln “freed the slaves,” but we are not prodded to contemplate what it means to achieve freedom without a home to live in, without food to eat, a bed to sleep on, clothes for your children, or money to buy any of it. Narratives collected from formerly enslaved people for the 1930s Federal Writers’ Project reveal the horrors of massive starvation, of “liberated” Black people seeking shelter in burned-out buildings and scrounging for food in decaying fields before eventually succumbing to the heartbreak of returning to bend over in the fields of their former enslavers, as sharecroppers, just so they would not die.<sup>46</sup> “With the advent of emancipation,” writes the historian Keri Leigh Merritt, “Blacks became the only race in the U.S. ever to start out, as an entire people, with close to zero capital.”<sup>47</sup>

In 1881, Frederick Douglass, surveying the utter privation in which the federal government left the formerly enslaved, wrote: “When the Hebrews were emancipated, they were told to take spoil from the Egyptians. When the serfs of Russia were emancipated, they were given three acres of ground upon which they could live and make a living. But not so when our slaves were emancipated. They were sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends and without a foot of land to stand upon. Old and young, sick and well, were turned loose to the open sky, naked to their enemies.”<sup>48</sup>

But even as the federal government decided that Black people were undeserving of any restitution, it was bestowing millions of acres in the West on white Americans under the Homestead Act, while also enticing white foreigners to immigrate with the offer of free land. From 1868 to 1934, the federal government gave away 246 million acres in 160-acre tracts, nearly 10 percent of all the land in the nation, to more than 1.5 million white families, native-born and foreign. Some 46 million American adults today, about 20 percent of all American adults, are descended from those homesteaders, according to research by the social scientist Trina Williams Shanks.<sup>49</sup> “If that many white

Americans can trace their legacy of wealth and property ownership to a single entitlement program,” Merritt writes, “then the perpetuation of Black poverty must also be linked to national policy.”<sup>50</sup>

The federal government turned its back on its financial obligations to four million newly liberated people, and then it left them without protection as well, as white rule was reinstated across the South starting in the 1870s. Federal troops pulled out of the former Confederacy, and white Southerners overthrew biracial governance using violence, coups, and election fraud.

The campaigns of white terror that marked the period after Reconstruction, known as Redemption, once again guaranteed an exploitable, dependent labor force for the white South. Most Black Southerners had no desire to work on the same forced-labor camps where they had just been enslaved. But white Southerners passed state laws that made it a crime if they didn’t sign labor contracts with white landowners or if they changed employers without permission or sold cotton after sunset. As punishment for these “crimes,” Black people were arrested and then forcibly leased out to companies and individuals. While white Northerners largely turned a blind eye, white Southerners compelled Black people back into quasi-slavery through sharecropping and convict leasing. This arrangement ensured that once-devastated towns like my father’s hometown, Greenwood, Mississippi, could again call themselves the cotton capitals of the world, and companies like United States Steel secured a steady supply of unfree Black laborers who could be worked to death, in what Douglas A. Blackmon calls “slavery by another name.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet Black Americans persisted, and despite the odds, some managed to acquire land, start businesses, and build schools for their children. But it was the most prosperous Black people and communities that elicited the most vicious responses. White people regularly deployed lynchings, massacres, and generalized racial terrorism against Black people who bought land, founded schools, built thriving communities, tried to organize sharecroppers’ unions, or opened their own businesses, depriving white owners of economic monopolies and the opportunity to cheat Black buyers.

According to a 2020 report by the Equal Justice Initiative, white Americans lynched at least 6,500 Black people from the end of the Civil War to 1950, an average of three every two weeks for eight and a half decades.<sup>52</sup> (Since 2015, law enforcement has killed, on average, nearly five Black people a week.<sup>53</sup>)

The scale of the destruction during the 1900s is incalculable. Black farms were stolen, shops burned to the ground. White mobs from Florida to North Carolina to Louisiana to Arkansas razed entire prosperous Black neighborhoods and communities. In Tulsa’s Greenwood neighborhood, a district so suc-

cessful that it became known as Black Wall Street, gangs of white men, armed with guns supplied by public officials, wreaked permanent economic destruction. They burned more than twelve hundred homes and businesses, including a department store, a library, and a hospital, and killed hundreds. These people, it is now believed, were buried in mass graves.<sup>54</sup> Today Greenwood, like so many once-prosperous Black areas, remains severely economically depressed.

**Even Black Americans** who did not experience theft and violence were continually deprived of the ability to build wealth. They were denied entry into labor unions and turned away from union jobs that ensured middle-class wages.<sup>55</sup> In both the North and the South, racist hiring laws and policies forced them into service jobs even when they held college degrees. Communities legally relegated them into segregated, substandard neighborhoods and segregated, substandard schools that made it impossible for them to compete economically even had they not faced rampant discrimination in the job market. In the South, for most of the period between the Civil War and the 1960s, nearly all of the Black people who wanted to earn professional degrees—law, medical, and master's degrees—had to leave the region to do so, even as white immigrants attended state colleges in the former Confederacy that Black American tax dollars helped pay for.<sup>56</sup>

As part of the New Deal programs, the federal government created redlining maps, marking neighborhoods where Black people lived in red ink to denote that they were uninsurable for federally backed mortgages. As a result, 98 percent of the loans the Federal Housing Administration insured from 1934 to 1962 went to white Americans, locking nearly all Black Americans out of the government program credited with building the modern (white) middle class.<sup>57</sup> “At the very moment when a wide array of public policies was providing most white Americans with valuable tools to advance their social welfare—insure their old age, get good jobs, acquire economic security, build assets, and gain middle-class status—most black Americans were left behind or left out,” the historian Ira Katznelson writes in his book *When Affirmative Action Was White*. “The federal government . . . functioned as a commanding instrument of white privilege.”<sup>58</sup>

In other words, while Black Americans were being systematically, generationally deprived of the ability to build wealth, and while some of them were also being robbed of the little they had managed to gain, white Americans were not only free to earn money and accumulate wealth with exclusive access to the best jobs, best schools, and best credit terms but were also getting substantial government help in doing so.

The civil rights movement ostensibly ended white advantage by law. And in the gauzy way many white Americans tend to view history, particularly the history of racial inequality, the end of legal discrimination, after 350 years, is all that was required to vanquish this dark history and its effects. Changing the laws, too many Americans have believed, marked the end of the obligation. But the civil rights laws passed in the 1960s merely guaranteed Black people the rights they should have always had. These laws dictated that from that day forward, the government would no longer sanction legal or explicit racial discrimination. But they did not correct the harm nor restore what was taken.

*Brown v. Board of Education* did not end segregated and unequal schools; it just ended segregation under the law. It took court orders and, at times, federal troops to produce any real integration. Nevertheless, more than six decades after the nation's highest court proclaimed school segregation unconstitutional, Black children remain as segregated from white kids as they were in the early 1970s.<sup>59</sup> There has never been a point in American history when even half of the Black children in this country have attended a majority-white school.

Making school segregation illegal did nothing to repay Black families for the theft of their educations or make up for the loss to generations of Black Americans, many of them still living, who could never go to college because white officials believed that only white students needed a high school education and so refused to operate high schools for Black children. As late as the 1930s, most communities in the South, where the vast majority of Black Americans lived, failed to provide a single public high school for Black children, according to *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*, by the historian James D. Anderson.<sup>60</sup> Heavily Black Richmond County in Georgia, for instance, did not provide a four-year Black high school from 1897 to 1945.

