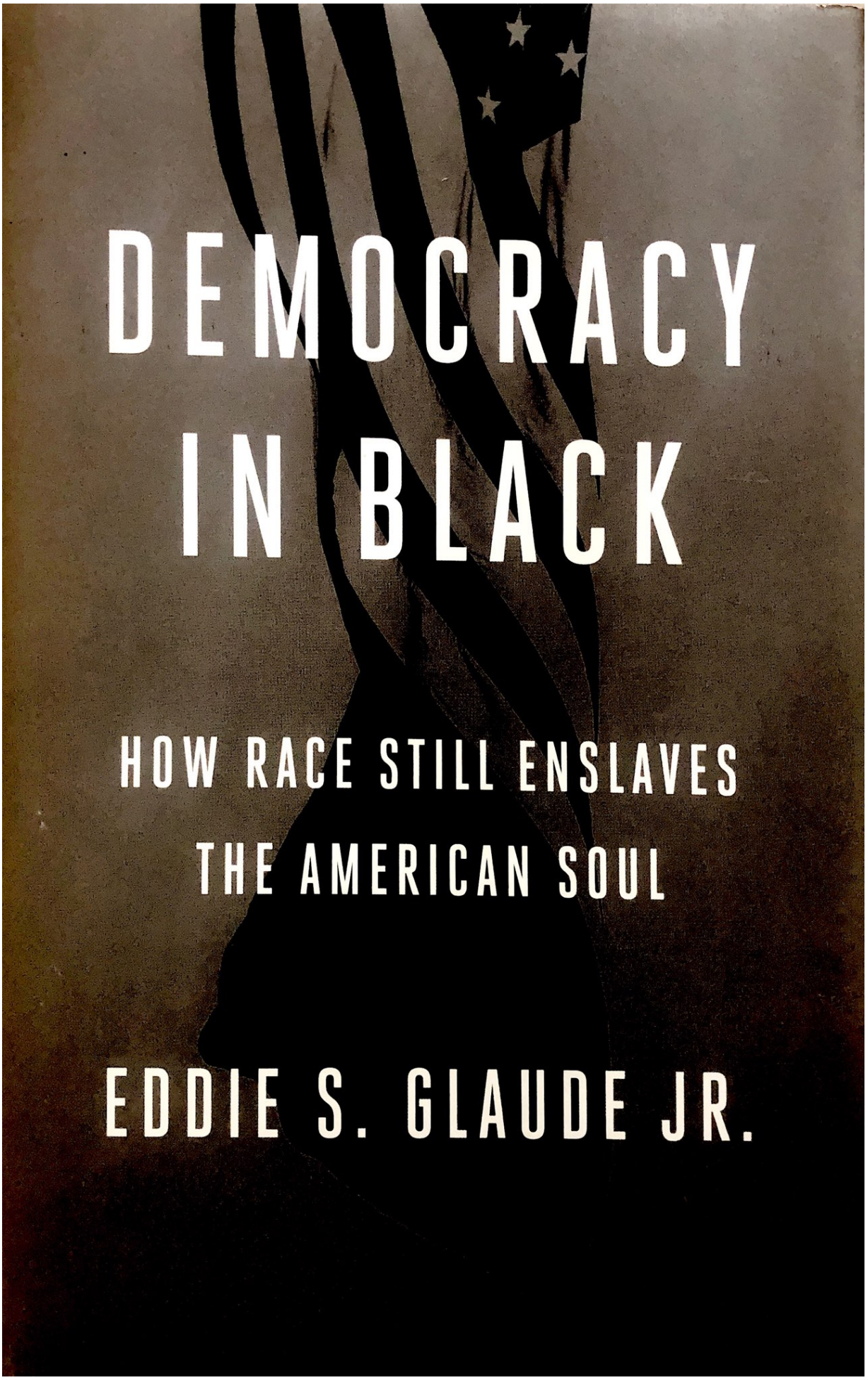
DEMOCRACY
IN BLACK
HOW RACE STILL ENSLAVES
THE AMERICAN SOUL
EDDIE S. GLAUDE JR.

Most of the businesses on West Florissant in Ferguson were boarded up. City officials had informed the owners that the grand jury's decision would be announced within days. They braced themselves for what was to come. To my Mississippi Gulf Coast eyes the town looked like it was preparing for a major hurricane. Plywood was everywhere.

My colleague and I were in Cathy's Kitchen Restaurant & Diner on South Florissant at around 8:30 p.m. waiting to talk with a small group of activists in the Ferguson movement. Apparently this was a favorite late-evening meeting spot for some of the protesters. It was nearing closing time, but the owner, Cathy Jenkins, told us to take our time and order whatever we liked. She and her husband were holding a staff meeting. They were preparing for the grand jury announcement and urging their staff to stay safe. There were no boards on the windows. They didn't expect anything to happen to the restaurant.

Alexis, Brittany, and Ashley finally arrived. These three dynamic young women had emerged as leading voices in the Ferguson movement and were cofounders of Millennial Activists United, a grassroots organization demanding "accountability for victims of social injustice in Ferguson, across America, and the world." Alexis was full of energy.

She walked in the door smiling and talking. Brittany was calm and subdued. She seemed reserved while Ashley brimmed with confidence; she carried herself like a leader. All of them looked like teenagers. Their eyes told you they were older.

Over a plate of sweet-and-spicy wings and fries, we talked about what had happened on August 9, 2014. But, in many ways, the conversation was about how the death of Michael Brown had rescued them from the challenges of daily life. "Every day you wake up, it's a conscious choice to get out your bed and go about your day," said Ashley. "I was waking up every day, and I was like, all right, today I'm going to stay alive. Counting down the hours until I'm going to shoot myself." Alexis and Brittany stared at her as she talked, as if Ashley was describing all of them. "Now it's like, okay, you've got to get up. You can't kill yourself today, because you got to do this. You've got this meeting, you've got to go protest at seven o'clock. You've got to chant. They need somebody up there to chant." Alexis put it bluntly: "Michael Brown saved my life."

Something happened in Ferguson that transformed these young women and transfixed the nation. As one of them said, "You just felt something different in the air." As if the fog was lifting a bit. I couldn't help but think of the contrast. They came of age politically with President Barack Obama in office and now they bathed in the intense rage of Ferguson. In so many ways, these young people were unprecedented.

District Attorney Bob McCulloch announced the grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson, the officer who shot and killed Brown, on November 24, 2014. By then I was back in Princeton, watching the press conference with a group of mostly black undergraduates. The students were overcome with emotion. They would later stage an impromptu protest on Prospect Street, where Princeton's tony eating clubs are located. They wanted to disturb the peace.

In Ferguson, tensions reached a fever pitch and the night turned ugly. The conflict spread to South Florissant. Businesses were vandalized

and some burned to the ground. A group of young protesters linked arms in front of Cathy's Kitchen and protected it as if it were their own. Something different was definitely in the air.

In his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. argued, among other things, that white supremacy stood in the way of democracy in this country, that it was an ever-present force in America frustrating the dreams of the nation's darker citizens and undermining any pretense to racial justice. He wrote:

> *Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America . . . proceed from a premise that equality is a* loose expression for improvement. *White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it. (Emphasis added.)*

Matters have not changed much since 1967. Jim Crow laws are no more, and we elected our first black president, but it is still the case, as Dr. King said, that in this country the idea of racial equality remains "a loose expression for improvement." When thought of in this way, racial justice gets reduced to a charitable enterprise—a practice by which white people "do good" for black people. That is not equality. Confronting this fact would take us a long way toward achieving racial justice in this country.

More immediately, confronting this fact would remove our blinders and allow us to see the crisis engulfing black America. The 2008 economic recession devastated black communities across the country. People lost their homes. Life savings disappeared. Thousands found

themselves out of work with no prospect of finding another job. This book details what I call the Great Black Depression, and shows how the current rhetoric of economic recovery does not include the majority of black communities in this country.

It challenges the pervasive silence about the crisis in black communities and puts forward an idea of American democracy shorn of its racist baggage. This book offers a thicker description of the current state of black America. It shows how what I call the value gap (the belief that white people are valued more than others) and racial habits (the things we do, without thinking, that sustain the value gap) undergird racial inequality, and how white and black fears block the way to racial justice in this country.

President Obama's election supposedly meant that we had turned a corner. We wanted to believe that we were leaving something bad behind. But we have seen and experienced so much ugliness over these past seven years. How many times have we watched black parents in anguish as they buried their children? As they stood before the press and demanded justice, joined with other parents in a communion of grief? The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and so many others shattered any illusion we might have had about a post-racial America. People from all over the country took to the streets. Ferguson and Baltimore ignited our frustrations. Chants of "Hands up, don't shoot" and "I can't breathe" and "Black lives matter" let the world know that race is far from being a nonissue in this country. Meanwhile, Republicans wrapped the flag around their bigotry and couched it in criticisms of big government. In 2008, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney declared that 47 percent of the Americans who voted for Obama were "takers," people "who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe they are entitled to health

care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it." Although he didn't say it explicitly, everyone knew that black people were part of that 47 percent.

Beyond the increase in explicit racism—the loud racists have gotten louder since the 2008 election (it almost feels like some white people have lost their minds)—black people have suffered tremendously on Obama's watch. Black unemployment remains high. Home foreclosures continue. The wealth gap between blacks and whites has grown wider. More young black families and children than ever are drowning in poverty. And police have been on what seems like a rampage—killing young black people at alarming rates. In short, black communities have been devastated. And Obama's most publicized initiative in the face of all this, even as the spate of racial incidents pressured him to be more forthright about this issue, has been My Brother's Keeper, a public-private partnership to address the crisis of young men and boys of color—a Band-Aid for a gunshot wound.

Obama reminds me of Herman Melville's *Confidence Man*: he sees exactly what we want and what we fear and adjusts himself accordingly. And what Melville believed people wanted more than anything was hope, a sense of the possibility of things for themselves and for the world. I am not sure Melville understood, although he might have, the depth of that claim for black folk. For us, hope has always come with a heavy dose of realism. It couldn't be otherwise in a world such as ours, where the color of your skin closes off certain possibilities from the moment you draw your first breath. W. E. B. Du Bois captured it best as "a hope not hopeless but unhopeful"—a blues-soaked sensibility that chastens one's expectations of the world, because the white people in it can be so hateful and mean.

In 2008 and again in 2012, Obama sold black America the snake oil of hope and change. He joined Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, other Democratic confidence men who presented themselves as people who

would challenge the racial order of things. Clinton even heralded from a place called Hope. But neither Carter nor Clinton changed the racial habits at the heart of the country. In some ways, they reinforced them. Obama promised more. Or at least we thought he did, until he told us that he wasn't the president of black America. Maybe black people believed he represented real change. Maybe we didn't. Maybe we needed the illusion of hope. It doesn't matter. The reality, amid the thick fog of unmet expectations, is that very little has changed in this country. In fact, things have gotten worse.

Obama is not alone in falling short of a real response. Most black liberals (elected and otherwise) have stood silently by as this economic devastation swallowed black America. Afraid to give ammunition to a boisterous ideological right and never wanting to appear disloyal to their own, they have refused to criticize the president. Instead, we have been asked to shift the blame to a recalcitrant Congress or to trust that they are working on our behalf behind closed doors. I want to expose the limits of this view of black politics—the wrongheaded idea that some leader in some back room can represent the interests of black people without any mechanism of accountability. This view of politics undermines the democratic process in black communities.

Democracy in Black calls for a reimagining of black politics and a remaking of American democracy. The two are knotted together. Both begin with local grassroots organizing and movements. We've witnessed this in the protests and demonstrations in Ferguson, in New York, and in other cities around the country and in the Forward Together moral movement in North Carolina. They have helped free our political imaginations from the romance with President Obama that paints him as the fulfillment of our political dreams by calling attention to all the hell breaking loose around us.

In the end, this book exposes the illusion of innocence at the heart of this nation by pointing out the concrete effects of persistent racial

inequality. Most Americans see inequality—and the racial habits that give it life—as aberrations, ways we fail to live up to the idea of America. But we're wrong. Inequality and racial habits are part of the American Idea. They are not just a symptom of bad, racist people who fail to live up to pristine ideals. We are, in the end, what we do. And this is the society we have all made. So much so that we can have a black man in the White House and nearly one million black men and women in the Big House.

For much of our national history we have struggled mightily with the issue of race. The evil of slavery shadowed the birth of this country. Precious ideas like "all men are created equal" were congenitally deformed by the idea that some men and women are valued less than others because of the color of their skin. The value gap was baked into one of the foundational principles of this country. That struggle, at least since 1876 (when the nation turned its back on the possibility of a multiracial democracy with the end of Reconstruction), has been a part of who we are as a nation. We wrestle, like Jacob, with the lived contradiction—not between beliefs and practices, but between and within beliefs themselves. Black folk never aspired to be the moral conscience of the nation, even as black leaders shouted it from the rooftops. It only happened to be the case that our actual lives rested in the gap between who America said it was as a democracy and how we actually lived. Our democratic principles do not exist in a space apart from our national commitment to white supremacy. They have always been bound tightly together, sharing bone and tissue.

Something profound has to happen if we are to change course. A revolution of value and a radical democratic awakening may be this country's only hope for salvation. *Democracy in Black* does not begin with pristine principles or with assumptions about our inherent goodness. Rather, its view of democracy emerges out of an unflinching encounter with lynching trees, prison cells, foreclosed homes, young men

and women gunned down by police, and other places where "hope unborn had died." It is also grounded in the unimaginable resolve of a people not just to survive in this country but to flourish in spite of it. The current times are dark. The issues are clear. Our choice now, as we leave behind the confidence men and their false hopes, is either to wake up and give everything to "achieve our country" or to remain asleep as America burns.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT BLACK DEPRESSION

Christine Frazer cried softly. She had been through hell and back and the wounds had not healed. Chris had worked hard all her life. She and her late husband had dreamed big dreams for themselves and their family. They had played by the rules. But when Chris lost her home to foreclosure in 2012 everything changed. Now, at the age of sixty-five, she was out of work and forced to live in a senior facility, her cherished home gone, her health deteriorating, and her dreams shattered.

"Me and my husband had a business for twenty-five years," she said in disbelief. "I raised my daughter in that home. I wasn't a new homeowner. I had been there for eighteen years."

Before the eviction, Chris had lived with her eighty-five-year-old mother, her adult daughter, and her four-year-old grandson in a triplex home in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. The upstairs had three bedrooms, two baths, and two big living rooms. There were two separate apartments downstairs. The house sat on a large plot of land, with lots of open space where Chris's dog, Sheeba, could run around. A minister who was a little person had designed the house. "He had been an architect, I guess. And there was not a square room in that house, the way he designed it. That's why I fell in love with it." Within a year of moving into their home, her husband lost his legs because of diabetes and had

to use a wheelchair. "But here's the kicker," Chris said. "Since the house had been built for a dwarf, once the ramp was built, he could maneuver in that house just like anybody else because the switches were lower. It was like God sent us there."

