

1. The Fight for a True Democracy

In 1776, the nation was founded on the ideal of democracy. In 1619, when enslaved Africans first arrived in what would become the United States, black people began the fight to make that ideal a reality. Released on Aug. 23, 2019.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It's quiet out here. There're seagulls. The sun is warm, but it's not too humid. It's actually kind of a great day for fishing, which is why it stinks.

Adizah Eghan

What does it smell like?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It smells like dead fish. It smells like the water.

Adizah Eghan

What is going through your head right now?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

I don't know, thinking about what they went through.

I don't know. I just wonder a lot what it was, what it was like.

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 the fear had turned to despair and the despair to resignation and the resignation gave way, finally, to resolve.

They knew then that they would not hug their grandmothers again, or share a laugh with a cousin during his nuptials, or sing their baby softly to sleep with the same lullabies that their mothers had once sung to them.

The teal eternity of the Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, that everything they ever knew had simply vanished from the earth.

Some could not bear the realization. They heaved themselves over the walls of wooden ships to swim one last time with their ancestors.

Others refused to eat, mouths clamped shut until their hearts gave out.

But in the suffocating hull of a ship called the White Lion, bound for where they did not know, those who refused to die understood that the men and women chained next to them in the dark were no longer strangers. They had been forged in trauma. They had been made black by those who believed themselves to be white.

And where they were headed, black equaled 'slave.' So these were their people now.

Adizah Eghan

What happened here?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

I mean, we really don't know a lot. A pirate ship by the name of White Lion sails into the bay here, and they needed to trade something of value so that they could get supplies to make the rest of their journey.

And what they traded were 20 to 30 Africans, and this would be at this place kind of ironically called Point Comfort, where slavery in the British North American colonies that would go on to become the United States begins.

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

From The New York Times Magazine, I'm Nikole Hannah-Jones. This is "1619."

Archived Recording (Speaker 1)

That's your Happy Valentine's Day, Nikole. This is a tape for Nikole.

Archived Recording (Speaker 2)

Hello, darling. How you doing? Excuse me while I partake of this cancer stick.

Archived Recording (Speaker 1)

That's O.K.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

When I was a child, my dad always flew a flag in our front yard. Our house is on a corner lot, and in the front yard right in the corner was this — I couldn't tell you how tall it was. It always seemed really garishly tall to me at the time. There was this very tall aluminum flagpole. My parents didn't make a lot of money, so our house always had paint chipping, and there was always something about the house that was in disarray. You know, the grass was looking disheveled or the railing on the stairs was falling off, but the flag was always pristine. As soon as it started to show even the slightest tatter, my dad would replace the flag with a fresh new flag. He would never allow a tattered flag to fly. And I

didn't understand it. I didn't know other black kids whose parents were flying a flag in their front yard. I know lots of white people who flew flags — lots of white people who flew flags.

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

My dad was born on a sharecropping farm in Greenwood, Mississippi, where his family picked cotton in the same cotton fields that enslaved people had picked cotton not too long before. That county, Leflore County in Mississippi, lynched more black people than any other county in Mississippi, and Mississippi lynched more black people than any other state in the country. So it was a pretty devastatingly violent and hard place to live.

My dad's mom fled the South like millions of other black people during the Great Migration and came north to Waterloo and found many of the same barriers that she had sought to escape. She was forced to buy a house on the black side of town. Most jobs were unavailable to her, so she cleaned white people's houses. My father went to segregated schools.

And at a young age, my father joined the military so that he could get his way out of poverty, but also for the reasons that so many black people join the military, which is he hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally see him as an American.

He loved being in the Army. He was stationed in Germany, picked up German very quickly. He was so smart. He loved talking about that time. It was a period where he got to see things that a poor black child born in Mississippi would not normally get to see.

But the military didn't end up being a way out for my dad for long. He was passed up for opportunities, and the only jobs my dad ever worked were service jobs. He worked as a convenience store clerk or a bus driver. And because of that, this big, pristine American flag flying in the front of our yard was deeply embarrassing to me. And I didn't understand why he would feel that much love for a country that clearly did not love him.

I felt this way all through high school. I was no longer standing for the national anthem. I had stopped saying the Pledge of Allegiance. And really, throughout most of my adult life — I mean, clearly I know I'm an American. I was born here. Every family member for generations back that I know were all born here, but I never felt like I could claim fully that I was an American.

But it wasn't until I really started researching and reading and thinking about this project that my own thinking started to shift, that I realized my dad understood things that I never knew.

I now understand for the first time why my dad was so proud to fly that flag.

Archived Recording (Fountain Hughes)

My name is Fountain Hughes.

I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia.

My grandfather belonged to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was 115 years old when he died, and now I am 101 year old.

Now in my boy days, we were slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that, have an

auction bench. Put you up on the bench and bid on you the same as you're bidding on cattle, you know.

But still, I don't like to talk about it, because it makes people feel bad.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So you kind of have to put yourself in the scene. It is June of 1776, and Thomas Jefferson, at the very young age of 33 years old, has been tasked with drafting the document that is going to declare to the world why the British North American colonies, the 13 colonies, want to break off from the British Empire. He goes to Philadelphia and rents two rooms on the edge of town along the river and sits down to draft what we all know now as the Declaration of Independence.

Archived Recording (John F. Kennedy)

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers —

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So he's sitting at this portable mahogany writing desk that he carries with him, and he pulls out some paper and a very nice quill pen. And he starts to write these words that almost every American can recite by heart.