The Fair Housing Act, passed in 1968, prohibited discrimination in housing, but it did not reset real estate values so that homes in redlined Black neighborhoods, whose prices had been artificially deflated by government policy, would be valued the same as identical homes in white neighborhoods, whose worth had been artificially inflated. It did not provide restitution for generations of Black homeowners forced into predatory loans because they had been locked out of the prime credit market. It did not repay every Black soldier who returned from World War II to find that he could not use his GI Bill benefits to buy a home for his family in any of the new whites-only suburbs subsidized by the same government he'd fought for. It did not break up the still entrenched housing segregation that had taken decades of government and private policy to create. Lay those redlining maps over almost any

city in America with a significant Black population and you will see that the government-sanctioned segregation patterns remain stubbornly intact and that those same communities bore the brunt of the predatory lending and foreclosure crisis of the late 2000s that stole years of Black homeownership and wealth gains.<sup>61</sup>

Making employment discrimination illegal did not come with a check for Black Americans to compensate for all the high-paying jobs they were legally barred from, for the promotions they never got solely because of their race, for the income and opportunities lost to the centuries of discrimination. Nor did these laws end ongoing discrimination, just as speed limits without enforcement fail to stop people from driving too fast. These laws opened up opportunities for limited numbers of Black Americans while largely leaving centuries of meticulously orchestrated inequities soundly in place, but now with the sheen of color-blind magnanimity.

**The inclination to bandage over and move on is a definitive American feature when it comes to anti-Black racism and its social and material effects.** The 2019 Yale University study describes this phenomenon this way: “A firm belief in our nation’s commitment to racial egalitarianism is part of the collective consciousness of the United States of America. . . . We have a strong and persistent belief that our national disgrace of racial oppression has been overcome, albeit through struggle, and that racial equality has largely been achieved.”<sup>62</sup> The authors point out how many white Americans love to play up moments of racial progress like the Emancipation Proclamation, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the election of Barack Obama, while playing down or ignoring lynching, racial apartheid, and the 1985 government bombing of a Black neighborhood in Philadelphia.<sup>63</sup> “When it comes to race relations in the United States,” the study said, “most Americans hold an unyielding belief in a specific, optimistic narrative regarding racial progress that is robust to counterexamples: that society has come a very long way already and is moving rapidly and perhaps naturally toward full racial equality.”<sup>64</sup>

This remarkable imperviousness to facts when it comes to white advantage and architected Black disadvantage is what emboldens some white Americans to quote the passage from Martin Luther King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech about being judged by the content of your character and not by the color of your skin. It’s often used as a cudgel against calls for race-specific remedies for Black Americans—while ignoring the part of that same

speech where King says Black people have marched on the capital to cash “a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”<sup>65</sup>

King was evoked continuously during the 2020 season of protests, sometimes to defend those who looted and torched buildings, sometimes to condemn them. But during that time of foment and its ongoing aftermath, we’ve witnessed an astounding silence around his most radical demands. The seldom-quoted King is the one who said that the true battle for equality, the actualization of justice, required economic repair.

In 1967, King gave a speech in Atlanta to the Hungry Club Forum, a secret gathering of civil rights leaders and white politicians. He had watched Northern cities explode even as his movement successfully pushed for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act and he saw the limitations of a movement that sought just to secure legal rights. King told the forum:

For well now twelve years, the struggle was basically a struggle to end legal segregation. In a sense it was a struggle for decency. It was a struggle to get rid of all of the humiliation and the syndrome of deprivation surrounding the system of legal segregation. And I need not remind you that those were glorious days. . . . It is now a struggle for genuine equality on all levels, and this will be a much more difficult struggle. You see, the gains in the first period, or the first era of struggle, were obtained from the power structure at bargain rates; it didn’t cost the nation anything to integrate lunch counters. It didn’t cost the nation anything to integrate hotels and motels. It didn’t cost the nation a penny to guarantee the right to vote. Now we are in a period where it will cost the nation billions of dollars to get rid of poverty, to get rid of slums, to make quality integrated education a reality. This is where we are now. Now we’re going to lose some friends in this period. The allies who were with us in Selma will not all stay with us during this period. We’ve got to understand what is happening. Now they often call this the white backlash. . . . It’s just a new name for an old phenomenon. The fact is that there has never been any single, solid, determined commitment on the part of the vast majority of white Americans to genuine equality for Negroes.<sup>66</sup>

A year later, in March 1968, King spoke to striking, impoverished Black sanitation workers in Memphis, “Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality,” he told the crowd. “For we know that it isn’t

enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?"<sup>67</sup> A month later, a white man assassinated King.

Decades after the end of the civil rights movement, which resulted in a nation where—for the first time since 1619—it was not legal to treat Black people differently than white ones, perhaps the starkest indication of our societal failures is that racial income disparities today look no different than they did the decade before King's March on Washington. According to a study published in September 2020 by the economists Moritz Kuhn, Moritz Schularick, and Ulrike Steins in the *Journal of Political Economy*, Black median household income in 1950 was about half that of white Americans, and today it remains so. More critical, the racial wealth gap is in relative terms about the same as it was in the 1950s as well. The typical Black household today is poorer than 80 percent of white households. "No progress has been made over the past 70 years in reducing income and wealth inequalities between Black and white households," according to the study.<sup>68</sup>

And yet most Americans remain in an almost pathological denial about the depth of Black financial struggle. That 2019 Yale University study, discussed in "The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality," found that most Americans believe that Black households hold \$90 in wealth for every \$100 held by white households. The actual amount is \$10. About 97 percent of the study participants overestimated Black-white wealth equality, and most assumed that highly educated, high-income Black households were the most likely to achieve economic parity with white counterparts. That is also wrong. The magnitude of the wealth gap only widens as Black people earn more income.<sup>69</sup>

"These data suggest that Americans are largely unaware of the striking persistence of racial economic inequality in the United States," the study's authors write. Americans, they note, tend to explain away or justify persistent racial inequality by ignoring the "tailwinds that have contributed to their economic success while justifying inequalities of wealth and poverty by invoking the role of individuals' traits and skills as explanations for these disparities."<sup>70</sup> They use the exceptional examples of very successful Black people to prove that systemic racism does not hold Black Americans back and point to the large numbers of impoverished Black people as evidence that Black people are largely responsible for their own struggles. In 2018, Duke University's Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development published *What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap*. This report examined the common misperceptions

about the causes of the racial wealth gap and presented data and social-science research that refutes all of them.<sup>71</sup>

The Duke study shows that the racial wealth gap is not about poverty. Poor white families earning less than \$27,000 a year hold nearly the same amount of wealth as Black families earning between \$48,000 and \$76,000 annually.<sup>72</sup> It's not because of Black spending habits. Black Americans have lower incomes overall but save at a slightly higher rate than white Americans with similar incomes. It's not that Black people need to value education more. Black parents, when correlated by household type and socioeconomic status, actually offer more financial support for their children's higher education than white parents do, according to the study.<sup>73</sup> And some studies have shown that Black youths, when compared with white youths whose parents have similar incomes and education levels, are actually more likely to go to college and earn additional credentials.<sup>74</sup> But what's probably most astounding to many Americans is that college simply does not pay off for Black Americans the way it does for other groups. Black college graduates are about as likely to be unemployed as white Americans with a high school diploma, and Black Americans with a college education hold less wealth than white Americans who have not even completed high school. Further, because Black families hold almost no wealth to begin with, Black students are the most likely to borrow money to pay for college and then to borrow more money in total. That debt, in turn, means that Black students cannot start saving immediately upon graduation, the way their less-debt-burdened peers can.<sup>75</sup>

It's not a lack of homeownership. While it's true that Black Americans have the lowest homeownership rates in the nation, simply owning a home does not have the same asset value as it does for white Americans. Black Americans get higher mortgage rates even with equal credit worthiness, and homes in Black neighborhoods do not appreciate at the same rate as those in white areas, because housing prices are still driven by the racial makeup of communities.<sup>76</sup> As the Duke University economist William Darity, Jr., the study's lead author, points out, the ability to purchase a home in the first place is seldom a result of just the hard work and frugality of the buyer: "It's actually parental and grandparental wealth that facilitates the acquisition of a home."<sup>77</sup>

It's not because a majority of Black families are led by a single mother. White single women with children hold the same amount of wealth as single Black women with no children, and the typical white single parent has twice the wealth of the typical two-parent Black family.

To summarize, none of the actions we are told Black people must take if

they want to “lift themselves” out of poverty and gain financial stability—not marrying, not getting an education, not saving more, not owning a home—can mitigate four hundred years of racialized plundering. Wealth begets wealth, and white Americans have had centuries of government assistance to accumulate wealth, while the government has for the vast history of this country worked against Black Americans’ efforts to do the same.