But when Chris lost her job in 2009 she struggled to keep making the payments. The house was underwater. She had already paid $240,000 on a home now valued at $40,000. Her mortgage changed hands at least three times in six months. Chris tried everything to prevent foreclosure, but the latest holder of her loan—Investors One Corporation—decided to evict her. President Obama had created a plan to help distressed borrowers, but Chris couldn't take advantage of it; the program required that homeowners be current on their mortgage, and she was not. "But if you're current on your mortgage, you don't need modification," Chris said. The game seemed rigged to protect the mortgage lenders.

Dekalb County sheriffs and deputies arrived in the middle of the night on May 2, 2012, to evict her. "They came in like I was a dope dealer. At three in the morning they drilled a hole in the lock in my front door. They drilled out the lock and just came in my house. It was the most terrifying moment that I can remember in my life. My grandson is six years old, and to this day he does not like police officers, because he remembers. He remembers."

When the police stormed into the house they ordered Chris and her family to get dressed immediately. Then they proceeded to empty the home of a life's worth of memories. It was chaos. For seven hours the police piled Chris's things onto the street. No one could help. The police had cordoned off the area. "They told me to pack up as if I just had a fire at my home and take my immediate possessions. And I had to leave immediately," she remembered. Everything was scattered, without any care, across the lawn. With no place to go, the family slept in the car—except for the family dog. The police made provisions for Sheeba.

"That was the part that I think came out in the eviction. When they came for me at three in the morning, they didn't have a place for me and my family to go, but the animal shelter came because they knew that there were dogs there. They came with a place for my dog."

The sprawling metropolis of Atlanta sat at the epicenter of the housing crisis that shook the foundations of the American economy. Once considered a promised land where good-paying jobs and affordable living offered a real chance for people to fulfill their dreams, by 2012, Atlanta was a wasteland of foreclosed homes and skyrocketing unemployment. In 2007 black unemployment in greater Atlanta was 8.3 percent, but by 2010, that figure had nearly doubled. Chris was among the casualties. According to the Federal Reserve, Atlanta held the dubious distinction of having "the most government-owned foreclosed properties for sale of any large city." The hard reality was undeniable, and Chris was just one example among many: the housing crisis was devastating black Atlanta, and it hardly stopped there. Like an out-of-control wildfire spreading across dry brushland, the crisis engulfed black America.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The road to the housing crisis in black America was paved with good intentions, sort of. In June of 2002 President George W. Bush made his way to the pulpit of a quaint African Methodist Episcopal church in Atlanta. "Now, we've got a problem here in America that we have to address," he told the crowd.

Too many American families, too many minorities do not own a home. There is a home ownership gap in America. The difference between Anglo American and African American and Hispanic home ownership is too big. And we've got to focus the attention of this nation to address this.

Bush had come to St. Paul AME to announce his plans for an "ownership society." By 2010, he wanted to increase homeownership among minorities by at least 5.5 million. This required making it easier for low-income buyers to make a down payment; it meant that more affordable housing needed to be available in certain neighborhoods and involved streamlining the home-buying process.

Bush hoped to achieve his goal through a vast network of public-private partnerships. He announced that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac would "increase their commitment to minority markets by more than $440 billion." Freddie Mac would make it possible for "consumers with poor credit . . . to get a mortgage with an interest rate that automatically goes down after a period of consistent payments"; Fannie Mae would partner with 100 faith-based organizations to improve homeownership education, and organizations like the Enterprise Foundation would help rebuild and rehabilitate urban neighborhoods in partnership with local community groups.

The congregation lavished the president with applause. It was a surreal moment. Here was the president of the United States, the most powerful man in the world—a Republican—stating unequivocally that he was committed to the idea that people of color should own something.

Before delivering the speech, President Bush toured Park Place South, a new development of affordable housing in an area once marked by crime and urban blight. There, he met Darrin West, a black Atlanta police officer who proudly showed off his new home. The president held up West as an example of what was possible with the policies he was promoting. And Bush's initial efforts to increase homeownership among African Americans were indeed quite successful. The rate of black homeownership rose to 49.1 percent during the height of the housing boom.

But the initiatives President Bush outlined in Atlanta unleashed torrid forces seeking to exploit "emerging markets." According to the Center for Responsible Lending, African Americans were 150 percent more

likely to get a high-cost loan with low interest rates that adjusted *upward* after two or three years. From 2007 to 2009, the African American homeownership rate fell by 6 percent (to the lowest level since 1995), a drop more than twice that experienced by any other racial group in the United States. African Americans lost more than 240,000 homes

One of them was Darrin West. He couldn't sell his home, so he gave it back to the bank and simply walked away. The *New York Times* reported that by 2008, "at least 10 percent of [the] 232 homes" in West's Park Place South development had been hit with foreclosure. This pattern played itself out across black America, as billions of dollars disappeared from communities already strapped for resources.

The irony is obvious and biting. So many Americans reveled in the historic significance of Barack Obama's election in 2008. There was a sense of real, exciting possibility, even as the nation confronted the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. It was a moment of contrasts, of decline but also of possibility—that somehow we were putting the ugliness of our racial past behind us as the country teetered on economic collapse. Uncertainty shadowed national euphoria, and this was especially true for African Americans. Many danced election night away and talked about the fulfillment of the civil rights movement, then woke up to foreclosure notices on their doors.

The foreclosure crisis among African Americans gives a clear sense of the despair and devastation wrought by what can only be called the Great Black Depression. The 2008 recession threatened the economic foundations of the country; over and over again we heard from economists and pundits that the nation had not experienced anything like this since the Great Depression. Venerable financial institutions collapsed. Liquidity froze. Jobs disappeared overnight. The recession cast a dark economic shadow over America.

But in black America, the reality was even bleaker. I mean this beyond the familiar platitude that says "whenever white America has a cold, black America has the flu." The reality is that by every relevant statistical measure (employment, wages, wealth, etc.) black America has experienced and is experiencing a depression. This is more like the symptoms of a national congenital disease than the flu.

To be sure, the circumstances of black America have waxed and waned since the heyday of the civil rights movement. The black freedom struggle of the 1960s brought unprecedented improvement in the lives of most African Americans. But even with these gains, the gap between whites and blacks persisted through the 1970s and 1980s alongside brewing racial tensions (often because of police violence) and deepening class divisions within black America. Combined with cyclical economic booms and busts, the slow march from the end of Jim Crow to full equality felt more like a bad roller-coaster ride. It was not until the long recovery of the 1990s, spurred by governmental policy and strong economic growth, that we began to see significant economic improvements for black America—particularly for the black middle class.

Fast-forward to the Great Black Depression of 2008. Much of the gains of the 1990s were erased. African Americans lost 31 percent of their wealth between 2007 and 2010. White Americans lost 11 percent. By 2009, 35 percent of African American households had zero or negative net worth. According to the Pew Research Center, by 2011, black families had lost 53 percent of their wealth. Just think about it: an entire decade of economic gains wiped away. Gone. This wasn't just the loss of homes—the primary source of wealth for most African Americans—but lost retirement savings, which shrank by 35 percent from 2007 to 2010. As many struggled to save their homes, as they witnessed the stock market spiral downward and their pensions dwindle to nothing, they took out what little money they had invested in order to keep themselves

afloat. Many could not wait for the market to rebound to reap its benefits. Their children won't be able to either.

As they lost their homes and saw their savings wiped out, people also lost their jobs, making it hard to imagine ever clawing their way back to where they'd once been. Often the last hired and first fired, people saw black unemployment soar as a result of the economic collapse. So much so that by November 2010, national black unemployment reached the stunning level of 16 percent (and this figure does not include those who simply dropped out of the labor market). White unemployment stood at 9 percent. Some cities, including Detroit and New York, reported unemployment among black males at close to 50 percent.

For all these reasons, poverty is growing in black America. One out of four African Americans lives in poverty today. One out of three black children grows up in poverty, while only one out of ten white children lives in poverty. One out of five black children is growing up in extreme poverty. That child's parents make less than $11,746 a year for a family of four. They live on $979 a month, $226 a week, or what ends up being $32 a day. In twenty-five of the fifty states and in the District of Columbia, at least 40 percent of African American children are poor. This is galling for a nation that considers itself the leader of the free world and a pioneer of democratic principles.

Given the impact on African American children, this crisis is not only an event of the present. Its implications for future generations of African Americans have yet to be calculated. Chris Frazer's six-year-old grandson will remember the horror of police tossing his family's possessions out in the yard like garbage as they were evicted, but beyond those memories, what will he inherit? Like so many young African Americans in this country, he will have to start economically with little or no help from the previous generation, because social and systemic barriers have severely limited economic mobility for black folk; the Great Black

Depression took the one thing his grandmother could claim as her own. His financial inheritance will be a balance of broken promises.

Such crushing poverty dashes the dreams of millions of children daily. But not only that: it almost ensures that they will lead less healthy lives as they grow up; that they will more than likely drop out of high school; that they will experience some form of violence in their lifetime; that they will likely find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system; and that they will end up raising their children in the same horrifying conditions they grew up in. In short, the terrible effects of the Great Black Depression guarantee, unless we fully understand the urgency of now, that even darker days are ahead.

The very foundations of black America have cracked under the weight of the economic fallout. It has affected what we own, how we work, and the future of our children. But what's really scary is how little anyone outside black America seems to care.

Patricia Hill was defiant. A judge had given her 75 days to vacate her beautiful home in the historic Bronzeville section of Chicago. In 2003 she'd obtained a lower fixed-rate mortgage with the intent of using the savings for extensive home repairs. Five years later Patricia noticed that her mortgage payment had increased by $500. "Can't nobody afford $500 extra a month," she complained. Saxon Mortgage Services said it would correct the mistake. She continued to pay her regular mortgage, only to be told later that her account was in arrears. Patricia was caught in the spider's web of predatory lending.

Eventually the Bank of New York Mellon sold the house right out from under her—"sold it to itself for about a third of its 2010 appraised value," Patricia said. On court order, the police attempted to evict her in 2011, but more than one hundred supporters from the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign blocked their efforts. In 2012, on her sixty-first

birthday, she was finally evicted. But when we talked about what happened to her, she remained defiant. In fact, Patricia was in her home. The bank still owned the property. But she says she never stopped living in the house.

"I never stopped receiving my mail here. I never stopped paying my homeowner's insurance. I never stopped paying my utilities. They won't allow me to pay my mortgage. Fine. They won't allow me to pay taxes. Fine. So everything has been as if I was here anyway, because I was." As she put it, "This is my reparation."

Patricia's home is a vintage two-story Greystone built in 1888. It has a front facade made of Bedford limestone, a distinctive feature of this architectural style. When she describes her home, her voice dances with pride. "Let's see, you have twelve-foot ceilings. You have the very high doors entering into the home and the foyer." A large stairway leads upstairs, with woodwork along the walls. "These little panels in the hallways, going up the stairs, around—I don't even know how to describe it." She has three open fireplaces and a restored cottage in the back.

"When I came back I was surprised, you know, the first night here: Oh, I can hear crickets again. . . . I look right outside my window and, you know, I can see the garden, and this is really where I thought I was going to live out the rest of my life. . . . This was my intent. I had no idea. None. I made everything secure. You know, I was paying my bills. I said, 'Okay, I can do this.' This is not an assumable mortgage. This wasn't a HUD. This was a conventional loan. Nothing is going to change." Her voice was no longer dancing.

Patricia said that her foreclosure was just a symptom of a deeper sickness in America: that the country had been sold to foreigners; that corporations, or what she called "corruptorations," and "the banksters" had turned people into commodities; and that black people had become too comfortable with the status quo. "In the late '70s, early '80s, people started getting into 'Oh, well, I want to become more a part of the

system.' Because to get you to buy into the system, the system was opening up certain things to make you feel more vested. And when you're vested in something, you're not going to fight against it."

Underneath it all, even as she railed against the system, Patricia still struggled with the fact that she had lost her home. She had raised three children. She had purchased her first home when she was twenty-six years old. And now, at the age of sixty-three, after a life of public service as a police officer and a teacher, she was a squatter in the home where she had imagined she would spend her last days.

Claims that the recession is over, made in the face of all I have described to this point, only confirm that much of what happens in black America is not a matter of national concern—unless, of course, it threatens people who "really matter." Such a lesson is a hard one to learn in the twenty-first century. We're supposed to be better than this. But we are rearing a generation of black children, as we have done for so many previous generations, to believe that their lives, unlike others who have money, aren't worth as much. This is the price of invisibility.

Inept public institutions in many black communities reinforce the belief that certain populations, certain black people, are disposable—that black lives don't matter. Here we find constellations of public dysfunction dotting the landscape: poor health care delivery (even with Obamacare), neighborhoods without supermarkets or other access to fresh foods, few job opportunities, and payday loan centers that prey on people who need money. As if that isn't enough, public schools repeatedly fail, and black children suffer disproportionately because of it. We see high dropout rates. And local municipalities ruthlessly close budget deficits on the backs of schools servicing these communities. In 2013, Chicago closed nearly 50 schools primarily in poor black and brown neighborhoods. From 2003 to 2013, Detroit closed 150 schools. All the

while the police do what society demands: they arrest and lock up black people in these communities at alarming rates. Today they lock up more black people than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.

Many of these communities are *opportunity deserts,* places of tremendous hardship, joblessness, and what seems to be permanent marginalization. Opportunity deserts are those communities, both urban and rural, that lack the resources and public institutions that give those who live there a chance to reach beyond their current lives. They are characterized, in part, by (1) the absence of social networks that point out pathways for professional and educational advance and (2) heightened police surveillance that increases the likelihood of someone's landing in the criminal justice system. Even the most resourceful people here find themselves awash in what the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness," in which people either look somewhere else for opportunity or succumb to the inevitable limits of where they were born. Opportunity deserts are isolated places for disposable people.

This is not to say these communities are without hope, but these are the harsh conditions under which hope dares to blossom. Opportunity deserts are the racial underside of a society that has turned its back on poor people, especially poor black people. This indifference to the poor allows most white Americans to be willfully ignorant of what happens in such places and to ignore the history of racism in this country that has consigned so many black people to poverty with little to no chance of escaping it. Most white Americans never go there—literally or metaphorically—and have a hard time imagining that such places exist.

