
THE HIDDEN ROOTS *of* WHITE SUPREMACY

and the
PATH *to a* SHARED
AMERICAN FUTURE

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SIMON & SCHUSTER 2023
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Prologue

BEFORE AMERICA

On May 4, 1863, the steamboat *Northerner* pushed up the Mississippi River from St. Louis, bound for Fort Snelling, a military outpost north of St. Paul, Minnesota. Just a few miles into the journey, Captain Alfred J. Woods encountered a large handmade raft adrift in the strong currents. Aboard were seventy-six African Americans: forty men, ten women, and twenty-six children.

The leader of this determined group was Robert Hickman, who was attempting to free himself, along with his family and neighbors, from enslavement on a plantation in Boone County, Missouri. Hickman, a preacher who could both read and write, had seen newspaper accounts of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation four months earlier. Although the proclamation did not apply to Missouri because it was under Union control, this news nonetheless inspired him to begin making plans to escape north. The Hickman party aimed to reach free soil by way of the river, which was by then safely patrolled by the Union army. They embarked under cover of darkness on the moonless night of May 3, but because their makeshift

craft was not equipped with sails or oars, they drifted for a day in the wrong direction before encountering the *Northerner*.¹

Seeing the floundering party with so many children aboard, Captain Woods asked if they needed assistance. Sympathetic to their plight and knowing that the strains of the Civil War had left Minnesota with a labor shortage, Woods ordered the raft to be securely tied to the steamboat and offered to take them as far as his final destination.

Neither Woods nor Hickman anticipated the vitriol that awaited them. On May 5, the *Northerner* approached the levee in Lowertown, on the outskirts of St. Paul. As local dock workers, mostly Irish, caught sight of the self-emancipated African Americans (commonly referred to as "contraband" by whites) on the trailing raft, they became increasingly agitated, seeing them as competition for jobs. As word spread, a threatening crowd gathered on the levee. The commotion was so great that St. Paul police arrived on the scene. But after assessing the situation, they sided with the mob and threatened to arrest not the Irish rabble-rousers but the Black asylum seekers, should they disembark.

Captain Woods ordered the boat with its trailing raft to steam on to Fort Snelling. There, Hickman and his party came ashore without incident on May 5, but they were met with an unexpected sight: hundreds of disheveled Native Americans were huddled together, forcibly assembled near the docks.

The desperate and anxious crowd they encountered were part of an original group numbering more than 1,600, mostly women, children, and elderly Dakota people who had been held under armed guard all winter, following the Dakota War of the year before, in a miserable encampment in a lowland area below Fort Snelling. Unbeknownst to them, Minnesota government officials and military leaders were awaiting the spring thaw that would allow for their mass deportation downriver from their ancestral homelands to a bleak

reservation in the Nebraska Territory. By the time the ice finally melted and river levels rose, hundreds had died. A group of 770 Dakota people had been shipped off the day before on another steamer, the *Davenport*.

Having set the Hickman party safely ashore and unloaded the wagons and supplies for the military fort, Captain Woods ordered preparations to receive his next "cargo": 547 Dakota people, whom he was transporting for the fee of \$25 per head plus 10 cents a day for sustenance. Soldiers from Fort Snelling herded the ragtag remnant aboard the *Northerner* "like so many cattle," as one observer put it. As they pulled away, a local minister's wife remarked, "May God have mercy on them, for they can expect none from man."²

Neither Hickman and his companions, nor the Dakota people, would have had the perspective to realize they were witnessing the momentous final chapter of both chattel slavery in the US and "Indian removal" in Minnesota. They would not have grasped the paradox the two groups represented that afternoon on the banks of the Mississippi River: that the end of bondage for Hickman's band also marked the last vestige of sovereignty for the Dakota people. And they would certainly have been unaware that, in the closing weeks of 1862, just five months earlier, President Lincoln was simultaneously considering two documents that would dramatically change the fates of each group: a warrant for the mass execution of thirty-eight Dakota men and the Emancipation Proclamation.

This encounter on May 5, 1863, contains multiple narrative streams, each of which tells a different story about America. The question is, which do we follow? Do we tell the story of Fort Snelling, the military outpost established to protect the westward expansion of settler colonialism? Do we embark back down the Mississippi River to Missouri and the story of enslaved Africans in the South? Do we push upriver from St. Paul to its headwaters and stories of Indigenous peoples populating this land for millennia? Or do we portage east

and cross the larger waters connected to the homelands of Europeans who first set foot on these shores just a few hundred years ago? Each narrative pushes back to a different beginning.