“The cause of the gap must be found in the structural characteristics of the American economy, heavily infused at every point with both an inheritance of racism and the ongoing authority of white supremacy,” the authors of the Duke study write. “There are no actions that Black Americans can take unilaterally that will have much of an effect on reducing the wealth gap.”<sup>78</sup> For the gap to be closed, America must undergo a vast social transformation produced by the adoption of bold national policies.

**At the center** of those policies must be reparations. “The process of creating the racial wealth chasm begins with the failure to provide the formerly enslaved with the forty acres they were promised,” Darity told me. “So the restitution has never been given, and it’s a hundred and fifty-five years overdue.”<sup>79</sup>

Darity has been studying and advocating for reparations for thirty years, and in 2020 he and his partner, A. Kirsten Mullen, published *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-first Century*. Both history and road map, the book answers many questions about who should receive reparations and how a program would work. I will not spend much time on that here, except to make these few points: Reparations are not about punishing white Americans, and white Americans are not the ones who would pay for them. It does not matter if your ancestors engaged in slavery or if you just immigrated here two weeks ago. Reparations amount to a societal obligation in a nation where our Constitution sanctioned slavery, Congress passed laws protecting it, and our federal government initiated, condoned, and practiced legal racial segregation and discrimination against Black Americans until half a century ago. And so it is the federal government that would pay.

Nor is it impossible to figure out who is eligible. Reparations would go to any person who has documentation that he or she identified as a Black person for at least ten years before the beginning of any reparations process and can trace at least one ancestor back to American slavery. Reparations should provide a commitment to vigorously enforce existing civil rights prohibitions against housing, educational, and employment discrimination, as well as in-

cluding targeted investments in Black communities segregated through government policy and the segregated, high-poverty schools that serve a disproportionate number of Black children. But critically, reparations must include individual cash payments to descendants of the enslaved in order to close the wealth gap. We must stop thinking of restitution for slavery as a zero-sum game. As this book has shown, the legacy of 1619 has harmed all Americans, and we are all suffering for it to some degree. In addition to reparations, our wealthy nation is morally obligated to do more for all Americans who struggle by adopting such things as a livable wage; universal healthcare, childcare, and college; and student loan debt relief. We can acknowledge our need to better support all of our citizens, and also the particular debt owed Black Americans.

The technical details, frankly, are the easier part. The real obstacle, the obstacle we have never overcome, is garnering the political will—convincing enough Americans that the centuries-long forced economic disadvantage of Black Americans should be remedied, that restitution is owed to people who have never had an equal chance to take advantage of the bounty they played such a significant part in creating.

This country can be remarkably generous. Each year Congress allocates money—in 2020, \$5 million—to help support Holocaust survivors living in America.<sup>80</sup> In backing the funding measure in 2018, Representative Richard E. Neal, a Democrat from Massachusetts, said that this country has a “responsibility to support the surviving men and women of the Holocaust and their families.”<sup>81</sup> And he is right. It is the moral thing to do. This country has also paid reparations to Japanese American victims of internment during World War II and to some Native American nations. And yet Congress has refused for three decades to pass H.R. 40, a bill introduced shortly after Congress approved reparations for Japanese Americans, which seeks to simply study the issue of reparations for descendants of American slavery. Its drafter, Representative John Conyers, Jr., a Michigan Democrat and the descendant of enslaved Americans, died in 2019—during the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans enslaved in Virginia—without the bill ever making it out of committee. It finally did so in early 2021.<sup>82</sup>

There are living victims of racial apartheid and terrorism born in *this* country, including civil rights activists who lost their homes and jobs fighting to make this country a democracy, who have never received any sort of restitution for what they endured. Soon, like their enslaved ancestors, they will all be dead, and then we’ll hear the worn excuse that this country owes no reparations because none of the victims are still alive. Darity and Mullen call this the

“delay until death” tactic.<sup>83</sup> Procrastination, they say, does not erase what is owed.

It is time, it is long past time, for reparations.

In the year 1903, perhaps the low point of the Great Nadir when Black Americans were being consumed by the violent retraction of their newly gained citizenship rights, the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois published one of this nation’s most important literary works. It is called *The Souls of Black Folk*, though a more accurate title for the seminal text might have been *The Soul of America*. A synergy of sociology, history, and literary prose, the book excavates the central tension in American life—the color line—while also reinforcing the unparalleled and largely erased place that Black Americans hold in the American story. In the opening paragraph of the opening chapter, Du Bois begins with a searing question: “Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question . . . How does it feel to be a problem?”<sup>84</sup> And in the final pages of the final chapter, Du Bois answers with a rousing declaration that Black people are not this nation’s problem, but its heart.

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centered for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation’s heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?<sup>85</sup>

This is our national truth: America would not be America without the wealth from Black labor, without Black striving, Black ingenuity, Black resistance. So much of the music, the food, the language, the art, the scientific advances, the athletic renown, the fashion, the guarantees of civil rights, the oratory and intellectual inspiration that we export to the world, that draws the world to us, comes forth from Black Americans, from the people born on the water. That is Black Americans’ legacy to this nation.

The legacy of this nation to Black Americans has consisted of immorally high rates of poverty, incarceration, and death and the lowest rates of land and home ownership, employment, school funding, and wealth. All of this reveals that Black Americans, along with Indigenous people—the two groups forced to be part of this nation—remain the most neglected beneficiaries of the America that would not exist without us. This unacknowledged debt, all of it, is still accruing. And it will continue to accrue until we as a society decide to tolerate it no longer.

Black Americans helped build the economic foundation that has made the United States a global power, but, as the first chapter of this book shows, they have also played an unparalleled and *uncompensated* role in building our democracy itself. For generations, U.S. soldiers whose stated mission was to spread freedom abroad have received pensions, federal grants, healthcare, and burial assistance. But the Black foot soldiers who fought over many generations to spread freedom *here* received no measure of compensation, even as that fight cost them their homes, their land, their educations, their employment, and, too often, their lives. And yet Black Americans fight to make this nation a democracy still.

We cannot change the hypocrisy upon which we were founded. We cannot change all the times in the past when this nation had the opportunity to do the right thing and chose to return to its basest inclinations. We cannot make up for all of the lives lost and dreams snatched, for all the suffering endured. But we can atone for it. We can acknowledge the crime. And we can do something to try to set things right, to ease the hardship and hurt of so many of our fellow Americans. It is one thing to say you do not support reparations because you did not know the history, that you did not understand how things done long ago helped create the conditions in which millions of Black Americans live today. But you now have reached the end of this book, and nationalized amnesia can no longer provide the excuse. None of us can be held responsible for the wrongs of our ancestors. But if today we choose not to do the right and necessary thing, *that* burden we own.

It is time for this country to pay the debt it began incurring four hundred


*The 1619 Project*

years ago, when it first decided that human beings could be purchased and held in bondage. What happened in 1619, the tragic origin story unveiled throughout this book, set in motion the defining struggle of American life, between freedom and oppression, equality and racism, between the lofty ideals of democracy and the fight to make them real. We must confront this four-hundred-year war between these opposing forces, and then we must make a choice about which America we want to build for tomorrow. The time for slogans and symbolism and inconsequential actions has long passed. Citizens inherit not just the glory of their nation but its wrongs, too. A truly great country does not ignore or excuse its sins. It confronts them, and then works to make them right.

If we are to be redeemed, we must do what is just: we must, finally, live up to the magnificent ideals upon which we were founded.

America begin a story about our nation's moral failures, or is it a story about America's long march toward her higher aspirations?

The answer to this question depends on what we, as Americans, choose to define our nation and ourselves by. This, in turn, will determine what our nation will become.



“WE CANNOT ALLOW ‘1619’ TO  
DUMB DOWN AMERICA IN THE  
NAME OF A CRUSADE”  
BY JOHN MCWHORTER

The data are in: the *New York Times*' 1619 Project<sup>51</sup> is founded on empirical sand. The fundamental claim that the Revolutionary War was fought to preserve slavery simply does not correspond with the facts, too conclusively for the point to be dismissed as mere hair-splitting. The issue is not differing interpretations of history, but an outright misinterpretation of it.