The result has been the privatization of black misery. Whatever bad things are happening in opportunity deserts, it is not the concern of the state or of Americans who don't live there, beyond questions of their own safety and protection. They see it as an issue of individual

behavior and bad choices. People who live in opportunity deserts, Americans think, have done something to deserve to be there. Social misery, understood in this sense, is a private affair. Somehow, people absurdly believe—and they have done so for much of our history—that black social misery is the result of hundreds of thousands of unrelated bad individual decisions by black people all across this country.

Today long-term unemployment among African Americans is at its highest in twenty years and has left many isolated in concentrated poverty while middle-class African Americans face the threat of downward mobility. People are losing their livelihoods and their communities, but little if anything is being said about either. Here the feeling that black people are disposable becomes concrete.

We should be better than this. But it seems that no matter what we do or what happens to us, African Americans can be seen only in a certain way or at certain times. Either our suffering has to be invisible, or that suffering has to be entirely familiar. Somebody has to call us a nigger, or someone has to shoot down an innocent twelve-year-old child, or someone has to massacre nine black people in a church to remind us of the ugliness of our past and present. Otherwise, the nation is unconcerned with the problems of black America, ignoring the dimming eyes of black children waiting to be warehoused in the nation's prisons.

Our segregated lives and our deep fears keep the problems of black folk from coming into full view. And even while hidden, the devastation spreads like cancer. This is the way we deal with race matters in this country: willful blindness. Any other approach threatens our national sense of morality.

The housing market in Atlanta has finally started to recover. Home prices are rising. As of August 2014, in places like Dunwoody, Georgia, northeast of downtown Atlanta, only 12.3 percent of the homes

were underwater. But a radically different picture emerged just a short drive south from Dunwoody. In Riverdale, a lower-income community that is 80 percent African American, 76 percent of the mortgages owed on homes exceeded their market value. The so-called recovery hadn't touched many of the African American neighborhoods in metro Atlanta. It is a tale of two cities. Affluent white neighborhoods have bounced back. Moderate-income black communities are still drowning. In fact, nineteen of the thirty ZIP codes with the highest percentage of underwater homes in the country are in metro Atlanta. One of them is Forest Park, Georgia, where Christine Frazer now lives.

After the foreclosure on her home, Chris and her family moved to a trailer, but their trouble didn't stop there. Soon she was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that leads to muscle weakness and fatigue. "I woke up one morning and one eye was one way and my other eye was the other way," she remembered. "I went to the doctors by the grace of God. I was diagnosed with what they call myasthenia gravis, which is usually brought on by too much stress. I had to start taking steroids and some other kind of medication. Now I take eight medications." Chris doesn't live in the trailer anymore. She moved to a senior living facility in Forest Park. Her daughter lived in Riverdale, but has since moved in with her. The rental market has been brutal.

It is unimaginable for Chris and her family to talk of anything approximating a recovery. They live amid the ruins of their lives, and it takes a tremendous toll. "The aftereffects, not just the housing issue, ruined my health," she said. "They say don't let it stress you out. But what else are you supposed to do? The home that you had for almost twenty years was snatched from you and you couldn't do anything about it, and you're out on the street."

Chris felt invisible, like her life did not and does not matter. She's not alone—millions of black Americans experience these same hardships and the same feelings of invisibility. Our national refusal to

acknowledge the Great Black Depression says to black America that the suffering it is enduring is unimportant. It is the latest instance of the contradiction that has defined this country since its birth: our claims to democracy have always been shadowed by the belief that some people—white people—are valued more than others.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VALUE GAP

American apathy or willful ignorance toward the suffering caused by the Great Black Depression is disheartening but not surprising. It is simply another manifestation of how little black people are valued in this country.

If the blind eye turned toward black economic suffering doesn't put a fine enough point on that fact, events involving police violence certainly have. When Michael Brown, the eighteen-year-old teenager killed by Darren Wilson of the Ferguson, Missouri, police department, was left dead in the street for four and a half hours with gunshot wounds to the head and body, members of that community saw clearly and felt painfully the undeniable fact that they were valued less. This horrific incident amplified their lived experience. Daily assaults on their humanity by police. Inadequate schools. Crippling unemployment and poverty. Injustices that were all plainly obvious but completely ignored. Now the body of one of their own lay dead for all to see. Think of the irreparable harm done to the psyches of the children in the Canfield Green apartments who saw him in the street.

What became immediately clear when the case hit the news was that the police and much of the nation refused to see Michael Brown. He was the thug who was "no angel," who listened to hip-hop, smoked

weed, and stole Swisher Sweets cigarillos. Michael Brown, no matter what his mother said about him and his ambitions, was swallowed by all the ugly stereotypes about young black men. He was not a straight-A student; his life didn't seem promising—so he alone was culpable in his death. He was disposable.

Police actions and community responses in Ferguson and elsewhere increasingly expose a painful reality: the United States remains a nation fundamentally shaped by its racist past and present. This is a hard fact for some Americans to accept. Of course, we are not the same country we were in 1860 or even 1960. Slavery is roundly seen as evil, and legal segregation is ostensibly gone. Black people run Fortune 500 companies; they are mayors of cities and professors at Ivy League schools. But despite the real gains we have made, white supremacy continues to shape this country.

The phrase *white supremacy* conjures images of bad men in hooded robes who believe in white power, burn crosses, and scream the word *nigger*. But that's not quite what I mean here. On a broader level, white supremacy involves the way a society organizes itself, and what and whom it chooses to value. Apartheid in South Africa, the Jim Crow South, and Nazi Germany are clear examples of societies organized by white supremacy. In each case, the belief that white people are valued more than nonwhite people shaped every aspect of social and political life. It determined where you lived, which schools you attended, and what jobs were available to you. It reminded you daily of your status and station in life. And that's white supremacy without all the bluster: a set of practices informed by the fundamental belief that white people are valued more than others.

America isn't exactly like the extreme examples of Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa, but we do live in a country where, every day, black people confront the damning reality that we are less valued. The data are crystal clear. African Americans suffer chronic double-digit

unemployment. We lead the nation in rates of heart disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS. Nearly 1 million of the 2.4 million Americans in prison are black. When we think about the differences between whites and blacks in high school and college graduation rates, in mortality rates, in access to health care, in levels of wealth, in salary differences with comparable education, in the childhood poverty rate, we can see that in this country, white people, particularly those with money, matter more than others. It has been this way since the very day this country was founded.

The crisis currently engulfing black America and the country's indifference to the devastation it has wrought illustrate what I call *the value gap*. We talk about the achievement gap in education or the wealth gap between white Americans and other groups, but the value gap reflects something more basic: that no matter our stated principles or how much progress we think we've made, white people are valued more than others in this country, and that fact continues to shape the life chances of millions of Americans. The value gap is in our national DNA.

At every crucial moment in our nation's history, when there have been fundamental changes in how we've dealt with race, white people asserted the value gap and limited the scope of change. The powerful ideals of the American Revolution, which challenged the authority of monarchs and insisted on the principles of freedom and equality in the context of democratic institutions, were reconciled with the institution of racial slavery. People could talk of freedom and liberty *and* hold black slaves. Even the first immigration and naturalization act, in 1790, allowed only "white persons" to attain citizenship, and that racial understanding of citizenship persisted until 1954. The brutal war to end slavery and the efforts during Reconstruction to imagine a genuine multiracial democracy were tossed aside: Jim Crow took over the South, white supremacy shaped our foreign policy in places like the Philippines

and Cuba, and convict leasing emerged as another form of slavery. Cries for "law and order" and of "reverse racism" echoed throughout the nation as black folk marched in the streets, organized in their communities, and forced the government to end Jim Crow and to embrace, at least in principle, the idea of full racial equality. And here we are today: the historic election of our first black president occasioned the vitriol of the Tea Party, urgent efforts to change voting laws in ways that threaten black voters, and the worry that whites are fast becoming a "politically incorrect minority."

Each of these moments of racial progress represents a profound change in the country. America was and is truly different because these events happened. But the extent of the change was always limited by the underlying belief in the supremacy of white people—a belief that adjusted and adapted to new conditions. Niggers became Negroes. Blatant racism became demands for states' rights, and whites became one ethnic group among many. Black people were now dependent on government handouts and affirmative action, lacking individual initiative and self-reliance. Mass incarceration became the answer to calls for law and order. With each step forward, equally powerful forces pulled the nation back in the direction of the status quo. This is what I think people mean when they say little has changed in America with regard to race.

The American Idea

Americans like to believe that we live in a special country: that the American Revolution introduced democracy to the modern world and that we are free to pursue our dreams in a religiously tolerant society without the burden of rigid class distinctions. In the United States, people can worship wherever they want to, or they can choose not to believe in God at all. Lords and knights don't exist here. And poor people,

if they work hard, can escape poverty and even become rich. The amazing bounty of our lands and natural resources also set us apart. It's as if God placed his hands only on us. As patriots of the revolution put it, "With the Revolution, God has shown that THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA are his vineyard—the principal seat of [His] glorious kingdom." In this view, America is an exceptional place, a chosen nation charged to redeem the world.

Believing this requires that we ignore our history. Even as America was imagined as a New Israel, many black people saw it as Egypt—a "democracy" with black slaves. With the abolition of slavery, black people found themselves relegated to second-class status as the country continued to exploit their labor. Over and over again, the American Idea—that ours was a nation committed to liberty, freedom, and the unfettered pursuit of individual dreams—ran up against the stark reality that black people were valued less than others and that our society was organized to reflect that fact.

Now, those who believe in the American Idea see this as a basic contradiction between our ideals and practices, but not as fundamental to who we are as a nation. We have a Constitution and a set of principles that crystallizes our values and provides whatever possible remedies for people who suffer from racial discrimination. And when we fall short of those principles, Americans will do the work to bridge the gap between our ideals and practices. Our history, so the argument goes, is replete with examples of righting the wrongs of our racist past. The fact that racial inequality persists only suggests that we still have work to do.

But the value gap isn't about the distance between our ideals and practices or whether the United States should be seen as the "Redeemer Nation." It is about the beliefs that inform and shape the principles we claim as uniquely our own—the soil within which all of this stuff grows. If you believe that white people matter more than black people, then the principles of freedom, liberty, and equality—democracy itself—will be

distorted and disfigured. If the American Idea shapes our democracy, and that idea is in turn informed by the value gap, then it hardly matters what form our laws and politics take. They may create a framework for equality, but the value gap will always rig the outcomes. We can do the work. In fact, we've done some of the work, and it has cost a great deal to do so. But the value gap at the heart of the American Idea ensures that no matter the form of our system, it will always produce the same results: racial inequality. We can even elect a black president and that inequality would not fundamentally change. Remedying the problem of racial inequality in this country, then, involves ridding ourselves of the value gap.

The problem lies, at least in part, in seeing America as something in the abstract, as an idea separate from our practices. We often frame unjust practices as aberrations that don't live up to what we want America to be. But it's hard to buy that logic when for more than seventy-five years the country's very Constitution dictated that a slave should be counted as three-fifths of a person. Really, what's an ideal when you can't even get it into the founding document? The American Idea has never been quite the pristine paradigm we make it out to be, and it is our inability to acknowledge this fact that nourishes the value gap.

This is no less true today. When Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, for example, talks of the American Idea it feels wholly disconnected from the actual history of this country. For him, the American Idea "describes a way of life made possible by our commitment to the principles of freedom and equality—rooted in our respect for every person's natural rights." He understands it philosophically in the way we think about opportunity and the American dream. In cultural and human terms, Ryan says, the American Idea is manifested in the way we imagine our relationships with the state, with family and civil society, and in virtuous citizenship. Economically, the American Idea is "the belief that broadly shared prosperity is best achieved by allowing

individual creativity and ingenuity to emerge and evolve." And this requires free choice and enterprise.

Ryan's hometown of Janesville, Wisconsin, concretized the American Idea for him. There, he came to learn the power of opportunity and hard work. People dreamed dreams and worked their behinds off to achieve them. Even if they faced setbacks and challenges they picked themselves up and, with the help of others in the community, tried again. For him, Janesville represents the values of the American Idea: a tight-knit community where money and class aren't really talked about, where people "make their own opportunities" and share a set of values such as personal responsibility and accountability. Janesville also embraces an idea of a government that doesn't disrupt how we live our lives, but instead protects the spaces for individual innovation and creativity. In small towns like Janesville, government doesn't get in the way. Government keeps us safe, enables fair competition, and provides "some basic protections to the vulnerable from the worst risks of modern life."

I grew up in a small town too, not in Wisconsin, but on the coast of Mississippi. But my hometown, Moss Point, doesn't look much like what Ryan talks about. Of course, people dreamed dreams and worked their behinds off. But their job security waxed and waned with local industry. One day the shipyard was hiring. The next day it was laying people off. Money and class mattered. The town was more than 70 percent black. The local schools struggled, and black unemployment was terribly high. Everything about my childhood let me know that I had to work twice as hard for opportunity and that I shouldn't expect the world to be fair, because the world isn't fair to black people. Here the American Idea wasn't neat and tidy.

My hometown is no less American than his, yet Ryan's American Idea cannot quite countenance the existence of it. His view of the American Idea is unsullied by our racial history and practices; it is set apart from how we actually live our lives. (He even ignores the fact that

members of his own community formed a Ku Klux Klan chapter.) And when I say *we,* I don't just mean African Americans. The attitudes of Ryan and his white neighbors in Janesville are just as surely shaped by the value gap as are those of my black neighbors in Moss Point. "I know a lot of people who have a lot of prejudice," Pam O'Leary, the owner of a diner in Janesville, said. "They'll say they're not prejudiced . . . but they'll use certain terms for certain groups." This is America, whether Ryan's American Idea admits it or not.

When I teach Introduction to African American Studies at Princeton I always begin with a quotation from Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 classic, *Democracy in America*. My hope is to shake the students from the belief that the course is only about black people. I want them to see that when we read about slavery, black religion, blues, jazz, the civil rights movement, and Black Power, these events and moments force us to confront the most difficult questions about American democracy.

Tocqueville helps me lay out the stakes. At the beginning of chapter 10 on the three races, he writes: "I have now finished the main task that I set myself and have, to the best of my ability, described the laws and mores of American democracy." His writing about race comes as an afterthought, as something wholly apart from the issue of American democracy. Tocqueville makes a mistake.

His talk of the *habits of the heart*—what he takes to be the cultural values and assumptions that make us who we are (the values, like individual initiative, that Paul Ryan talks about in Janesville, Wisconsin)—includes assumptions about the value of white people and black people that limit how we think about democracy in this country. White people, particularly propertied white men, actively participated in the political process in the 1830s and 1840s. Black people were either slaves or relegated to the margins of society. That position was justified by a host

of beliefs about black people's capacities for self-governance that shaped the daily lives of white Americans. Black people were meant to be servile; everything about our society reflected that fact. To talk of habits of the heart apart from the racial views of Americans is to miss completely one of the crucial blind spots of American democracy at the time. (Unless, of course, you too believed that white people mattered more than black people.) Tocqueville's mistake, I tell my students, is our mistake. Americans often speak of freedom while giving little care to the great legacy of unfreedom at the heart of the American project. We continue to keep separate the American Idea and white supremacy.