Archived Recording (George H.W. Bush)

The Declaration of Independence, we hold these truths —

Archived Recording

We hold these —

Archived Recording (George H.W. Bush)

— to be self-evident.

Archived Recording (Bill Clinton)

We hold —

Archived Recording

— to be self-evident.

Archived Recording (Bill Clinton)

— these truths to be self-evident —

Archived Recording (George H.W. Bush)

— that all men are created equal.

Archived Recording

— that all men are created equal.

Archived Recording (Bill Clinton)

— that all men are created equal.

Archived Recording

— that all men are created equal.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

They become some of the most famous words in the English language.

Archived Recording 1

That they are endowed by their creator with certain —

Archived Recording 2

— with certain unalienable rights, that among these —

Archived Recording 3

— *that among these are life* —

Archived Recording 4

— *life* —

Archived Recording 5

— *liberty* —

Archived Recording 6

— *liberty* —

Archived Recording 7

— *and the pursuit of happiness.*

Archived Recording 8

— *and the pursuit of happiness.*

Archived Recording (Barack Obama)

Life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that's what makes us unique. That's what makes us strong, the shared values that we all hold so dear.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

But what most Americans don't know is that while he's writing these lofty words for liberation, he had brought with him one of the many enslaved people whom he owned in order to serve him and to keep him comfortable. Now that enslaved person was a teenager, and that teenager was the half-brother of Thomas Jefferson's wife. What that means is Thomas Jefferson's father-in-law had children with one of the women that he enslaved. So actually, he was Thomas Jefferson's

brother-in-law. And so as he's writing these ideals, he knows that they will not apply even to his own family members.

So 150 years have passed since those first Africans were sold into Virginia, and slavery in America looks very different than the slavery that they experienced. The enslaved population has grown from 20 to now 500,000 people. Fully one-fifth of the population is now enslaved.

It has grown from a conditional institution where some of those first 20 were able to become free after a term of time to one where black people are born into it. They die into it. And they pass that status on to their children. You now have generations of black people who have never known a day of freedom and who will never know a day of freedom.

And yet when Thomas Jefferson's contemporaries talk in public about why the colonists need to be free from England, they refer to themselves as slaves, slaves to the king of England. And so the colonists are being criticized in newspapers for this obvious duplicity by those who don't believe that they should break off from the British Empire. One of them writes, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for freedom from the drivers of Negroes?" Another writes to Benjamin Franklin and says, perhaps you should ask the people who are actually enslaved what slavery is like.

Thomas Jefferson, of course, is deeply aware of the hypocrisy and aware of the criticism of the hypocrisy. So as he's drafting the declaration, he includes a passage in there where he actually blames the king of England for introducing slavery into the colonies. He calls slavery a crime, and he says that the king of England committed this crime, but that's not our fault. It was not our doing. This is just one more thing that the king of England did to wrong us. So he brings this document to the Continental Congress, and it doesn't take long before delegates from

the Carolinas and from Georgia look at that language about slavery. And one can imagine they said, what the hell are you doing? And they say that there is no way that they are going to sign this document as long as that passage about slavery remains. And so it is struck, and the 13 colonies sign the declaration, and the declaration goes out into the world without mentioning slavery at all, and we start the Revolutionary War.

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

Somehow, miraculously, these 13 scrappy colonies managed to defeat one of the most powerful empires in the world, and we become a new nation. And so the colonists gather, and they try to figure out the language that they are going to create in the founding document that we, of course, come to know as the Constitution. But now they have a problem.

They were trying to leave behind an old country that they believed was antithetical to freedom and create a new one that they believe will be defined by freedom. This was a country that was going to be based on individual rights, on a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, but this was also a place that, at this time, was still practicing the institution of slavery.

And so the colonists have a choice to make. Are they going to be the country of their ideals, the ideals that they were putting to paper, a country based on the idea that all men were created equal? And if they were going to be that country, then they were going to have to abolish the institution of slavery. Or were they going to be wedded to the institution of slavery because they depended so heavily on the wealth that was being generated from it? And in that case, they can't really write the document that they want to write. And so what they do is they

decide that they are going to try to have it both ways, and they bake that contradiction right into the Constitution, both codifying and protecting the institution of slavery but never actually mentioning the word. And so they have written what is perhaps the most radical constitution in the world, and from the beginning, they knew they were going to violate its most essential principles.

They call this new country a democracy, but it wasn't one, not yet.

[Music]
Fountain Hughes

And sometimes you say, I wonder if we'll ever be free.

Gonna ask the Lord to free us. We're going to sing. And one day, shall I ever reach heaven? And one day, shall I fly?

And they would sing that for about an hour. Way by and by — oh, I can hear them singing now, but I can't repeat it like I could in them days. Someday when I'm not hoarse, I can sing it for you, but I'm too hoarse now.

Oh, I wish I could — I wish I could sing it for you.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

On August 14, 1862, Abraham Lincoln invites five free black men to the White House for a meeting. They are part of the black elite in Washington, D.C., and he wants to have a conversation with them.

The Civil War has been going on for about a year, and Abraham Lincoln is worried because the war is not going well. And because it's not going well, he's feeling like he might have to do something drastic. He's considering taking this very radical step of liberating all of the enslaved people who are in the Confederate states, and he's thinking about doing

this as a war tactic, understanding that if he takes away the South's labor force, that might cripple them, or at least the threat of it would force them to remain in the Union. But he's also concerned about what it might mean to suddenly free four million enslaved people and what the consequences of that might be.