Yet the project lives on. Its spearheaders blithely dismiss the charges of inaccuracy as mere natterings that at least verge on racism, while school districts nationwide eagerly receive pedagogical materials based on the idea of offering students a fresh, revealing take on American history.

We must ask: Is there some broader aspect of the 1619 Project that justifies a certain slippage between its claims and actual fact? Just what does this project have to teach students? What does it have to teach us? And if the answer to those questions is “nothing much,” then how is it that brilliant, high-placed people can be so serenely unruffled in promulgating this material to innocent young minds?

In the end, the 1619 Project is more than a history lesson. It is founded on three basic principles, none expounded with a great



deal of clarity, but all of them pernicious to a truly constructive black American identity.

★ ★ ★

One takeaway from the *Times*' rhetoric is that the American experiment offers nothing to celebrate, definitionally polluted by its dependence for so long on unpaid labor by black people. Our red-blooded celebration of 1776 as a political and even moral and intellectual victory is, under this analysis, callow and backward. In their minds, 1776 was a culmination of a grisly beginning 157 years before, of a kind no one could dream of feting with fireworks and barbecues.

For all of its emotional resonance, this assertion is so simplistic and anti-intellectual that both rationality and morality require dismissing it. For example, one corollary of this viewpoint is a discomfort with seeing America's Founding Fathers honored as heroes and pioneers. We are taught that, because these men either owned slaves or let pass that others did, we are to see them as morally repugnant. In a recent radio interview, a black journalist discussed a book she has written documenting the racist aspects of all of the U.S. presidents. She argued that we must be "honest" about these figures instead of settling for a sanitized vision of what these men did and tolerated. The host, a black woman, very civilly asked her for what purpose we should keep these things about these men in mind.

The historian only repeated her point about "honesty" a few times; she seemed a tad thrown by the angle of the question. One sensed that she was refraining from saying directly that we are not to think of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, or even Franklin D. Roosevelt as heroes, that musicals such as *1776*, films such as *Lincoln*, and the endless stream of august biographies celebrating such men are inappropriate. The protean musical

*Hamilton* actually has been critiqued in this vein for not holding front and center that slaves were keeping the New York he knew afloat, and that Alexander Hamilton was not sufficiently committed to arguing against slavery.

This way of thinking calls for pretty much any white figure before now to wear scarlet letters on their heads. The letter today presumably would be R for "racist." Everyone knew Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne was a kind person in many ways, but Hawthorne portrayed a society whose morality decreed that her adultery be treated as a defining trait, relegating all else about her to triviality. Almost all of us, including many very religious people, today look upon this as benighted; the book is used in schools as an object lesson in how censorious obsessions of the moment can lead to unthinking cruelty. However, the 1619 Project puts forth that this kind of moral absolutism is correct in the case of American slavery.

That slavery was almost universally condoned at the time, an ordinary feature of life that one grew up immersed in unquestioned, and at a time when much less was known about science or the wider world, is considered irrelevant. We are to think of the sin of slavery as overriding all considerations of context, of what it is to be a human being, of, in a word, complexity.

Here, then, is the problem: The 1619 kind of perspective, for all of its elaborate terminology and moral passion vented in serious media organs and entertained by people with PhDs, demands that we abjure complexity. It is a call for dumbing ourselves down in the name of a moral crusade.

America has always been an experiment, ever imperfect, always in rehearsal. That its beginnings four hundred years ago were founded in casual bondage of other humans is appalling from our viewpoint but should surprise no one given what was ordinary in all human societies worldwide at the time. That, in this nation, slavery gradually was abolished, via a movement in which white people vigorously and crucially

participated, was a kind of miracle in itself. It demonstrated that the rehearsal was a progressive one, moving ever towards justice even if never achieving its quintessence.

The 1619 adherent rolls their eyes to hear that, as if some larger and obvious point is being missed. However, they have failed to communicate any such point that stands up to basic scrutiny, and meanwhile, it is they who miss a larger point: what social history actually is. Frankly, the 1619 vision, in pretending that the roiling, complex history of the United States can be reduced to the fate of one group of people within it, abused, oppressed, and dismissed though they were for so very long, is lazy. Constitutional history matters only in that slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person. Feminism matters only in that white feminists were racists by our standards. Economic history matters only in relation to the yield from plantations. Geopolitics matters only in terms of whether the British would have abolished slavery in America. Technology matters only in terms of the cotton gin.

The entire business absolves one of the responsibility to engage the vast spectrum of human affairs that history constitutes, with the methods of inquiry and engagement long established as its *modus operandi*. To engage history openly and thoroughly becomes almost disloyal, inauthentic. History itself does not interest these people as much as something more local, personal even.

Thought experiment: Imagine the 1619 crowd's response to a version of American history stressing the fate of white women, asserting that the patriarchy always has and continues to deny women's humanity and that this is the guiding force of American history, having made the rise of the republic possible. Immediately, our 1619-ers would grasp that as grievous as the history of women in America (and worldwide) is, a vision of this kind is reductive, appealing largely to a small group most would see as highly ideological.

Yet the 1619 idea is similar. Slavery was hideous in endless ways, but it was still, in the grand scheme of things—and there was one—

just one of a great many things going on. And if all of those things can be cleverly traced to the black people toiling in fields, sheds, and pantries, then so too can they be traced to the women often doing similar things and undergoing different kinds of abuse, including what women historians today convincingly limn as denials of their humanity.

And never mind how often people of the 1619 mindset get even their history wrong. Their guiding idea is that to closely engage all of this “white” history, and certainly to see anything in it to praise, is as if one were doing all of this while a slave was being whipped just beyond the corner of one's eye.

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation doesn't matter because he also for a while thought slaves, once freed, should be transported back to Africa. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society must be remembered as the product of a man who gleefully referred to “niggers” in private and made nice with open segregationists. Black women who love Hillary Clinton must ever recall that she once referred to certain black gang members as “superpredators.”<sup>52</sup>

We are to keep ever at the forefront of our minds that all of these blights and torts are the spawn of something so conclusively revolting that it eliminates any reason to seriously consider anything else about these people in evaluating them as human figures or, by extension, America as an accomplishment. America's very foundation, the heart of what America has ever been, is a denial of black people's humanity. As such, we must conceive of all of these white big names with big Rs on their foreheads—and of course, all modern whites must wear big Ps for “privilege” on theirs.

A smart ten-year-old could see through the willful cluelessness on which this supposedly enlightened conception of social history is based. Who seriously condemns persons of the past for being unable to see beyond the confines of their time, when the ability to do this is precisely what we otherwise consider one of the quintessences of greatness? Or to anticipate a likely objection, who thinks the abil-

ity to see beyond the confines of one's time is the very definition of greatness, such that we must disqualify the Founding Fathers because despite whatever else they did that might seem to court greatness, they could not see beyond their time enough to grasp the full humanity of black people and therefore fell conclusively short?

The illogic here is plain to anyone. Only a certain etiquette today makes enough non-blacks refrain from acknowledging that the types who promulgate tropes such as the 1619 Project are able to do so with so little self-questioning and such impatience with critique. This is a way of looking at the past familiar from Marxist ideology, training adherents Zen-style to carefully stanch reasonable disbelief in favor of slogans, to tamp down a desire to explore, discover, and reason with a commitment to broad-stroked evangelism. If the 1619 Project has a defensible justification, this perspective on history is not one of them.

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Or, suppose it is? One might understand that 1619-style history is propaganda masquerading as thought, while supposing that to wink and let it pass is worthwhile in view of a larger agenda. Take the evangelism I referred to above—is the 1619 perspective geared towards achieving a result beyond the historiographical that will uplift black America in such a way that we might hearken to John Ford's call to "print the legend" when it serves a worthy purpose?

One purpose the 1619 idea could serve is to reanimate the idea that black Americans are owed reparations for the salary denied their slave ancestors. Nikole Hannah-Jones has stated<sup>53</sup> that this is the ultimate goal of the proposal she has been central in spearheading, for example.

However, we must ask why Hannah-Jones has only stated this in an almost parenthetical fashion. If the point is intended to get black

people reparational payments, then we would expect that this would have been headlined front and center, rather than the idea being largely presented as a mere history lesson.