Think about it this way. When Communists declare that Stalinism wasn't really communism or when Christians and Muslims say that the horrific things some Christians and Muslims have done in the name of their religion isn't really Christianity or Islam, what are they doing? They are protecting their ideology or the religion from the terrible things that occur in its name. They claim only the good stuff. What gets lost in all of this is that the bad stuff may very well tell us something important about communism, Christianity, or Islam—that there may be something in the ideology and in the traditions themselves that gives rise to the ugly and horrific things some people do in its name. (Minimally, it shows us that these traditions are hotly fought over and never that stable to begin with.)

The same holds true for the American Idea. We like to keep separate the evils of our national past from the sacredness of our ideals. That separation allows us to maintain a pristine idea of America despite all of the ugly things we have done. Americans can celebrate the founding fathers even when we hear John Adams declare to King George, "We will not be your negroes" or learn that Thomas Jefferson wasn't so consistent in his defense of freedom. We keep treating America like we have a great blueprint and we've just strayed from it. But the fact is that we've built the country true. Black folk were never meant to be full-fledged

participants in this society. The ideas of freedom and equality, of liberty and citizenship did not apply to us, precisely because we were black. Hell, the ability to vote for the majority of black people wasn't guaranteed until 1965. The value gap limited explicitly the scope and range of democratic life in this country. So when folks claim that American democracy stands apart from white supremacy, they are either lying or they have simply stuck their head in the sand.

Let's be clear. American democracy isn't just a set of abstract principles. Democracy acquires its power and substantive meaning in our living together, with all of its contradictions, its horrors and joys. Black people have shared in that life from the beginning. We have toiled on plantations and in factories. We have worked in homes, nursed babies, washed clothes, and shined shoes. Our lives, despite the circumstances, answered Ralph Waldo Emerson's call to "sing America."

We have also buried our dead here. Cut them down from lynching trees. Identified them as they were discovered floating in rivers, left in alleys to rot after sexual assault, or shot down by a police officer's gun. We have done all this in light of America's most elaborated contradiction: that no matter our stated commitments to democracy, white people in the country where I live are valued more than black people.

When we understand American democracy and white supremacy as inextricably connected we can see how tortuous our efforts have been to accommodate the value gap. For much of our history we have reconciled the contradiction by excluding black people from full participation in American life and creating odd categories to account for them that placed them at the margins of society—categories like "three-fifths of a person" in the Constitution and the doctrine of "separate but equal." With emancipation and the political enfranchisement of black Americans, we invoked the idea of "a more perfect union."

Correction of past wrongdoings, like ending slavery and dismantling legal segregation, confirmed the rightness of our ideals. Nothing fundamental about those ideals needed to change. We simply had to be better people.

I want no part of that story. It blinds us to how the value gap has been so fundamental to who we are as a nation. Over and over again, we have confronted the overriding belief, held by our government and exhibited in our daily lives, in white supremacy. The story blinds most white Americans to the harsh reality of this country. It hems them in. They see only what they want to see. But if we reckon with what has happened and is actually happening in this country, like the Great Black Depression, we can rid ourselves of the dangerous idea that Americans are inherently good or exceptional, and that these sorts of events are aberrations. We can finally leave behind this false idea that the true problem in this country is the gap between our ideals and practices. No. The true problem is our repeated failure to value *all* Americans. As James Baldwin writes:

> *The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that 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. Negroes know far more about white Americans than that.*

The task at hand is not about securing the goodness of the American Idea or about perfecting the union. It is about according dignity and standing to all Americans no matter the color of their skin.

The "Problem with Black People"

Today most of us find it difficult to acknowledge the persistence of racial inequality, let alone something like the value gap. And if you reject the claim that white supremacy still shapes this country, there are only two ways to reconcile what's happening across America. Either you point to the passage of civil rights legislation or to a black man's presence in the White House and declare our race problem solved, or you decide that black people must be at fault for their own terrible condition.

Throughout American history, as we have struggled with the issue of race, the particular circumstances of black lives have been hidden by the illusion that white America has adequately addressed "the Negro problem." We have a long history of prematurely proclaiming that our race problems are long over. In the years following the Civil War and Reconstruction, for example, many white Americans lauded the end of the race problem in the country just as Jim Crow took shape in the South. The Supreme Court in the civil rights cases of 1883 declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. That law had fined private business owners for engaging in racial discrimination. Many saw the law as an infringement on freedom of choice (Senator Rand Paul made a similar argument in 2011 against the Civil Rights Act of 1964). Slavery had been over for almost twenty years, and the justices cautioned that black people needed to finally stand on their own without the help of government despite crippling poverty, daily violence, and the ascendance of Jim Crow. Justice Joseph P. Bradley wrote the majority opinion.

> *When a man has emerged from slavery, and, by the aid of beneficent legislation, has shaken off the inseparable concomitants of that state, there must be some stage in the progress of his elevation when he takes the rank of a mere citizen and ceases to be the special favorite of the laws, and when his rights as a citizen or a man are to be protected in the ordinary modes by which other men's rights are protected.*

The fact that black people were subject to continued racial discrimination did not warrant unique consideration, according to the Court. The issue of slavery had been settled. Neither the Thirteenth nor the Fourteenth Amendment gave Congress the power to restrict racial discrimination in the private sector. Black people were now like everyone else. Tragically, more than 2,000 black people were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1903. Didn't matter: the problem had been solved.

Fast-forward to 2013. The Supreme Court struck down a key provision in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Court held that Section Four, which determined which states must receive clearance before making any changes to voting procedures, was unconstitutional. Chief Justice John Roberts was clear about the reasoning of the majority. "Our country has changed," he wrote. "[T]he conditions that originally justified the measures no longer characterize voting in the covered jurisdictions." The Court was claiming that the problem the Voting Rights Act sought to resolve was, for the most part, settled. Meanwhile, state after state, many in the covered jurisdictions, passed restrictive voter-identification laws that disproportionately affected black voters.

The illusion that we've solved our race problem often leads to harsh judgments about black people: continued demands for racial equality amount to acts of extortion by people who don't want to take responsibility for themselves. Since the 1980s and the advent of the Reagan revolution, the majority of Americans tend to see racial inequality, if they acknowledge it exists at all, as the fault of black people. Too many black folk have failed to take advantage of the successes of the civil rights movement, the argument goes. They have relied on government

handouts that deepened their dependency, and they have failed to hold themselves accountable and responsible for their own circumstances and actions. Bill O'Reilly and many other Republicans argue repeatedly that what's really wrong with the black community isn't racism. It's the breakdown of the family, the absence of fathers, and the failure to embrace education.

Sadly, none of this is new. Throughout this country's history various justifications for the status of black Americans have been put forward. Black people were incapable of civilization, prone to crime, lacking in intelligence, generally lazy, and sexually promiscuous. The list goes on and on. These stereotypes stood in the place of actual black people, and popular culture reinforced them. Americans absorbed these images of black people with characters like Stepin Fetchit and shows like *Amos 'n' Andy*. Today we see similar images on *Cops* or with shows like *Love & Hip Hop*.

Perhaps, then, it's unsurprising that poll data consistently show that many white Americans continue to rate black people as lazier than whites and more likely to prefer to live off of welfare. Even though they are not loud racists, many white Americans associate negative qualities with black people, and that association affects how black individuals are seen and treated, and how policy to remedy racial inequality is imagined. Bill O'Reilly again comes to mind here.

But, as the data show, right-wingers like O'Reilly and the people at Fox News are not alone in their beliefs. In a 2013 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll respondents were asked what they thought was most responsible for the continuing problem of poverty in this country. They were given a list of eight factors, including "too much welfare that prevents initiative," "lack of job opportunities," and "racial discrimination." The last choice revealed how poverty is often associated with black people. Twenty-four percent of the respondents chose "too much government welfare that prevents initiative," making it the most popular answer.

To my mind, this doesn't mean that Americans are mean-spirited people who lack empathy for the less fortunate (although the likes of Paul Ryan and Ted Cruz may make me change my mind). Instead, it shows how we see poverty today. If financial success is primarily understood in terms of individual initiative and ambition, then poverty must be its exact opposite. By that logic, federal programs to benefit the poor, like welfare, won't solve the problem. They will only make it worse.

But this argument seems to apply only when the face of poverty is black. From the New Deal up to Robert Kennedy's tour of Appalachia in 1968, welfare was widely seen as good government. Racist southern populists initially supported the New Deal, because the policies helped the white poor in the region—policies systematically denied to black Americans. But around 1968, with the help of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, the face of poverty turned black, and welfare became a problem of government dependence. In fact, economists Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote have shown that the primary reason we don't have a European-style welfare state is because the programs are seen to benefit black people. For them, "race is the single most important predictor of support for welfare."

Most white Americans today tend to see poverty in individual instead of systemic terms, having much to do with our national commitment to individualism. But African Americans know that whatever the system is, it is rigged in the favor of white people. It's not just about "initiative."

For some of us, we only have to talk to members of our family to get a sense of how things were, or still are, rigged. My great-grandmother Ruby Wilson worked as a domestic for white people in my hometown for almost thirty years. She never talked about that job or the people she worked for. No one told us, but we knew the subject was taboo. She didn't hate those people; she just understood them for who they were. When I came home from college angry about racism, she simply said,

"You better not dwell on that. That stuff will eat you up." Her pension plan amounted to the dimes she saved—dimes that bought the stove that cooked amazing pinto beans, and the refrigerator, or ice box as she called it, that held the best Kool-Aid in the world. Talking with her gave me a sense that some people had it better in life than others. Not because they had more individual initiative or were more disciplined. She worked tremendously hard. They were simply white.

None of this seems to matter in the broader public debate. African Americans who are struggling to find a job or keep a roof over their heads are often seen, especially by those on the right, as lazy or gaming the system (they buy steaks with food stamps!). If they are unsuccessful or poor, it is a reflection of bad character and bad choices, not a shortage of opportunities.

Even deadly encounters with the police indicate a failure of character. In response to the death of Michael Brown, Ben Stein, the actor and conservative commentator, had this to say:

> *The idea of calling this poor young man unarmed when he was 6'4" 300 lbs full of muscles, apparently according to what I read in* The New York Times *on marijuana, to call him unarmed is like calling Sonny Liston unarmed or Cassius Clay unarmed. He wasn't unarmed. He was armed with his incredibly strong, scary self. . . . There was a time . . . when lynchings of African Americans were not that incredibly rare. Now the lynchings are of the police. It's just an outrage. Notice in both this case, just as in Trayvon Martin's case, it is the very large so-called victim attacking the policemen, who winds up dead. If they would not attack the police, if they would just talk to the policemen in a reasonable way no one would be dead.*

There is so much going on here that it is difficult to know where to begin. Stein magically transforms George Zimmerman, a wannabe

neighborhood watchman, into a police officer. He claims Michael Brown was "armed" just by being "his incredibly strong, scary self"—like he is describing King Kong. Moreover, Brown's failure to submit to authority caused his death, not Darren Wilson, who pulled the trigger.

As if this isn't enough, Stein drops a history lesson in the middle of his rant. Once upon a time, the lynchings of black people "were not that incredibly rare." Now the police are the victims of lynchings. (A Fox News guest, Ron Hosko, went so far as to say, "Mr. Holder, it's time to cut Darren Wilson down from that tree.") We've put behind our troublesome racial past only to face reverse racism. Black people are no longer the victims of discrimination and racial violence. The police are. And, by implication because they are principally tasked to protect them, white people are.

It's easy to dismiss the views of Stein and others as those of a radical right-wing fringe. But Stein said out loud what poll data confirmed. Sixty-two percent of white St. Louis County residents believed that Wilson was justified in killing Brown. When asked whether the shooting raised important questions about race in this country, African Americans overwhelmingly said yes (about four to one). The majority of white respondents said that the issue was getting more attention than it deserved. Stein couched these racial attitudes within a broader story about the country. For him, we have put all of this behind us—except for a few racist lunatics. The problems black people face today, like the problem Michael Brown created for himself, are primarily of their own doing.

And that's just crazy, because most black people have known for some time that the problem with this country isn't *us*. It's *white* folk.

The value gap persists, in part, because of our national refusal to remember and our unwillingness to see what is right in front of our eyes. To declare ourselves a bastion of democratic life when black infant

mortality is twice that of whites; when the level of inequality between the rich and the poor surpasses that of any other nation in the industrialized world; and when the United States has the highest documented rate of incarceration in the world—such a declaration is galling. Given this gap, the idea, one so powerfully expressed by Martin Luther King, that the nation must experience a fundamental change of the heart is not some sentimental, apolitical notion that ignores structural matters. It reflects, instead, that closing the value gap has both moral and political significance. We have to become better people by fundamentally transforming the conditions of our living together. This will require setting aside our comforting illusions.

When I say that the value gap is rooted, in part, in our national refusal to remember, I am not invoking some politically correct notion of history that simply includes previously excluded groups. How we collectively remember is bound up with questions of justice. Or, to put the point differently, what we choose to forget often reveals the limits of justice in our collective imaginations. Think about this in a personal way. Imagine that a family, one that prides itself on the strength of familial bonds, carries the burden of a terrible secret. Everyone knows, even as they act like they don't, that an adored relative has sexually abused a young niece repeatedly. Family gatherings go on as if nothing has happened or is happening. As time passes, stories are told about his sense of humor, his generosity in times of need, and his loving personality. With each recollection, the memory of his heinous actions falls into the shadows and the injustice of his treatment of his niece is ignored or forgotten—except by the victim herself. For her, stories of his kindness tell her, in effect, to shut her mouth.

When we *disremember* an event, an egregious moment in the past, we shape how we live in the present. I borrow the word from Toni Morrison. In her magisterial novel *Beloved*, she grapples with the difficulty of memories, haunting memories that come back to consume.

Disremembering enables the characters in the novel to ward off, temporarily, the pain of past events. Disremembering blots out horrible loss, but it also distorts who the characters take themselves to be. Something is lost. It is this sense of the word that strikes me as particularly useful for our current moment. Disremembering is active forgetting.