AMERICA'S IDENTITY CRISIS

Across the last few decades in the US, we have experienced widespread debates and even violent conflicts over American history. Battles like these typically erupt during times of social change, when cultural convulsions shake the foundations of old ways of knowing and living. In these unsettling times, closely held stories, long-established institutions, and taken-for-granted features of the landscape itself are questioned. We fight over heroes and monuments and scream at school board meetings. Teachers and librarians are surveilled; writers and artists are suspect; books are banned and burned. We move with increasing hesitation in uncharted cultural territory, like explorers venturing into those voids on ancient maps marked only with the ominous words "Here be dragons."

Identity, rather than policy, drives divisions. History becomes the new front line in the culture wars, as claims about who we are as a people inevitably turn on competing narratives about when and how we arrived at this place. These contests are not mere verbal abstractions. Each narrative arc, each "in the beginning," privileges one set of interests over others and ultimately validates the accumulation of power and wealth and land in the hands of some and not others.

We are living in such a time of uncertainty and transition. As I documented in *The End of White Christian America*, over the last two decades the country has, for the first time in our history, moved from being a majority-white Christian nation, demographically speaking, to one in which there is no ethno-religious cultural majority. When Barack Obama, our first African American president, was elected in

2008, a solid majority of Americans (54 percent) still identified as white and Christian. But by the end of his second term, as Donald Trump entered the national political scene and was elected president, that number had fallen to 47 percent.³ According to PRRI's American Values Atlas, by 2022 that number had dipped further to 42 percent.⁴ Even if everyday Americans weren't familiar with the statistics, they could sense the tectonic plates moving via the shifting demographic composition of their neighborhoods, the variety of food on their grocery store shelves, the appearance of Spanish-language local radio and roadside billboards, and the class photos on the walls of their public schools.

The juxtaposition of our forty-fourth and forty-fifth presidents—and the new identity politics of white Christian nationalism that has emerged across these last dozen years—exposes the heart of the conflict. Obama's election in 2008, and his reelection in 2012, were unmistakable signs that the old cultural foundations were failing. Trump's narrow election win in 2016—fueled by a wave of anger and resentment among conservative white Christians who were increasingly feeling displaced from the center of a new American story—was the desperate attempt to shore them up.

The 2016 presidential election provides unambiguous evidence of America's identity crisis. One of the public opinion survey questions most predictive of the 2016 vote was this one: "Do you think that American culture and way of life has changed for the better or changed for the worse since the 1950s?" The country was, remarkably, evenly divided in its evaluation of American culture today, compared to an era prior to school desegregation, the civil rights movement, the banning of Christian prayer by teachers on public school grounds, the widespread availability of the pill and other forms of contraception, legalized abortion, and marriage equality.

Attitudes among partisans were striking mirror opposites. Two-thirds of Democrats said things have changed for the better, but

two-thirds of Republicans said things had changed for the worse since the 1950s. White Christians also stood out from other Americans. Majorities of white evangelicals (74 percent), white mainline Protestants (59 percent), and white Catholics (57 percent) believed things had changed for the worse since the 1950s.⁵

In my most recent book, *White Too Long*, I found similar patterns in the prevalence of racist attitudes among white Christian subgroups.⁶ There I developed a Racism Index, a composite statistical measure based on fifteen survey questions about Confederate monuments, the effect of past discrimination on the present, the treatment of African Americans in the criminal justice system, and the existence of racial discrimination—where a score of 1 represented holding the least racist attitudes and a score of 10 represented holding the most racist attitudes. White evangelicals scored 8 out of 10 on the Racism Index, while white mainline Protestants and white Catholics each scored 7. By contrast, white Americans who claimed no religious affiliation scored 4.

Among white Christians, these fears about cultural change and attitudes about race were strongly correlated with electoral choices. While it is well known that approximately eight in ten white evangelical Protestants voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020, it is less frequently noted that six in ten white mainline Protestants and white Catholics cast their lot with Trump in both elections as well.⁷

Particularly in the wake of Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) takeover of the Republican Party, our two political parties are increasingly animated by two starkly different visions of the nation's past and future. Is America a divinely ordained promised land for European Christians, or is America a pluralistic democracy where all stand on equal footing before the law? Most Americans embrace the latter. But a desperate, defensive, mostly white Christian minority cling to the former.

THE 1619 PROJECT AND THE BATTLE OVER AMERICA'S BEGINNINGS

While this contest played out on the national political stage, the battle over American history was also roiling journalism and the academy. The most powerful manifestation of this conflict was "The 1619 Project," an ongoing long-form journalism project conceived of and led by Nikole Hannah-Jones, which was first published in the *New York Times Magazine* on August 18, 2019.