A charitable explanation for why the reparations aim has been backgrounded so by 1619 proponents is a sense among them that the reparations argument is so poorly received in so many quarters—including many black ones—that it is most effectively presented in a backdoor manner. After all, the initial national discussion of the idea in the 1970s went nowhere, and its revival in the late 1990s also was longer on heat than result, leaving Congressman John Conyers Jr. quietly entering his reparations bill year after year in what became a kind of quiet gesture of protest rather than a plan of action. While Ta-Nehisi Coates's noteworthy article<sup>54</sup> reignited the idea, after all of the attention paid, it would be hard to say that the idea has gotten any further beyond the stirring but empty symbolism of the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates paying lip service to it in line with current "woke" expectations.

Possibly, then, reparations are best put over via stealth, in the way that an evangelist might try to bring someone into their fold by first asking their interlocutor whether they sense a lack of direction in their lives, whether they believe in something larger, and so on. Here, we learn that the American experiment actually begins with black people brought to these shores in bondage (actually, they apparently were indentured servants, not slaves). So generations of black people after this worked without pay under brutal conditions, and then after emancipation, their descendants were treated little better, in many quarters until as late as the 1960s. It might seem to naturally follow that modern black people are owed some money.

Note, however, that the last sentence above feels a touch hasty to most readers beyond those already converted to the idea of reparations. The entire argument always has been a fragile one in countless dimensions, with this having as much to do with the resistance to it



as racism and indifference. For one, the very notion that today's problems in black America trace to what happened in 1619 is more a Rube Goldberg-style mental stunt than actual social history, vastly oversimplifying a much more complex, and in many ways more heartening, story; Coleman Hughes has outlined this quite usefully.<sup>55</sup>

Then, Yale University law professor Boris Bittker's book on reparations,<sup>56</sup> now forty-eight years old, politely but comprehensively fileted the whole idea so conclusively that it continues to stand as the last word on the matter. Those under the impression that Coates's article in the *Atlantic* has superseded it would feel otherwise if they read Bittker's book—unless they operate under the indefensible conceit that a book on reparations is logically and morally valid only if written by someone black. Both Coates's article and Randall Robinson's *The Debt*<sup>57</sup> of 2000, as eagerly and widely discussed just twenty years ago as Coates's article has been, are largely eloquent *cris de coeur* in the place of pragmatic analysis. Coates brings in some information about redlining; Robinson was more concerned with Africa. Both, however, largely punt on specifics.

In general, then, if the 1619 idea is an indirect way of calling for reparations for slavery, there are two problems. One is that this call has failed to bear real fruit for longer than most black people now have been alive. It renders the 1619 proposal old wine in what is now a battered and half-empty bottle. Second is that the proponents of the 1619 idea apparently lack the confidence in their reparational aims to even present them directly—or at best, are under an impression that hints, implications, and parentheticals can be an effective way of swaying a vast and diverse populace regarding a radical, controversial proposal. This is not only old wine in an old bottle, but to borrow another alcohol-related metaphor that Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) used in reference to something else during the Democratic debates of summer 2019, this is “all foam and no beer.”<sup>58</sup>

The 1619 analysis is also designed to serve as an explanation for disparities between black and white achievement. The lesson, sometimes openly stated, is that all such deficits trace to the disadvantage that black people were saddled with by being brought to America in chains. This grows from a basic tenet among perhaps most black academics in the humanities and social sciences, as well as other black people of the “woke” mindset. That tenet is that America must understand that there is “nothing wrong with” black people. These people fairly ache to see Americans master the mental trick, the moral generosity, to look upon black-white disparities and understand that the reason for these is black people's lack of “agency,” as sociologists put it. We must understand that tomatoes are fruits, that gravity means that people in the Southern Hemisphere do not fall off the earth, that mountains wear down to create sand—and that black problems are “not our fault.”

And to be sure, in terms of how these disparities began, they are not “our fault.” If black people had come to America on their own steam, and somehow not been processed by whites here as animals, we can be quite sure there would not be the disproportion of black people in urban inner-city neighborhoods, the subpar scholastic achievement (if anyone doubts that, consult studies that documented sky-high IQs among plenty of black students in Chicago in the 1930s), and so much else. The pathway from 1619 to 2020 is vastly more tortuous than we are being taught to believe—that is, today we would not find that kind of IQ performance among those very students' great-grandchildren, for reasons that trace to “racism” only in ways the 1619 crowd would find inconvenient; consult Stuart Buck's *Acting White: The Ironic Legacy of Desegregation*.<sup>59</sup> However, in the grand scheme of things, it is indeed not “our fault.”

Too seldom asked, however, is why it is so important what white people think of us. To precisely what end must white people master a complex, nuanced social history lesson when it comes to black people? What are the chances that this ever will, or even could, happen, given that very few people are historians or professors? Of course, we must battle the kind of acrid contempt that leads to violence and murder. However, when it comes to matters of whites' quieter dismissive attitudes and misimpressions, the black intelligentsia's Ahab-like commitment to transforming their mentality has always perplexed me. Under what conception of human strength do we teach a group of people to obsess over how they are seen in the eyes of others?

More specifically, how is this Black Power? The idea seems to be that for black people—and only us—it is a kind of human strength to obsess with Talmudic intensity over whether white people like us, value us, truly see us equals, and in just which ways. For black people, the cry of powerlessness is somehow a form of strength, and even racial authenticity. However, actual defenses of that idea seem not to exist. The detractor objects that no one has said that whites' attitudes were so important—but the fact that the 1619 Project is founded upon exactly such a concern neatly deep-sixes this objection. And the fact remains that this obsession with white people understanding that it “isn't our fault” goes against the basics of what we consider healthy tutelage to any human being. “Who cares what he thinks about you?” we tell our child. The psychologist treats minimization of obstacles, an almost willful denial, as a healthy kind of coping strategy for busy humans grappling with the challenges of life.

But our wise ones tell us that when it comes to black people, things are different. Authentic blackness means refraining from any natural inclination to minimization. Our entire self-conception as a race is supposed to be founded on the fact that whites see us as inferior, upon a wariness of how whites feel about us, and even a sense of fellowship

as people communally “oppressed” by the fact that whites don't quite see us with the dignity and precision we would prefer.

My intent here is not to encourage the reader to simply dismiss people such as the 1619 advocates as “crazy.” We must attempt to get at the heart of what these intelligent, morally concerned people suppose. Here, it is reasonable to surmise that they think this focus on whether it's “our fault” has some kind of benefit that makes it worth it to battle minimization, that makes it somehow advanced, progressive, to obsess over obstacles, rather than seek to get around them.

For example, one might suppose that if more people understood that “it isn't our fault,” then societal changes that would elevate black America would happen faster. That vision is easy to accommodate from a distant, vague perspective. However, we must ask: What is the evidence that this is true? In what other human society did the ruling class's understanding that “it isn't their fault” condition a change in an oppressed group's fortunes? Note that the only real example is this very society, where exactly this happened with black people during the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. It seems that today's warriors suppose that further, deeper understanding of this kind could fashion even more change.

However, the simple question is: Who are the people who, if they underwent a grand realization that “it isn't their fault” beyond the basic “root causes” wisdom, now entrenched among the educated for fifty years, would fashion impactful changes in legislation on health, drugs, education, or housing? Which officials, in which positions? What exactly are we thinking they would do? “I finally understood that the problems in black communities trace back to injustices that began in the seventeenth century, and that is what finally made me \_\_\_\_\_.” With what would the 1619 people fill in that blank?

A common riposte here will be that what makes the “it's not their fault” argument especially important is that the black experience is defined by experiencing racism not just as a passing attitude but in the

form of violence at the hands of the police. We will leave aside that the universality of this experience among black people is vastly exaggerated—as Ellis Cose, likely in favor of the 1619 position, has stated, “Most middle-class blacks know that they are not very likely to find themselves on the wrong side of a policeman’s baton.”<sup>60</sup>

However, in general, after the room is done clapping and amending and snapping their fingers, to bring the cops into this is more something someone would think of as a defense than an actual argument. Via what strategy are we hoping to teach the typical cop the lesson “it isn’t their fault,” and most importantly, how would that relate to whether or not they hurt or killed a black person in the heat of the moment? The 1619 advocate is caught in a bind here, dedicated to pointing out how ineradicably racism is imprinted in the white soul while also preparing to claim that some articles in the *New York Times Magazine* are going to transform that white soul’s psyche.