We forget particular moments for specific reasons. Speaking at an event sponsored by Iowans for Tax Relief in 2011, former U.S. Representative Michele Bachmann said, without any hint of irony, that the United States was founded on racial and ethnic diversity and that the founding fathers were responsible for abolishing slavery. Let's acknowledge for a moment that Bachmann has on a number of occasions revealed her scant knowledge of American history (she even declared John Quincy Adams one of the men who drafted the Constitution). If I were to criticize her simply for getting the facts wrong, you might accuse me of going after low-hanging fruit, but that's not what I'm interested in. What's important here isn't the gaffe itself but what its content reveals about how Bachmann disremembers the past. For her and her Tea Party supporters, America has *always* been good. Even when we were wrong, we were right. So in this misstatement of fact, the image of America as an ethnic melting pot, an Ellis Island image, is read back onto our national beginnings and the end of slavery is seen as part of our founding. The value gap gets completely lost in her insistence that America has been abolitionist since its beginning.

What we put in and leave out of our stories tells us something about who we are. The Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Presidents' Day, and Martin Luther King Day are public rituals that tell a particular story about our national journey. That story often involves accounts of heroic efforts or extraordinary events that make us feel good about ourselves and loyal to our country. The United States is not unique in this. All countries do it. But all too often, how we tell our story keeps us from seeing aspects of the past that may call into question the American Idea.

In 1834, during our national celebration of the Fourth of July, for example, African Americans who dared to join the activities were attacked, as their mere presence challenged the story of America. How could America be celebrated as a bastion of freedom when the very bodies of black folk suggested otherwise? We don't talk much about the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of Native Americans from their lands as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, or about the evil of lynching (between 1887 and 1906, an African American was lynched in the South every four days). We may read about this stuff in a textbook, but we rarely question America's self-understanding as a beacon of freedom.

Even when we confront the more challenging aspects of our past, we do so to corroborate our goodness. When we see images of fire hoses turned on peaceful protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 or watch the trauma of slavery in a film like *Twelve Years a Slave,* it is someone else's story. We stand in judgment of the past, but rarely in self-judgment.

Collective forgetting is crucial in determining the kind of story we tell ourselves. Ours is the chosen nation, the "shining city upon a hill," as Ronald Reagan called it. America *is* democracy. Anyone, no matter his humble beginnings, has a chance to make his dreams come true here. That's our story. To believe this, we have to forget and willfully ignore what is going on around us. Forget that for much of our history black people have had to wage a relentless war against white supremacy. Forget that now our class structure is so rigid that you probably have a better chance of winning the lottery than getting out of poverty if you are born poor. Forget all the bad stuff that cuts short the illusion that we are an example of democracy already achieved.

Our silence about the suffering throughout the country conspires with injustice. People who have suffered from past wrongdoings and

present failings find it difficult, if not impossible, to call attention to their suffering when a precondition for American civic life is that only certain events can be recalled and must be recalled in certain ways. We have to talk about racism in a certain way. Dr. King is the model. We have to invoke love and nonviolence. Talk of white supremacy isn't allowed. We have to talk about poverty in a certain way. "Ladders of opportunity" are better than redistributive economic policies or what some call "class warfare." To ignore this is to risk being accused of trading in victim talk or, worse, to be declared "not one of us"—a traitor. The primary purpose of disremembering is to hide from view the value gap and to protect our national innocence: to keep the ugliness of our deeds at arm's length or buried deep in our national subconscious.

This is part of the sinister work of the value gap. We laud our democratic virtues to others and we represent ourselves to the world as a place of freedom and equality, all while our way of life makes possible choices that reproduce so much evil, and we don't see it happening—or, worse, we don't want to know about it. James Baldwin's words haunt: "People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster." Are we a nation of monsters?

What is required, if America is to become the nation it hopes to be, is a wholesale transformation of our idea of who we are. This must involve confronting, without flinching, the nasty implication of the value gap. We must tell ourselves a different story, about how this belief has devastated the lives of so many Americans and how it has warped our idea of democracy. We can no longer forget. Such forgetting leaves in place the habits and illusions that make possible the value gap and sanctions our willful blindness to the devastation caused by the Great Black Depression.

We have to do better. And this will take much more than lofty

appeals to the American Idea—the delusion that somehow, if we live up to our principles, all will be well once again in America. Illusions will not save us; they have to be smashed. We have to change fundamentally, and that will require uprooting the racial habits that are the lifeblood of the value gap.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHITE FEAR

Richard Cohen, the *Washington Post* columnist, wrote a controversial op-ed after the verdict acquitting George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin was delivered. In Cohen's opinion, Zimmerman and white people, generally, have good reason to fear young black men: "Young black males commit a disproportionate amount of crime." That fact alone, Cohen argued, warrants suspicion of black men and justifies "stop and frisk" policies by police. The solution to such fear isn't a change in white people's attitudes, Cohen said. It requires changing black culture.

> *[T]he least we can do is talk honestly about the problem. It does no one any good to merely cite the number of stop-and-frisks involving black males without citing the murder statistics as well. Citing the former and not the latter is an Orwellian exercise in political correctness. It not only censors half of the story but also suggests that racism is the sole reason for the policy. This mindlessness, like racism itself, is repugnant.*

Cohen doesn't defend George Zimmerman. In fact, he explicitly says he "does not like what [he] did." But Cohen does believe Zimmerman was

justified in fearing for his life, because young black men commit more crimes than others, and this makes it reasonable to fear *all* young black men.

Cohen's op-ed set off a firestorm. *Daily Kos* offered one of the more imaginative responses, listing data that contradicted the idea that white people should be afraid of young black men. The odds of a black person killing a white person are about 0.0000212. With those numbers, "[y]ou really have far more reason to be scared of say, getting on a ladder, than you do of getting murdered by the hoodie wearing teenager you see on the street. The fear is irrational." But that doesn't matter. Cohen believes this stuff, and he is not alone.

What matters for Cohen and for a large segment of white America was and is *white fear*. White fear is the general frame of mind that black people are dangerous, not only to white individuals because they are prone to criminal behavior, but to the overall well-being of our society.

White fear begins with logical feelings of unease about specific situations and spirals from there. It makes sense to be doubly vigilant when we drive in neighborhoods plagued by high crime rates. People, especially women, are mindful of the potential dangers of walking in a parking lot late at night. But that same vigilance can also lead us to perceive danger where it does not exist. The particulars of the situation don't really matter.

For instance: I was walking to my car one evening after a long day in the office when I saw the spouse of a colleague and raised my hand to say hello. But a peremptory glance let me know she was not interested. She seemed afraid. The fact that we've had dinner together and shared jokes, or that her partner writes about race, didn't seem to matter. I was black, and it was dusk.

She hurried along and I got in my car. It's Princeton. It's a patrolled campus parking lot. The black guy is wearing an expensive suit. Doesn't

matter. The object of fear, in this instance, has only one identifiable quality: skin color. We see potential danger whenever we see *these* people.

White fear is a kind of political fear. Political fear (like the current fear of Muslims) reaches beyond fright or anxiety experienced by individuals. It's bigger than any one person. It is a deeply felt, collectively held fear shared by people who believe, together, that some harm threatens them and their way of life. That apprehension, based in how we generally live our lives and sometimes in individual experience, guides political choices and policy.

Here is the wildest and most devastating part. White fear isn't just limited to white people. As a political emotion, white fear is expressed across and within different groups—even among black people themselves. When I drive down Stuyvesant Avenue in Trenton, New Jersey, at night, I feel a deep concern about my own safety. Stuyvesant is not safe. In some quarters, it is known as "Little Iraq." Shootings, drug deals, and other illicit behavior happen on this street. But that "reasonable" concern is bound up with other assumptions about this particular street, and about the people who live there.

My particular sense of fear converges with broader assumptions and beliefs about Trenton, about cities (even small ones like Trenton), about African Americans, and especially about poor African Americans. In other words, I drive down Stuyvesant with an already developed sense of the danger of the space and of the people who inhabit it, because we learn from our society what is harmful and what is not.

This is how political fear works. It takes fears based in narrow concerns and gives them a more generalized feel: the specific fear that motivates *me* in this one instance ought to motivate me to be concerned about what matters *to us*, even if I am in no immediate danger. Intimate fears about encounters with individual black people become broader concerns about a general threat to the very fabric of our society. That threat, in turn, creates and nurtures our most intimate fears. It's a vicious circle.

Since even before this country's founding, fears of black men have come from ideas and beliefs about who they are and about what they're capable of. Those ideas and beliefs circulated in newspapers and in popular culture, and eventually made their way into the first feature-length film in the United States, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was based on the 1905 novel *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon. They made black men subhuman. As the anti-lynching crusader and black feminist Ida B. Wells-Barnett put it: "[T]he world has accepted the story that the Negro is a monster, which the southern white man has painted him. And, today the Christian world feels, that while lynching is a crime . . . it cannot by word or deed, extend sympathy or help to *a race of outlaws* [emphasis added]." A race of outlaws or monsters is to be feared and policed, because they pose a threat not just to individuals but also to a cherished way of life.

Thus, white fear can be understood as something anticipatory, a fear just waiting to be expressed. It isn't based in any actual threat of harm. Instead, the *idea* of black violence or crime does all the work. The mere possibility of danger is enough to motivate us to act as if we are in immediate danger.

Such fears can produce cycles of *racial moral panics* in which black people are viewed as a threat to everything we hold dear. That perception shapes public sentiment and informs public policy debates as people call for directed efforts to address the crisis. For example, after emancipation, white fears about black male sexual desire for white women unleashed unimaginable terror and violence throughout the South. (Black women were always the object of sexual terrorism, during and after slavery, but never mind.) Black men dared to assert their equal standing in public life during this period, to assert their manhood. The idea of black manhood, expressed through full citizenship and evidenced in voting and economic success, produced fears of black men sleeping with white women.

Anxiety and panic ensued, so much so that in 1866 six former Confederate officers founded the Ku Klux Klan as a secret social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, to defend "the hallowed Southern way of life." By 1868, the Klan was terrorizing black men who tried to vote and, frequently, accusing those men of sexual liaisons with white women. In 1871, a congressional committee convened an investigation of the Klan's violence. It heard testimony across the South and soon discovered that black people who challenged white supremacy, especially those who stood accused of having slept with white women, were subject to unimaginable violence.

Henry Lowther, a black freedman from central Georgia, told the committee his story. One night about twenty disguised Klansmen came to his home. They accused him of taking "too great a stand against them in the Republican Party." He managed to get away safely. Lowther was later jailed and charged for conspiring to kill another black man, but denied a trial. This time he could not escape. Klansmen arrived in the middle of the night and took him to a swamp. "The moon was shining bright, and I could see them," he told the committee. They castrated him. The Klansmen not only condemned his work with the Republican Party, they accused him of "going to see a white lady."

Americans experienced several racial moral panics in the latter half of the twentieth century—all related to the fear of black criminality. As the nation confronted the grassroots social movements for black freedom, many Southern segregationists called for law and order in the face of the threat of the black criminal. Senator Strom Thurmond suggested that calls for integration would result in "a wave of terror, crime, and juvenile delinquency." At the 1964 Republican National Convention, presidential candidate Barry Goldwater was even more explicit:

The growing menace in our country tonight, to personal safety, to life, to limb and property, in homes, in churches, on the playgrounds,

and places of business, particularly in our great cities, is the mounting concern, or should be, of every thoughtful citizen in the United States. Security from domestic violence, no less than from foreign aggression is the most elementary and fundamental purpose of any government, and a government that cannot fulfill that purpose is one that cannot long command the loyalty of its citizens.

For Goldwater and others, the mass demonstrations of the black freedom struggle—even Dr. King's nonviolent protests—amounted to "bullies and marauders" running rampant in the streets.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, concerns over black lawlessness helped morph the United States into the prison state it has become, as draconian laws swelled prison populations throughout the country. Fears about substance abuse and related violence were exploited by politicians and led to a declaration of a war on drugs. The epidemic of crack cocaine, a drug associated with poor black neighborhoods, drove that war into a heated frenzy. Concerns over wild and lawless youth with their soundtrack of rap music gripped the nation. The horror of the attack on the Central Park jogger on April 19, 1989, only heightened the crisis as four black youths and one Hispanic youth were accused and convicted of brutally raping Trisha Meili after a night of "wilding." Politicians and scholars alike fretted loudly over the new seemingly ultra-dangerous young black men who threatened to rip through the very fabric of the nation.

The political scientist John J. Dilulio even coined the term *superpredator* to call attention to this new breed of criminal, as dramatized by the young men in the Central Park case. These were "kids that have no respect for human life and no sense of the future," Dilulio said. They were "fatherless, Godless, and jobless." For him, these were "stone-cold predators." He even predicted that by 2000 "there would be a million more people between the ages of 14 and 17 than there are now. . . . Six percent of them will become high rate, repeat offenders—thirty

thousand more young muggers, killers, and thieves than we have now. Get ready."

The moral panic drove public policy as local, state, and federal governments began to imprison young black men and women at alarming rates. (Black women, for example, had the fastest-growing incarceration rates in the 1990s.) Black children weren't treated like children—they were increasingly tried in courts as adults.

Of course, Dilulio's findings were eventually proved incorrect. His data were wrong. There were no superpredators on the horizon. He even recanted his theory in 2001. "If I knew then what I know now, I would have shouted for preventions of crimes." The social costs and the lives ruined, however, cannot be undone. (The Central Park Five were exonerated in 2002.) White fear is the danger. Not black people.

Racial moral panics resulted in exaggerated outrage that increased policing of certain black communities, dulled even further capacities for empathy and compassion, and confirmed and deepened white fears. And we now have nearly one million African Americans incarcerated, which for many people, consciously or not, affirms the perceptions that started the cycle in the first place.

In 2014 the national media for a brief moment took up the horror of a supposed new game in American cities called "knockout." Videos on the Internet showed different groups of black men randomly "knocking out" unsuspecting strangers with one punch. The media was frenzied. News anchors were outraged. Lawmakers rushed to make the game a felony. Police announced more patrols. Panic gripped the public. You never know when or if it will happen to you. But whether or not the game had actually gone viral didn't ultimately matter. White fear was confirmed. As Philip Fisher writes in his important book *The Vehement Passions*:

This fear is general rather than individual, and its object is any possible other person, not one specific man facing me on the street at

night. It is also any possible time, not a specific moment, which after all is an exceptional moment, one that will come to an end. This fear never ends, never starts, is always present like gravity.

Here Fisher describes fear generally. But in the United States *white* fear never ends either. It is always present, ready to be activated by the slightest encounter or gesture and ready to be used to short-circuit any serious attempt to end racial inequality. And its gravitational force (the media) pulls all Americans, no matter their color, into its orbit.