I can imagine these five distinguished men are very excited to get Lincoln's invitation. They are abolitionists. They have been pressuring Lincoln to abolish slavery. But when they get there, they are greeted by President Lincoln and another man. His name is James Mitchell. Now, James Mitchell is a new employee. He's only been at the White House for a couple of days. And his job is a new job, and it's called commissioner of emigration. Now that's emigration with an "e," meaning his job was not to help people to enter the country, but to help people to exit it. Lincoln doesn't waste any time, according to documents that recount what happened that day. He tells the men that he had gotten funds from Congress to ship black people, once they had been freed, to some other country. And then Lincoln said, "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," he said, "we suffer on each side."

We are taught to think of Abraham Lincoln as the great emancipator, and he was. But the truth is, like many white Americans, he was opposed to slavery because it was a cruel and unjust institution in opposition to this nation's ideals, but he was also opposed to black political and social equality. As he said in a speech that he gave in 1853, he considered black people a, quote, "troublesome presence," and that they were incompatible with a democracy that was designed for white people. As he said in that speech, "Free them and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this, and if

mine would, we well know that those of a great mass of white people will not.”

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

As those five black men stood in the White House, I wonder what it must have felt like. These men had been fighting for the liberation of millions and had waited for this moment, only to be told that once they were granted their freedom, they were going to be asked to leave the country of their birth. And to make it even worse, Lincoln then tells them that it's their fault that the country is fighting a civil war at all. He says, “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.” That's why, the president said, “it is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.”

So Lincoln ends the meeting, and one of the men tells him that they will go back and consider his proposal. Lincoln then tells them, “Take your full time. No hurry at all.” After that meeting, those men made it clear that they were not interested in taking Lincoln up on his offer to leave the country of their birth. There's a quote by a different group of black abolitionists that really sums up the way that most black Americans felt, and that quote said, “This is our home, and this is our country. Beneath its side lie the bones of our fathers. Here we were born, and here we will die.”

After everything that black Americans have been through in this country, that they didn't immediately take up Lincoln's offer and go somewhere else and start over is really an astounding testimony to their belief in the American ideals. By choosing to stay, black people were

saying, this is our country. We are American, and we're actually going to work to make these founding ideals a reality.

And in the years that followed, after the Civil War ends, a very short period called Reconstruction began.

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

You see the formerly enslaved pushing their white allies in Congress to start to change our founding documents and to actually resolve those contradictions that were baked in. They do this through getting amendments passed. And, of course, amendments are the way that we change our Constitution.

So, of course, the very first amendment that they have to pass is the 13th Amendment, which abolishes the institution of slavery. And what's interesting about that is this is actually the first time that the word slavery is mentioned in the Constitution, is in the amendment that finally abolishes it. They pass the 14th Amendment, and the 14th Amendment guarantees that all of the enslaved people will finally be citizens of the country of their birth. It also ensures for the first time that the laws cannot treat people differently based on their race. This is called the equal protection clause, and this clause will be used again and again, really all the way up until now, to guarantee that all Americans are treated as equal citizens.

And, finally, they pass the 15th Amendment, which probably is the most important amendment when we're considering what a democracy is supposed to be. The 15th Amendment guaranteed the right to vote no matter what your race is. Now, it didn't include women at that time, but it certainly set the stage, and it, for the first time, guaranteed that whether you were born a person who was enslaved, whether you were

white or you were black, you had the right to exercise your vote in this democracy.

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

The only reason we saw all of these gains in the South was because there were federal troops there, and those federal troops were holding back the violence of white Southerners who were not interested in seeing these gains. This all changes with the presidential election of 1876. It was a contested election, and Rutherford B. Hayes is the Republican candidate. And remember, back then it was Republicans who were the progressive party, and they were the party of Lincoln that was working to pass all of this progressive legislation. But Rutherford B. Hayes really wants to win this election, and so he makes a deal with the Democrats in Congress that if they give him their electoral votes, he will withdraw the federal troops from the South and end Reconstruction. So he makes the deal, and the troops leave, and we immediately see white Southerners implement a campaign to force black people back into the position that they had been in before Reconstruction.

The suppression of black life over the next five decades would be so devastating that it would come to be known as the Great Nadir, the second slavery.

Fountain Hughes

Tell you the truth, when I think over today, I don't know how I'm living. I'm the oldest one that I know that's living. But still, I'm thankful to the Lord. Colored people is free. We ought to be awful thankful. If I thought that I'd ever be a slave again, I'd take a gun and just end it all right away, because you're nothing but a dog. You're not a thing but a dog.

Archived Recording

The day of days for America and her allies. Crowds before the White House await the announcement.

Archived Recording (Harry S. Truman)

I have received this afternoon a message from the Japanese government which specifies the unconditional surrender of Japan.

Archived Recording

Reporters rush out to relay the news to an anxious world and touch off celebrations throughout the country. Joy is unconfined.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It's February of 1946, and a young black man is sitting on a bus watching the Georgia pines fly past the windows. He's on his way to see his wife, and he's probably very excited, because he's been away at war, and he hasn't seen her in a very long time. He'd been fighting for this country in World War II, and just that day, he'd been honorably discharged for his service. But he is a black man who is returning to the Jim Crow South.

Archived Recording 1

You can never whip these birds if you don't keep you and them separate.

Archived Recording 2

The whole trouble with this integration business is it probably will end up with mixing socially.

Archived Recording 3

But to tell me that I don't even have the right to fight to protect the white race —

Archived Recording 4

We are going to maintain segregated schools down in Dixie.