Countless human groups have succeeded amidst dismissive attitudes, and in societies in which no one cared the slightest about the intricacies of how social history held them back. The modern black intelligentsia’s claim is that for some reason, in the late twentieth century in the United States there emerged a situation in which one particular oppressed class, the descendants of African slaves, could only fitfully succeed once the ruling class underwent a profound transformation not just in how it ran things, but in how it thought, down all the way to its basal, precortical impulses.

Gone are the days when a true civil rights leader such as Bayard Rustin could, in his renowned *Commentary* article<sup>61</sup> in 1965, carefully outline just how black people could succeed despite the challenges of automation and what the ruling culture would need to provide, in the concrete rather than psychological sense, to allow this to be so. Nowhere are we taught why today’s psychological focus is a preferable approach, rather than a mere fashion. And perplexingly, nowhere in these people’s writings and talks do we see any hint of the shame that

you would expect someone to feel in lustily proclaiming their own people as uniquely incapable of coping with a challenging reality.

To the extent that answers to the questions raised here either dance around or dismiss them, we understand that the entire 1619 edifice is founded on something other than pragmatism.

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To accept the implication of the 1619 ideology that heroic figures should be dismissed for not fully understanding the horrors of slavery, and that the American story is defined by nothing except the treatment of black people, would be to disrespect them as infantile minds. As such, we must evaluate the project on what it portends for forging socio-political change. Sadly, here the project would seem to yield nothing. A revivification of the reparations argument is longer on theatre than politics. The concern with whites understanding that “it isn’t our fault” may seem a form of political engagement but in fact is quite irrelevant to change in actual lives.

Rather, the 1619 message is, alone, the action in itself. To many black thinkers today, they sense that the Cassandra role is what makes black thought most interesting. It also makes a black thinker feel important, like they matter. There is an insecurity being assuaged here, an understandable product of a race subjected to such dismissal for centuries. Black America is still working that out, despite the new freedoms afforded us fifty years ago, and among the black intelligentsia, this also explains the hypersensitivity about whether whites “understand.” That kind of hypersensitivity is a product of self-doubt. A people who truly like themselves don’t give a damn whether other people like them and take pride in the very act of succeeding regardless.

But what this means is that, evaluated honestly, the 1619 Project is a kind of performance art. Facts, therefore, are less important than

attitude. Hannah-Jones has predictably dismissed serious and comprehensive empirical critiques, as if for black thinkers, truth is somehow ranked second to fierceness and battle poses. For many, questioning the 1619 Project elicits irritation, of a kind that suggests personal insult rather than difference of opinion. This is because the 1619 Project is indeed all about personality, a certain persona that smart black people are encouraged to adopt as a modern version of being a civil rights warrior.

For this 2.0 version of a civil rights warrior, authentic blackness, significant blackness, requires eternal opposition, bitter indignation, and claims of being owed. Whether all of this is rooted in reality in a way that can create change for actual human beings is of less concern than whether all of this is expressed, on a regular basis. It keeps The Struggle going, we are told.

How sad that the wandering socio-historical trajectory that got us from 1619 to here can create a caste among the oppressed who, in all sincerity, mistake performance for activism. If we really want to get anywhere, the tragedy is that today we must take a deep breath and forge a new Struggle against them and their influence. Ironically, we must understand, despite the performers' tongue-clucking and nasty tweets and GIFs, that it will be those engaged in this new Struggle who will qualify, in a truly proactive sense, as authentically black.

# The End of the Black American Narrative

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 [theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative/](http://theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative/)

June 1, 2008

*On June 30, 2020, the English department at my alma mater, Virginia Tech, held a virtual event titled Black Matters: A Teach-In On Language, Literature, Rhetoric, Writing and Verbal Art, opening with a reading and remarks from renowned poet and University Distinguished Professor Nikki Giovanni. This essay was one of the writings featured that evening, a complete list of which can be found here. —Jayne Ross*

*It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge.*  
—John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

*Back to the things themselves!*  
—Edmund Husserl

As a writer, philosopher, artist, and black American, I've devoted more than 40 years of my life to trying to understand and express intellectually and artistically different aspects of the black American narrative. At times during my life, especially when I was young, it was a story that engaged me emotionally and consumed my imagination. I've produced novels, short stories, essays, critical articles, drawings, and PBS dramas based on what we call the black American story. To a certain degree, teaching the literature of black America has been my bread and butter as a college professor. It is a very old narrative, one we all know quite well, and it is a tool we use, consciously or unconsciously, to interpret or to make sense of everything that has happened to black people in this country since the arrival of the first 20 Africans at the Jamestown colony in 1619. A good story always has a meaning (and sometimes layers of meaning); it also has an epistemological mission: namely, to show us something. It is an effort to make the best sense we can of the human experience, and I believe that we base our lives, actions, and judgments as often on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (even when they are less than empirically sound or verifiable) as we do on the severe rigor of reason. This unique black American narrative, which emphasizes the experience of victimization, is quietly in the background of every conversation we have about black people, even when it is



not fully articulated or expressed. It is our starting point, our agreed-upon premise, our most important presupposition for dialogues about black America. We teach it in our classes, and it is the foundation for both our scholarship and our popular entertainment as they relate to black Americans. Frequently it is the way we approach each other as individuals.

As a writer and a teacher of writing, I have to ask myself over and over again, just what *is* a story. How do we shape one? How many different forms can it take? What do stories tell us about our world? What details are necessary, and which ones are unimportant for telling it well? I constantly ask my creative writing students two questions: Does the story work, technically? And, if so, then, what does it say? I tell them that, like a work of philosophy (which is the sister discipline to storytelling among the interpretive arts), a narrative vision must have the qualities of coherence, consistency, and completeness. The plot of a modern story must be streamlined and efficient if it is to be easily understood. And, like Edgar Allan Poe in his 1842 essay "On the Aim and the Technique of the Short Story," I argue that a dramatic narrative should leave the listener with "a certain unique or single effect" that has emotional power. For the last 32 years, I've stressed to my students that a story must have a conflict that is clearly presented, one that we care about, a dilemma or disequilibrium for the protagonist that we, as readers, emotionally identify with. The black American story, as we tell it to ourselves, beautifully embodies all these narrative virtues.

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The story begins with violence in the 17th-century slave forts sprinkled along the west coast of Africa, where debtors, thieves, war prisoners, and those who would not convert to Islam were separated from their families, branded, and sold to Europeans who packed them into the pestilential ships that cargoed 20 million human beings (a conservative estimate) to the New World. Only 20 percent of those slaves survived the harrowing voyage at sea (and only 20 percent of the sailors, too), and if they were among the lucky few to set foot on American soil, new horrors and heartbreak awaited them.

As has been documented time and again, the life of a slave—our not-so-distant ancestors—was one of thinghood. Former languages, religions, and cultures were erased, replaced by the Peculiar Institution, in which the person of African descent was property, and systematically—legally, physically, and culturally—denied all sense of self-worth. A slave owns nothing, least of all himself. He desires and dreams at the risk of his life, which is best described as relative to (white) others, a reaction to their deeds, judgments, and definitions of the world. And these definitions, applied to blacks, were not kind. For 244 years (from 1619 to 1863), America was a slave state with a guilty conscience: two and a half centuries scarred by slave revolts, heroic black (and abolitionist) resistance to oppression, and, more than anything else, physical, spiritual, and

psychological suffering so staggering it silences the mind when we study the classic slave narratives of Equiano or Frederick Douglass. Legal bondage, the peculiar antebellum world, ended during the Civil War, but the Emancipation Proclamation did not bring liberation.