On the home page dedicated to the project, the following words appear in white letters against Dannielle Bowman's monochromatic photograph of a dark, empty ocean meeting a gray, cloudless sky:

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed. On the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully.⁸

The power of the 1619 Project was its endeavor "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."⁹ Its principal tool for accomplishing this goal was to give America a new genesis: not 1776, when British colonies and slavery were well established, but 1619, the year a group of Africans were brought against their will to the British territories. The introduction to the 1619 Project boldly declared that "the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619" and that this moment represented

not just “the country’s original sin” but rather “the country’s very origin.”¹⁰

It was a provocative move, particularly in the volatile climate created by the Trump presidency. The project was immediately controversial, in both foreseeable and unpredictable ways. On the one hand, there was the denouncement from an all-white group of historians; they argued that the 1619 Project had drastically overstated the extent to which the American colonists were motivated to revolt against Great Britain by a desire to preserve slavery, a point the *New York Times Magazine* essentially conceded in a correction issued in March 2020.¹¹ But some critics then seemed intent on using this objection or other quibbles about specific facts to discredit the entire project.¹²

On the other hand, there was also criticism from the widely respected scholar Nell Irvin Painter, emeritus professor of history at Princeton University. Painter, who is African American, endorsed the goals of the project but pointed to a problem with the project’s core narrative: the Africans brought to the colonies in 1619 were not enslaved. Painter explained the importance of the distinction in an op-ed published in the *Guardian* the same week the 1619 Project launched:

People were not enslaved in Virginia in 1619, they were indentured. The 20 or so Africans were sold and bought as “servants” for a term of years, and they joined a population consisting largely of European indentured servants, mainly poor people from the British Isles whom the Virginia Company of London had transported and sold into servitude. Enslavement was a process that took place step by step, after the mid-seventeenth century. This process of turning “servants” from Africa into racialized workers enslaved for life occurred in the 1660s to 1680s through a succession of Virginia laws that decreed that a child’s status followed that of its mother and that baptism did not automatically

confer emancipation. By the end of the seventeenth century, Africans had indeed been marked off by race in law as chattel to be bought, sold, traded, inherited and serve as collateral for business and debt services. This was not already the case in 1619.¹³

Moreover, while 1619 marked the first forced arrival of Africans in the British colonies, historians generally agreed that enslaved Africans arrived nearly a century before as part of the first European colony in what would become the United States. In 1526, Spanish conquistadors founded San Miguel de Gualdape, located on the Atlantic coast near the Georgia/South Carolina border, as an outpost that would help establish Spain’s new-world claims. Before the end of the year, however, the enslaved Africans launched a rebellion—the first slave revolt north of the Rio Grande—that resulted in the colony’s demise. Though precise records do not exist, it is probable that some of the Africans who survived the ordeal escaped and lived with the local Guale tribe. If this is true, these courageous and defiant Africans were the first transatlantic permanent residents of what is now the United States since the Vikings.¹⁴

Despite these controversies, the 1619 Project became a cultural juggernaut. Jake Silverstein, the editor in chief of the *New York Times Magazine*, noted that its initial publication “was greeted with an enthusiastic response unlike any we had seen before.”¹⁵ Copies of the magazine, including an additional print run of tens of thousands, sold out immediately. Issues were posted for sale on eBay at eye-popping prices. The opening essay by Hannah-Jones was cited on the floor of Congress, and Democratic nominees for president referred to it in stump speeches. A school curriculum, created in partnership with the Pulitzer Center, was soon disseminated to more than 4,500 classrooms.¹⁶ The 1619 Project grew from its original home in the *New York Times Magazine* to an expanded website, a podcast, a bestselling book, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*,

and a six-part docuseries on Hulu.¹⁷ It won Hannah-Jones a 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Commentary.¹⁸

The project also produced significant political pushback. By 2021, Republicans in five states introduced legislation to withhold funding from public schools that used the 1619 Project curriculum. The biggest grandstanding, not surprisingly, came from President Trump. Just over a year after the 1619 Project launched, Trump organized a White House Conference on American History to counter it. At a press conference on September 17, 2020, following the event, he declared:

By viewing every issue through the lens of race, they want to impose a new segregation, and we must not allow that to happen. Critical race theory, the 1619 Project and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country.¹⁹

As in many of his speeches, Trump's usage of the pronouns *they* and *we* are nakedly racist. He treats "American history" like a piece of amber, where white founding fathers are forever captured in their colonial finery at the dawn of the Revolutionary War, and he casts any attempt to redirect attention away from that scene as "toxic" and "poison."