Archived Recording 5

Well, I think their aim is mixed marriages and becoming equal with the whites.

Archived Recording 6

You've got to keep your white and the black separate.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

What happened on that day is a story that will be told across the country.

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

Good morning. This is Orson Welles speaking. I'd like to read to you an affidavit.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It was a story that would actually change the course of history.

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

I, Isaac Woodard Jr., being duly sworn to depose and state as follows, that I am 27 years old and a veteran of the United States Army, having served 15 months in the South Pacific and earned one battle star. I was honorably discharged on February 12, 1942.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

He's riding the bus through Georgia.

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

At one hour out of Atlanta, the bus driver stopped at a small drugstore.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

He wants to get off and use the restroom.

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

He stopped. I asked him if he had time to wait for me until I had a chance to go the restroom. He cursed and said no. When he cursed me, I cursed him back. When the bus got to —

Nikole Hannah-Jones

The bus driver gets upset with him. They have a little bit of an argument. Woodard doesn't think much of it. He goes to the bathroom, runs back to the bus, and the bus keeps going. But then, a few miles down the road, the bus stops, and the bus driver gets off the bus, and then calls and tells Woodard that he needs to get off the bus as well. So Woodard gets off the bus, and before he can even utter a word —

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

When the bus got to Aiken, he got off and went and got the police. They didn't give me a chance to explain. The policeman struck me with a billy across my head and told me to shut up.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

He's struck in the head by a police officer.

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

— by my left arm and twisted it behind my back. I figured he was trying to make me resist. I did not resist against him. He asked me, was I discharged, and I told him yes. When I said yes, that is when he

started beating me with a billy, hitting me across the top of the head. After that, I grabbed his billy and wrung it out of his hand. Another policeman came up and threw his gun on me and told me to drop the billy or he'd drop me, so I dropped the billy. After I dropped the billy, the second policeman held his gun on me while the other one was beating me.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

And the blows keep coming, and they keep coming, to the point that Woodard loses consciousness.

Woodard is still wearing his crisp Army uniform. He's been discharged just a few hours earlier. When he comes to, he's in a jail.

Archived Recording (Orson Welles)

I woke up next morning and could not see.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

He was beaten so severely by that police officer that he would never see again.

So Woodard's beating was not at all unusual. World War II had done exactly what many white people had feared, that once black people were allowed to fight in the military, and when they traveled abroad and they experienced what it was like not to live under a system of racial apartheid, that it would be much harder to control them when they came back. Black men in their uniforms were seen as being unduly proud. So these men who had served their country, who had come home proudly wearing the uniform to show their service for their country, would find that this actually made them a target of some of the most severe violence. But what was unusual was what happened after.

Woodard's case was picked up by the N.A.A.C.P., and they take him on a bit of a tour. They take photographs of him. Those photographs are sent out to newspapers and to fundraising efforts, where they're saying, look what happened to this man who served his country. It's that spark that finally determines among millions of black people that enough is enough.

And that's largely seen as one of the sparks of the modern civil rights movement.

Archived Recording (Martin Luther King Jr.)

We have people coming in from all over the country. I suspect that we will have —

Nikole Hannah-Jones

The second sustained movement of black people trying to secure equal rights before the law and an equal place in this democracy.

Archived Recording 1

During the early weeks of February 1960, the demonstrations that came to be called the sit-in movement exploded across the South.

Archived Recording 2

Negro youngsters paraded with placards, handed out literature, and tried to sit in at lunch counters.

Archived Recording 3

I think, honestly, many of us didn't realize just how important our movement would grow to be.

Archived Recording 4

Official reaction was both swift and severe.

Archived Recording 5

Don't blame a cracker in Georgia for your injustices. The government is responsible for the injustices. The government can bring these injustices to halt.

Archived Recording (Martin Luther King Jr.)

How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Hallelujah!

Nikole Hannah-Jones

And in 1968, 350 years after the introduction of the first enslaved Africans into the colonies —

Archived Recording (Lyndon B. Johnson)

This Civil Rights Act is a challenge to all of us.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

— Congress passes the last of the great civil rights legislation.

Archived Recording (Lyndon B. Johnson)

— to go work in our communities and our states, in our homes and in our hearts —

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It ends legal discrimination on the basis of race from all aspects of American life.

Archived Recording (Lyndon B. Johnson)

— to eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in our beloved country.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

We often think of the civil rights movement as being about black rights, but the civil rights movement was never just about the rights of black people. It was about making the ideals of the Constitution whole. And so when you look at the laws born out of black resistance, these laws are guaranteeing rights for all Americans.

Archived Recording

This experience, which black Americans were having, did not go unnoticed by the rest of America.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

I mean, basically every other rights struggle that we have seen —

Archived Recording

Now we fought the public accommodations fight 10 years ago with the blacks. Are we going to have to start all over again with women?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

Disability rights, gay rights, women's rights —

Archived Recording (George H.W. Bush)

That people with disabilities were still victims of segregation and discrimination.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

— all come from the efforts of the black civil rights struggles.

Archived Recording

— equal rights. Equals rights to have a job, to have respect, to not be viewed as a piece of meat.

Archived Recording (George H.W. Bush)

No Americans will ever again be deprived of their basic guarantee of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Archived Recording 1

Celebrations erupted on the steps of the Supreme Court.