Legal freedom instead gradually brought segregation, America's version of apartheid. But "separate" clearly was not "equal." Black Americans were not simply segregated; they were methodically disenfranchised, stripped of their rights as citizens. From the 1890s through the 1950s, the law of black life was experienced as second-class citizenship. In the century after the Emancipation Proclamation, members of each generation of black Americans saw their lives disrupted by race riots, lynchings, and the destruction of towns and communities, such as the Greenwood district of black homes, businesses, and churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on May 31, 1921. The challenge for black America and the conflict for its story, then, was how to force a nation that excluded black people from its promise of "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" after the Revolutionary War, and failed to redress this grievance after Reconstruction, to honor these principles enshrined in its most sacred documents.

What I have described defines the general shape of the black American group narrative before the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the most important and transformative domestic event in American history after the War Between the States. The conflict of this story is first slavery, then segregation and legal disenfranchisement. The meaning of the story is group victimization, and every black person is the story's protagonist. This specific story was not about ending racism, which would be a wonderful thing; but ending racism entirely is probably as impossible for human beings as ending crime, or as quixotic as President Bush's "war on terror." No, the black American story was not as vague as that. It had a clearly defined conflict. And our ancestors fought *daily* for generations, with courage and dignity, to change this narrative. That was the *point* of their lives, their sacrifices, each and every day they were on this earth. We cannot praise enough the miracle they achieved, the lifelong efforts of our leaders and the anonymous men and women who kept the faith, demonstrated, went to jail, registered black people to vote in the Deep South, changed unjust laws, and died in order that Americans of all backgrounds might be free. I have always seen their fight for us as noble.

Among those I pay special tribute to is W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the NAACP, who deeply understood the logic and structure of this narrative as it unfolded from Reconstruction through the 1950s. It was a sign of his prescience that he also could see *beyond* this ancient story while still in the midst of it and fighting mightily to change it.

In 1926, Du Bois delivered an address titled, "Criteria of Negro Art" at the Chicago Conference for the NAACP. His lecture, which was later published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, which Du Bois himself edited, took place during the most entrenched period of segregation, when the opportunities for black people were so painfully circumscribed. "What do we want?" he asked his audience. "What is the thing we are after?"

Listen to Du Bois 82 years ago:

What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?...

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;—what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners, and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.

This provocative passage is, in part, the foundation for my questioning the truth and usefulness of the traditional black American narrative of victimization. When compared with black lives at the dawn of the 21st century, and 40 years after the watershed events of the Civil Rights Movement, many of Du Bois' remarks now sound ironic, for all the impossible things he spoke of in 1926 are realities today. We are "full-fledged Americans, with the rights of American citizens." We *do* have "plenty of good hard work" and live in a society where "men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life." Even

more ironic is the fact that some of our famous rappers and athletes who like “living large,” as they say, seem obsessed with what Du Bois derisively called “the tawdry and flamboyant” (they call it “bling”). Furthermore, some of us *douse* the freedom paid for with the blood of our ancestors to pursue conspicuous consumption in the form of “powerful motor cars,” “elaborate estates,” “striking clothes,” and “the richest dinners.”

To put this another way, we can say that 40 years after the epic battles for specific civil rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, after two monumental and historic legislative triumphs—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—and after three decades of affirmative action that led to the creation of a true black middle class (and not the false one E. Franklin Frazier described in his classic 1957 study, *Black Bourgeoisie*), a people oppressed for so long have finally become, as writer Reginald McKnight once put it, “as polymorphous as the dance of Shiva.” Black Americans have been CEOs at AOL Time Warner, American Express, and Merrill Lynch; we have served as secretary of state and White House national security adviser. Well over 10,000 black Americans have been elected to offices around the country, and at this moment Senator Barack Obama holds us in suspense with the possibility that he may be selected as the Democratic Party’s first biracial, black American candidate for president. We have been mayors, police chiefs, best-selling authors, MacArthur fellows, Nobel laureates, Ivy League professors, billionaires, scientists, stockbrokers, engineers, theoretical physicists, toy makers, inventors, astronauts, chess grandmasters, dot-com millionaires, actors, Hollywood film directors, and talk show hosts (the most prominent among them being Oprah Winfrey, who recently signed a deal to acquire her own network); we are Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists (as I am). And we are not culturally homogeneous. When I last looked, West Indians constituted 48 percent of the “black” population in Miami. In America’s major cities, 15 percent of the black American population is foreign born—Haitian, Jamaican, Senegalese, Nigerian, Cape Verdean, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali—a rich tapestry of brown-skinned people as culturally complex in their differences, backgrounds, and outlooks as those people lumped together under the all too convenient labels of “Asian” or “European.” Many of them are doing better—in school and business—than native-born black Americans. I think often of something said by Mary Andom, an Eritrean student at Western Washington University, and quoted in an article published in 2003 in *The Seattle Times*: “I don’t know about ‘chitlings’ or ‘grits.’ I don’t listen to soul music artists such as Marvin Gaye or Aretha Franklin....I grew up eating *injera* and listening to *Tigrinya* music....After school, I cook the traditional coffee, called *boun*, by hand for my mother. It is a tradition shared amongst mother and daughter.”

No matter which angle we use to view black people in America today, we find them to be a complex and multifaceted people who defy easy categorization. We challenge, culturally and politically, an old group narrative that fails at the beginning of this new century to capture even a fraction of our rich diversity and heterogeneity. My point is not that black Americans don’t have

social and cultural problems in 2008. We have several nagging problems, among them poor schools and far too many black men in prison and too few in college. But these are problems based more on the inequities of class, and they appear in other groups as well. It simply is no longer the case that the essence of black American life is racial victimization and disenfranchisement, a curse and a condemnation, a destiny based on color in which the meaning of one's life is thinghood, created even before one is born. This is not something we can assume. The specific conflict of this narrative reached its dramatic climax in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, and at the breathtaking March on Washington; its resolution arrived in 1965, the year before I graduated from high school, with the Voting Rights Act. Everything since then has been a coda for almost half a century. We call this long-extended and still ongoing anticlimax the post-civil-rights period. If the NAACP is struggling these days to recruit members of the younger generation and to redefine its mission in the 21st century—and it *is* struggling to do that—I think it is a good sign that the organization Du Bois led for so long is now a casualty of its own successes in the 1960s.

Yet, despite being an antique, the old black American narrative of pervasive victimization persists, denying the overwhelming evidence of change since the time of my parents and grandparents, refusing to die as doggedly as the Ptolemaic vision before Copernicus or the notion of phlogiston in the 19th century, or the deductive reasoning of the medieval schoolmen. It has become ahistorical. For a time it served us well and powerfully, yes, reminding each generation of black Americans of the historic obligations and duties and dangers they inherited and faced, but the problem with any story or idea or interpretation is that it can soon fail to fit the facts and becomes an ideology, even kitsch.

This point is expressed eloquently by Susan Griffin in her 1982 essay "The Way of all Ideology," where she says, "When a theory is transformed into an ideology, it begins to destroy the self and self-knowledge....No one can tell it anything new. It is annoyed by any detail which does not fit its worldview....Begun as a way to restore one's sense of reality, now it attempts to discipline real people, to remake natural beings after its own image."

In his superb book *In My Father's House*, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "There is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us." We can easily amend or revise this insight and apply it to the pre-21st-century black American narrative, which can do very little of the things we need for it to do today.

But this is an enduring human problem, isn't it? As phenomenologist Edmund Husserl revealed a hundred years ago, we almost always perceive and understand the new in terms of the old—or, more precisely, we experience events through our ideas, and frequently those are ideas that bring us comfort, ideas *received* from our parents, teachers, the schools we attend, and the enveloping culture, rather than original ones of our own. While a story or model may disclose a particular meaning for an experience, it also forces into the background or conceals other possible meanings. Think of this in light of novelist Ralph Ellison's brilliant notion of "invisibility," where—in his classic *Invisible Man*—the characters encountered by his nameless protagonist all impose their ideologies (explanations and ideas) on the chaos of experience, on the mysterious, untamed life that forever churns beneath widely accepted interpretations and explanations of "history" and "culture," which in our social world, for Ellison, are the *seen*. I know, personally, there is value in this Ellisonian idea because in the historical fictions I've been privileged to publish, like "Martha's Dilemma" in my second collection, *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, I discovered that the most intriguing, ambiguous, and revealing material for stories can often be found in the margins of the codified and often repeated narrative about slavery. In this case, I dramatized a delicious anecdote about what happened to Martha and her slaves right after the death of George.