White fear more than almost anything else has driven the lightning-rod incidents involving the unnecessary deaths of black people at the hands of the police or armed whites. And yet we were supposed to believe that the George Zimmerman trial had little, if anything, to do with race. The system certainly tried to exclude it. Judge Debra Nelson ruled in a pretrial hearing that the prosecution could use only the word *profiling*—not *racial profiling*. Explicit reference to race was banished from the proceedings. Juror B37 echoed this point. She insisted that race did not play a role in what Zimmerman did. He'd simply judged Martin's behavior in the context of a rash of burglaries in the neighborhood. As she put it, "I think [George] just profiled him because he was the neighborhood watch, and he profiled anyone who came in acting strange. I think it was just circumstances happened that he saw Trayvon at the exact time that he thought he was suspicious."

But race was everywhere in this confrontation and in the trial. We heard it in Martin's description of Zimmerman as "a creepy-ass cracker." We saw it in Zimmerman's suspicion of Martin. We heard it in the testimony of Rachel Jeantel, the last person to talk with Martin before his death, whose speech patterns and combative style on the witness stand set off a firestorm in the press and on social media. Or when defense

attorney Mark O'Mara brought out a slab of concrete and claimed that it was a deadly weapon because Martin *could have* bashed Zimmerman's head into it. Trayvon was akin to the brute beast that Darren Wilson saw in Michael Brown. He was, in effect, the monster that our history had made him to be.

Zimmerman's "reasonable fear"—the threshold for his use of the "stand your ground" defense—was no ordinary response to a perceived threat. Trayvon Martin was a young black man, wearing a hoodie in a neighborhood in which Zimmerman thought he didn't belong. And in our culture, young black men dressed like Martin and in the "wrong" place are presumed dangerous. On Fox News, Geraldo Rivera went as far as to say that Martin was partly responsible for his own death, because he was wearing a hoodie. "When you see a kid walking down the street, particularly a dark-skinned kid like my son Cruz . . . what do they think? What's the identification, what's the association?" In those moments, a host of stereotypes about who black men are and what they are capable of are triggered. Rivera said as much. "It's those crime-scene surveillance tapes. Every time you see someone sticking up a 7-Eleven, the kid is wearing a hoodie. You have to recognize that this whole stylizing yourself as a gangster, you're gonna be a gangster wannabe? *Well, people are gonna perceive you as a menace.*" No matter what Trayvon Martin was doing (buying a bag of Skittles) or who he was (his father actually lived in the subdivision), he was invisible to Zimmerman. The stereotype of young black men as the menace described by Rivera obstructed Zimmerman's vision. The conditions for Martin's murder were set well before that fateful encounter. He was by definition a threat to someone's life.

Social-science research shows that people instantly categorize others on the basis of distinctions like race. Stereotypes are triggered when we encounter black people and, all too often, prejudice follows. That research also shows that in video simulations, people are more likely to shoot black men. In one study, white *and* black participants were more

inclined to press "shoot" in the game when confronted by an unarmed black person than an unarmed white person. Police officers, even with their training, had similar results. These outcomes aren't inevitable. We can do something about them. But it requires that we acknowledge how racial stereotypes and bias affect how we see and respond to others. You just can't ignore racial habits, as Judge Nelson tried to do in the Zimmerman trial, and think that's the solution to such intractable problems.

In his freshman year at Brown University, my son, Langston, experienced what it means to be black and in the "wrong" place. His urban-studies professor assigned his group the task of observing one of the richest neighborhoods in Providence. Langston couldn't make the initial trip with his classmates to the neighborhood, so the next day, he went with his girlfriend to complete the assignment. They strolled into a park around 6:30 p.m. and sat down on a nearby bench. He pulled out his notebook and began writing down his observations. A bit later, a Providence police cruiser slowly drove by. The officers stared at him. The police car abruptly made a U-turn, turned on its blue lights, and drove onto the sidewalk, blocking any possible exit. An officer got out of the car. He shined a light into my son's face, then at his feet, and then near the shrubs and bushes. Never saying a word. Never acknowledging my son's existence. Langston finally asked, "Officer, can I help you?" The cop responded, "Who are you? Where are you from? And why are you here?" My son told him he was a Brown student and that he was completing a class assignment. The officer told him that the park closes at 9 p.m. Langston said, "I know, but it is only 7 p.m." The officer repeated, this time more forcefully, "The park *closes* at 9 p.m." At this point, his partner came around the car with his hand on his gun or Taser. My son put his hands up and said, "We don't want any trouble. We're leaving now."

As he told me the story on the phone later, I fumed. I had just received a call, not an hour earlier, informing me that I had been elected the next president of the American Academy of Religion, the largest professional organization of religion scholars in the world. That didn't matter. My status as a Princeton professor didn't matter. I knew that. I teach about this stuff. But this wasn't an intellectual argument or an example in a book. My only child was telling me that the police, one of them with his hand on a weapon, told him that his body was in the wrong place. He'd had reason to fear for his life. They could've killed him.

We talked. His emotions ranged from shock to anger. I told him, "Now imagine if you lived in a different place how often you would have to experience that."

Embargoing talk of race won't help us get at what motivated the officers to harass my child, or help us understand why Zimmerman decided to do what he did to Trayvon Martin, or help us as a nation get at the racial habits that drive our most intimate and generalized fears about black people. It certainly won't help us understand what it means when we discover police officers in North Miami using mug shots of African American men for target practice. Nor will embargoing race help us fathom how trained police could drive up on a twelve-year-old boy and, within two seconds, mistake him for a twenty-year-old man, reasonably fear for their lives, shoot him, and refuse to administer first aid. White fear blinds us to the humanity of the people right in front of us. It makes it easier to devalue them, to see them as a threat, to dispose of them without any discomfort or conscience.

White people aren't fearful of black people simply because they're white. That fear has a history. It has shadowed American life ever since we reconciled our commitment to democratic principles with the institution of slavery. That reconciliation required, among other things,

white people to believe that their lives mattered more than others—that the benefits and burdens of democracy did not extend to black people. They were slaves or, at best, interlopers in this grand experiment in democracy.

Americans believe in democracy, *and* we are committed to white supremacy. Obviously, it is wrong to hold both views. White fear can rear its ugly head as a kind of moral anxiety when we recognize just how wrong this is, and consistently do nothing about it. Looked at like this, white fear is the belief that black people are dangerous; the danger, though, stems from the fear of black revenge or of God's punishment for our national sins around race.

This kind of fear—the fear, as Malcolm X said, "of the chickens coming home to roost"—is as old as America itself. In 1785, Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

> *Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature, and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.*

Jefferson was obviously concerned with divine retribution. He feared the moral implications of holding another human being in bondage.

For Jefferson, this sense of fear was a consequence of racial habits learned in the context of living with slavery. Customs and manners were indelibly shaped by the transactions that slavery demanded. As Jefferson put it, "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise in the most boisterous passion." Slaves had to know their place or risk violent punishment. Masters had to exercise their power. Those caught in slavery's vise grips could see themselves and others only

in particular ways: as those who owned people and as those who were owned. Slavery affected and deformed the character of slaveholders by creating habits of mind that distorted their moral sense. These habits were passed along to children. Jefferson wrote: "The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worse of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities."

For Jefferson, white fear takes root here: in the habits formed as we live lives shaped by the ideas and practices of white supremacy and in the anticipation of the possible consequences that may follow from what we are doing to other people. Those habits carry with them, then, a kind of fear and trembling that someday, at some point, all of us, like sinners condemned to hell, will be held to account.

Jefferson is not alone. Abraham Lincoln echoed this haunting sense some eighty years later. In his second inaugural address, amid the carnage of the Civil War, Lincoln said:

> *Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."*

Lincoln characterized the war as, perhaps, God's punishment for the sin of slavery. Even in this most sacred of moments in American history, white fear as divine retribution haunted the nation.

And not just a reckoning from the heavens. Alongside the moral judgment has always been the fear that black people will exact their own

vengeance—and that they'll be right to do so. Jefferson was concerned with the moral wrongness of bondage, but he also worried about black slave insurrection in the United States—a kind of deep and pervasive fear and paranoia about possible revenge.

The Haitian revolution confirmed those fears. In 1804, some nineteen years after Jefferson's expression of fear and trembling, Toussaint Louverture and Dessaline defeated Napoleon's armies, and Haiti became the first black nation in the new world. Napoleon's defeat sent shock waves throughout the slaveholding Americas. People feared that those forced to toil in the fields would inevitably turn their rage against their masters and that, given the moral abomination of slavery, God would take the side of the slaves. Slave rebellion would be divinely sanctioned.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, slave rebellions like those planned by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner scared the hell out of white slave owners. And the idea of weaponized black folk, talking about violence or self-defense, or calling for rebellion or revolution, has continued to scare the hell out of white folk. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panther Party frightened white America. Young black men and women, with leather jackets and berets, carried guns and challenged state power. They called cops pigs and dared to speak openly of revolution. No wonder J. Edgar Hoover thought of them as "the most dangerous threat to national security" in America. The Panthers capitalized on white fear; they understood it and brought the anxieties of the country to a fever pitch. They wanted to make sure the status quo was uncomfortable.

But neither fear of divine retribution nor of black revenge was sufficient motivation to treat black people justly or to reimagine American democracy apart from white supremacy. Jefferson talked and wrote eloquently about democracy and the moral cost of bondage and, with rational efficiency, managed his slaves at Monticello. Lincoln denounced slavery, signed the Emancipation Proclamation, and considered the

reasonableness of emigration/colonization schemes to rid the country of its black problem. For both, the presence of black people threatened the moral standing of the country and the moral character of its most valued asset—white Americans. White fear has never motivated people to look for solutions that would involve ameliorating the deep conditions that produced the fear in the first place. Instead, the response has been to eliminate the fear by eliminating black people. Either we needed to get rid of black folk physically or just make the whole damn country color-blind.

Such color-blindness would be rich in irony given another of white fear's many facets: the fear that genuine racial equality requires the end of white America. That would be the ultimate revenge—the disappearance of white folk altogether. Some believe that black freedom—economic, political, and otherwise—threatens the freedom of white people. The conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat wrote that many white people believe the nation is hell-bent on handing over the country to underrepresented groups; that all pathways to success for hardworking white people have been shut down. "This breeds paranoia, among elite and non-elites alike," Douthat noted. "Among the white working class, increasingly the most reliable Republican constituency, alienation from the American meritocracy fuels the kind of racial conspiracy theories that [Glenn] Beck and others have exploited."

Douthat isn't making this stuff up. Sixty percent of working-class white Americans believe that discrimination against whites is a bigger problem than discrimination against blacks. One respondent in the Whiteness Project put it this way: "It's my honest opinion that today it's the white race is the one that's discriminated against. . . . I have taken exams to get into the skills trades . . . and scored well on the exam, but didn't get picked for the apprenticeship programs, because minorities

had to fill 'em, because of quota status. . . . I felt cheated and it wasn't fair." For him, racial equality amounts to taking opportunities from honest white Americans and giving them to people who haven't earned them—an un-American notion to its core. It is a zero-sum game.

A sign on an overpass on Interstate 640 in Knoxville, Tennessee, captures the underlying sentiment. Two vinyl banners about 30 inches tall and 123 feet long, stretching across the Norfolk Southern Bridge covering the width of the interstate, declared ANTI-RACISM IS A CODE WORD FOR ANTI-WHITE. For the people who put up the sign, true racial equality means one thing: a wholesale attack on white people and a deep-seated fear about what that might mean.

White fear is clearly dangerous to black people as individuals, and that fear affects how black people behave politically and how we respond more generally to racial inequality. The *fear of white fear* distorts black political behavior. We have to constantly censor our rage. I can't be "the angry black man." I can't call Bill O'Reilly a dumbass (at least not in public or on television). No matter the horror of the moment, our anger must be overcome and expressed reasonably out of concern of triggering white fear or making white folk uncomfortable under the weight of racial accusation. That's why black protesters must constantly allay national fears, no matter the context, by proclaiming their commitment to nonviolence. It's a litmus test to make sure you're one of "the good ones." Constantly policing what we say and how we feel, many African Americans often don the mask in public debate as our spirits wage war against the rage that threatens to consume us. We have to confront, every time we open our mouths, the possible consequences of making white people afraid. It can be exhausting.

One can see this in the political calculations of President Obama. His campaign speech on race in Philadelphia, considered one of the most

important political speeches in recent memory, offers a great example of how a fear of white fear can work. Obama tried to account for the anger of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright by explaining that he was among those who grew up in a country that regularly defeated the dreams of African Americans. Wright's anger, then, was understandable, but its expression was unproductive. Obama then immediately juxtaposed Wright's anger with the anger of segments of white America. As he put it,

> *[A] similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. . . . They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures. . . . Opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college . . . resentment builds over time. Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company.*

Obama's approach gave the expression of anger in both instances the same moral weight. Such a move obscures the power of racial habits in determining the life outcomes of Americans. It makes it seem that black rage in the face of debilitating inequality is the same as white anger over the loss of white privilege. But this just deepens racial habits, as white Americans are led to believe that their anger toward black people is justified. It also gives license to those who routinely dismiss African American grievances as the cries of perennial victims.

In his address celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington—a sacred moment in African American history—Obama

told a particular story of black struggle. That story involved a troubling account of the role of black anger. He said,

> *If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that during the course of 50 years, there were times when some of us, claiming to push for change, lost our way. The anguish of assassinations set off self-defeating riots.*
>
> *Legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse-making for criminal behavior. Racial politics could cut both ways as the transformative message of unity and brotherhood was drowned out by the language of recrimination. And what had once been a call for equality of opportunity, the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead, was too often framed as a mere desire for government support, as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child and the bigotry of others was reason to give up on yourself. All of that history is how progress stalled. That's how hope was diverted. It's how our country remained divided.*

Nothing about this formulation rings historically true. The language of recrimination, I suppose, stands as a description of the rhetoric of the Black Power movement. But the other stuff is just the nasty rhetoric of the Reagan era that has sadly become familiar. Obama invokes the idea of black criminality, of black people looking for government handouts instead of working hard, of black parents failing to raise their children properly, and of false cries of racism as the excuse for troubles that are of our own making. This is the refrain of the neoconservatives who worked tirelessly in the 1980s and 1990s to undo the gains of the black freedom struggle.

President Obama trades in this kind of talk without any shame. His words stand as the flip side of the racial dog whistle. It's not that he seeks

to trigger the racism of whites with coded language, as Republicans do with their talk of entitlements. Instead, with these words, Obama assuages, or so he hopes, the fears of white America. He confirms, at least for those who are listening, that he isn't some Manchurian candidate for black revenge.