Taking aim at the 1619 Project's claims to establish "a new origin story," Trump announced his own project, "the 1776 Commission," an advisory group that would focus on "patriotic education" and produce resources that glorified "the legacy of 1776." It was short-lived. The commission, which lacked a single professional historian among its members, released a report on January 18, 2021, less than two weeks after the failed insurrection, attempted in Trump's name and with his encouragement, at the US Capitol.²⁰ The materials were widely panned by historians, and one of President Joe Biden's first

orders after taking office just two days later was to disband the commission and take down the website.²¹

THE IMPORTANCE AND INADEQUACY OF 1619 AS AMERICA'S "NEW ORIGIN STORY"

Nearly six decades ago, in *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin vividly described the gift that a Black perspective holds for white Americans who are invested in a truer understanding of our shared history and our own heritage:

The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure.²²

The most important contribution of the 1619 Project is the de-centering of an American history of untenable innocence and impossible virtue. Whatever its shortcomings, the 1619 Project has helped make that vision of history indefensible. It has disrupted the old master narrative, creating an opportunity for Americans to mature, to embrace a more complex and truthful understanding of our heritage. And that is a remarkable achievement.

Again, Baldwin:

Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Ameri-

cans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way. And perhaps this attitude, held in spite of what they know and have endured, helps to explain why Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred. The tendency has really been, insofar as this was possible, to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.²³

The 1619 Project's purchase on the American imagination has been a long time coming, built on the public historical witness of a chorus of Native American and African American writers, artists, and leaders: William Apess, James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Vine Deloria Jr., Lorraine Hansberry, Chief Joseph (Hinmatóowyalahtq̓it), Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Luther Standing Bear (Mathó Náʒiŋ), Wilma Pearl Mankiller, Tecumseh, and Ida B. Wells, to name just a few. Nell Painter's calibrated characterization of the importance of the 1619 Project, featured in an interview with *The Atlantic's* Adam Serwer, is apt. While she stood by her criticism of the project and conceded that it was not history "as I would write it," she nonetheless declared, "I support the 1619 Project as kind of a cultural event."²⁴

Even so, the 1619 Project overreaches with its goal "to reframe American history by regarding 1619 as our nation's birth year."²⁵ In its claim to be *the* new American origin story, the 1619 Project risks trading one exclusion for another. The original 1619 Project published in the *New York Times Magazine* mentions Native Americans only five times, mostly in passing. Hannah-Jones's much-heralded twenty-two-page opening essay makes no mention of Native Americans.²⁶ Throughout, Native Americans appear because of their connections to African American history in the context of European settler colonialism, not on their own terms. By starting with the

oppression of Africans in British colonial America, the 1619 Project cloaks from historical view at least sixteen thousand years of Indigenous history prior to European contact.²⁷ And by pushing more than a century of Europeans' prior violent interactions with the continent's Indigenous peoples into the shadows, it obscures the headwaters from which the brutal colonial impulse—and more importantly, its moral justification—flows.²⁸

While many Native Americans applauded the 1619 Project's de-centering of a Eurocentric history, there were some sharp responses to the myopia produced by the focus on the year 1619. For example, writing in Norfolk's *Virginia-Pilot* in late 2020, Dawn Custalow, a member of the Mattaponi tribe and a descendant of Pocahontas (born Amonute and later known as Matoaka), strongly objected to the 1619 Project's dominance in educational circles. "How can any group of people reframe another's history when the descendants of the original people are still alive and can testify to the validity of their history?" she asked incredulously. "If the idea that U.S. history began in 1619 is accepted, then my people's collective memory is blotted out forever."²⁹ Custalow's denouncement gained little public traction.

FROM 1619 TO 1493: THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

Indeed, by 1619, the Indigenous bodies that were subject to the initial acts of invasion, domination, and colonization by Europeans in North America were, by more than a century, cold. Viewed in this light, the transportation of twenty indentured Africans to this continent in 1619 was one of many outcomes of a collusion between European monarchies and the western Christian Church that began nearly 130 years earlier.