What I am saying is that "official" stories and explanations and endlessly repeated interpretations of black American life over decades can short-circuit direct perception of the specific phenomenon before us. The idea of something—an intellectual construct—is often more appealing and perfect (in a Platonic sense) than the thing itself, which always remains mysterious and ambiguous and messy, by which I mean that its sense is open-ended, never fixed. It is always wise, I believe, to see all our propositions (and stories) as provisional, partial, incomplete, and subject to revision on the basis of new evidence, which we can be sure *is* just around the corner.

Nevertheless, we have heavily and often uncritically invested for most of our lives in the pre-21st-century black American narrative. In fact, some of us depend upon it for our livelihood, so it is *not* easy to let go, or to revise this story. Last October, Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan spoke for two and a half hours at the Atlanta Civic Center. He and his mentor, black separatist Elijah Muhammad, provided black Americans with what is probably the most extreme, Manichean, and mythological version of the black American narrative, one that was anti-integrationist. In this incomplete and misleading rendition of the black American story, the races are locked in eternal struggle. As a story, this narrative fails because it is conceived as melodrama, a form of storytelling in which the characters are flat, lack complexity, are either all good or all bad, and the plot involves malicious villains and violent actions. Back in the 1930s when Elijah Muhammad shaped his myth of Yacub, which explained the origins of the white race as "devils," he sacrificed the credibility of both character and plot for the most simplistic kind of dramatic narrative. Farrakhan covered many subjects that day last October, but what I found most

interesting is that he said successful black people like Oprah Winfrey, Senator Obama, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice give black Americans a false impression of progress. In other words, their highly visible successes do not change the old narrative of group victimization. Minister Farrakhan seems unwilling to accept their success as evidence that the lives of black Americans have improved. He seems unwilling to accept the inevitability of change. He was quoted in the press as saying, "A life of ease sometimes makes you forget the struggle." And despite the battles for affirmative action that created a new middle class, he added, "It's becoming a plantation again, but you can't fight that because you want to keep your little job."

I beg to differ with Farrakhan, with his misuse of language, his loose, imprecise diction, because we obviously do *not* live on plantations. And wasn't job opportunity one of the explicit goals of the black American narrative? Farrakhan's entire life has been an investment in a story that changed as he was chasing it. So we can understand his fierce, personal, and even tragic attachment to dusty, antebellum concepts when looking at the uncharted phenomena in the early 21st century that outstrip his concepts and language.

However, it is precisely because Farrakhan cannot progress beyond an oversimplified caricature of a story line for racial phenomena that the suddenly notorious Rev. Jeremiah Wright praises him, saying "His depth of analysis...when it comes to the racial ills of this nation is astounding and eye-opening," and, "He brings a perspective that is helpful and honest." Recently Wright called the Nation of Islam leader, "one of the most important voices in the 20th and 21st centur[ies]." I do not doubt that Wright and Farrakhan are men who have experienced the evil of racism and want to see the conditions of our people improve, or that both have records of community service. But it is the emotional attachment to a dated narrative, one leavened with the 1960s-era liberation theology of James Cone, that predictably leads Wright to proclaim that the U.S. government created the AIDS virus to destroy blacks (he invokes the old and proven, the ghastly Tuskegee syphilis experiment, in an effort to understand a new affliction devastating black people, and thus commits the logical fallacy known as misuse of analogy); that Jesus was "a black man"; and that the brains of blacks and whites operate differently. The former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago has made these paranoid and irresponsible statements publicly again and again without offering the slightest shred of evidence for these claims. "A bunch of rants that aren't grounded in truth" was how Barack Obama described his former minister's incendiary oratory, which is clearly antithetical not only to the postracial spirit of the Illinois senator's own speeches but also to his very racially and geographically mixed background. For in the realm of ideological thinking, especially from the pulpit, feeling and faith trump fact, and passion (as well as beliefs based on scripture) replaces fidelity to the empirical and painstaking logical demonstration.

Furthermore, such obsolete stories can also lead to serious mistakes in scholarship. I'm thinking now of Henry Louis Gates Jr., who in 1988 directed the publication of Oxford University Press's 40-volume Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. In his foreword, Gates praised the lost works of these black women writers as being the literary ancestors of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. Furthermore, he said it was the discovery of a particular lost black novel, called *Four Girls at Cottage City*, published in 1895 by Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, that inspired him to direct this Schomburg series in the first place so, he said, "I can read them myself."

Okay, so far so good.

But in 2005, Holly Jackson, then a doctoral student of English at Brandeis University, was given the academically pedestrian, grunt-work assignment of writing an entry about Kelley-Hawkins for the *African American National Biography*. At the time very little was known about Kelley-Hawkins. After checking birth records in the Massachusetts Vital Records, and other documents, Jackson realized that Kelley-Hawkins was not black—as five decades of scholars had assumed—but white. Yet all the evidence to suggest her whiteness was clearly present in the books she wrote. Something that had always puzzled scholars, Jackson said, was "the apparent whiteness of her characters, who are repeatedly described with blue eyes and skin as white as 'pure' or 'driven' snow." Even more fantastic are the theories that literary scholars came up with to explain why Kelley-Hawkins, supposedly a black woman, made no references to race or blackness in her two novels written in the 1890s. Jackson says, "Scholars have explained this away by arguing that the abundance of white signifiers is actually politically radical, with some even going so far as to argue that this extremely white world depicts a kind of post-racial utopia," a modern world where, according to critic Carla L. Peterson, "racial difference no longer existed."

Obviously, all these explanations are hogwash. Fifty years of scholarship based on these mistakes—articles, dissertations, courses in African American women's writing that include the work of Kelley-Hawkins—turns out to be an illusion created by the blinding intentionality of those who wrote about this white author based on a tangled knot of beliefs and prejudices, their concept of her completely distorting the facts.

Once Gates learned of this research by Jackson and also investigations by Katherine Flynn, a genealogist, he immediately went into the mode of damage control. He told a reporter that the work of Kelley-Hawkins would at least be removed from future editions of the Schomburg series, and he downplayed the significance of these discoveries by Jackson and Flynn. But Jackson, being a true scholar, would not allow this intellectual scandal to be swept under the rug. Of this "enormous historical misconception," she said, "there is so much at stake here, because of all the writing that has been done based on a false



assumption about race.” She asks us to wonder, “How have her [Kelley-Hawkins’s] overwhelmingly ‘white’ texts successfully passed as black for so long in the absence of any corroborating historical data? How does this discovery change our understanding of African American literary history?” Finally, she said, “We have stretched our understanding of how black women have written in America to incorporate texts that do not fit.”

I’ve gone into great detail about the Kelley-Hawkins story because it is a cautionary tale for scholars and an example of how our theories, our explanatory models, and the stories we tell ourselves can blind us to the obvious, leading us to see in matters of race only what we want to see based on our desires and political agendas. When we confront phenomena of any kind, we are wise if we assume the position phenomenologist Herbert Spiegelberg called epistemological humility, which is a healthy skepticism about what we think we already know. When constructing our narratives, it would also help if we remember a famous and often-quoted statement by C. S. Lewis on the characteristics of the human mind: “Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them—never become conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?”

How much, indeed.

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But if the old black American narrative has outlived its usefulness as a tool of interpretation, then what should we do? The answer, I think, is obvious. In the 21st century, we need new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality, a single phenomenological profile that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned. These will be narratives that do not claim to be absolute truth, but instead more humbly present themselves as a very tentative thesis that must be tested every day in the depths of our own experience and by all the reliable evidence we have available, as limited as that might be. For as Bertrand Russell told us, what we know is always “vanishingly small.” These will be narratives of individuals, not groups. And is this not exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of when he hoped a day would come when men and women were judged not by the color of their skin, but instead by their individual deeds and actions, and the content of their character?

I believe this was what King dreamed and, whether we like it or not, that moment is now.