Archived Recording 2

One of its most momentous civil rights decisions. The Supreme Court found gay and lesbian Americans have a constitutional —

Archived Recording 3

— right to marry. The majority found its justification in the 14th Amendment, written after the Civil War to extend equal protection under law to freed slaves.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So we are raised to think about 1776 as the beginning of our democracy, but when that ship arrives on the horizon at Point Comfort in 1619, that decision made by the colonists to purchase that group of 20 to 30 human beings, that was a beginning too. And it would actually be those very people who were denied citizenship in their own country, who were denied the protections of our founding documents, who would fight the hardest and most successfully to make those ideals real, not just for themselves but for all Americans. It is black people who have been the perfectors of this democracy.

When I was a kid — it must have been in fifth or sixth grade. Our teacher gave us an assignment. It was a social studies class, and we were learning about different places that people came from, and this was her way of kind of telling the story of the great American melting pot. So

she told us all to research our ancestral land and to write a small report about it, and then to draw a flag. I remember kind of looking up and making eye contact with the other black girl who was in the class, because we didn't really have an ancestral land that we knew of. Slavery had made it so that we didn't know where we came from in Africa. We didn't have a specific country. And we could say that we were from the whole continent, but even so, there's no such thing as an African flag. And so I remember going to the globe by my teacher's desk — it was on the windowpane along the left side of the classroom — and spinning it to the continent of Africa and just picking a random African country.

So I went back to my desk, and I drew that random African country's flag, and I wrote a report about it. And I felt ashamed. I felt ashamed, one, because I was lying, but I also felt ashamed because I felt like I should have some other country, and that all the other kids could trace their roots elsewhere, and I could only trace my roots to the country that had enslaved us.

I wish now that I could go back and talk to my younger self and tell her that she should not be ashamed, that this is her ancestral home, that she should be as proud to be an American as her dad was, and that she should boldly and proudly draw those stars and stripes and claim this country as her own.

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2. The Economy That Slavery Built

The cotton plantation was America's first big business, and the institution of slavery turned the poor, fledgling nation into a financial powerhouse. Built into this system, which formed the foundation of American capitalism, was violence. Released on Aug. 30, 2019.

TRANSCRIPT

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2. The Economy That Slavery Built

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Nikole Hannah-Jones

Seven years after my dad died, I went to the place he was born for the first time. My dad was born on a cotton plantation in Greenwood, Mississippi, where his family were sharecroppers in the same field that enslaved people had picked cotton for generations and generations before. Every year, our family would go on family vacations, and we would go on family reunions. But we would never go to the place of my dad's birth. It wasn't a place that he really wanted to take us to or a place that he wanted to return.

[Music]

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It just so happened that my Great-Aunt Charlotte, my grandmother's sister, was visiting nearby at the time that I went down. And it's strange because I'm 38 years old, but I'm so relieved to have this elderly woman with me, because for some reason, I'm just a little afraid, which is kind of weird. But I really was.

I'd grown up with Aunt Charlotte my whole life. She's the one who taught me how to make yeast rolls in her kitchen, and she was this woman who wore heels until she was in her 90s, who, when you would go in her house, everything was always very neat. There was plastic over the furniture. It was very important for her at all times to appear respectable, and I understood that so much of that was because in her formative years, she was not treated with respect in the place that she was born.

So we get in the car, and I try, as I had done several times through the years, to get my Great-Aunt Charlotte to open up about what it was like to live down there. And for most of the ride, she was giving me the same gauzy version that she'd always given me, that life for them wasn't really that hard, that it was a good place to grow up.

As we finally approach Greenwood, I see a big sign. It's painted in brown, and it says, in white letters, "Greenwood: Cotton Capital of the World."

And then we approached the Yazoo River.

The Yazoo River is fed by the Tallahatchie River. And Aunt Charlotte said that when she was young, she was baptized in the Tallahatchie River. But as she's saying that, I also know that something else happened in that river. Because that river is a place where they found the body of Emmett Till, who was lynched by white men when he was 14 because they thought that he had done something untoward to a white woman. And after they killed him, they had sunk him in that river, tying a cotton gin fan around his neck.

I know that Emmett Till was just four years older than my own father, and that like my father, his mother had also fled north. And like my father, he had been sent for the summers to stay with his grandparents, and that's how he died.

And for some reason, it's at the river's edge that Aunt Charlotte finally starts to talk. And she tells me about another baptism of sorts that occurred there.

It was a long time ago when they were kids, and her brother and her cousin were walking through the white side of town. And black people

weren't allowed in the white side of town if they weren't there for work. So a car approaches behind them, and a group of white boys began to chase. And my aunt described how her brother and her cousin just ran and ran and eventually jumped into those muddy rivers in order to escape, and how they came home dripping wet, their chests heaving.

And it reminded me of all the other stories I had heard about how when enslaved people tried to run away, they would sometimes jump into the river in hopes that they could hide their scent from the dogs that were chasing them.

And then she tells me about the time another brother had to come home, his chest heaving. He came to warn the family that his cousin had stood up to a white plantation owner, and everyone understood what that meant. You could not stand up to white plantation owners in the South if you were black and live to tell that story. So her own father had to grab his Winchester and another rifle, and they guarded him through that night in a well-practiced vigil to ensure that he would be safe until they could whisk him away to the North.

All these years when I had been trying to get Aunt Charlotte to talk about what it was like in Mississippi, and now here we are, with the mosquitoes swarming our legs. And it felt like the ghosts of Greenwood started to come near.

