7 EDITION

RETHINKING THE COLOR LINE

READINGS IN RACE AND ETHNICITY

CHARLES A. GALLAGHER

Rethinking the Color Line

Seventh Edition

This book is dedicated to my daughters Talia and Sophia. Their willingness to speak frankly, forcefully, and often about how teens see race and what parents miss has provided me with exceptional insight into contemporary issues of racism, identity construction, and racial inequality.

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Readings in Race and Ethnicity

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PREFACE

When it comes to race and ethnic relations in the United States, we are two nations: the nation we imagine ourselves to be as depicted in the media and the nation we actually inhabit. The iPhone video of Minneapolis White police officer Derek Chauvin killing African American George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for 9 minutes and 31 seconds set in motion thousands of racial protests across the country. Black Lives Matter signs became ubiquitous in yards across the country. It seemed that a sizable portion of America became "woke" to the idea that systemic racism is a societal disease that has not been adequately addressed. Alongside these mass protests a second narrative was playing out in American's living rooms. Turn on the television and you enter a racial fantasyland where Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians gather together to shop, eat, work, and interact in spaces where race is meaningless. The Marvel franchise movie Black Panther, with an almost entirely Black cast, grossed 1.3 billion dollars. Michelle and Barack Obama routinely top the list of Gallup's poll of the most admired Americans. Car commercials as well as advertisements for antacids, snack foods, soda, and fast-food restaurants routinely show an America that is integrated, assimilated, and color-blind. In this carefully manufactured racial utopia, television commercials depict actors of different races interacting in race-neutral environments like Chili's or Applebee's. In Hollywood's version of U.S. race relations, one of your best friends is always from a different race. In this racial nirvana, handsome, middle-class men of varying races relax in upper-middle-class living rooms backslapping and bonding over football, Coors beer, and Domino's pizza. America's racial "presentation of self" in the media is overwhelmingly depicted as an environment that is integrated, multiracial, and for the most part color-blind. The media now present America as a kind of United Nations reunion party where everyone has equal social standing and equal opportunity and everyone is middle class.

These representations of a color-blind America seriously misrepresent the extent to which race continues to shape the life chances of people of color in the United States. Consider, for example, racial diversity in corporate America. Significant movement into the upper ranks of top management would indicate that racial barriers have fallen. Progress has been made in the upper ranks of corporate America, but the proportion of people of color now in these positions is minuscule. In 2020, 90% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies where White, and of them 87% were White men. People of color make up 38% of the U.S. population. All things being equal, we should expect to see about 38% of the top jobs going to people of color. What we see, however, is that only 5% not a 38% of senior managers at Fortune 1000 and Fortune 500 companies are members of people of color. What does this figure say about the notion that we are now a color-blind nation?

The United States Senate provides a rather good test of the fit between how groups are presented in television dramas like CSI, The Walking Dead, or in films at the multiplex and the political power these groups have achieved. Since there are 100 members in the U.S. Senate and people of color in the United States account for about 38% of the population, all things being equal, the Senate should have about 38 members from people of color. When we look at the members of the 117th Congress, however, we find only 11 racial minority members, which means that 89 senators are White. Since Whites constitute about

65% of the population, proportional representation suggests that Whites should hold 65 Senate seats not 89. There are currently no American Indians in the U.S. Senate. Although women comprise 52% of the adult population (which means we should see 52 women in the Senate), there are only 24 female U.S. Senators.

It is difficult to think about life in America without directly confronting issues of race and ethnicity. Reflect for a moment on how recent events and trends both dominate and alter American social and cultural life. There has been a rise in right-wing, neo-Nazi hate groups often lumped under the umbrella term *alt-right* whose platform includes anti-immigrant, anti-minority and anti-Semitic rhetoric. At the same time 85% of Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2004) support interracial marriage and 75% of this demographic group support gay marriage. Oprah Winfrey has a net worth of more than a billion dollars, while almost a quarter of the total Black population lives below the poverty line; Latinos now outnumber the Black population, yet each group is significantly underrepresented in Congress and in corporate America. The readings in *Rethinking the Color Line* will allow students to examine the contradictions of race and ethnicity and prepare them to live in an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse society.

Although the media have seized on a U.S. Census Bureau figure predicting that by the year 2060 Whites will be outnumbered by Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians, this rather simplistic demographic forecast misses the conflicts, contradictions, and cultural convergences that currently define race and ethnic relations in the United States. *Rethinking the Color Line* is designed to help make sense of how race and ethnicity influence aspects of social life in ways that are often made invisible by culture, politics, and economics. This theoretically informed, empirically grounded reader uses a social constructionist perspective to frame and define the concepts of race and ethnicity in the United States. The selections should stimulate conversation in the classroom and allow students to think through solutions to what often seem intractable problems. As a pedagogical strategy, this text raises a number of questions in the part introductions that guide students through the readings by providing an overview of how each reading is conceptually linked to the others. Each chapter starts with Questions to Consider, asking students to focus their attention on specific themes, issues, or questions raised in the reading. It is important to me that my students be exposed to the classic paradigms in the study of race and ethnic relations in the United States. However, just as important is my desire that students be exposed to and explore new theories and paradigms that are challenging, supplanting, and redefining the classic race and ethnicity canon, which itself changes over time. The biologically based, pseudoscientific assumptions that defined and guided race and ethnicity scholarship for much of this and the previous century have been debunked, discredited, and discarded. What has emerged in the last 30 years are competing narratives of what race and ethnic identity mean and the social pressures that shape those meanings. Postcolonial, postmodern, postethnic, class-based, and primordial perspectives all claim to elucidate how race and ethnicity have been, and continue to be, thoroughly rethought.

The readings in the first part of this text provide students with the theoretical framework and analytical tools they will use throughout the book. Students come to understand what is meant by race and ethnicity as social constructions. The news, situation comedies, social media, and racial topography of neighborhoods all become subjects for sociological scrutiny. *Rethinking the Color Line* allows students to learn how race and ethnicity influence life in ways that many students routinely take for granted. It has been my experience that a majority of students who read these articles internalize a version of the *sociological imagination* that forever changes how they understand race and ethnic relations. Raising consciousness about how each of us influences and in turn is influenced by race and ethnic relations is an explicit goal of this book.

Over the last decade I have had the luxury of testing a large number of varied readings on hundreds of students in dozens of race and ethnic relations classes at large public universities as well as

small, elite liberal arts colleges. The readings in this book represent the final outcome of classroom "hits and misses." I have used classroom experiences, the results of examinations, and how easily students were able to integrate the readings into research papers to gauge (1) the extent to which the reading contributed to students' understanding of a particular theory or concept, (2) if the reading was intellectually engaging, and (3) if it lent itself to active learning in the classroom. If a reading could pass these hurdles in at least three of my classes, then it made it into this book. Teaching at both public universities and private colleges also provided me with the opportunity to observe how students from different regions, class backgrounds, and racial and ethnic identities reacted to the assigned readings. The articles speak to, challenge, and find common ground among students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse backgrounds. *Rethinking the Color Line* is a response to my students' calls for a book that was user-friendly but did not sacrifice intellectual or theoretical rigor.

This book has been designed to be relevant for students on an individual level while also helping them understand that race and ethnic relations are embedded in the institutions that structure their lives. The readings require students to constantly negotiate the tensions between individual agency and the often-determined constraints of social structure. The common thread that links these readings is the ongoing debate about the relationship between agency and structure. It is this conceptual framework that allows students to think about race and ethnicity in fluid rather than static terms.

CHANGES IN THE SEVENTH EDITION

The seventh edition of *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity* contains 11 new articles that explore a number of topics that are timely and topical and explore how the idea of race is being refashioned by various social, political, and cultural forces. The reason for the large number of new articles in the seventh edition reflects the seismic shifts that have taken place in race relations in the United States. In a relatively short amount of time, we went from a national narrative about moving towards a post-race society to one where White nationalists, under the label of alt-right, have moved into the political mainstream. The murder by asphyxiation of African American George Floyd by White police officer Derek Cauvin set in motion a national dialogue and thousands of protests regarding police brutality and systemic racism in the United States. Attitudes many Americans have about immigrants and new immigration policy have always been linked and intertwined with issues of racial identity. This link was made all the more clear by ex-President Donald Trump's fanning the flames of xenophobia and his tacit approval of White nationalist groups that would eventually storm the U.S. Capital on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to overturn and invalidate the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States. These protests and insurrections were taking place during the largest and most deadly pandemic the nation has seen in a century. According to the CDC over 34 million Americans have contracted COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019 was shortened to COVID-19) and over 630,000 people (as of 2021) have died from this pandemic. What became abundantly clear from the start of this was that certain racial and ethnic groups were more likely to be exposed to, catch, and die from this disease. The seventh edition examines the social factors at play that made this disease more deadly for Blacks and Latinos in the United States.

Nikole Hannah-Jones (Reading 3) asks a provocative and timely question about the ideals of liberty and freedom that have shaped our national identity. Her question is simple yet quite damning. Who was free? Who had political, social, and economic liberties they could exercise? How and to what extent did race structure every facet of American society, from 1619, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in the Jamestown to discussion of police brutality today? Why does most American history taught in high schools skip over the profound role race played in forging our nation? Rashawn Ray (Reading 7)

tells us that Blacks make up 16% of the state of Illinois' population but accounted for 30% of those diagnosed with COVID-19. Why? What are the social factors that made this pandemic so much more deadly for people of color? Ray argues that race, place, poverty, and certain occupations where people of color are concentrated explain these health and mortality disparities. Canizales and Vallejo (Reading 14) make the case that the current hysteria around immigration issues served to "racialize" the Latino population in the United States, which in turn mobilized the political far-right. They argue that one defining feature of the Trump administration was the rise of White nationalist groups that have as their main focus an anti-immigrant agenda. Gallagher (Reading 15) asks us to consider how colorblindness as a way to frame race relations has a pernicious side effect. He argues that by promoting the ideal of colorblindness we ignore the ways in which race continues to shape the life course and opportunities of People of color. Doane (Reading 17) further complicates what we mean when we talk about living in a racially color-blind society. If colorblindness as an ideology was flawed because it failed to address ongoing institutional racism, *post-colorblindness* has allowed a political space to open up for aggrieved Whites who can articulate their victimization through White nationalist groups. Allegra Frank (Reading 33) forces us to confront the historical racism of cultural products that have been around so long most people don't think about the racial meaning behind the team they are rooting for (Washington Red Skins) or the pancakes they eat for breakfast (Aunt Jemima). The big question we are asked to grapple with is why in this day and age are these racist images still around?

In Reading 40 Caitlin Dickerson challenges the widespread belief that as a "nation of immigrants" we have always welcomed newcomers to our shores. She reminds us that the "first American immigration laws were written in order to keep the country White." The larger question this article addresses is if current immigration policies mirror "similar attacks from centuries past." Hinton, Henderson, and Reed (Reading 30) provide an overview of the overrepresentation of Black Americans in the nation's criminal justice system. In addition, they chronicle the very high-cost mass incarcerations plays for the families and communities when a significant number of Black men are incarcerated. Frost, Clear, and Monteiro (Reading 31) provide a bold plan for ending mass incarceration as it now exists. Their policy suggestions focus specially on nonviolent offences that would get millions of individuals out of the jails and prisons and save American taxpayers billions of dollars. Ray (Reading 32) asks us why mid-level and senior leadership in corporate America is disproportionately White and male. While it may appear that these hiring decisions are at the individual level, Ray argues that this pattern reflects institutions "built and managed to prioritize whiteness." In other words, in White-run institutions, Whites will always have an inside track in climbing the corporate ladder. McGee (Reading 48) presents a plan that addresses racially inequality in a way that takes into account all those who are socially and economically marginalized. In many ways what McGee is calling for in a New-New Deal where massive investments in infrastructure and social programs benefit everyone, but would have a disproportionate effect on those groups that have been historically marginalized.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

An old saying suggests that if you "scratch" at any creative endeavor you will uncover personal biography. The genealogy of *Rethinking the Color Line* reflects this adage. As a boy I grew up in Overbrook Park, an all-White, working- and lower-middle-class neighborhood in Philadelphia. My world was a mix of first- and second-generation immigrants from Poland, Russia, Ireland, and Italy. Race was something I experienced when we left our completely self-contained, row house community and went "downtown." Race was typically presented to me in terms of geography: Blacks lived in North and West Philly, Asians clustered in Chinatown, and Latinos resided off of N. Broad Street. The "race as geography" analogy was cemented as I got older and was taken on class trips to museums of art and natural history. The dioramas in the museums had each of the "major races of mankind" frozen in a variety of daily, primitive routines: Some were engaged in tepee making, others were spearing fish or seals, farmers tended rice paddies, peasants worked the land. Typically, there was a map that explained that Black people were from this continent, brown people from there, and so on, until all the racial groups had been repatriated back to their "original" homeland.