One candidate for a more promising point of departure for America's origin story is 1493—not the year Christopher Columbus “sailed the ocean blue,” but the year in which he returned to a hero's welcome in Spain, bringing with him gold, brightly colored parrots, and nearly a dozen captive Indigenous people.³⁰ It was also the year he was commissioned to return to the Americas with a much larger fleet of seventeen ships, nearly 1,500 men, and more than a dozen priests to speed the conversion of Indigenous people who inhabited what he, along with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, still believed were Asian shores. That trip resulted in the founding of La Isabela, in present-day Dominican Republic, the first permanent European occupation attempted in the Americas. While the colony would not last, the ripple effects of the journey would soon be felt in all spheres of human interaction and relationships. As Charles C. Mann, author of *1493: Uncovering the World Columbus Created*, notes, Columbus's actions “began the era of globalization—the single, turbulent exchange of goods and services that today engulfs the entire habitable world.”³¹

The return of Columbus in 1493 also precipitated the culmination of one of the most fateful but unacknowledged theological developments in the history of the western Christian Church: the Doctrine of Discovery.³² Established in a series of fifteenth-century papal bulls (official edicts that carry the full weight of church and papal authority), the Doctrine claims that European civilization and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races, and religions. From this premise, it follows that domination and colonial conquest were merely the means of improving, if not the temporal, then the eternal lot of Indigenous peoples. So conceived, no atrocities could possibly tilt the scales of justice against these immeasurable goods. With its fiction of previously “undiscovered” lands and peoples, the Doctrine fulfilled European rulers' request for an unequivocal theological and moral justification for their new global political and economic exploits.

Robert J. Miller, professor of law at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University and an enrolled citizen of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe, summarized the Doctrine's purpose as follows:

In essence, the Doctrine provided that newly arrived Europeans immediately and automatically acquired legally recognized property rights over the inhabitants without knowledge or consent of the Indigenous peoples. When English explorers and other Europeans planted their national flags and religious symbols in “newly discovered” lands, as many paintings depict, they were not just thanking God for a safe voyage. Instead they were undertaking a well-recognized legal procedure and ritual mandated by international law and designed to create their country's legal claim over the “newly discovered” lands and peoples.³³

The Doctrine of Discovery, in short, merged the interests of European imperialism, including the African slave trade, with Christian missionary zeal.³⁴ *Dum Diversas*, the initial edict that laid the theological and political foundations for the Doctrine, was issued by Pope Nicholas V on June 18, 1452. It explicitly granted Portuguese king Alfonso V the following rights:

To invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.³⁵

The papal bull elevated what had been accepted practice into official church doctrine and international law. It marshaled theological

categories, targeting Muslims and all other non-Christian peoples, who are described as “enemies of Christ,” as the primary metric for determining who deserved political or human rights. Most notably, it explicitly gave European leaders permission not only to subdue such peoples initially but to “reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.” This decree, promulgated by the person western Christians considered the Vicar of Christ on earth, provided the blueprint for an unfettered European colonial race for “undiscovered lands” and fertilized the blossoming African slave trade.

The most relevant papal edict for the American context was the bull *Inter Caetera*, issued by Pope Alexander VI in May 1493 with the express purpose of validating Spain’s ownership rights of previously “undiscovered” lands in the Americas following the voyages of Columbus the year before. It praised Columbus, “who for a long time had intended to seek out and discover certain islands and mainlands remote and unknown and not hitherto discovered by others.” It again affirmed the church’s blessing of and interest in political conquest, “that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.”³⁶

Given the competition between European powers, *Inter Caetera* also had an important additional purpose: to help provide rules of engagement that would minimize the blood and treasure Europeans would expend fighting each other. To this end, Pope Alexander VI included two caveats. First, he drew a vertical demarcation line extending from one pole to the other, “one hundred leagues to the west and south of any of the islands that are usually called the Azores and Cape Verde,” to allocate land claims between Spain and Portugal. Second, he added a provision that lands could be claimed only if they were “not previously possessed by any Christian owner.”³⁷ Robert J. Miller and his colleagues note the

convergence of powerful shared motives: “The Church’s interest in expanding Christendom and adding to its wealth, and Spain’s and Portugal’s economic and political interests in acquiring new territories, assets, and colonies had solidified by 1493 under the canon and international law of the Doctrine of Discovery.”³⁸

Not to be left out of the international contest among the leading European powers to carve up the “new world” among themselves, in 1496 King Henry VII also drew upon the logic of the emerging Doctrine of Discovery to commission John Cabot and his sons to represent England with the following mission:

To find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians. We have also . . . given licence [*sic*] to set up our aforesaid banners and ensigns in any town, city, castle, island or mainland whatsoever, newly found by them. And that the before-mentioned John and his sons or their heirs and deputies may conquer, occupy and possess whatsoever such towns, castles, cities and islands by them thus discovered.³⁹

I concede that, on its face, the claim that edicts issued by European popes and kings in the fifteenth century are vital for understanding our current divides may seem strained. Indeed, to my knowledge, no mainstream American history textbooks have focused on the Doctrine of Discovery as critical for American self-understanding. Across my decade of graduate education in the 1990s, completing a seminary graduate degree and a PhD in religion, I never encountered the Doctrine of Discovery. But its absence from the historical canon of predominantly white academic institutions is testimony to its continued cultural power. While the Doctrine of Discovery has escaped scrutiny by most white scholars and theologians, Indigenous people

and African Americans have long been testifying to these Christian roots of white supremacy, while dying from and living with their damaging effects.