For the first time, I started to get a glimpse of my family's story. And the stories were in the land and in the water, in the Tallahatchie that flowed to the Yazoo, and the Yazoo that flowed to the Mississippi, and the Mississippi, whose muddy waters created the delta that this vast land was named after. And that river created soils that were so rich that they led to the expansion of cotton unlike anything that the world had seen. And it also helped to fuel the modern American economy. This river,

the Mississippi River, brought so much life and so much death. It created the fertile land that made cotton king and lavish riches on the white people who owned almost all of it.

But it also led to the pain and suffering for the black people who had to work almost all of it.

[Music]
Nikole Hannah-Jones

From The New York Times Magazine, I'm Nikole Hannah-Jones. This is "1619."

Archived Recording

This is cotton, the living plant. Beauty and utility bred into the living fiber by nature herself, by nature working with her incomparable tools, the sun and the air, the soil, the rains, and the wonder of growth.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

You want me to pull up closer? Yeah?

Matthew Desmond

O.K., you ready?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

Matt Desmond, how did we in the United States first start to come to grow cotton?

Archived Recording

Cotton, its beginnings veiled in antiquity.

Matthew Desmond

So the story of cotton is an old story. You know, it goes back millennia.

Archived Recording

Its story older than history itself.

Matthew Desmond

In this country, it dates back to the earliest years of the colonies. And when slavery begins on these shores, it begins in cotton fields, but it's also in tobacco fields. It's in rice paddies. It's in sugar plantations. And everyone understood the potential of cotton.

Archived Recording

It's beautiful.

Matthew Desmond

It was the commodity the world wanted. It was like oil, in a way, in our modern day.

Archived Recording

And just as important, it will stay beautiful. It's cotton.

Matthew Desmond

But cotton was not king at this time. And the reason cotton wasn't king is because it was labor-intensive. It took about 10 hours for one enslaved worker just to pick the seeds out of 1 pound of cotton. And so everyone knew that if you could harness cotton, you could make a killing. But then something changed. And that something was the invention of the cotton gin. And the gin that we credit to Eli Whitney broke the bottleneck, and suddenly you were able to clean as much cotton as you can grow. And so the cotton market explodes in America. But there is a problem. Cotton needed land. You could only grow cotton on the same patch of land for about three years before that soil was depleted. So where do we get the land? Well, the United States

government itself took it from Native American peoples. It dispatched its military in Alabama, and Georgia, and Florida, and it acquires land and then it sells that land back on the cheap to white settlers. And suddenly, the United States had millions of acres that could be cultivated for cotton.

And this is when we start seeing slavery take off, because once you have the land, the thing you need next is the labor. In 1790, we had just shy of about 700,000 enslaved workers on these shores. By 1850, that number is three million enslaved workers in America, and cotton is driving most of that growth. You know, we all learn about Eli Whitney and the cotton gin at fourth or fifth grade as kind of a clever invention.

Archived Recording

(SINGING) Oh, things were rotten in the land of cotton until Whitney made the cotton gin. Now old times there will soon be forgotten for it did the work of 100 men.

Matthew Desmond

What we often don't learn about is how profound an effect that invention had on the lives of enslaved workers. Enslavers wanted to get the most out of their workers, and they did. And what took hold in America was a new kind of economic system, one that was relentlessly focused on increasing cotton productivity.

You know, many of our depictions of the cotton plantation are bucolic and small. You know, you might see a handful of enslaved workers in the fields, and an overseer on a horse, and then the owner in a big house. That's not how it was. It was incredibly complex. The slave plantations that developed in the Mississippi Valley were huge. They resembled something much more closely to our modern multinational

corporations than we often think. There was complex hierarchies with mid-level managers and workers who reported to other workers who reported to other workers. There were sophisticated data-tracking techniques that were developed, so we knew how much labor and money went into producing each bale of cotton. Complicated workforce supervision techniques were developed for making sure people met their quotas by the end of the day. Professional manuals and credentials were developed so enslavers could trade information about what to feed their enslaved workforce, how to house them, even how to speak to them. But behind all the sophistication, behind all this capitalistic rationality, was violence.

Because overseers were tracking everyone's haul, if you fell short of that quota, you were often beat. And these beatings are horrendous to read about. Enslaved workers passed out often from pain. They wake up vomiting. Pregnant women were meant to lay down in small kind of divots in the ground so their belly could go in to allow the whip to fall flat on their back. You know, your job, this terrible job you had, was to try to hit your quota every day. And if you fell below your quota, you could be subject to torture. But if you overshot, that brought another terror, too, because the overseers might increase your quota for the next day. It's also why punishments rose and fell with global market fluctuations. It wasn't random. I read an account from 1854, from a fugitive enslaved worker named John Brown, and he wrote, quote, "When the prices rise in the English market, the poor slaves immediately feel the effects. They are harder driven, and the whip is kept more constantly going." So, you know, you increase the price of the crop in Manchester, and enslaved workers are going to feel it in the fields of Alabama and Georgia back in the United States.

So when I was in college, I worked at a telemarketing call center. And —

Matthew Desmond

I did that, too, in college!

Nikole Hannah-Jones

Unfortunately, probably a lot of us did that. I was not very good at it. But I remember we would all have a target, and everyone's target was determined by how many sales they had made the week before. And there was this balancing of, well, you don't want to have a really exceptional week, because then you might be expected to repeat that exceptional week. But you also couldn't have a really low week, because then you'd get called into the manager's office. Are you saying that these types of management systems, that they have their genesis in the system of plantation slavery?