I saw parallels to the representations of race I experienced as a boy and the textbooks available to me as a student teacher more than 20 years ago. Race and ethnicity readers and textbooks typically presented each group's history as discrete events that took place in a social vacuum rather than weaving a narrative that reflects the constant interaction within and between racial and ethnic groups. Race relations play out in housing, the economy, criminal justice, schooling, love, culture, and politics. This perspective shows the social relations that link all racial and ethnic groups together rather than an approach in which week four is dedicated to African Americans and week seven to American Indians. What I have attempted to do in this book is take the study of race out of the museum and into the spaces we live in and share across the color line.

A note on spelling: The readings in the Seventh Edition were originally published elsewhere, and used the spelling conventions for racial and ethnic groups chosen by those authors and publishers. In this book we have standardized the spelling and use upper case for all racial and ethnic groups, a convention preferred by many contemporary race scholars.

RETHINKING THE COLOR LINE

Understanding How Boundaries Shift

The title *Rethinking the Color Line* means that we will explore the contemporary meanings of race and ethnicity and examine how social, political, economic, and cultural forces shape those meanings.

This may seem like a straightforward task. It is not. Race and ethnicity are slippery concepts because they are always in a state of flux. Imagine for a moment the shape of the United States as analogous to a definition of race or ethnicity. It may appear that an outline or sketch of the U.S. border, like a definition of race or ethnicity, can be neatly described or mapped out; that is, just as we can imagine the borders of the United States, we can, with reasonable certainty, identify someone as Black, White, Asian, or American Indian. We place people in these racial categories because we have been trained to focus on a combination of traits like skin color, hair texture, and eye shape. After we have placed individuals in racial categories, we typically use cultural markers, such as their ethnic background or ancestry, to further sort them. For instance, if a White person walks into a room, we see that individual's race. What happens when he or she starts talking and we pick up on an Irish brogue or a New York City accent or a southern dialect? What happens when the brown woman in front of us in the supermarket talks to the cashier and we recognize her accent as Jamaican or English? We tend to sort first by color and then by cultural background.

Since the founding of the United States more than two hundred years ago, the lines that have defined the nation's borders have been redrawn dozens of times. Just as there was no United States of America prior to 1776, the idea of race as it is currently understood did not exist until the Europeans colonized the Americas, Africa, and parts of Asia. The mental map we conjure up of the United States today is only about fifty years old. The map was last redrawn in 1959 when Hawaii was admitted into the Union as the fiftieth state. Previously, the map had been redrawn after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and again after the Missouri Compromise of 1820, as well as after the admittance of every new state to the Union. And we will have to redraw our mental map yet again if the

Commonwealth of Puerto Rico votes to enter the Union as the fifty-first state.

The problem with definitions of race and ethnicity, as with the shape of the United States, is that the borders or contours that give form and meaning to these concepts change over time. A person defined as White in the year 2010 might have been defined as Black or Irish or Italian at various times in American history. For example, around the turn of the twentieth century, Irish and Italian immigrants were not viewed as White when they first arrived in the United States. At that time, members of those groups did not easily fit into the existing racial hierarchy; they were in a racial limbo—not White, not Black, not Asian. Their ethnic background—that is, the language, culture, and religious beliefs that distinguished these Irish and Italian immigrants from the dominant group—was used in various ways to define them as a racial group. Within a generation or two, these so-called Irish and Italian racial groups assimilated and were absorbed into the category we now know as White. The journey from being considered not White or racially ambiguous to White was rather swift. It may seem odd, and may even shock our racial sensibilities, to think that is your Greek, Italian or Irish grandparents as possibly being defined as non-White Italians or non-White Irish at different times in American history. But is a non-White Italian or non-White Irish any less curious an idea than a Black-Irish American or an Asian-Italian American? If one's ethnic identity is subsumed or taken over by a racial identity, the question we need to ask as sociologists is, why?

Just as the shape of the United States has changed over time, so have the definitions of race and ethnicity. Do you think your view of race and ethnicity is different from that of your parents or grandparents? How you understand race and ethnicity reflects a definition specific to this moment in time, one that, in all likelihood, will look quite different in three or four decades. Rethinking the Color Line will provide you with a theoretical framework for understanding how and why definitions of race and ethnicity change over time, what sociological forces bring about these changes, and what these categories might look like in the future.

What these examples suggest, and what many of the readings in Rethinking the Color Line consciously explore, is how race and ethnicity are socially constructed. When we say that something is "socially constructed," we mean that the characteristics deemed relevant to that definition are based on societal and cultural values. Race and ethnicity are social constructions because their meanings are derived by focusing on arbitrary characteristics that a given society deems important. Race and ethnicity are social products based on cultural values, not scientific facts.

Think for a moment about gravity. If you push this book off your desk, do you expect it to fall to the ground? Obviously, you do. If you lived in Brazil or South Africa or Puerto Rico, would you expect the same thing to happen to your book? Of course you would, because you know that gravity is a universal constant. However, someone defined as Black in the United States could be defined as White in Brazil, Trigueno (intermediate) in Puerto Rico, and "coloured" in South Africa. Gravity is the same everywhere, but racial classifications vary across place and time because definitions of race and ethnicity are based on the physical traits a society chooses to value or devalue. Because each society's values are based on a different set of historical experiences, cultural circumstances, and political definitions, ideas about race and ethnicity can vary quite a bit, not only between countries but within them as well. For example, historically, it was not uncommon for someone to have been socially and legally defined as Black in the southern part of the United States but to "pass" for White after migrating north. The beliefs and definitions that undergird the idea of race are very unstable and, as we will see in the readings, quite susceptible to political manipulation.

Racial and ethnic identity is culturally meaningful only because we define and understand it in that way. In other words, race exists because we say race exists. And because the characteristics that make up the idea of race and ethnicity reflect a social process, it is possible to imagine these

concepts in a different way. Instead of looking at skin color, facial features, or hair texture as a way to sort individuals, we could create a racial category based on the size of people's feet. People with shoe sizes between 4 and 7 would be labeled the Petite Race, those with sizes 8—11 would be designated the Bigger Race, and the 12—15 shoe size crowd would be categorized as the Monster Foot Race. Those with feet smaller or larger than the existing categories would be the "Other" Race. Likewise, we could use eye color, height, glove size, or nose length to create racial categories. Because the physical markers we use to define race are arbitrary and have no basis in genetics, biology, anthropology, or sociology, using shoe size as the criterion to fashion a new definition of race would be just as valid as the system currently in place. Similarly, we could redefine ethnicity by changing the focus from language, culture, religion, or nationality as a method of sorting people and instead create categories of people based on the amount of meat they eat or the way they style their hair.

What complicates our ability to accurately and easily map these definitions of race and ethnicity is that the definitions are constantly changing. Are the almost 60 million Latinos in the United States (2018) an ethnic group because they are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as such, or are Latinos a racial group? If the current census categories of White, Black, Asian, and American Indian do not adequately reflect what Latinos experience or how Latinos are viewed by non-Latinos, should a "brown" category be added to the census? Would a newly created "brown" category link Puerto Ricans in New York City with Cuban Americans in Miami and Mexican Americans in San Diego? Why or why not? How should we define the race of a child whose father is Mexican-African American and whose mother is Japanese-Irish American? What is this child's ethnicity? For that matter, how and in what ways are race and ethnicity related?

In 1903, sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois wrote "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." It appears that a key problem of the twenty-first century, while different in degree and context from the one Du Bois chronicled, will still be the color line. A topic or issue may not initially seem to be linked to race or ethnicity, but on closer sociological scrutiny, patterns often emerge that make it clear that race and ethnicity matter quite a bit. How do you see race and ethnicity being connected to who gets a good education or adequate health care, who is likely to be poor, where toxic waste sites are built, who gets hired or promoted, or who is more likely to be sentenced to death and executed? Race and ethnicity are intertwined in every aspect of our lives.

Rethinking the Color Line will provide you with the tools necessary to navigate the complicated and often contradictory meanings of race and ethnicity in the United States. The readings will take you on a sociological journey and explore how you, your classmates, your family, and your friends fit into the racial and ethnic mosaic of the United States. If you focus carefully on the readings, the "Questions to Consider" that introduce them, and the "Seeing the Big Picture" discussion at the end of most chapters, your perspective on race and ethnic relations in the United States will be changed forever.

SORTING BY COLOR

Why We Attach Meaning to Race

WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO "BE" BLACK or American Indian or White or Asian? Did you learn to "do" your race by watching sitcoms on television or by watching your peers in the schoolyard? Was it your parents or an older sibling or cousin who taught you how to act both your age and your race? In what social situations do you think about your racial identity? Is it only when you interact with an individual from a different racial background? Do you think about your race, about other racial groups, or about race relations when you watch football games or *CSI* or *Game of Thrones*? Do you think about your race while you are in your neighborhood or only when you drive through an area with a different racial population? Were you ever in a social setting in which you were the only person of your color? How did that make you feel?

How did you learn to "be" Korean or Jamaican or German? In what situations do you think about your ancestry? Is it during the holidays or when you spend time with your family? Or has your family been in the United States for so many generations that the family tree linking you to the homeland is unimportant, nonexistent, or untraceable? Does that mean you have a racial identity but not an ethnic identity? Or does "American" best mirror your social identity?

The readings in Part I answer these questions by exposing you to the social theories used to define and understand the dynamics of race and ethnicity. The first five readings, in Race and Ethnicity: Sociohistoric Constructions, examine how the natural variation in human skin color has been used as a way to sort people into groups, create a racial hierarchy, and justify exploitation based on skin color. Marvin Harris explains why gradations of color, from Black to White, are "beautiful" sociocultural responses to the environment. Howard Zinn charts the evolution of the idea of race in early U.S. history and how the idea of racial categories was synonymous with who would be free and who would be enslaved. Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain the emergence of racial categories as a "sociohistoric" process they call racial formation; that is, the way we define ourselves racially reflects a political and social process that was hundreds of years in the making. John Iceland explains why and how racial discrimination seems to reinvent itself anew every generation. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva suggests that race, like class or gender, takes on a "life of its own," creating hierarchical social relations that are exploitive and

coercive. As you will see throughout the text, many of the articles in this reader draw on one or more of these theories to explain a particular aspect of racial inequality and race and ethnic relations.

The next two readings, in Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Socioeconomic Trends, draw on theories outlined in the first section while emphasizing socioeconomic disparities between racial and ethnic groups. David Williams and Selina Mohammed examine racial and ethnic inequalities in health and how sociology's unique focus on social structure provides insight into the factors that lead to racial differences in disease. Not only are racial minorities worse off compared to Whites on almost every health measure, but it is likely this gap will continue to grow as the United States limits access to public health care for the poor. Using national data on wealth, Thomas Shapiro and colleagues examine the racial dynamics of how transformative assets—the financial assistance one gets from families—shape life chances.

In Race as Chameleon: How the Idea of Race Changes over Time and Place, F. James Davis uses the "one-drop rule" to map the ever-changing definition of race by focusing on the various status and identity positions that emerged as groups mixed across the color line. What is important to note is that the definitions forced on mixed-race groups reflected power relations and the desire to fashion various social buffers that maintained White supremacy.

Readings by David Wilkins, and Dina Okamoto and Cristina Mora, demonstrate how, why, and in what situations racial and ethnic identities are used to organize politically. It is often the case that those in power thrust a racial identity upon a group even though there may be enormous cultural diversity within that group. Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans "became" Asian through the racialization process.

Throughout this book I will be arguing that the idea of race is not static. Saher Selod and David Embrick examine the social construction of race regarding Muslim Americans, and Kathleen Fitzgerald examines how the growth in the rise in DNA ancestry testing is not blurring the color line but making it more rigid. As these readings demonstrate, the creation of racial categories is as much a historical process as it is a political one.