Indigenous scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota, Standing Rock Sioux) have been highlighting, for over fifty years now, the centrality of this fateful theological and political turn, in well-documented books with provocative titles such as *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* and *God Is Red*.⁴⁰ Deloria summarized the dehumanizing logic of the Doctrine of Discovery and the devastating consequences it brought for Indigenous people globally and for those within the vicinity of the fledgling United States:

The natives had rights to occupy the lands on which they had traditionally lived until such time as those lands were needed by the invading Europeans. At that time, the European nation could extinguish the natives' title by purchase or conquest. With respect to each other, the European nations accepted the claims of the nation that first explored new lands and had sufficient military power to protect its claim. With respect to the natives who happened to occupy the lands, they were completely at the mercy of the acquisitive Christian nation. . . . Almost the first claim put forth by the new nation after the successful break with England was that the colonies had succeeded to the claims made by the mother country under the Doctrine of Discovery. The United States was therefore under no obligation to deal justly with the continent's tribes.⁴¹

As I've continued my reeducation journey over the last ten years, I have come to consider the Doctrine of Discovery as a kind of Rosetta Stone for understanding the deep structure of the European political and religious worldviews we have inherited in this country. The Doctrine of Discovery furnished the foundational lie that America

was "discovered" and enshrined the noble innocence of "pioneers" in the story we white Christian Americans have told about ourselves. It animated the religious and cultural worldview that delivered Europeans to these shores far before 1619. Ideas such as Manifest Destiny, America as a city on a hill, or America as a new Zion all sprouted from the seed that was planted in 1493. This sense of divine entitlement, of European Christian chosenness, has shaped the worldview of most white Americans and thereby influenced key events, policies, and laws throughout American history.⁴²

The white male leaders of the thirteen British colonies began their 1776 Declaration of Independence from the British Crown with these inspirational 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." But just thirty lines down—in this document marking the year Trump and many conservatives want to hold up as exemplary of the nation's character at its origin—the Doctrine of Discovery rears its head. The British colonists complain that King George III has encouraged slave rebellions ("domestic insurrections amongst us") and speak of Native Americans as "merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and condition."⁴³ As for self-evident truths, and the rights following from them, these principles were compatible at the time not only with such views of Indigenous people but also with the continued enslavement of African Americans and the exclusion of women from democratic participation.

Similarly, the 1789 US Constitution, which opens with the inclusive words "We the people," is, rightly, understood as a watershed moment in the history of democracy and self-government. But its first article—just four sentences into the document—runs aground on the legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery. Article I, Section 2 clarifies that the real "we" constituting "the people" are European men. The apportionment of state representatives is "determined by adding

to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons." Despite being "free persons" on their own land, Indigenous people are explicitly excluded from the constitutional "we." Enslaved Black people are counted as only three-fifths of a person, and then only for the purpose of buttressing the political power of white enslavers. White women, though counted for the purpose of allotting representatives, are excluded from voting, never mind holding elected office themselves.

The Doctrine of Discovery also guided Thomas Jefferson—a lawyer trained in the legal tradition built on its logic—in his approach to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. He knew that the agreement was technically an acquisition of France's discovery rights (the right to preemptive title to this vast tract of land against other European claims), rather than a purchase of the land itself, which remained occupied by Indigenous people. And he understood that this logic justified any subsequent violence toward and displacement of Native Americans in that territory as the US sought to convert its discovery rights into a claim of complete title through occupancy.⁴⁴

The Doctrine of Discovery was formally incorporated into US law in 1823 in *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, which held, by unanimous decision, that "discovery gave [the US government] an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or conquest." In a sprawling thirty-three-page opinion penned by Chief Justice John Marshall, the court grounded its argument explicitly in the narrative of the Doctrine of Discovery:

The character and religion of [the new world's] inhabitants afforded an apology for considering them as a people over whom the superior genius of Europe might claim an ascendancy. The potentates of the old world found no difficulty in convincing themselves that they made ample compensation to the inhabi-

tants of the new, by bestowing on them civilization and Christianity, in exchange for unlimited independence. . . .