Matthew Desmond

I think that's fair to say. These techniques of supervision were developed by folks trying to squeeze as much productivity out of their enslaved workforce as possible. And violence worked. At the eve of the Civil War, the average enslaved worker picked 400 percent as much cotton as her counterpart did 60 years earlier. It's an incredible amount of productivity. The system is really pulling as much as it can out of its enslaved workforce.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So in order to expand profits, you have to expand the amount of people who are working to pick and process the cotton. Except enslaved people are very expensive. A single kind of, quote, unquote, "prime hand" could be, in current dollars, tens of thousands of dollars. So how are these planters, these enslavers, paying for this expansion?

Matthew Desmond

That's where the banks come in. Planters, to expand their operations and make more money, needed more capital. And so what did they do? They took out mortgages. And the way we usually think of a mortgage is, O.K., bank, please lend me the money to buy a house, and against that loan, I'm going to leverage my asset, this house. So if I don't pay back my loan, you can take my house. Now, that concept has been around for a long time in America, but for a lot of our history, it wasn't about houses, and it wasn't about land. It was about enslaved people. Plantation owners went to the banks and said, please give me a loan to buy more land and expand my workforce. And against that loan, I'm going to put up my people that I own.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So what does that mean? How does that work exactly, that you can take out a mortgage on a human being?

Matthew Desmond

For enslavers, mortgaging their workforce was easier than mortgaging their homes or mortgaging their land. You know, land wasn't worth that much. And so what people put up was actual human beings. They mortgaged enslaved workers to buy more enslaved workers.

Something else that it means, though, which is critical, is this allowed global markets to get into the business of slavery. And so this is how it worked. State-chartered banks would take this slave-backed mortgage from this plantation owner, and this one, and this one. And they would bundle that debt and make something called a bond. And they would sell those bonds to investors all over the Western world. And so when owners made payments on their mortgages, the investors got a little return. Today, we call this securitizing debt, and it's really a way to kind

of sink global capital into the American slave economy at the time. In fact, historians have shown that the majority of credit powering the American slave economy came from the London money market. And keep in mind, this is years after Britain abolished the African slave trade in 1807. So a generation removed from that decision, and Britain and much of Europe along with it is still bankrolling slavery in the United States.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So you didn't have to personally own human beings to make a great deal of profit off of them.

Matthew Desmond

No, you didn't have to. And it's interesting, the growth of these kind of newfangled financial instruments, like slave-backed mortgage bonds — they grew in popularity as the institution of slavery itself grew more unpopular around the world. It's allowing investors in those countries to really say they're against slavery out of one part of their mouth and use their money to invest in it from the other. And the money flowed in. So at the height of slavery, the combined value of enslaved workers exceeded that of all the railroads and all the factories in the nation.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

Let's just pause and reflect on that. Just say that one more time, because I remember the first time I read that statistic, I just stopped on the page.

Matthew Desmond

Yeah. So at the height of slavery, the combined value of all enslaved people was more than that of all the railroads and all the factories of the nation combined.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

When you think of that comparison, how does that make you feel?

Matthew Desmond

Yeah, it's, um —

Nikole Hannah-Jones

I feel like a long pause makes sense because I'm not sure how it makes me feel either. It's such an illuminating statistic. It really speaks to what was driving our economy at that time.

Matthew Desmond

Yeah. The enslaved workforce in America was where the country's wealth resided.

[Music]

Matthew Desmond

So America is riding this wave of cotton prices just increasing and increasing, and more money keeps flowing. And more people around the Western world are invested in this bubble. And we know how these stories end. And the bubble eventually pops. You know, the American South overproduces cotton. Consumer demand cannot keep up. And prices start to plummet in 1834, and then they drop, causing a recession, which has been known as the Panic of 1837. Investors and creditors, they started calling in their debts, but plantation owners were totally underwater. They couldn't sell their enslaved workforce, and they couldn't sell their land to pay off their debts, either, because as the price of cotton dropped, the price of enslaved workers and the price of land dropped with it. So that debt was toxic. But investors wanted their money. So states had a few decisions. They could have raised taxes. But their citizens said absolutely not, and they listened to them. They also

could have foreclosed on the plantations, essentially shutting down the cotton industry. But the cotton industry was holding everything together, and if you foreclosed on the cotton industry, you foreclosed on the economy.

And so, basically, they did nothing. They did nothing. Because cotton slavery was too big to fail.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

Where have we heard that before?

Matthew Desmond

No, it sounds so familiar, right?

Archived Recording 1

Well, Mark, earlier this week, we heard all about these “too-big-to-fail” banks, the systemically important financial institutions. So let’s describe a too-big-to-fail bank.

Archived Recording 2

Do we still have banks that are too big to fail?

Archived Recording 3

Citigroup is too big to fail.

Archived Recording 4

Too-big-to-fail financial institutions were both a source of the crisis and among the primary impediments to policymakers’ efforts to contain it.

Matthew Desmond

It's not hard to draw these parallels between what happened in the 1830s in America and what happened in the 2000s.

Archived Recording (Barack Obama)

We are in the most serious financial crisis in generations.

Matthew Desmond

You know, all of the ingredients are there.

Archived Recording

Complex illiquid mortgage and mortgage-related securities —

Matthew Desmond

There's mystifying financial instruments —

Archived Recording

Help me out here. How does that make sense?

Matthew Desmond

— which hide the risk and connect people all over the world. There's stacks of paper money printed on the myth that some institution — cotton, housing — is unshakable.

Archived Recording

It says Morgan Stanley encouraged a lender to push risky, more expensive mortgages on black customers in Detroit.