The next three readings, in Color-Blind America: Fact, Fantasy, or Our Future?, focus on how different social conditions can exacerbate racial and ethnic relations and what might be done at both the macro and micro levels to ameliorate racial inequality. Professor Charles A. Gallagher notes that current trends in popular culture have blurred the color line by linking the consumption of products across racial groups to racial harmony. If groups from various races now share and consume the same products (rap/hip-hop, McDonald's, reality TV), Gallagher asks, has racial equality been achieved? Margaret Hunter explains how the use of new types of skin-bleaching creams is viewed by many as a way to enhance one's social standing, and Herbert Gans argues that a "beige-ing" of America is taking place that will incorporate some parts of the Latino and Asian populations but not Blacks. The color line will shift, Gans argues, but not necessarily in a way that is inclusive. Each of these readings points to the various social, economic, and cultural barriers to racial equality and the rather lofty goal of becoming a truly color-blind nation.

RACE AND ETHNICITY
Sociohistoric Constructions

1

HOW OUR SKINS GOT THEIR COLOR

Marvin Harris

The late **Marvin Harris** spent a portion of his life teaching in the anthropology department at Columbia University, where he served as department chair. He published sixteen books, including *Cannibals and Kings; Culture, People, and Nature;* and *Our Kind.*

MOST HUMAN BEINGS ARE NEITHER VERY fair nor very dark, but brown. The extremely fair skin of northern Europeans and their descendants, and the very Black skins of central Africans and their descendants, are probably special adaptations. Brown-skinned ancestors may have been shared by modern-day Blacks and Whites as recently as 10,000 years ago. Human skin owes its color to the presence of particles known as **melanin.** The primary function of melanin is to protect the upper levels of the skin from being damaged by the sun's ultraviolet rays. This radiation poses a critical problem for our kind because we lack the dense coat of hair that acts as a sunscreen for most mammals. . . . Hairlessness exposes us to two kinds of radiation hazards: ordinary sunburn, with its blisters, rashes, and risk of infection; and skin cancers, including malignant melanoma, one of the deadliest diseases known. Melanin is the body's first line of defense against these afflictions. The more melanin particles, the darker the skin, and the lower the risk of sunburn and all forms of skin cancer. This explains why the highest rates for skin cancer are found in sun-drenched lands such as Australia, where light-skinned people of European descent spend a good part of their lives outdoors wearing scanty attire. Very dark-skinned people such as heavily pigmented Africans of Zaire seldom get skin cancer,

melanin The pigment that gives the skin its color. Melanin protects the skin from the ultraviolet rays associated with various skin cancers. Populations living near the equator have darker skin to protect them from the harsh effects of the sun.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Cultural anthropologist Marvin Harris links the variations in skin color one can observe in traveling around the world to the human body's ability to adapt physically to changes in exposure to solar radiation. How do you explain his assertion that "White was beautiful because White was healthy" and "Black was beautiful because Black was healthy"?

but when they do, they get it on depigmented parts of their bodies—palms and lips.

If exposure to solar radiation had nothing but harmful effects, natural selection would have favored inky Black as the color for all human populations. But the sun's rays do not present an unmitigated threat. As it falls on the skin, sunshine converts a fatty substance in the epidermis into vitamin D. The blood carries vitamin D from the skin to the intestines (technically making it a hormone rather than a vitamin), where it plays a vital role in the absorption of calcium. In turn, calcium is vital for strong bones. Without it, people fall victim to the crippling diseases rickets and osteomalacia. In women, calcium deficiencies can result in a deformed birth canal, which makes childbirth lethal for both mother and fetus.

Vitamin D can be obtained from a few foods, primarily the oils and livers of marine fish. But inland populations must rely on the sun's rays and their own skins for the supply of this crucial substance. The particular color of a human population's skin, therefore, represents in large degree a trade-off between the hazards of too much versus too little solar radiation: acute sunburn and skin cancer on the one hand, and rickets and osteomalacia on the other. It is this trade-off that largely accounts for the preponderance of brown people in the world and for the general tendency for skin color to be darkest among **equatorial populations** and lightest among populations dwelling at higher latitudes.

At middle latitudes, the skin follows a strategy of changing colors with the seasons. Around the Mediterranean basin, for example, exposure to the summer sun brings high risk of cancer but low risk for rickets; the body produces more melanin and people grow darker (i.e., they get suntans). Winter reduces the risk of sunburn and cancer; the body produces less melanin, and the tan wears off.

The correlation between skin color and latitude is not perfect because other factors—such as the availability of foods containing vitamin D and calcium, regional cloud cover during the winter, amount of clothing worn, and cultural preferences—may work for or against the predicted relationship. Arctic-dwelling Eskimo, for example, are not as light-skinned as expected, but their habitat and economy afford them a diet that is exceptionally rich in both vitamin D and calcium.

Northern Europeans, obliged to wear heavy garments for protection against the long, cold, cloudy winters, were always at risk for rickets and osteomalacia from too little vitamin D and calcium. This risk increased sometime after 6000 B.C., when pioneer cattle herders who did not exploit marine resources began to appear in northern Europe. The risk would have been especially great for the brown-skinned Mediterranean peoples who migrated northward along with the crops and farm animals. Samples of Caucasian skin (infant penile foreskin obtained at the time of circumcision) exposed to sunlight on cloudless days in Boston (42°N) from November through February produced no vitamin D. In Edmonton (52°N) this period extended from October to March. But further south (34°N) sunlight was effective in producing vitamin D in the middle of the winter. Almost all of Europe lies north of 42°N. Fair-skinned, nontanning individuals who could utilize the weakest and briefest doses of sunlight to synthesize vitamin D were strongly

equatorial populations Populations living near the equator.

favored by **natural selection.** During the frigid winters, only a small circle of a child's face could be left to peek out at the sun through the heavy clothing, thereby favoring the survival of individuals with translucent patches of pink on their cheeks characteristic of many northern Europeans. (People who could get calcium by drinking cow's milk would also be favored by natural selection.)

If light-skinned individuals on the average had only 2 percent more children survive per generation, the changeover in their skin color could have begun 5,000 years ago and reached present levels well before the beginning of the Christian era. But natural selection need not have acted alone. **Cultural selection** may also have played a role. It seems likely that whenever people consciously or unconsciously had to decide which infants to nourish and which to neglect, the advantage would go to those with lighter skin, experience having shown that such individuals tended to grow up to be taller, stronger, and healthier than their darker siblings. White was beautiful because White was healthy.

To account for the evolution of Black skin in equatorial latitudes, one has merely to reverse the combined effects of natural and cultural selection. With the sun directly overhead most of the year, and clothing a hindrance to work and survival, vitamin D was never in short supply (and calcium was easily obtained from vegetables). Rickets and osteomalacia were rare. Skin cancer was the main problem, and what nature started, culture amplified. Darker infants were favored by parents because experience showed that they grew up to be freer of disfiguring and lethal malignancies. Black was beautiful because Black was healthy.

natural selection In his 1859 book *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin describes the process by which nature "selects" the best-adapted varieties of animals for survival.

cultural selection The idea that, in ways that mirror natural selection, society "selects" those cultural traits that will enhance the survival of a particular civilization.

2

DRAWING THE COLOR LINE

Howard Zinn

The late **Howard Zinn**, professor, activist, and author, dedicated his life to the notion that the knowledge of history is important to people's everyday lives and can be a powerful force for social change.

A BLACK AMERICAN WRITER, J. SAUNDERS Redding, describes the arrival of a ship in North America in the year 1619:

> Sails furled, flag drooping at her rounded stern, she rode the tide in from the sea. She was a strange ship, indeed, by all accounts, a frightening ship, a ship of mystery. Whether she was trader, privateer, or man-of-war no one knows. Through her bulwarks Black-mouthed cannon yawned. The flag she flew was Dutch; her crew a motley. Her port of call, an English settlement, Jamestown, in the colony of Virginia. She came, she traded, and shortly afterwards was gone. Probably no ship in modern history has carried a more portentous freight. Her cargo? Twenty slaves.

There is not a country in world history in which racism has been more important, for so long a time, as the United States. And the problem of "the color line," as W.E.B. Du Bois put it, is still with us. So it is more than a purely historical question to ask: How does it start?—and an even more urgent question: How might it end? Or, to put it differently: Is it possible for Whites and Blacks to live together without hatred?

If history can help answer these questions, then the beginnings of slavery in North America—a continent where we can trace the coming of the first Whites and the first Blacks—might supply at least a few clues.

Some historians think those first Blacks in Virginia were considered as servants, like the White **indentured servants** brought from Europe. But the strong probability is that, even if they were listed as "servants" (a more familiar category to the English), they were viewed as being different from White servants, were treated differently, and in fact were slaves. In any case, slavery developed quickly into a regular institution, into the normal labor relation of Blacks to Whites in the New World. With it developed that special racial feeling—whether hatred, or contempt, or pity, or patronization—that accompanied the inferior position of Blacks in America for the next 350 years—that combination of inferior status and derogatory thought we call racism.

Everything in the experience of the first White settlers acted as a pressure for the enslavement of Blacks.

The Virginians of 1619 were desperate for labor, to grow enough food to stay alive. Among them were survivors from the winter of 1609–1610, the "starving time," when, crazed for want of food, they roamed the woods for nuts and berries, dug up graves to eat the corpses, and died in batches until five hundred colonists were reduced to sixty.

In the *Journals* of the House of Burgesses of Virginia is a document of 1619 which tells of the first twelve years of the Jamestown colony. The first settlement had a hundred persons, who had one small ladle of barley per meal. When more people arrived, there was even less food. Many of the people lived

indentured servant Historically, a laborer under contract to an employer for some period of time, usually seven years, in exchange for travel, food, and accommodations. Servants often became indebted to their employer and were often subject to violence.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In this reading, Howard Zinn chronicles the beginning of slavery in North America. How did law, custom, and culture reconcile the emergence of chattel slavery with Christian precepts, which reject the idea that one human can own or forcibly control another human being? What arguments were used to justify slavery? List which groups profited from the slave trade.

in cavelike holes dug into the ground, and in the winter of 1609–1610, they were

> driven thru insufferable hunger to eat those things which nature most abhorred, the flesh and excrements of man as well of our own nation as of an Indian, digged by some out of his grave after he had lain buried three days and wholly devoured him; others, envying the better state of body of any whom hunger has not yet so much wasted as their own, lay wait and threatened to kill and eat them; one among them slew his wife as she slept in his bosom, cut her in pieces, salted her and fed upon her till he had clean devoured all parts saving her head.

A petition by thirty colonists to the House of Burgesses, complaining against the twelve-year governorship of Sir Thomas Smith, said:

> In those 12 years of Sir Thomas Smith, his government, we aver that the colony for the most part remained in great want and misery under most severe and cruel laws. . . . The allowance in those times for a man was only eight ounces of meale and half a pint of peas for a day . . . mouldy, rotten, full of cobwebs and maggots, loathsome to man and not fit for beasts, which forced many to flee for relief to the savage enemy, who being taken again were put to sundry deaths as by hanging, shooting and breaking upon the wheel . . . of whom one for stealing two or three pints of oatmeal had a bodkin thrust through his tongue and was tied with a chain to a tree until he starved.

The Virginians needed labor, to grow corn for subsistence, to grow tobacco for export. They had just figured out how to grow tobacco, and in 1617 they sent off the first cargo to England. Finding that, like all pleasurable drugs tainted with moral disapproval, it brought a high price, the planters, despite their high religious talk, were not going to ask questions about something so profitable.

They couldn't force Indians to work for them, as Columbus had done. They were outnumbered, and while, with superior firearms, they could massacre Indians, they would face massacre in return. They could not capture them and keep them enslaved; the Indians were tough, resourceful, defiant, and at home in these woods, as the transplanted Englishmen were not.

White servants had not yet been brought over in sufficient quantity. Besides, they did not come out of slavery, and did not have to do more than contract their labor for a few years to get their passage and a start in the New World. As for the free White settlers, many of them were skilled craftsmen, or even men of leisure back in England, who were so little inclined to work the land that John Smith, in those early years, had to declare a kind of martial law, organize them into work gangs, and force them into the fields for survival.