White fear requires that we make white people feel comfortable about race. Black people have to be the "Uncle Remus" of American national politics: nonthreatening, loyal, and generally happy. If we are angry, we have to express that anger in a way that white people find politically acceptable. We have to march, vote for some Democratic candidate, or watch a gaggle of civil rights leaders hold a press conference and invoke the legacy of Dr. King—the King of 1963, mind you. It also entails translating the specific concerns of black communities into something more universal. The issue can't be all about black people. We have "to lift all boats." All of this happens because of one unmistakable fact: if we talk directly about black suffering in this country we risk alienating large segments of white America, jump-starting their fears. Without a hint of irony, this approach to race matters acknowledges the long-standing and dangerous racial habits lurking beneath our politics. And Barack Obama's election did little, if anything, to uproot them. In fact, he conceded to their terms.

Like most African Americans, President Obama worries that honest and direct conversations about race might produce feelings of guilt or a sense of accusation. But here I think Malcolm X got it right: "Stop sweet talking them. Tell them how you really feel. Tell them what kind of hell you've been catching. And let him know that if he's not ready to clean up his house—if he's not ready to clean up his house, he shouldn't have a house. It should catch on fire and burn down." In other words, we should remind America that chickens do, in fact, come home to roost.

CHAPTER NINE

RESURRECTION

I had to see it for myself. Many friends and colleagues had already made their way to Ferguson before I decided to go in November of 2014. Some had participated in the #BlackLivesMatter "Freedom Ride," in which more than 500 people from cities across the country descended on Ferguson in late August and stood in solidarity with the protesters. Many would return home and organize demonstrations in their own cities. Others had gone for "Ferguson October," a call put out by clergy and activists for massive demonstrations in support of Michael Brown's family. More than a thousand protesters, some from as far away as Palestine, came "to fill Ferguson's jails as a gesture of noncompliance with a police department that they deemed morally compromised."

I thought of going, but I decided to wait until November. Reverend Osagyefo Sekou, one of the organizers of Ferguson October, gave me the names of a few key people among the protesters: folks like Tef Poe and Ashley Yates, Reverends Traci Blackmon and Renita Lamkin. He also suggested I attend a meeting of Metropolitan Congregations United (MCU) at Central Reform Congregation, a synagogue led by Rabbi Susan Talve. When I arrived, the city was standing on a knife's edge as it awaited the announcement of the grand jury.

My colleague, Joshua Guild, and I drove straight to the synagogue,

where a meeting of clergy and organizers was being held. They were preparing for the grand jury decision and training people who wanted to join the protests or who volunteered their churches or synagogues to be "safe spaces" or "sanctuary churches," places where protesters could retreat and members of the community could find some comfort amid the anticipated chaos. We sat in amazement as we listened to Reverend Lamkin, a white African Methodist Episcopal minister who had been shot with rubber bullets by the Ferguson police. Her task was to rid everyone of any hint of sentimentality and to prepare them for the potential violence by the police and the intensity of the anger of the protesters.

We were given handouts. Told how to dress for the protests (layered clothing; comfortable shoes; no hoop earrings, necklaces, watches) and what to do if we got teargassed (flush our eyes with water or milk—no rubbing—and blow our noses; don't suck it back in). She urged us to protest using a buddy system. We should stay in groups of two, exchange telephone numbers, birth dates, emergency contacts, and try to have only one in the group arrested. The other would get you out of jail. She told the participants to "know their limits" and to work hard at "de-escalating" situations. There was a list of suggestions about how to interact with protesters. "Mingle, but don't ask too many personal questions; it raises suspicion." "Make eye contact with the police on the front line," but "do not talk to police!" "Avoid giving direction unless necessary for safety; never EVER tell someone 'Don't do that.'"

She was intense, and earnest. They were preparing for war.

We need a powerful expression of black politics today: everyday people engaged in concerted efforts to rebuild black communities, and movements to shake the country out of its current racial morass. We've done it before. The twentieth century is filled with examples of ordinary black folk, along with other concerned Americans, transforming

our national ideas of freedom and democracy. We've paid the price too. The country's soil is soaked with the blood of black martyrs who turned their backs on the status quo and risked everything for a more expansive idea of what this country could be.

Two thousand eight was a rough and pivotal year. We have not been able to talk clearly and forcefully about the crisis in our communities without the added burden of Obama's calculated evasions of race matters and worries about giving ammunition to the right. In that sense, we haven't been able to behave like other political constituents in the democratic process, even though we voted for him at a rate of 93 percent in 2012, just four years later. At some point, we will have to ask ourselves: Was his presidency worth it all? The question is not one that awaits us in some distant future. Obama's time as president is drawing to a close, and we have to confront it now.

African Americans should not expect the next president to behave any differently than Obama has on race. If anyone cries out after 2016 about persistent racial inequality, I can imagine the response. "Where was your outrage when President Obama didn't do anything on this issue?" Accusations of a double standard will keep the black political class in check, because there will be no moral ground to stand on. Political expediency over the past eight years has eroded the soil. The political stage will have been set for a generation, unless we do something about it.

We have to turn our backs on contemporary black liberal politics. That politics gets in the way of the kind of democratic life we desperately seek. Black liberalism in its various forms today reflects the price that white supremacy demands: either we have leaders who undermine how black people participate in the democratic process, or we have to translate black experiences into more palatable, universal claims in order to maintain political consensus and continue the lie of color-blindness. Both paths support racial habits that block the way to achieving our country.

We need to do something dramatic. We must disrupt how society

responds to black suffering and imagines black political participation. We also have to challenge our own sense of who and what the black community is. In other words, we need to shut down the traditional circuitry of black politics and reboot how we engage the democratic process. We need a *civic power outage,* and that will have to happen in the streets and at the ballot box. And the events in Ferguson were just the spark we needed.

Ferguson Protests

Meeting with a group of young activists showed me how the Ferguson movement was trying to change the political game. We all sat in the conference room of Teach for America in downtown St. Louis. Brittany Packnett, the executive director of TFA St. Louis, opened the space for us, and I came to learn rather quickly that she was playing a crucial role in the movement. The discussion was wide-ranging. We talked about the scale of the arbitrary violence of the police, the limits and failures of black leadership, and the organic and creative power of the protests.

Johnetta Elzie (or Netta, as she's called) caught my attention. She sat quietly at first, but then described how she was shot with rubber bullets on August 11. Two days earlier, she had gone to Canfield Drive "to pay her respects to the space, to the people, and the community." She saw Michael Brown's blood in the middle of the street, and it changed her life.

"I had on a jean jacket. I was just standing there, because we were with Wes Lowery," a reporter from the *Washington Post.* They were handing out bottled water to people when they saw three armored trucks slowly driving up the street. "They are like, 'Return to your homes.' And the people are like, 'Fuck you, you return to *your* homes. This is our home.'" Netta described how people weren't exactly in the street,

just standing outside on their front lawns. They were in their neighborhood. But the police weren't having it. "So they start coming up, and the next thing you know they make an announcement: 'If you're in the streets, you're liable to get arrested.' Like it's on you." The police were about to turn it up.

"Next thing I know," Netta remembered, "I'm watching tear gas canisters get shot at people across the street, like dead at someone. It drops off the person and it explodes." Chaos ensued. "I'm watching this across the street [when] I feel like someone just punched me in the chest, and I'm like, 'What just happened to me?' Some dude, he was just checking himself, and I'm like 'What's wrong?' He says, 'We got shot.' . . . I looked down and there were rubber pellets on this man's driveway." She couldn't believe what had happened. "Oh my God, I got shot in Ferguson, for what?" she recalled thinking. "For standing on a corner trying to hand out water. And then they started teargassing us."

But Netta, the other young people, and their allies defied the police who stood in their riot gear, with long batons and M16s. "That night I wasn't concerned about the police, it became obvious to me that in order to be involved in the protests there was no place for fear," she later told a reporter from the *Huffington Post.*

The group gathered at TFA contrasted this experience with the grandstanding of the St. Louis County NAACP and other national black leaders who came to Ferguson. The NAACP had held a highly publicized mass meeting the same day Netta was shot. Local leaders and young ministers spoke passionately about the tragic death of Michael Brown and committed themselves to fight for justice on his behalf.

"It was trash," Netta murmured.

Brittany Packnett agreed. "It was just like smoke and mirrors."

The meeting wasn't organically connected to the young people in the streets. The church where the meeting was held wasn't in Ferguson, and the rhetoric, Brittany noted, was disturbing. "A lot of the rhetoric

in the church was 'Well, those folks over there are the looters. We're the people who are going to find the solution over here.'"

"They were just like, 'We're the solution,'" said Netta. "I ain't seen them since."

Brittany was asked to pick up a prominent civil rights leader one day. She brought him to meet some of the key organizers on the ground and he asked, "Where are all of the people?" He wanted to be where the cameras were. "He had me take him, essentially lead a caravan, to Canfield." Some people flocked to him once they started to walk. Others, particularly those under eighteen, asked her who he was. "There was a moment where I was, like, 'This is the divide. This is it right here.'"

For the activists around the table with me, this famous civil rights leader (who I knew was the Reverend Jesse Jackson) had no real interest in the protests or the protesters or any real intention of substantively transforming the circumstances of the residents of Ferguson. He was there for himself. "I tell this story to illustrate how not to enter this place," Brittany said, "because the same person got booed when he was at a rally a couple of days later."

Larry Fellows III, another organizer, chimed in about the Reverend Sharpton and other civil rights leaders. "I know for a fact Sharpton was very critical of Ferguson October from the start. . . . He declared that he wanted to hold a march that would be more effective and much more appropriate." Sharpton approached the protests like a competition. But everyone agreed he had little, if any, influence among the people in the streets.

And the "streets" mattered. The Ferguson protesters were weary of the speeches and the grandstanding. In the name of Michael Brown, they wanted a full frontal assault on the brutality of the police and the government that supported them. None of them believed the grand jury was going to indict Darren Wilson. And they were right. But they did

believe no one should be comfortable until racial justice was made real in Ferguson and in the country.

What they called "actions" made sure of that. These were often improvised acts of civil disobedience designed to disrupt business as usual. One example was called They Think It's a Game. DeRay McKesson, a Bowdoin College alum who came to Ferguson after Michael Brown's death, and Kayla Reed, an organizer for the Organization of Black Struggle, came up with the idea. One of the organizers asked what are the chances they think what the protesters are doing is a game—that it's a joke? "If they think it's a game, let's actually shut it down by playing games," Netta recalled. "Hopscotch, double Dutch, Backleg, anything you could play out in the street. . . . And shut down all of the corridors because [we're] playing games." It was brilliant.

The same group would later join up with other groups and walk toward St. Louis University, coordinating it all by word of mouth and social media. As the different groups converged on a bridge covered in fog, about 300 people confronted a line of city police officers tapping their batons against their shoes (the theater of fascist authority). Netta told the story:

> *People started clapping. We can make noise too. We can sing songs. We can get on your nerves just as much as you get on ours. They don't let people pass. . . . It's like 300 people on this bridge. The people from out of town are scared. They're crying. I'm like, "What's wrong with y'all? Just be calm. We got it. . . ." We're able to go across the bridge and the crowd gets even bigger and the police still don't know what to do. And this group called Tribe X, they were the ones, us and them, we helped them with the logistics and, like, how to keep people together, but it was their idea to Occupy St. Lou. So we had Think It's a Game, Occupy St. Lou all in one night, and we just see this mass influx of people going to St. Lou, and the guard is*

like, "Y'all don't have a [campus ID]." Someone in the crowd was like, "They're actually my guests. All of them."

More than a thousand people staged an improvised sit-in on campus. This was not Sharpton's traditional march with its government permits and his $20,000 Porta-Potties. It was creative civil disobedience, which drew on the unique skill sets of this generation of activists. Leaders emerged in the moment. As Brittany put it, "Some of the most successful actions have been the ones that have been last-minute that have been planned by brilliant young people out there *in the street*, figuring out how to organize and keeping people together."

These young people engaged in acts of civil disobedience to disrupt the traditional theater of America's racial politics. No charismatic preacher stood at the front of the march. No long sermons. Just a concerted effort to force those in power to hold Darren Wilson accountable for the senseless death of Michael Brown. That specific demand came with a broader claim about how we police black communities in this country and how black people are criminalized (no matter what they are doing). In short, these young people challenged our racial habits.

The next day we met DeRay and Netta in the afternoon at Cathy's Kitchen on South Florissant. These two stood out among the protesters, because of their work with social media and the publication of the newsletter "This Is the Movement." They have chronicled the movement from the beginning, taking control of the narrative from the mainstream media. Telling their story. Tweeting anything of substance about what's happening in Ferguson. As Netta put it, "I don't need media people, because my first-day tweets to my 91-day tweets, that's what I've been doing. I was the media. So I don't need you to push me forward in front of a camera." Both were awarded the 2015 Howard

Zinn Award for their work on the newsletter and featured on the cover the *New York Times Magazine*. They are a study in contrasts. DeRay, a queer black graduate of an elite liberal arts college, is in constant motion. Sentences just flow from his mouth. Netta, a brilliant native of St. Louis, is reserved and cautious. Her brow is constantly furrowed, and she will speak her mind when necessary. Both are fearless.

DeRay described the Ferguson movement in terms of family, but it reflects a more inclusive idea of black politics. One moment in the conversation stands out. He was involved in a protest action in Shaw, a neighborhood in St. Louis. This is the place where Vonderrit Myers, an eighteen-year-old black male, was killed by an off-duty St. Louis police officer working as a security guard. The policeman maintained that Myers fired a gun at him. Witnesses say he was unarmed. DeRay described the action. "One night the police were crazy. What the police did is that they made a circle here and all the protesters got split in four directions. Two groups got trapped on the sidewalk. A group got trapped this way. . . . I got trapped on the side that was open; so we just kept moving and protesting." He then recounted this amazing moment:

H.J. was there and I'm like, I know him enough that we protested together. We got back to the big circle after we finished walking around and he was cursing at the police. He was like, "You fucking faggot." That's what he said to the police officer. He turns around and this other protester says, "I'm really offended by that." It happened in like twelve seconds. H.J.'s like, "I'm sorry. Everything just keeps happening. The police are macing people."

The story revealed how complex the Ferguson movement was and is. A wide cross-section of the black community was out front in the protests. Openly queer women, for example, helped organize #BlackLivesMatter.

Alexis Templeton and Brittany Ferrell, cofounders of Millennial Activists United in Ferguson, fell in love during the protests (and later got engaged). And here in the middle of a heated action someone was willing to apologize for a hurtful homophobic remark to someone who was risking his life right beside him. As DeRay put it, "Seeing love on display in the midst of trauma is something I never would have thought I would have seen in protest."