Matthew Desmond

There's the intentional exploitation of black people.

Archived Recording

The suit claims they steered black and Hispanic borrowers into bad loans, resulting in mass foreclosures.

Matthew Desmond

And there is impunity for the profiteers when it all falls apart.

Archived Recording

Really, the regulators had no practical choice but to keep them from failing.

Matthew Desmond

You know, the borrowers were bailed out after 1837.

Archived Recording

Because they would've brought down the whole financial system with them.

Matthew Desmond

And of course, the banks were bailed out after 2008.

Archived Recording (Bernie Sanders)

If a bank is too big to fail, it is too big to exist.

Matthew Desmond

So this is a story about American capitalism, about the foundations of American capitalism, about the American economy. And it was an economy that got started in brutality.

Slavery allowed this poor, fledgling nation to turn into a colossal powerhouse in the global economy. But what slavery also created was a culture in American capitalism that was incredibly brutal.

Archived Recording 1

— learned six women blamed their miscarriages on working conditions at the warehouse. Others say they passed out because of excessive heat and lack of A.C.

Archived Recording 2

Hundreds of employees on zero-hours contracts are subjected to a regime described as horrendous and exhausting.

Archived Recording 3

There are several investigations about injuries on the job.

Archived Recording 4

They're monitored at all times. Even toilet visits are regulated.

Archived Recording 5

Breathing toxic fumes, stress, injuries, over 100 ambulance calls.

Matthew Desmond

It's tolerance for inequality.

Archived Recording

I work 40 hours a week, and I can't survive.

Matthew Desmond

The level of poverty that we have here, compared to other industrialized societies —

Archived Recording (Elizabeth Warren)

Who is this economy really working for?

Archived Recording

The C.E.O.s making 204 times what the average worker is making.

Matthew Desmond

And it's a culture that brought us the Panic of 1837, the stock-market crash of 1929, the global financial crisis in 2008.

Archived Recording

Salaries on Wall Street rose last year to their highest levels since the 2008 financial crisis.

Matthew Desmond

And if the American capitalist way is uniquely brutal compared to other kind of capitalist societies in the world, it may have to do with how capitalism started on these shores and the plain fact that we haven't shook this kind of shadow of slavery from our economic life.

[Music]

Nikole Hannah-Jones

Thank you so much, Matt.

Matthew Desmond

Thank you so much, Nikole.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

You've reached Nikole Hannah-Jones. Please leave me a message, including your name and the number where I can reach you. Thank you.

Jesmyn Ward

Hello, Nikole. This is Jesmyn Ward. I just want to tell you a little bit about the piece I'm going to read. It's about what happened on

January 1, 1808, when the acts prohibiting the importation of slaves went into effect. This basically banned the importation of enslaved people from abroad, but it also meant that enslaved people who were already in the United States of America, that millions of them were then sold south to provide labor for the cotton industry and the sugar industry, which then meant that thousands upon thousands of families were broken and split apart forever. So that's why I chose to write about that moment, because I wanted to look really closely at what this change, this change in law, what that did to human beings. So here's the piece.

Jesmyn Ward

The whisper run through the quarters like a river swelling to flood. We passed the story to each other in the night in our pallets, in the day over the well, in the fields as we pulled at the fallow earth. They ain't stealing us from over the water no more. We dreamed of those we was stolen from: our mothers who oiled and braided our hair to our scalps, our fathers who cut our first staffs, our sisters and brothers who we pinched for tattling on us, and we felt a cool light wind move through us for one breath. Felt like ease to imagine they remained, had not been stolen, would never be. That be a foolish thing. We thought this later when the first Georgia Man come and roped us. Grabbed a girl on her way for morning water. Snatched a boy running to the stables. A woman after she left her babies blinking awake in their sack blankets. A man sharpening a hoe. They always came before dawn for us chosen to be sold south. We didn't understand what it would be like, couldn't think beyond the panic, the prying, the crying, the begging and the screaming, the endless screaming from the mouth and beyond. Sounding through the whole body, breaking the heart with its volume. A blood keen. But the ones that owned and sold us was deaf to it. Was unfeeling of the

tugging the children did on their fathers' arms or the glance of a sister's palm over her sold sister's face for the last time. But we was all feeling, all seeing, all hearing, all smelling: We felt it for the terrible dying it was. Knowed we was walking out of one life and into another. An afterlife in a burning place. The farther we marched, the hotter it got. Our skin grew around the rope. Our muscles melted to nothing. Our fat to bone. The land rolled to a flat bog, and in the middle of it, a city called New Orleans. When we shuffled into that town of the dead, they put us in pens. Fattened us. Tried to disguise our limps, oiled the pallor of sickness out of our skins, raped us to assess our soft parts, then told us lies about ourselves to make us into easier sells. Was told to answer yes when they asked us if we were master seamstresses, blacksmiths or lady's maids. Was told to disavow the wives we thought we heard calling our names when we first woke in the morning, the husbands we imagined lying with us, chest to back, while the night's torches burned, the children whose eyelashes we thought we could still feel on our cheeks when the rain turned to a fine mist while we stood in lines outside the pens waiting for our next hell to take legs and seek us out. Trade our past lives for new deaths.

[Music]
Jesmyn Ward

Yeah, that's it.

Listen 31:51

3. The Birth of American Music

America heard the sound of complete artistic freedom in black music, and then claimed that music as its own. "And that's ironic," Wesley Morris tells us. "Because this is the sound of a people who, for decades and centuries, have been denied freedom." Released on Sept. 6, 2019.