There may have been a kind of frustrated rage at their own ineptitude, at the Indian superiority at taking care of themselves, that made the Virginians especially ready to become the masters of slaves. Edmund Morgan imagines their mood as he writes in his book *American Slavery, American Freedom*:

> If you were a colonist, you knew that your technology was superior to the Indians'. You knew that you were civilized, and they were savages. . . . But your superior technology had proved insufficient to extract anything. The Indians, keeping to themselves, laughed at your superior methods and lived from the land more abundantly and with less labor than you did. . . . And when your own people started deserting in order to live with them, it was too much. . . . So you killed the Indians, tortured them, burned their villages, burned their cornfields. It proved your superiority, in spite of your failures. And you gave similar treatment to any of your own people who succumbed to their savage ways of life. But you still did not grow much corn.

Black slaves were the answer. And it was natural to consider imported Blacks as slaves, even if the institution of slavery would not be regularized and legalized for several decades because, by 1619, a million Blacks had already been brought from Africa to South America and the Caribbean, to the Portuguese and Spanish colonies, to work as slaves. Fifty years before Columbus, the Portuguese took ten African Blacks to Lisbon—this was the start of a regular trade in slaves. African Blacks had been stamped as slave labor for a hundred years. So it would have been strange if those twenty Blacks, forcibly transported to Jamestown, and sold as objects to settlers anxious for a steadfast source of labor, were considered as anything but slaves.

Their helplessness made enslavement easier. The Indians were on their own land. The Whites were in their own European culture. The Blacks had been torn from their land and culture, forced into a situation where the heritage of language, dress, custom, family relations, was bit by bit obliterated except for the remnants that Blacks could hold on to by sheer, extraordinary persistence.

Was their culture inferior—and so subject to easy destruction? Inferior in military capability, yes—vulnerable to Whites with guns and ships. But in no other way—except that cultures that are different are often taken as inferior, especially when such a judgment is practical and profitable. Even militarily, while the Westerners could secure forts on the African coast, they were unable to subdue the interior and had to come to terms with its chiefs.

The African civilization was as advanced in its own way as that of Europe. In certain ways, it was more admirable; but it also included cruelties, hierarchical privilege, and the readiness to sacrifice human lives for religion or profit. It was a civilization of 100 million people, using iron implements and skilled in farming. It had large urban centers and remarkable achievements in weaving, ceramics, sculpture.

European travelers in the sixteenth century were impressed with the African kingdoms of Timbuktu and Mali, already stable and organized at a time when European states were just beginning to develop into the modern nation. In 1563, Ramusio, secretary to the rulers in Venice, wrote to the Italian merchants: "Let them go and do business with the King of Timbuktu and Mali and there is no doubt that they will be well-received there with their ships and their goods and treated well, and granted the favours that they ask."

A Dutch report, around 1602, on the West African kingdom of Benin, said: "The Towne seemeth to be very great, when you enter it. You go into a great broad street, not paved, which seemeth to be seven or eight times broader than the Warmoes Street in Amsterdam. . . . The Houses in this Towne stand in good order, one close and even with the other, as the Houses in Holland stand."

The inhabitants of the Guinea Coast were described by one traveler around 1680 as "very civil and good-natured people, easy to be dealt with, condescending to what Europeans require of them in a civil way, and very ready to return double the presents we make them."

Africa had a kind of **feudalism,** like Europe based on agriculture, and with hierarchies of lords and vassals. But African feudalism did not come, as did Europe's, out of the slave societies of Greece and Rome, which had destroyed ancient tribal life. In Africa, tribal life was still powerful, and some of its better features—a communal spirit, more kindness in law and punishment—still existed. And because the lords did not have the weapons that European lords had, they could not command obedience as easily.

In his book *The African Slave Trade,* Basil Davidson contrasts law in the Congo in the early sixteenth century with law in Portugal and England. In those European countries, where the idea of private property was becoming powerful, theft was punished brutally. In England, even as late as 1740, a child could be hanged for stealing a rag of cotton. But in the Congo, communal life persisted, the idea of private property was a strange

feudalism A medieval European political system in which land was leased through the king to barons and knights who engaged serfs to work the land in return for military protection. The system was based on military, social, and economic obligations and enforced through law, custom, and religion.

one, and thefts were punished with fines or various degrees of servitude. A Congolese leader, told of the Portuguese legal codes, asked a Portuguese once, teasingly: "What is the penalty in Portugal for anyone who puts his feet on the ground?"

Slavery existed in the African states, and it was sometimes used by Europeans to justify their own slave trade. But, as Davidson points out, the "slaves" of Africa were more like the serfs of Europe—in other words, like most of the population of Europe. It was a harsh servitude, but they had rights which slaves brought to America did not have, and they were "altogether different from the human cattle of the slave ships and the American plantations." In the Ashanti Kingdom of West Africa, one observer noted that "a slave might marry; own property; himself own a slave; swear an oath; be a competent witness and ultimately become heir to his master. . . . An Ashanti slave, nine cases out of ten, possibly became an adopted member of the family, and in time his descendants so merged and intermarried with the owner's kinsmen that only a few would know their origin."

One slave trader, John Newton (who later became an antislavery leader), wrote about the people of what is now Sierra Leone:

> The state of slavery, among these wild barbarous people, as we esteem them, is much milder than in our colonies. For as, on the one hand, they have no land in high cultivation, like our West India plantations, and therefore no call for that excessive, unintermitted labour, which exhausts our slaves: so, on the other hand, no man is permitted to draw blood even from a slave.

African slavery is hardly to be praised. But it was far different from plantation or mining slavery in the Americas, which was lifelong, morally crippling, destructive of family ties, and without hope of any future. African slavery lacked two elements that made American slavery the most cruel form of slavery in history: the frenzy for limitless profit that comes from capitalistic agriculture; the reduction of the slave to less than human status by the use of racial hatred, with that relentless clarity based on color, where White was master, Black was slave.

In fact, it was because they came from a settled culture, of tribal customs and family ties, of communal life and traditional ritual, that African Blacks found themselves especially helpless when removed from this. They were captured in the interior (frequently by Blacks caught up in the slave trade themselves), sold on the coast, then shoved into pens with Blacks of other tribes, often speaking different languages.

The conditions of capture and sale were crushing affirmations to the Black African of his helplessness in the face of superior force. The marches to the coast, sometimes for 1,000 miles, with people shackled around the neck, under whip and gun, were death marches, in which two of every five Blacks died. On the coast, they were kept in cages until they were picked and sold. One John Barbot, at the end of the seventeenth century, described these cages on the Gold Coast:

> As the slaves come down to Fida from the inland country, they are put into a booth or prison . . . near the beach, and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out onto a large plain, where the ship's surgeons examine every part of everyone of them, to the smallest member, men and women being stark naked. . . . Such as are allowed good and sound are set on one side . . . marked on the breast with a red-hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English, or Dutch companies. . . . The branded slaves after this are returned to their former booths where they await shipment, sometimes 10–15 days.

Then they were packed aboard the slave ships, in spaces not much bigger than coffins, chained together in the dark, wet slime of the ship's bottom, choking in the stench of their own excrement. Documents of the time describe the conditions:

> The height, sometimes, between decks, was only eighteen inches; so that the unfortunate

> human beings could not turn around, or even on their sides, the elevation being less than the breadth of their shoulders; and here they are usually chained to the decks by the neck and legs. In such a place the sense of misery and suffocation is so great, that the Negroes . . . are driven to frenzy.

On one occasion, hearing a great noise from below decks where the Blacks were chained together, the sailors opened the hatches and found the slaves in different stages of suffocation, many dead, some having killed others in desperate attempts to breathe. Slaves often jumped overboard to drown rather than continue their suffering. To one observer a slave-deck was "so covered with blood and mucus that it resembled a slaughter house."

Under these conditions, perhaps one of every three Blacks transported overseas died, but the huge profits (often double the investment on one trip) made it worthwhile for the slave trader, and so the Blacks were packed into the holds like fish.

First the Dutch, then the English, dominated the slave trade. (By 1795 Liverpool had more than a hundred ships carrying slaves and accounted for half of all the European slave trade.) Some Americans in New England entered the business, and in 1637 the first American slave ship, the *Desire,* sailed from Marblehead. Its holds were partitioned into racks, 2 feet by 6 feet, with leg irons and bars.

By 1800, 10 to 15 million Blacks had been transported as slaves to the Americas, representing perhaps one-third of those originally seized in Africa. It is roughly estimated that Africa lost 50 million human beings to death and slavery in those centuries we call the beginnings of modern Western civilization, at the hands of slave traders and plantation owners in Western Europe and America, the countries deemed the most advanced in the world.

In the year 1610, a Catholic priest in the Americas named Father Sandoval wrote back to a church functionary in Europe to ask if the capture, transport, and enslavement of African Blacks was legal by church doctrine. A letter dated March 12, 1610, from Brother Luis Brandaon to Father Sandoval gives the answer:

> Your Reverence writes me that you would like to know whether the Negroes who are sent to your parts have been legally captured. To this I reply that I think your Reverence should have no scruples on this point, because this is a matter which has been questioned by the Board of Conscience in Lisbon, and all its members are learned and conscientious men. Nor did the bishops who were in Sao Thome, Cape Verde, and here in Loando—all learned and virtuous men—find fault with it. We have been here ourselves for forty years and there have been among us very learned Fathers . . . never did they consider the trade as illicit. Therefore we and the Fathers of Brazil buy these slaves for our service without any scruple.

With all of this—the desperation of the Jamestown settlers for labor, the impossibility of using Indians and the difficulty of using Whites, the availability of Blacks offered in greater and greater numbers by profit-seeking dealers in human flesh, and with such Blacks possible to control because they had just gone through an ordeal which if it did not kill them must have left them in a state of psychic and physical helplessness—is it any wonder that such Blacks were ripe for enslavement?

And under these conditions, even if some Blacks might have been considered servants, would Blacks be treated the same as White servants?

The evidence, from the court records of colonial Virginia, shows that in 1630 a White man named Hugh Davis was ordered "to be soundly whipt . . . for abusing himself . . . by defiling his body in lying with a Negro." Ten years later, six servants and "a negro of Mr. Reynolds" started to run away. While the Whites received lighter sentences, "Emanuel the Negro [was] to receive thirty stripes and to be burnt in the cheek with the letter R, and to work in shackle one year or more as his master shall see cause."

Although slavery was not yet regularized or legalized in those first years, the lists of servants show Blacks listed separately. A law passed in 1639 decreed that "all persons except Negroes" were to

get arms and ammunition—probably to fight off Indians. When in 1640 three servants tried to run away, the two Whites were punished with a lengthening of their service. But, as the court put it, "the third being a negro named John Punch shall serve his master or his assigns for the time of his natural life." Also in 1640, we have the case of a Negro woman servant who begot a child by Robert Sweat, a White man. The court ruled "that the said negro woman shall be whipt at the whipping post and the said Sweat shall tomorrow in the forenoon do public penance for his offense at James citychurch."

This unequal treatment, this developing combination of contempt and oppression, feeling and action, which we call "**racism**"—was this the result of a "natural" antipathy of White against Black? The question is important, not just as a matter of historical accuracy, but because any emphasis on "natural" racism lightens the responsibility of the social system. If racism can't be shown to be natural, then it is the result of certain conditions, and we are impelled to eliminate those conditions.

We have no way of testing the behavior of Whites and Blacks toward one another under favorable conditions—with no history of subordination, no money incentive for exploitation and enslavement, no desperation for survival requiring forced labor. All the conditions for Black and White in seventeenth-century America were the opposite of that, all powerfully directed toward antagonism and mistreatment. Under such conditions even the slightest display of humanity between the races might be considered evidence of a basic human drive toward community.

Sometimes it is noted that, even before 1600, when the slave trade had just begun, before Africans were stamped by it—literally and symbolically—the color Black was distasteful. In England, before 1600, it meant, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul. Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister. Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horribly wicked. Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc." And Elizabethan poetry often used the color White in connection with beauty.

It may be that, in the absence of any other overriding factor, darkness and blackness, associated with night and unknown, would take on those meanings. But the presence of another human being is a powerful fact, and the conditions of that presence are crucial in determining whether an initial prejudice, against a mere color, divorced from humankind, is turned into brutality and hatred.