DeRay and Netta asked Josh and me if we wanted to see the memorials for Kajieme Powell, the twenty-five-year-old man killed by St. Louis police for "lunging" at them with a knife (cell phone footage revealed that the police lied), and Vonderrit Myers. As we drove, DeRay talked about his family. His parents were drug addicts. His father had cleaned himself up, but his mother couldn't. His dad had raised him. He said it all matter-of-factly. Netta sat quietly. We arrived at the site. Without the teddy bears and stuffed animals tied to a tree, no one would have known that Powell had been killed there.

As we stood on the corner, Netta and DeRay received a tweet that an action was happening in Shaw. They looked at us and asked if we were ready. Josh and I looked intently at each other. We exchanged cell phone numbers. We wrote them down on the palms of our hands in case we lost our phones. Took off our watches and wedding rings. Agreed that only one of us would get arrested. In effect, we followed the protocols of the MCU training from a day earlier.

When we arrived in Shaw a crowd was beginning to gather near the convenience store where Myers had been killed. In one of the police accounts, the officer said Myers jumped out of the bushes and struggled with him. There were no bushes anywhere in the area. Folks mingled. Myers's father was present. DeRay and Netta immediately sprang into action. Filming and tweeting. Posting videos on Vine. Others started to come. Tef Poe of Hands Up United and the St. Louis University law professor Justin Hansford came. They, along with the parents of

Michael Brown and other activists, were preparing to leave for Geneva, Switzerland, the next morning to plead their case before the United Nations Committee against Torture. The crowd continued to grow. Close to a hundred people were now gathered on the corner.

A young man in sagging jeans and a skully began to speak with a bullhorn. He emerged as the leader of this action. "They treat us like dogs," he said. His comments ranged from criticisms of capitalism's exploitation of the ghetto to the fact that black people were once "kings and queens." It was a patchwork of analysis of the condition of the poor and most vulnerable in this society. And it didn't rely on the familiar language of nonviolence and love. He was angry. Myers's father spoke and thanked the crowd for their support. And then a cousin spoke. He stood about five feet seven with tattoos on his arms and neck. "I'm afraid to go out in these streets. Not because of some set. I can handle that. Because of the police. When I want to go to the store late at night I wake my daughter up and take her with me. Thinking maybe they won't shoot me if she's with me."

The young man grabbed the bullhorn and said, "We're not going to get arrested tonight. We're just going to let these folks know we're still here." And with that, the march began. We just followed the young folk as they marched through the neighborhood, chanting "Hands up, don't shoot" and "FTP" (fuck the police) at the top of their lungs. There were no television cameras or news reporters. No leaders at the front of the march. Just people together, walking steadily forward to keep the pressure on the powers that be. Soon the sound of helicopters above could be heard. Police cars were stationed at certain intersections. As we reached the highway, organizers told us to stay on the sidewalk. Cars followed us. They blasted rap music and young men hung out of the windows, rapping verses in honor of Vonderrit Myers. As quickly as it started, it ended. We arrived back at the corner. People hugged. They knew, for a moment, that they had disturbed the peace.

The protests in the streets of Ferguson disrupted the status quo and dramatically affected the lives of the people who live there. Some condemned the sporadic violence and challenged the effectiveness of constant demonstrations. They urged the protesters to channel their rage and turn to the ballot box. But the protests had a measurable effect. These young people exposed the predatory practices of the municipal government. The city manager and the chief of police have resigned. Police tickets have decreased. The Missouri Supreme Court called for the immediate transfer of all Ferguson municipal cases to St. Louis County. This didn't happen because of an election; it wasn't the result of aligning the demonstrations with the Democratic Party. Nor did it happen because of traditional black leadership. As one of the organizers said, "It started because regular people came outside and said enough was enough."

I don't want to romanticize it all. A lot has happened since that August. Many of the activists are now on the lecture circuit. Others have joined task forces or committees organized by government officials. Organizations have collapsed. Personal conflicts have emerged. Market forces are also doing their work. Some people have monetized their participation in the struggle. I guess it is in the nature of things. Moments of democratic awakening are fugitive. They happen in fits and starts, and rarely are sustained for extended periods of time. Democratic awakenings can, however, switch the tracks. We can find ourselves traveling down a different path because of them.

What becomes clear is that the turn to "the streets" effectively disrupted the order of things. When the protests erupted in New York after the grand jury failed to indict the cop for the death of Eric Garner—and in Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, Atlanta, Memphis, Miami—a shock wave was sent throughout the country. The protests put the government and traditional black leaders and organizations on notice. As Brittany Packnett put it, "We have to be serious about not allowing

established people in organizations to choose comfort. We operate with authenticity to the real struggle of the people that we say we're serving." We should follow their lead. We need to stay in the streets about policing, education, and jobs with a livable wage if we are going to cut the power to the current ways of doing things and uproot the racial habits that are choking the life out of democracy.

The Ballot Box

Gwen Ifill of PBS held a town hall meeting in Ferguson soon after the protests erupted. Law enforcement, government officials, thought leaders, and activists reflected on the tense days following Michael Brown's death. Tef Poe of Hands Up United expressed his loss of faith in the country. For him, and many others in the room, "the system is broken." Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri said she understood his position, but urged him and other young black people to get involved in the political process—to run for office and, most important, to vote. Tef Poe's response was telling. "What do you say to those of us that are [politicized]? I voted for Barack Obama twice and still got teargassed." It was a stunning dismissal of the power of the ballot.

Young activists continue to face calls to translate their rage into electoral politics. To work within the system. Sharpton said as much at Michael Brown's funeral. And Ferguson protesters at the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma march were told by some older people in the crowd, "Your vote is your voice. Get registered." *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow directly challenged those who questioned the value of voting. Blow wrote, "We don't vote for people because they are the exact embodiment of our values, but because they are likely to be the most responsive to them." For him, the vote is sacred even as he recognizes how profoundly frustrating the political system is. As he put it, "We are

people who must know that the voice and the vote are mutual amplifiers, not mutually exclusive."

I was talking about this question of voting with Charlene Carruthers, the national coordinator of the Black Youth Project 100, an organization that has been deeply involved in the ongoing protests around the country. She mentioned how her executive board was debating whether or not to vote at all in the next national election and what that might mean politically. She was clear about how difficult the question is: some people don't see voting as a means of change, while others "have dedicated their entire lives to expanding the franchise, of securing the franchise for black people." And the battle over the franchise for black people still rages on, 150 years after emancipation.

But if we're going to change how we participate in the democratic process in this country, we have to change how we think about "the vote." I am not suggesting that we don't vote or that we deny the value of voting. I agree with Blow. Voting and direct action are not mutually exclusive. But we need to understand voting as a tool of protest that potentially goes beyond putting people out of office.

Think about it this way: José Saramago's novel *Seeing* opens with the presiding officer of a polling station fretting over the weather. Torrential rains threaten to dampen voter turnout during a national election. No one seems to be coming to the polls. Then voters begin to show up in record numbers. But something dramatic happens. When the ballots are counted, three-quarters of them are blank. People showed up to vote, but refused to vote for any particular party. The authorities panic and call a second election. The same thing happens, except this time, 83 percent of the ballots are left unmarked. Elected officials interpret "the electoral blank-out" as a direct challenge to the democratic process.

Saramago brilliantly dramatizes a profound insight. The voters reject the choices put before them, because the entire process is bankrupt. And that refusal is a "bloodless revolutionary" act (sort of like in Melville's

Bartleby, the Scrivener: "I would prefer not to."). As "the blankers" of the capital, as they came to be called, debated the implications of their actions, one group explained succinctly what motivated them:

> *[T]hey had voted the way they voted because they were disillusioned and could find no other way of making it clear just how disillusioned they were, that they could have staged a revolution, but then many people would undoubtedly have died, something they would never have wanted, that all their lives they had patiently placed their vote in the ballot box, and the results were there for all to see. This isn't democracy, sir, far from it.*

Of course, this is fiction. We live in the real world. But so much of what we endure in our lives can be seen as the stuff of fiction that we may as well reach for it as a way of freeing our political imaginations.

In fact, we don't have to reach very far at all to find a blank-out campaign in our world. In 1998, Puerto Rican voters were faced with a referendum about the status of the island. They were given a choice between statehood, independence, free association, commonwealth, or none of the above. A heated debate arose over the definitions of the terms. The definition of *commonwealth*, in particular, raised some concerns. So a campaign was launched to vote "none of the above." That vote signaled a refusal to accept the given options; it was a political act to not play the game as scripted. "None of the above" won 50.2 percent of the vote.

We need to do something that bold. Something that will upset the entire game. In 2016, we should call for an "electoral blank-out." We vote in the national election for the presidency of the United States, but we leave the ballot blank or write in "none of the above." This isn't your standard call for a third-party candidate or an independent black political thrust. Nor is it a rejection of our sacred duty to vote. Exercising

the franchise is sacred. Actually, I want black people to turn out for the election in record numbers *without Obama on the ticket,* but give our attention to other issues on the ballot. We should vote in congressional, state, and local elections.

Elections are important, but they are hardly the only work of democracy. For too long we've been sold a bill of goods that this person or that one will do what we need, if only we can get them elected. This promise wants us to believe that voting *is* democracy. But that's only half true. Sure, we must work overtime (sadly) to ensure that no one rolls back the gains of the Voting Rights Act and that everyone has access to the ballot. But the work of democracy does not end with elections.

We should turn our attention to efforts like the Forward Together moral movement and the Dream Defenders and #BlackLivesMatter, or to mobilizing around public school closings in our neighborhoods. Some issue, concrete and right in front of us, should be our focus. A collateral effect, although not the main objective, would be the election of men and women at the state and local levels who aren't about symbolism and celebrity, but who put forward a strategic vision for our communities. (When elections become the primary aim of grassroots mobilization, the conditions for demobilization are built into the very activity. If you succeed, you are often left twiddling your thumbs.) The hope would be that the "Blank-Out 2016" campaign could change the tone and focus of American politics, and demonstrate that black folk have finally gotten sick and tired of being sick and tired.

The core of the campaign would be a coordinated effort—*a networked coalition*—of grassroots organizations whose primary task in the run-up to the election would be to focus attention on particular issues in the black community. These organizations would urge black voters to leave the presidential ballot blank or to write "none of the above." But the trade-off would be to take up an issue (or issues) that requires our

attention beyond the election cycle. The idea is to use the presidential election as a moment to disrupt the notion that democracy rests primarily with elections and to reject black liberal politics. Combined with action in the street, we could shut down the power of politics as usual in this country.

I am suggesting a seismic shift in black politics. Obviously, we can't stand idly by as Democrats take our votes for granted and cave to forces that devastate our communities. Nor can extremists on the right and those who enable them expect us to sit back as they trade in racist nonsense, continue to legislate for the 1 percent, and undo the modest gains we've made in this country. What has become crystal clear over these past few years, at least to me, is that business as usual isn't sufficient; that the typical black characters on the national scene have to be called out for what they have failed to do and say in the face of what has happened and is happening in black America.

I want to be clear. I am not suggesting that we concede the national political scene (although I am certainly suspicious of it). Instead, we have to reboot national politics—change the flow of the current. Here intensified local efforts enter into a network of other local practices across the country that, taken together, have national political implications. You can build a national politics from the ground up rather than think about it as decisions that flow from the top down. That's what the protests did. They connected what happened to Michael Brown in Missouri and Jessica Hernandez in Colorado and John Crawford III and Tanisha Anderson in Ohio with Eric Garner in New York and Trayvon Martin in Florida and Ezell Ford in California and Yvette Smith in Texas and Tony Terrell Robinson Jr. in Wisconsin. The same has happened with the reaction to the closing of schools in places like Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, and with struggles for a livable wage for workers at Walmart and McDonald's all across the country.

We can do what the civil rights icon Ella Baker did, in her early days of organizing NAACP chapters. She established pathways, connections, and conduits that linked her practice across the United States. Like her, we can build a network of local efforts that can give us a more robust form of democratic politics. Collectively, such grassroots work—people doing what they do in their communities linking up with other people doing similar work in their communities—loosely constitutes a national politics.

If the nation is on fire with local movements in the streets, the Beltway has to respond. The blank-out campaign could constitute an initial dramatic act, which prefaces and follows from intensified grassroots organizing and action. If we are going to substantively address the condition of black communities and change the course of this nation, we must strategize around particular issues that cut across a number of different domains: in the courtroom (challenging voter-ID laws), at the ballot box (the blank-out campaign, running young, progressive candidates for office in local and state elections), and in the streets (constant pressure around policing, wildcat strikes about public schools, and direct action about a living wage). Imagine the combination of grassroots action, for example, about neighborhood school closings, litigation in the courts about the issue, and wildcat walkouts by students and teach-ins by teachers—all on the heels of an electoral blank-out. The traditional assumptions about black political behavior would have to be thrown out the window.

Some might say what I'm recommending amounts to electoral nihilism. We would end up giving the presidency over to Republicans and their extremist base. The Supreme Court would turn Red for the next thirty years. We would see the undoing of the health care law and the further erosion of the social safety net. And the country would be left in the hands of libertarians and corporatists, a remarkably high price to pay for *all* Americans. But these same people who shout gloom and

doom fail to advocate for dramatic change to take back the country from these folks. This is the scare tactic that clouds our imaginations: that no matter the circumstances, choosing the lesser of two evils is always better. By this logic, we are imprisoned in a political cage—to accept matters as they are. I refuse to do so, because the political terrain as it is currently laid out has left black and other vulnerable communities throughout this country in shambles. I want to choose another path. I want to remake American democracy, because whatever this is, it ain't democracy.

We have to change the terms of political debate. This involves, as I have suggested, changing our view of government, our view of black and white people, and our view of what matters to us as Americans. An electoral blank-out undermines, at least for an election cycle, the assumption that black voters are captured and silent. It also disrupts the racial advocacy hustle of a black political class leveraging its ability to deliver black voters for crumbs and/or for selfish gain.

The idea of politics I'm suggesting here assumes a different kind of leadership. It insists on the capacities and responsibilities of everyday, ordinary black people and urges them to reach for a higher self even in opportunity deserts. Those deserts are fertile ground to be politically creative. They are the places in which we can think, reflect, and act anew. They provide opportunities to *expand the very idea of who matters* in the context of struggle with others and let us see ourselves as our own saviors. Ferguson showed us that. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee did this in the bowels of the Deep South at the height of Jim Crow segregation. Its members dared to claim that black sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta were not only worthy of participation in the democratic process, but they could lead themselves in doing so. We can do the same with those on the margins of our

own communities—expand the *demos* to substantively include the black poor, those caught up in the criminal justice system, those who are deemed less than respectable by the folks currently in charge. Doing so, we say, loud and clear, that black lives matter and that we don't need HNICs. We simply need each other.