The Indians were admitted to be the rightful occupants of the soil, with a legal as well as just claim to retain possession of it, and to use it according to their own discretion; but their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations, were necessarily diminished, and their power to dispose of the soil at their own will, to whomsoever they pleased, was denied by the original fundamental principle, that discovery gave exclusive title to those who made it.

While the different nations of Europe respected the right of the natives, as occupants, they asserted the ultimate dominion to be in themselves; and claimed and exercised, as a consequence of this ultimate dominion, a power to grant the soil, while yet in possession of the natives.⁴⁵

Chief Justice Marshall's conscience was evidently troubled enough that he felt the need to address the prima facie injustice and arrogance of these discovery claims. But he argued that moral concerns or "abstract principles" were irrelevant beside the power of historical precedent and inertia: "However extravagant the pretension of converting the discovery of inhabited country into conquest may appear, if the principle has been asserted in the first instance, and afterwards sustained; if a country has acquired and held under it; if the property of the great mass of the community originates in it, it becomes the law of the land, and cannot be questioned."⁴⁶

Johnson v. M'Intosh, rooted deeply in the Doctrine of Discovery, set the legal standard for how the US would deal with the Native American population, and actively shapes both US and international law today.⁴⁷ It provided the legal basis for Georgia's aggressive imposition of state laws on Native Americans within its borders in violation of federal treaties and the pursuit of its claim of a legal right to coerce the removal of the Cherokee in the late 1820s and 1830s.

Johnson v. M'Intosh provided the basis for Federal Indian Law and set the stage for the creation of the Office of Indian Affairs, which was notably first located within the Department of War, becoming later the Bureau of Indian Affairs within the Department of the Interior.

Via the *Johnson v. M'Intosh* decision, the Doctrine of Discovery was also exported into international law and remains today "the original and controlling precedent for Indigenous rights and affairs" in four countries whose legal systems derive from British law: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.⁴⁸ Our continued reliance on that legal precedent was the key reason that these countries were the only four, out of 147, to vote against the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the 2007 United Nations General Assembly (although each later changed their votes to approval after public pressure and outcry).⁴⁹

Against this historical backdrop, the shortcomings of reifying 1619 as the birth year of the nation become glaringly apparent. From that vantage point, Indigenous peoples and their history are barely visible, and the American story is seen primarily in terms of white oppression of Black enslaved people. But if we go back to 1493, the protracted sweep of European contact with Native peoples is fully visible—as is the religious, cultural, and political worldview that motivated European conquest and colonization of "newly discovered" lands. This longer view also importantly reveals the connected historical streams of the US and the Americas, and of Native Americans, African Americans, and European Americans. Moreover, it brings us closer to the root of the problem: the disastrous cultural influence of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, which continues to threaten the promise of a pluralistic American democracy.

Of course, there is nothing magical about any particular date. The concept of a year, after all, is an artificial human attempt to demarcate the fluidity of events using an arbitrary measure, the time our planet takes to make its way around the sun. I do not want to

commit my own act of overreach by claiming that 1493 should be considered the nation's birth year. Even the critical events of that fateful year were not born *ex nihilo* but emerged out of the long flow of history, with roots in the Crusades between 1096 and 1271, and going back at least to the fifth century as popes began to assert authority over territory and to bind the spread of the gospel to the advance of empire.⁵⁰ But we can point to that year as a culturally significant one, marking the beginning of sustained European contact with people in the Americas; and as a morally significant one, when the logic of the Doctrine of Discovery crystallized into early international law, shaping more than five centuries of Christian moral imagination and Western European treatment of Indigenous peoples around the globe.

A MAP FOR THE JOURNEY

At its heart, this book sets out to expose the deep, hidden roots of America's current identity crisis. This moment of reckoning with our fraught and contested heritage is spawning new practices of remembering: reckoning with mistakes made, commemorating victims forgotten, and imagining paths not taken. It is also generating a visceral, and sometimes violent, resistance. As historian Scott Ellsworth, a scholar of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and a Tulsa, Oklahoma, native, recently observed, the US is currently in a great "Age of Re-evaluation":

Longstanding institutions are coming under brand-new scrutiny, histories are being challenged and reexamined, statues are toppling. Moreover, those whose voices have long been kept from being heard are claiming their rightful place at the table, while others are waiting in the wings.⁵¹

As a southerner, I've always been intrigued by the power of place. While the national struggles grab the headlines, local efforts are reshaping the stories we tell about our communities. This book tells the story of how contemporary residents of three places—Tallahatchie County, Mississippi; Duluth, Minnesota; and Tulsa, Oklahoma—have worked across racial lines to tell a truer story about their past. These three communities represent unique points in our history and disparate geographic and cultural environments. Like facets of a prism, each community refracts the historical light differently. And each is at a different point on the path toward reckoning with this legacy, repairing its downstream damage, and building a shared future.