In spite of such preconceptions about blackness, in spite of special subordination of Blacks in the Americas in the seventeenth century, there is evidence that where Whites and Blacks found themselves with common problems, common work, common enemy in their master, they behaved toward one another as equals. As one scholar of slavery, Kenneth Stampp, has put it, Negro and White servants of the seventeenth century were "remarkably unconcerned about the visible physical differences."

Black and White worked together, fraternized together. The very fact that laws had to be passed after a while to forbid such relations indicates the strength of that tendency. In 1661 a law was passed in Virginia that "in case any English servant shall run away in company of any Negroes" he would have to give special service for extra years to the master of the runaway Negro. In 1691, Virginia provided for the banishment of any "White man or woman being free who shall intermarry with a negro, mulatoo, or Indian man or woman bond or free."

There is an enormous difference between a feeling of racial strangeness, perhaps fear, and the mass enslavement of millions of Black people that took place in the Americas. The transition from one to the other cannot be explained easily by "natural" tendencies. It is not hard to understand as the outcome of historical conditions.

Slavery grew as the plantation system grew. The reason is easily traceable to something other than

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racism The assigning of attitudes, behaviors, and abilities to individuals or groups based on skin color; includes the institutional arrangements that privilege one group over another and the ideological apparatus that perpetuates and makes those arrangements possible.

natural racial repugnance: the number of arriving Whites, whether free or indentured servants (under four to seven years' contract), was not enough to meet the need of the plantations. By 1700, in Virginia, there were 6,000 slaves, one-twelfth of the population. By 1763, there were 170,000 slaves, about half the population.

Blacks were easier to enslave than Whites or Indians. But they were still not easy to enslave. From the beginning, the imported Black men and women resisted their enslavement. Ultimately their resistance was controlled, and slavery was established for 3 million Blacks in the South. Still, under the most difficult conditions, under pain of mutilation and death, throughout their two hundred years of enslavement in North America, these Afro-Americans continued to rebel. Only occasionally was there an organized insurrection. More often they showed their refusal to submit by running away. Even more often, they engaged in sabotage, slowdowns, and subtle forms of resistance which asserted, if only to themselves and their brothers and sisters, their dignity as human beings.

The refusal began in Africa. One slave trader reported that Negroes were "so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap'd out of the canoes, boat and ship into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned."

When the very first Black slaves were brought into Hispaniola in 1503, the Spanish governor of Hispaniola complained to the Spanish court that fugitive Negro slaves were teaching disobedience to the Indians. In the 1520s and 1530s, there were slave revolts in Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Santa Marta, and what is now Panama. Shortly after those rebellions, the Spanish established a special police for chasing fugitive slaves.

A Virginia statute of 1669 referred to "the obstinacy of many of them," and in 1680 the Assembly took note of slave meetings "under the pretense of feasts and brawls" which they considered of "dangerous consequence." In 1687, in the colony's Northern Neck, a plot was discovered in which slaves planned to kill all the Whites in the area and escape during a mass funeral.

Gerald Mullin, who studied slave resistance in eighteenth-century Virginia in his work *Flight and Rebellion,* reports:

> The available sources on slavery in 18th-century Virginia—plantation and county records, the newspaper advertisements for runaways—describe rebellious slaves and few others. The slaves described were lazy and thieving; they feigned illnesses, destroyed crops, stores, tools, and sometimes attacked or killed overseers. They operated blackmarkets in stolen goods. Runaways were defined as various types, they were truants (who usually returned voluntarily), "outlaws" . . . and slaves who were actually fugitives: men who visited relatives, went to town to pass as free, or tried to escape slavery completely, either by boarding ships and leaving the colony, or banding together in cooperative efforts to establish villages or hide-outs in the frontier. The commitment of another type of rebellious slave was total; these men became killers, arsonists, and insurrectionists.

Slaves recently from Africa, still holding on to the heritage of their communal society, would run away in groups and try to establish villages of runaways out in the wilderness, on the frontier. Slaves born in America, on the other hand, were more likely to run off alone, and, with the skills they had learned on the plantation, try to pass as free men.

In the colonial papers of England, a 1729 report from the lieutenant governor of Virginia to the British Board of Trade tells how

> a number of Negroes, about fifteen . . . formed a design to withdraw from their Master and to fix themselves in the fastnesses of the neighboring Mountains. They had found means to get into their possession some Arms and Ammunition, and they took along with them some Provisions, their Cloths, bedding and working Tools. . . . Tho'

> this attempt has happily been defeated, it ought nevertheless to awaken us into some effectual measures.

Slavery was immensely profitable to some masters. James Madison told a British visitor shortly after the American Revolution that he could make $257 on every Negro in a year, and spend only $12 or $13 on his keep. Another viewpoint was of slaveowner Landon Carter, writing about fifty years earlier, complaining that his slaves so neglected their work and were so uncooperative ("either cannot or will not work") that he began to wonder if keeping them was worthwhile.

Some historians have painted a picture—based on the infrequency of organized rebellions and the ability of the South to maintain slavery for two hundred years—of a slave population made submissive by their condition; with their African heritage destroyed, they were, as Stanley Elkins said, made into "Sambos," "a society of helpless dependents," or as another historian, Ulrich Phillips, said, "by racial quality submissive." But looking at the totality of slave behavior, at the resistance of everyday life, from quiet noncooperation in work to running away, the picture becomes different.

In 1710, warning the Virginia Assembly, Governor Alexander Spotswood said:

> freedom wears a cap which can without a tongue, call together all those who long to shake off the fetters of slavery and as such an Insurrection would surely be attended with most dreadful consequences so I think we cannot be too early in providing against it, both by putting our selves in a better posture of defence and by making a law to prevent the consultations of those Negroes.

Indeed, considering the harshness of punishment for running away, that so many Blacks did run away must be a sign of a powerful rebelliousness. All through the 1700s, the Virginia slave code read:

> Whereas many times slaves run away and lie hid and lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places, killing hogs, and commiting other injuries to the inhabitants . . . if the slave does not immediately return, anyone what soever may kill or destroy such slaves by such ways and means as he . . . shall think fit. . . . If the slave is apprehended . . . it shall . . . be lawful for the county court, to order such punishment for the said slave, either by dismembering, or in any other way . . . as they in their discretion shall think fit, for the reclaiming any such incorrigible slave, and terrifying others from the like practices.

Mullin found newspaper advertisements between 1736 and 1801 for 1,138 men runaways, and 141 women runaways. One consistent reason for running away was to find members of one's family—showing that despite the attempts of the slave system to destroy family ties by not allowing marriages and by separating families, slaves would face death and mutilation to get together.

In Maryland, where slaves were about one-third of the population in 1750, slavery had been written into law since the 1660s, and statutes for controlling rebellious slaves were passed. There were cases where slave women killed their masters, sometimes by poisoning them, sometimes by burning tobacco houses and homes. Punishments ranged from whipping and branding to execution, but the trouble continued. In 1742, seven slaves were put to death for murdering their master.

Fear of slave revolt seems to have been a permanent fact of plantation life. William Byrd, a wealthy Virginia slave owner, wrote in 1736:

> We have already at least 10,000 men of these descendants of Ham, fit to bear arms, and these numbers increase every day, as well by birth as by importation. And in case there should arise a man of desperate fortune, he might with more advantage than Cataline kindle a servile war . . . and tinge our rivers wide as they are with blood.

It was an intricate and powerful system of control that the slaveowners developed to maintain

their labor supply and their way of life, a system both subtle and crude, involving every device that social orders employ for keeping power and wealth where it is. As Kenneth Stampp puts it:

> A wise master did not take seriously the belief that Negroes were natural-born slaves. He knew better. He knew that Negroes freshly imported from Africa had to be broken into bondage; that each succeeding generation had to be carefully trained. This was no easy task, for the bondsman rarely submitted willingly. Moreover, he rarely submitted completely. In most cases there was no end to the need for control—at least not until old age reduced the slave to a condition of helplessness.

The system was psychological and physical at the same time. The slaves were taught discipline, were impressed again and again with the idea of their own inferiority to "know their place," to see blackness as a sign of subordination, to be awed by the power of the master, to merge their interest with the master's, destroying their own individual needs. To accomplish this there was the discipline of hard labor, the breakup of the slave family, the lulling effects of religion (which sometimes led to "great mischief," as one slaveholder reported), the creation of disunity among slaves by separating them into field slaves and more privileged house slaves, and finally the power of law and the immediate power of the overseer to invoke whipping, burning, mutilation, and death. Dismemberment was provided for in the Virginia Code of 1705. Maryland passed a law in 1723 providing for cutting off the ears of Blacks who struck Whites, and that for certain serious crimes, slaves should be hanged and the body quartered and exposed.

Still, rebellions took place—not many, but enough to create constant fear among White planters. The first large-scale revolt in the North American colonies took place in New York in 1712. In New York, slaves were 10 percent of the population, the highest proportion in the northern states, where economic conditions usually did not require large numbers of field slaves. About twenty-five Blacks and two Indians set fire to a building, then killed nine Whites who came on the scene. They were captured by soldiers, put on trial, and twenty-one were executed. The governor's report to England said: "Some were burnt, others were hanged, one broke on the wheel, and one hung alive in chains in the town." One had been burned over a slow fire for eight to ten hours—all this to serve notice to other slaves.

A letter to London from South Carolina in 1720 reports:

> I am now to acquaint you that very lately we have had a very wicked and barbarous plot of the designe of the negroes rising with a designe to destroy all the White people in the country and then to take Charles Town in full body but it pleased God it was discovered and many of them taken prisoners and some burnt and some hang'd and some banish'd.

Around this time there were a number of fires in Boston and New Haven, suspected to be the work of Negro slaves. As a result, one Negro was executed in Boston, and the Boston Council ruled that any slaves who on their own gathered in groups of two or more were to be punished by whipping.

At Stono, South Carolina, in 1739, about twenty slaves rebelled, killed two warehouse guards, stole guns and gunpowder, and headed south, killing people in their way and burning buildings. They were joined by others, until there were perhaps eighty slaves in all and, according to one account of the time, "they called out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, and two Drums beating." The militia found and attacked them. In the ensuing battle perhaps fifty slaves and twenty-five Whites were killed before the uprising was crushed.

Herbert Aptheker, who did detailed research on slave resistance in North America for his book *American Negro Slave Revolts,* found about 250 instances where a minimum of ten slaves joined in a revolt or conspiracy.

From time to time, Whites were involved in the slave resistance. As early as 1663, indentured White servants and Black slaves in Gloucester County, Virginia, formed a conspiracy to rebel and gain their freedom. The plot was betrayed, and ended with executions. Mullin reports that the newspaper notices of runaways in Virginia often warned "ill-disposed" Whites about harboring fugitives. Sometimes slaves and free men ran off together, or cooperated in crimes together. Sometimes, Black male slaves ran off and joined White women. From time to time, White ship captains and watermen dealt with runaways, perhaps making the slave a part of the crew.

In New York in 1741, there were ten thousand Whites in the city and two thousand Black slaves. It had been a hard winter and the poor—slave and free—had suffered greatly. When mysterious fires broke out, Blacks and Whites were accused of conspiring together. Mass hysteria developed against the accused. After a trial full of lurid accusations by informers, and forced confessions, two White men and two White women were executed, eighteen slaves were hanged, and thirteen slaves were burned alive.

Only one fear was greater than the fear of Black rebellion in the new American colonies. That was the fear that discontented Whites would join Black slaves to overthrow the existing order. In the early years of slavery, especially, before racism as a way of thinking was firmly ingrained, while White indentured servants were often treated as badly as Black slaves, there was a possibility of cooperation. As Edmund Morgan sees it:

> There are hints that the two despised groups initially saw each other as sharing the same predicament. It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together. It was not uncommon for them to make love together. In Bacon's Rebellion, one of the last groups to surrender was a mixed band of eighty negroes and twenty English servants.

As Morgan says, masters, "initially at least, perceived slaves in much the same way they had always perceived servants . . . shiftless, irresponsible, unfaithful, ungrateful, dishonest." And "if freemen with disappointed hopes should make common cause with slaves of desperate hope, the results might be worse than anything Bacon had done."

And so, measures were taken. About the same time that slave codes, involving discipline and punishment, were passed by the Virginia Assembly,

> Virginia's ruling class, having proclaimed that all White men were superior to Black, went on to offer their social (but White) inferiors a number of benefits previously denied them. In 1705 a law was passed requiring masters to provide White servants whose indenture time was up with ten bushels of corn, thirty shillings, and a gun, while women servants were to get 15 bushels of corn and forty shillings. Also, the newly freed servants were to get 50 acres of land.

Morgan concludes: "Once the small planter felt less exploited by taxation and began to prosper a little, he became less turbulent, less dangerous, more respectable. He could begin to see his big neighbor not as an extortionist but as a powerful protector of their common interests."

We see now a complex web of historical threads to ensnare Blacks for slavery in America: the desperation of starving settlers, the special helplessness of the displaced African, the powerful incentive of profit for slave trader and planter, the temptation of superior status for poor Whites, the elaborate controls against escape and rebellion, the legal and social punishment of Black and White collaboration.

The point is that the elements of this web are historical, not "natural." This does not mean that they are easily disentangled, dismantled. It means only that there is a possibility for something else, under historical conditions not yet realized. And one of these conditions would be the elimination of that class exploitation which has made poor Whites desperate for small gifts of status, and has prevented that unity of Black and White necessary for joint rebellion and reconstruction.

Around 1700, the Virginia House of Burgesses declared:

> The Christian Servants in this country for the most part consists of the Worser Sort of the people of Europe. And since . . . such numbers of Irish and other Nations have been brought in of which a great many have been soldiers in the late warrs that according to our present Circumstances we can hardly governe them and if they were fitted with Armes and had the Opertunity of meeting together by Musters we have just reason to fears they may rise upon us.

It was a kind of **class consciousness,** a class fear. There were things happening in early Virginia, and in the other colonies, to warrant it.

class consciousness Karl Marx argued that the working classes were not conscious of the ways in which the ruling class oppressed them. Class consciousness refers to the ability of the laboring class (the proletariat) to challenge the reasons given to them by economic elites as to why they were impoverished.

3

OUR DEMOCRACY'S FOUNDING IDEALS WERE FALSE WHEN THEY WERE WRITTEN. BLACK AMERICANS HAVE FOUGHT TO MAKE THEM TRUE

Nikole Hannah-Jones

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

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

Grandmama, as we called her, found a house in a segregated Black neighborhood on the city's east side and then found the work that was considered Black women's work no matter where Black women lived—cleaning White people's houses. Dad, too, struggled to find promise in this land. In 1962, at age 17, he signed up for the Army. Like many young men, he joined in hopes of escaping poverty. But he went into the military for another reason as well, a reason common to Black men: Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American.

The 1619 Project is an ongoing initiative from *The New York Times Magazine* that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative. Read all the stories.

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

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Professor Hannah-Jones argues that "[t]he United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie." What most students learn in elementary and high school is the *ideal* of what America stands for rather than the *lie*. It is rare that high school students are given detailed accounts of the role race and institutional racism has played in forging our nation. What are the ideals you were taught that America stands for when you were in high school? After reading this article and Howard Zinn's, what do you think about Professor Hannah-Jones' assertion that our nation was founded on an ideal and a lie?

So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this Black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused Black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn't understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.

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

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

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Virginia, one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage.

Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66% of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for White people North and South—at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island *slave trader*. Profits from Black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring, and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance, and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world.

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

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4,1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the White men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of Black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the

freedom and justice promised to all, Black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of Black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—Black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous, and patriotic efforts of Black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different—it might not be a democracy at all.

The very first person to die for this country in the American Revolution was a Black man who himself was not free. Crispus Attucks was a fugitive from slavery, yet he gave his life for a new nation in which his own people would not enjoy the liberties laid out in the Declaration for another century. In every war this nation has waged since that first one, Black Americans have fought—today we are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military.

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

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty. As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master's beck and call. His name was Robert Hemings, and he was the half brother of Jefferson's wife, born to Martha Jefferson's father and a woman he owned. It was common for White enslavers to keep their half-Black children in slavery. Jefferson had chosen Hemings, from among about 130 enslaved people that worked on the forced-labor camp he called Monticello, to accompany him to Philadelphia and ensure his every comfort as he drafted the text making the case for a new democratic republic based on the individual rights of men.

At the time, one fifth of the population within the 13 colonies struggled under a brutal system of slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before. Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of Black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status on to their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift, and disposed of violently. Jefferson's fellow White colonists knew that Black people were human beings, but they created a network of laws and customs, astounding for both their precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such. As the abolitionist William Goodell wrote in 1853, "If any thing founded on falsehood might be called a science, we might add the system of American slavery to the list of the strict sciences."

Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold, and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised "Negroes for Sale." Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, or cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing, and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, to produce the highest profits for the White people who owned them.

Yet in making the argument against Britain's tyranny, one of the colonists' favorite rhetorical devices was to claim that *they* were the slaves—to Britain. For this duplicity, they faced burning criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English writer and Tory opposed to American independence, quipped, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. The wealth and prominence that allowed Jefferson, at just 33, and the other founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world came from the dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery. In other words, we may never have revolted against Britain if some of the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required to ensure that slavery would continue. It is not incidental that 10 of this nation's first 12 presidents were enslavers, and some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.

Jefferson and the other founders were keenly aware of this hypocrisy. And so in Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence, he tried to argue that it wasn't the colonists' fault. Instead, he blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and called the trafficking in human beings a crime. Yet neither Jefferson nor most of the founders intended to abolish slavery, and in the end, they struck the passage.

There is no mention of slavery in the final Declaration of Independence. Similarly, 11 years later, when it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word. In the texts in which they were making the case for freedom to the world, they did not want to explicitly enshrine their hypocrisy, so they sought to hide it. The Constitution contains 84 clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, as the historian David Waldstreicher has written, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the "property" of those who enslaved Black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved Africans for a term of 20 years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had run away seeking refuge. Like many others, the writer and abolitionist Samuel Bryan called out the deceit, saying of the Constitution,

> The words are dark and ambiguous; such as no plain man of common sense would have used, [and] are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe, that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations.

With independence, the founding fathers could no longer blame slavery on Britain. The sin became this nation's own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it. The shameful paradox of continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a hardening of the racial caste system. This ideology, reinforced not just by laws but by racist science and literature, maintained that Black people were subhuman, a belief that allowed White Americans to live with their betrayal. By the early 1800s, according to the legal historians Leland B. Ware, Robert J. Cottrol, and Raymond T. Diamond, White Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, "had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of Black inferiority." While liberty was the inalienable right of the people who would be considered White, enslavement and subjugation became the

natural station of people who had any discernible drop of "Black" blood.

The Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, ruling that Black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race. This made them inferior to White people and, therefore, incompatible with American democracy. Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "no rights which a White man was bound to respect." This belief, that Black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If Black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the "we" in the "We the People" was not a lie.

On Aug. 14,1862, a mere 5 years after the nation's highest courts declared that no Black person could be an American citizen, President Abraham Lincoln called a group of five esteemed free Black men to the White House for a meeting. It was one of the few times that Black people had ever been invited to the White House as guests. The Civil War had been raging for more than a year, and Black abolitionists, who had been increasingly pressuring Lincoln to end slavery, must have felt a sense of great anticipation and pride.

The war was not going well for Lincoln. Britain was contemplating whether to intervene on the Confederacy's behalf, and Lincoln, unable to draw enough new White volunteers for the war, was forced to reconsider his opposition to allowing Black Americans to fight for their own liberation. The president was weighing a proclamation that threatened to emancipate all enslaved people in the states that had seceded from the Union if the states did not end the rebellion. The proclamation would also allow the formerly enslaved to join the Union army and fight against their former "masters." But Lincoln worried about what the consequences of this radical step would be. Like many White Americans, he opposed slavery as a cruel system at odds with American ideals, but he also opposed Black equality. He believed that free Black people were a "troublesome presence" incompatible with a democracy intended only for White people. "Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals?" he had said 4 years earlier. "My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of White people will not."

That August day, as the men arrived at the White House, they were greeted by the towering Lincoln and a man named James Mitchell, who 8 days before had been given the title of a newly created position called the commissioner of emigration. This was to be his first assignment. After exchanging a few niceties, Lincoln got right to it. He informed his guests that he had gotten Congress to appropriate funds to ship Black people, once freed, to another country.

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

You can imagine the heavy silence in that room, as the weight of what the president said momentarily stole the breath of these five Black men. It was 243 years to the month since the first of their ancestors had arrived on these shores, before Lincoln's family, long before most of the White people insisting that this was not their country. The Union had not entered the war to end slavery but to keep the South from splitting off, yet Black men had signed up to fight. Enslaved people were fleeing their forced-labor camps, which we like to call plantations, trying to join the effort, serving as spies, sabotaging confederates, taking up arms for his cause as well as their own. And now Lincoln was blaming them for the war. "Although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other . . . without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence," the president told them. "It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated."

As Lincoln closed the remarks, Edward Thomas, the delegation's chairman, informed the president, perhaps curtly, that they would consult on his proposition. "Take your full time," Lincoln said. "No hurry at all." Nearly 3 years after that White House meeting, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. By summer, the Civil War was over, and four million Black Americans were suddenly free. Contrary to Lincoln's view, most were not inclined to leave, agreeing with the sentiment of a resolution against Black colonization put forward at a convention of Black leaders in New York some decades before: "This is our home, and this our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers. . . . Here we were born, and here we will die."

That the formerly enslaved did not take up Lincoln's offer to abandon these lands is an astounding testament to their belief in this nation's founding ideals. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries." Black Americans had long called for universal equality and believed, as the abolitionist Martin Delany said, "that God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth." Liberated by war, then, they did not seek vengeance on their oppressors as Lincoln and so many other White Americans feared. They did the opposite. During this nation's brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process. With federal troops tempering widespread White violence, Black Southerners started branches of the Equal Rights League—one of the nation's first human rights organizations—to fight discrimination and organize voters; they headed in droves to the polls, where they placed other formerly enslaved people into seats that their enslavers had once held. The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with Black Americans elected to local, state, and federal offices. Some 16 Black men served in Congress—including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first Black man elected to the Senate. (Demonstrating just how brief this period would be, Revels, along with Blanche Bruce, would go from being the first Black man elected to the last for nearly a hundred years, until Edward Brooke of Massachusetts took office in 1967.) More than 600 Black men served in Southern state legislatures and hundreds more in local positions.

These Black officials joined with White Republicans, some of whom came down from the North, to write the most egalitarian state constitutions the South had ever seen. They helped pass more equitable tax legislation and laws that prohibited discrimination in public transportation, accommodation, and housing. Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of that most democratic of American institutions: the public school. Public education effectively did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The White elite sent their children to private schools, while poor White children went without an education. But newly freed Black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education. So Black legislators successfully pushed for a universal, state-funded system of schools—not just for their own children but for White children, too. Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, Black and White, were now required to attend schools like their Northern counterparts. Just 5 years into Reconstruction, every Southern state had enshrined the right to a public education for all children into its constitution. In some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, small numbers of Black and White children, briefly, attended schools together.

Led by Black activists and a Republican Party pushed left by the blatant recalcitrance of White Southerners, the years directly after slavery saw the greatest expansion of human and civil rights this nation would ever see. In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, Black Americans, exerting their new political power, pushed White legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act, the nation's first such law and one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation Congress has ever passed. It codified Black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited

housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property, make and enforce contracts, and seek redress from courts. In 1868, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States. Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here to a European, Asian, African, Latin American, or Middle Eastern immigrant gains automatic citizenship. The 14th Amendment also, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed equal protection under the law. Ever since, nearly all other marginalized groups have used the 14th Amendment in their fights for equality (including the recent successful arguments before the Supreme Court on behalf of same-sex marriage). Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship—the right to vote—to all men regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." For this fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War we could create the multiracial democracy that Black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not.

But it would not last.

Anti-Black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that Black people are the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce White resistance throughout the South, including unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud, and even, in some extreme cases, the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments. Faced with this unrest, the federal government decided that Black people were the cause of the problem and that for unity's sake, it would leave the White South to its own devices. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes, to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, White Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic White suppression of Black life was so severe that this period between the 1880s and the 1920s and '30s became known as the Great Nadir, or the second slavery. Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century.