In my home state of Mississippi, the Delta is the site of the 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, and the courthouse where his killers were quickly acquitted by an all-white jury sits in Sumner, a county seat of Tallahatchie County. Although these events made international headlines and helped spark the modern civil rights movement, the local community has only recently begun working to commemorate these events. Over the last two decades, a group of citizens, working across racial lines, formed the Emmett Till Memorial Commission, which organized a public apology to the Till family for the injustice, raised funds for the renovation of the courthouse to restore it to its 1955 appearance, founded the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, and transformed the local landscape with historical markers and a civil rights driving tour.

In the far north, Duluth, Minnesota, witnessed a horrific—and much less well known—lynching of three Black itinerant circus workers in 1920 by an estimated mob of nearly ten thousand people, approximately one-tenth of the town's heavily white Christian population. In 2003, Duluth also became one of the first major cities in the post-Jim Crow era to officially memorialize the victims of a lynching, creating a large plaza on a city corner that has for the last two

decades served as a gathering place for marches and demonstrations for civil rights.

Tulsa, still a rough-and-tumble city on the Oklahoma oil frontier in the early twentieth century, was the site of one of the worst events of white mass racial violence in American history. Over the course of two days in 1921, bands of roving white residents murdered as many as three hundred of their fellow Black citizens and burned the entire African American Greenwood neighborhood to the ground. In 2021, a century after this horrific event, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission raised millions of dollars to create a museum dedicated to the memory of Greenwood and the victims, along with scholarships and community development funds for North Tulsa residents. In his speech at the centennial memorial event, Joe Biden became the first sitting president to acknowledge these horrific events and to name white supremacy as the cause of the violence.

This book began with my interest in the ways the Black Lives Matter movement, which erupted into virtually all areas of American public consciousness in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in 2020, was strengthening the work of historical truth-telling, healing, and justice at the local level. But as I spent time in Mississippi, Minnesota, and Oklahoma, I came to realize that a full understanding of the contemporary currents could only come from a clearer knowledge of the tributaries that have fed them. Upstream from the stories of violence toward African Americans, in all three communities, were the legacies of genocide and removal of the land's Indigenous peoples. Each of these communities—one in the heart of the South, one in the North, and one in the West—has a history of brutal exploitation of and violence toward the Indigenous people who were the original inhabitants of their region.

The murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Tallahatchie County flows from the killing and expulsion of Choctaws forced to

walk the Trail of Tears from Mississippi. The lynching of three Black circus workers in Duluth is downstream from the mass executions of thirty-eight Dakota men and the exile of the Dakota people from Minnesota. The massacre of African American residents and the conflagration in Tulsa emanates from the murder and exploitation of both the Indigenous people of Oklahoma and the systematic oppression of the more than eighty thousand Native American refugees arriving from the Southeast during the "Indian removal" policies of the early 1800s.

This longer, interconnected perspective presents a better understanding of who and where we are. It eschews the naïve innocence of 1776. And it avoids the myopic Black/white binary of 1619. Most importantly, by illuminating the different ways our communities have been fractured by the logic of the Doctrine of Discovery, it inverts the gaze. Rather than focusing on the oppression of African Americans or Native Americans, whose siloed histories in our telling rarely intersect, the focus turns to white Americans, a people whose story, at least in this part of the world, begins with an audacious claim: that God intended America to be a new Euro-Christian promised land; and its corollary: that the systemic violence we have wielded to seize it is justified.

In the concluding chapters, I reflect on what the country can learn from these three communities' efforts at truth-telling, commemoration, and repair. Each has provided a different model for retelling their community's story. Each has struggled, with varying degrees of success, to express their commitment to a different future. These community actors teach us that remembering and truth-telling are not ends in themselves, nor are they acts of self-flagellation or avenues of cheap absolution for the guilty consciences of white Americans. Rather, confession and memorialization are powerful rituals that rehabilitate and kindle our moral and

religious imaginations. These acts dispel the confounding mist, helping us see where we are and how we arrived at our current circumstances. They also reorient us toward the work of repair that is vital for charting a new path forward at this critical time of reckoning in our country.