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

Georgia pines flew past the windows of the Greyhound bus carrying Isaac Woodard home to Winnsboro, SC. After serving 4 years in the Army in World War II, where Woodard had earned a battle star, he was given an honorable discharge earlier that day at Camp Gordon and was headed home to meet his wife. When the bus stopped at a small drugstore an hour outside Atlanta, Woodard got into a brief argument with the White driver after asking if he could use the restroom. About half an hour later, the driver stopped again and told Woodard to get off the bus. Crisp in his uniform, Woodard stepped from the stairs and saw the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, one of the officers struck him in his head with a billy club, beating him so badly that he fell unconscious. The blows to Woodard's head were so severe that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 4 1/2 hours after his military discharge. At 26, Woodard would never see again.

There was nothing unusual about Woodard's horrific maiming. It was part of a wave of systemic violence deployed against Black Americans after Reconstruction, in both the North and the South. As the egalitarian spirit of post-Civil War America evaporated under the desire for national reunification, Black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation's failings. White America dealt with this inconvenience by constructing a savagely enforced system of racial apartheid that excluded Black people almost entirely from mainstream American life—a system so grotesque that Nazi Germany would later take inspiration from it for its own racist policies.

Despite the guarantees of equality in the 14th Amendment, the Supreme Court's landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 declared that the racial segregation of Black Americans was constitutional. With the blessing of the nation's highest court and no federal will to vindicate Black rights, starting in the late 1800s, Southern states passed a series of laws and codes meant to make slavery's racial caste system permanent by denying Black people political power, social equality, and basic dignity. They passed literacy tests to keep Black people from voting and created all-White primaries for elections. Black people were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court against a White person. South Carolina prohibited White and Black textile workers from using the same doors. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths. Memphis had separate parking spaces for Black and White drivers. Baltimore passed an ordinance outlawing Black people from moving onto a block more than half White and White people from moving onto a block more than half Black. Georgia made it illegal for Black and White people to be buried next to one another in the same cemetery. Alabama barred Black people from using public libraries that their own tax dollars were paying for. Black people were expected to jump off the sidewalk to let White people pass and call all White people by an honorific, though they received none no matter how old they were. In the North, White politicians implemented policies that segregated Black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-Black schools, operated Whites-only public pools and held White and "colored" days at the country fair, and White businesses regularly denied Black people service, placing "Whites Only" signs in their windows. States like California joined Southern states in barring Black people from marrying White people, while local school boards in Illinois and New Jersey mandated segregated schools for Black and White children.

This caste system was maintained through wanton racial terrorism. And Black veterans like Woodard, especially those with the audacity to wear their uniform, had since the Civil War been the target of a particular violence. This intensified during the two world wars because White people understood that once Black men had gone abroad and experienced life outside the suffocating racial oppression of America, they were unlikely to quietly return to their subjugation at home. As Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi said on the Senate floor during World War I, Black servicemen returning to the South would "inevitably lead to disaster." Giving a Black man "military airs" and sending him to defend the flag would bring him "to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected."

Many White Americans saw Black men in the uniforms of America's armed services not as patriotic but as exhibiting a dangerous pride. Hundreds of Black veterans were beaten, maimed, shot, and lynched. We like to call those who lived during World War II the Greatest Generation, but that allows us to ignore the fact that many of this generation fought for democracy abroad while brutally suppressing democracy for millions of American citizens. During the height of racial terror in this country, Black Americans were not merely killed but castrated, burned alive, and dismembered with their body parts displayed in storefronts. This violence was meant to terrify and control Black people, but perhaps just as important, it served as a psychological balm for White supremacy: You would not treat human beings this way. The extremity of the violence was a symptom of the psychological mechanism necessary to absolve White Americans of their country's original sin. To answer the question of how they could prize liberty abroad while simultaneously denying liberty to an entire race back home, White Americans resorted to the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers had used at the nation's founding. This ideology—that Black people belonged to an inferior, subhuman race—did not simply disappear once slavery ended. If the formerly enslaved and their descendants became educated, if we thrived in the jobs White people did, if we excelled in the sciences and arts, then the entire justification for how this nation allowed

slavery would collapse. Free Black people posed a danger to the country's idea of itself as exceptional; we held up the mirror in which the nation preferred not to peer. And so the inhumanity visited on Black people by every generation of White America justified the inhumanity of the past.

Just as White Americans feared, World War II ignited what became Black Americans' second sustained effort to make democracy real. As the editorial board of the Black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, "We wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who will enslave us." Woodard's blinding is largely seen as one of the catalysts for the decades-long rebellion we have come to call the civil rights movement. But it is useful to pause and remember that this was the second mass movement for Black civil rights, the first being Reconstruction. As the centennial of slavery's end neared, Black people were still seeking the rights they had fought for and won after the Civil War: the right to be treated equally by public institutions, which was guaranteed in 1866 with the Civil Rights Act; the right to be treated as full citizens before the law, which was guaranteed in 1868 by the 14th Amendment; and the right to vote, which was guaranteed in 1870 by the 15th Amendment. In response to Black demands for these rights, White Americans strung them from trees, beat them and dumped their bodies in muddy rivers, assassinated them in their front yards, firebombed them on buses, mauled them with dogs, peeled back their skin with fire hoses, and murdered their children with explosives set off inside a church.

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

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

The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of Black resistance. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but Black people did. As one scholar, Joe R. Feagin, put it, "Enslaved African-Americans have been among the foremost freedom-fighters this country has produced." For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.

They say our people were born on the water.

When it occurred, no one can say for certain. Perhaps it was in the second week, or the third, but surely by the fourth, when they had not seen their land or any land for so many days that they lost count. It was after fear had turned to despair, and despair to resignation, and resignation to an abiding understanding. The teal eternity of the

Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely from what had once been their home that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, as if everything and everyone they cherished had simply vanished from the earth. They were no longer Mbundu or Akan or Fulani. These men and women from many different nations, all shackled together in the suffocating hull of the ship, they were one people now.

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

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

Today, our very manner of speaking recalls the Creole languages that enslaved people innovated to communicate both with Africans speaking various dialects and the English-speaking people who enslaved them. Our style of dress, the extra flair, stems back to the desires of enslaved people—shorn of all individuality—to exert their own identity. Enslaved people would wear their hat in a jaunty manner or knot their head scarves intricately. Today's avant-garde nature of Black hairstyles and fashion displays a vibrant reflection of enslaved people's determination to feel fully human through self-expression. The improvisational quality of Black art and music comes from a culture that because of constant disruption could not cling to convention. Black naming practices, so often impugned by mainstream society, are themselves an act of resistance. Our last names belong to the White people who once owned us. That is why the insistence of many Black Americans, particularly those most marginalized, to give our children names that we create, that are neither European nor from Africa, a place we have never been, is an act of self-determination. When the world listens to quintessential American music, it is our voice they hear. The sorrow songs we sang in the fields to soothe our physical pain and find hope in a freedom we did not expect to know until we died became American gospel. Amid the devastating violence and poverty of the Mississippi Delta, we birthed jazz and blues. And it was in the deeply impoverished and segregated neighborhoods where White Americans forced the descendants of the enslaved to live that teenagers too poor to buy instruments used old records to create a new music known as hip-hop.

Our speech and fashion and the drum of our music echoes Africa but is not African. Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from White America, we forged this nation's most significant original culture. In turn, *mainstream* society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to appropriate the one truly American culture as its own. As Langston Hughes wrote in 1926, "They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed— / I, too, am America."

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

At 43, I am part of the first generation of Black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which Black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally *free* for

just 50. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there never having been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, Black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.

What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution?

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

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

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

Correction August 15, 2019

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was approved on July 4,1776, not signed by Congress on that date. The article also misspelled the surname of a Revolutionary War-era writer. He was Samuel Bryan, not Byron.

Editors' Note March 11, 2020

A passage has been adjusted to make clear that a desire to protect slavery was among the motivations of some of the colonists who fought the Revolutionary War, not among the motivations of them all. Read more.

Nikole Hannah-Jones is a staff writer for the magazine. A 2017 MacArthur fellow, she has won a National Magazine Award, a Peabody Award, and a George Polk Award. Adam Pendleton is an artist known for conceptually rigorous and formally inventive paintings, collages, videos, and installations that address history and contemporary culture.

The 1619 Project is an ongoing initiative from *The New York Times Magazine* that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.

4

RACIAL FORMATIONS

Michael Omi and Howard Winant

Michael Omi is a professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the co-author of *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s* (1986). He has also written about racial theory and politics, right-wing political movements, Asian Americans and race relations, and race and popular culture. In 1990, he was the recipient of Berkeley's Distinguished Teaching Award.

Howard Winant is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (1994) (with Michael Omi), *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (1994), and *Stalemate: Political Economic Origins of Supply-Side Policy* (1988).

IN 1982–83, SUSIE GUILLORY PHIPPS unsuccessfully sued the Louisiana Bureau of Vital Records to change her racial classification from Black to White. The descendant of an eighteenth-century White planter and a Black slave, Phipps was designated "Black" on her birth certificate in accordance with a 1970 state law which declared anyone with at least one-thirty-second "Negro blood" to be Black. The legal battle raised intriguing questions about the concept of **race,** its meaning in contemporary society, and its use (and abuse) in public policy. Assistant Attorney General Ron Davis defended the law by pointing out that some type of racial classification was necessary to comply with federal record-keeping requirements and to facilitate programs for the prevention of genetic diseases. Phipps's attorney, Brian Begue, argued that the assignment of racial categories on birth certificates was unconstitutional and that the one-thirty-second designation was inaccurate. He called on a retired Tulane University professor who

race Sociologists view race as a social concept because the idea of race has changed over time, the categories of race are not discrete (they blend into one another), and the definition of race changes from country to country. We tend to think about race in terms of skin color, but the reason we place human beings into skin color categories is as arbitrary as grouping individuals by height, blood type, weight, eye color, or finger length.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

If race is not "real" in a scientific sense, why can I look around the classroom or campus and see that someone is Black or Asian or White? What is the difference between something being "real" (like the book in front of you) and something being a "social construction" (like race or gender)? Use Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation to explain how and why we "see" race as we do.

cited research indicating that most Whites have one-twentieth "Negro" ancestry. In the end, Phipps lost. The court upheld a state law which quantified racial identity, and in so doing affirmed the legality of assigning individuals to specific racial groupings.[1]

The Phipps case illustrates the continuing dilemma of defining race and establishing its meaning in institutional life. Today, to assert that variations in human physiognomy are racially based is to enter a constant and intense debate. *Scientific* interpretations of race have not been alone in sparking heated controversy; *religious* perspectives have done so as well.[2] Most centrally, of course, race has been a matter of *political* contention. This has been particularly true in the United States, where the concept of race has varied enormously over time without ever leaving the center stage of U.S. history.

WHAT IS RACE?

Race consciousness, and its articulation in theories of race, is largely a modern phenomenon. When European explorers in the New World "discovered" people who looked different than themselves, these "natives" challenged then-existing conceptions of the origins of the human species and raised disturbing questions as to whether *all* could be considered in the same "family of man."[3] Religious debates flared over the attempt to reconcile the Bible with the existence of "racially distinct" people. Arguments took place over creation itself, as theories of polygenesis questioned whether God had made only one species of humanity ("monogenesis"). Europeans wondered if the natives of the New World were indeed human beings with redeemable souls. At stake were not only the prospects for conversion, but the types of treatment to be accorded them. The expropriation of property, the denial of political rights, the introduction of slavery and other forms of coercive labor, as well as outright extermination, all presupposed a worldview which distinguished Europeans—children of God, human beings, etc.—from "others." Such a worldview was needed to explain why some should be "free" and others enslaved, why some had rights to land and property while others did not. Race, and the interpretation of racial differences, was a central factor in that worldview.

In the colonial epoch science was no less a field of controversy than religion in attempts to comprehend the concept of race and its meaning. Spurred on by the classificatory scheme of living organisms devised by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae,* many scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dedicated themselves to the identification and ranking of variations in humankind. Race was thought of as a *biological* concept, yet its precise definition was the subject of debates which, as we have noted, continue to rage today. Despite efforts ranging from Dr. Samuel Morton's studies of cranial capacity[4] to contemporary attempts to base racial classification on shared gene pools,[5] the concept of race has defied biological definition. . . .

Attempts to discern the *scientific meaning* of race continue to the present day. Although most physical anthropologists and biologists have abandoned the quest for a scientific basis to determine racial categories, controversies have recently flared

in the area of genetics and educational psychology. For instance, an essay by Arthur Jensen arguing that hereditary factors shape intelligence not only revived the "nature or nurture" controversy, but raised highly volatile questions about racial equality itself.[6] Clearly the attempt to establish a *biological* basis of race has not been swept into the dustbin of history, but is being resurrected in various scientific arenas. All such attempts seek to remove the concept of race from fundamental social, political, or economic determination. They suggest instead that the truth of race lies in the terrain of innate characteristics, of which skin color and other physical attributes provide only the most obvious, and in some respects most superficial, indicators.

RACE AS A SOCIAL CONCEPT

The social sciences have come to reject biologistic notions of race in favor of an approach which regards race as a *social* concept. Beginning in the eighteenth century, this trend has been slow and uneven, but its direction clear. In the nineteenth century Max Weber discounted biological explanations for racial conflict and instead highlighted the social and political factors which engendered such conflict.[7] The work of pioneering cultural anthropologist Franz Boas was crucial in refuting the scientific racism of the early twentieth century by rejecting the connection between race and culture, and the assumption of a continuum of "higher" and "lower" cultural groups. Within the contemporary social science literature, race is assumed to be a variable which is shaped by broader societal forces.

Race is indeed a pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept. Racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Racial meanings have varied tremendously over time and between different societies.

In the United States, the Black/White color line has historically been rigidly defined and enforced. White is seen as a "pure" category. Any racial intermixture makes one "non-White." In the movie *Raintree County,* Elizabeth Taylor describes the worst of fates to befall Whites as "havin' a little Negra blood in ya'—just one little teeny drop and a person's all Negra."[8] This thinking flows from what Marvin Harris has characterized as the principle of *hypo-descent*:

> By what ingenious computation is the genetic tracery of a million years of evolution unraveled and each man [sic] assigned his proper social box? In the United States, the mechanism employed is the rule of hypo-descent. This descent rule requires Americans to believe that anyone who is known to have had a Negro ancestor is a Negro. We admit nothing in between. . . . "Hypo-descent" means affiliation with the subordinate rather than the superordinate group in order to avoid the ambiguity of intermediate identity. . . . The rule of hypo-descent is, therefore, an invention, which we in the United States have made in order to keep biological facts from intruding into our collective racist fantasies.[9]

The Susie Guillory Phipps case merely represents the contemporary expression of this racial logic.

By contrast, a striking feature of race relations in the lowland areas of Latin America since the abolition of slavery has been the relative absence of sharply defined racial groupings. No such rigid descent rule characterizes racial identity in many Latin American societies. Brazil, for example, has historically had less rigid conceptions of race, and thus a variety of "intermediate" racial categories exist. Indeed, as Harris notes, "One of the most striking consequences of the Brazilian system of racial identification is that parents and children and even brothers and sisters are frequently accepted as representatives of quite opposite racial types."[10] Such a possibility is incomprehensible within the logic of racial categories in the U.S.

To suggest another example: the notion of "passing" takes on new meaning if we compare various American cultures' means of assigning racial

identity. In the United States, individuals who are actually "Black" by the logic of hypo-descent have attempted to skirt the discriminatory barriers imposed by law and custom by attempting to "pass" for White.[11] Ironically, these same individuals would not be able to pass for "Black" in many Latin American societies.

Consideration of the term "Black" illustrates the diversity of racial meanings which can be found among different societies and historically within a given society. In contemporary British politics the term "Black" is used to refer to all non-Whites. Interestingly this designation has not arisen through the racist discourse of groups such as the National Front. Rather, in political and cultural movements, Asian as well as Afro-Caribbean youth are adopting the term as an expression of self-identity.[12] The wide-ranging meanings of "Black" illustrate the manner in which racial categories are shaped politically.

The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and reformed. We use the term **racial formation** to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as a *central axis* of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception.

RACIAL IDEOLOGY AND RACIAL IDENTITY

The seemingly obvious, "natural" and "commonsense" qualities which the existing racial order exhibits themselves testify to the effectiveness of the racial formation process in constructing racial meanings and racial identities.

racial formation The process in which race operates as a central axis of social relations, which then determine social, economic, and political institutions and practices.

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is. This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially "mixed" or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning. Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.

Our compass for navigating race relations depends on preconceived notions of what each specific racial group looks like. Comments such as, "Funny, you don't look Black," betray an underlying image of what Black should be. We also become disoriented when people do not act "Black," "Latino," or indeed "White." The content of such stereotypes reveals a series of unsubstantiated beliefs about who these groups are and what "they" are like.[13]

In U.S. society, then, a kind of "racial etiquette" exists, a set of interpretative codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life. Rules shaped by our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the "presentation of self,"[14] distinctions of status, and appropriate modes of conduct. "Etiquette" is not mere universal adherence to the dominant group's rules, but a more dynamic combination of these rules with the values and beliefs of subordinated groupings. This racial "subjection" is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world.

Racial beliefs operate as an "amateur biology," a way of explaining the variations in "human nature."[15] Differences in skin color and other obvious physical characteristics supposedly provide visible clues to differences lurking underneath. Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of

race. Such diverse questions as our confidence and trust in others (for example, clerks or salespeople, media figures, neighbors); our sexual preferences and romantic images; our tastes in music, films, dance, or sports; and our very ways of talking, walking, eating, and dreaming are ineluctably shaped by notions of race. Skin color "differences" are thought to explain perceived differences in intellectual, physical and artistic temperaments, and to justify distinct treatment of racially identified individuals and groups.

The continuing persistence of racial ideology suggests that these racial myths and stereotypes cannot be exposed as such in the popular imagination. They are, we think, too essential, too integral, to the maintenance of the U.S. social order. Of course, particular meanings, stereotypes and myths can change, but the presence of a *system* of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of U.S. culture.

Film and television, for example, have been notorious in disseminating images of racial minorities which establish for audiences what people from these groups look like, how they behave, and "who they are."[16] The power of the media lies not only in their ability to reflect the dominant racial ideology, but in their capacity to shape that ideology in the first place. D. W. Griffith's epic *Birth of a Nation,* a sympathetic treatment of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, helped to generate, consolidate and "nationalize" images of Blacks which had been more disparate (more regionally specific, for example) prior to the film's appearance.[17] In U.S. television, the necessity to define characters in the briefest and most condensed manner has led to the perpetuation of racial caricatures, as racial stereotypes serve as shorthand for scriptwriters, directors and actors, in commercials, etc. Television's tendency to address the "lowest common denominator" in order to render programs "familiar" to an enormous and diverse audience leads it regularly to assign and reassign racial characteristics to particular groups, both minority and majority.

These and innumerable other examples show that we tend to view race as something fixed and immutable—something rooted in "nature." Thus we mask the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping race relations. Races do not emerge full-blown. They are the results of diverse historical practices and are continually subject to challenge over their definition and meaning.

RACIALIZATION: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RACE

In the United States, the racial category of "Black" evolved with the consolidation of racial slavery. By the end of the seventeenth century, Africans whose specific identity was Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, etc., were rendered "Black" by an ideology of exploitation based on racial logic—the establishment and maintenance of a "color line." This of course did not occur overnight. A period of indentured servitude which was not rooted in racial logic preceded the consolidation of racial slavery. With slavery, however, a racially based understanding of society was set in motion which resulted in the shaping of a specific *racial* identity not only for the slaves but for the European settlers as well. Winthrop Jordan has observed: "From the initially common term *Christian,* at mid-century there was a marked shift toward the terms *English* and *free.* After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term of self-identification appeared—White."[18]

We employ the term **racialization** to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Racialization is an ideological process, a historically specific one. Racial ideology is constructed from

racialization The social process by which a racial identity is attached to a group and that group is placed in a race-based social hierarchy. Upon their arrival in America, for example, Europeans labeled the hundreds of indigenous tribal populations "Indians" and placed them in a single group in a racial hierarchy.

pre-existing conceptual (or, if one prefers, "discursive") elements and emerges from the struggles of competing political projects and ideas seeking to articulate similar elements differently. An account of racialization processes that avoids the pitfalls of U.S. ethnic history[19] remains to be written.

Particularly during the nineteenth century, the category of "White" was subject to challenges brought about by the influx of diverse groups who were not of the same Anglo-Saxon stock as the founding immigrants. In the nineteenth century, political and ideological struggles emerged over the classification of Southern Europeans, the Irish and Jews, among other "non-White" categories.[20] Nativism was only effectively curbed by the institutionalization of a racial order that drew the color line *around,* rather than *within,* Europe.

By stopping short of racializing immigrants from Europe after the Civil War, and by subsequently allowing their assimilation, the American racial order was reconsolidated in the wake of the tremendous challenge placed before it by the abolition of racial slavery.[21] With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, an effective program for limiting the emergent class struggles of the later nineteenth century was forged: the definition of the working class *in racial terms*—as "White." This was not accomplished by any legislative decree or capitalist maneuvering to divide the working class, but rather by White workers themselves. Many of them were recent immigrants, who organized on racial lines as much as on traditionally defined class lines.[22] The Irish on the West Coast, for example, engaged in vicious anti-Chinese race-baiting and committed many pogrom-type assaults on Chinese in the course of consolidating the trade union movement in California.

Thus the very political organization of the working class was in important ways a racial project. The legacy of racial conflicts and arrangements shaped the definition of interests and in turn led to the consolidation of institutional patterns (e.g., segregated unions, dual labor markets, exclusionary legislation) which perpetuated the color line *within* the working class. Selig Perlman, whose study of the development of the labor movement is fairly sympathetic to this process, notes that

> the political issue after 1877 was racial, not financial, and the weapon was not merely the ballot, but also "direct action"—violence. The anti-Chinese agitation in California, culminating as it did in the Exclusion Law passed by Congress in 1882, was doubtless the most important single factor in the history of American labor, for without it the entire country might have been overrun by Mongolian [sic] labor and *the labor movement might have become a conflict of races instead of one of classes.*[23]

More recent economic transformations in the U.S. have also altered interpretations of racial identities and meanings. The automation of southern agriculture and the augmented labor demand of the postwar boom transformed Blacks from a largely rural, impoverished labor force to a largely urban, working-class group by 1970.[24] When boom became bust and liberal welfare statism moved rightwards, the majority of Blacks came to be seen, increasingly, as part of the "underclass," as state "dependents." Thus the particularly deleterious effects on Blacks of global and national economic shifts (generally rising unemployment rates, changes in the employment structure away from reliance on labor intensive work, etc.) were explained once again in the late 1970s and 1980s (as they had been in the 1940s and mid-1960s) as the result of defective Black cultural norms, of familial disorganization, etc.[25] In this way new racial attributions, new racial myths, are affixed to "Blacks."[26] Similar changes in racial identity are presently affecting Asians and Latinos, as such economic forces as increasing Third World impoverishment and indebtedness fuel immigration and high interest rates, Japanese competition spurs resentments, and U.S. jobs seem to fly away to Korea and Singapore.[27] . . .

Once we understand that race overflows the boundaries of skin color, super-exploitation, social stratification, discrimination and prejudice,

cultural domination and cultural resistance, state policy (or of any other particular social relationship we list), once we recognize the racial dimension present to some degree in *every* identity, institution, and social practice in the United States—once we have done this, it becomes possible to speak of *racial formation*. This recognition is hard-won; there is a continuous temptation to think of race as an *essence,* as something fixed, concrete, and objective, as (for example) one of the categories just enumerated. And there is also an opposite temptation: to see it as a mere illusion, which an ideal social order would eliminate.

In our view it is crucial to break with these habits of thought. The effort must be made to understand race as *an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.*

5

RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICA

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THEORIES EXPLAINING RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITIES

In a column critical of Black civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Jason Riley argues, "What we have left today as civil-rights leaders are second- and third-tier types striving for relevance in an era when the biggest barrier to Black progress is no longer White racism but Black anti-social behavior and counterproductive attitudes toward work, school, marriage and so forth."[1] In a succinct manner Riley clearly articulates the view that culture matters: Black disadvantage can be blamed on harmful attitudes and behaviors among Blacks today.

In contrast, in an article that makes a case for racial reparations, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates argues