

CHAPTER 2

Building the Racist Foundation

Colonialism, Genocide, and Slavery

Why is the white racial frame so deep and so foundational in the United States? The central reason is that this country is built on 350 years of extreme racial oppression. Over its first centuries of operation, this oppression aggressively targeted indigenous peoples for extermination or expulsion, and targeted African Americans with a bloody slavery system. From the 1840s to the 1960s, powerful white capitalists and politicians gradually brought into this preexisting system of racism yet more people of color such as the Chinese and Mexicans in the 1840s and 1850s—frequently to secure low-wage labor for whites' wealth-generating economic enterprises. Given this extensive and racialized oppression, whites have long tried to rationalize, and hide or disguise, the extensive and lasting patterns of oppression they have created and maintained. Over centuries a large majority have become fervent partisans and defenders of white power and privilege, especially by means of the white racial frame. Playwright Eugene O'Neill once wrote that "There is no present or future, only the past, happening over and over again, now." The better we understand this past of bloody racial oppression, the better we can understand our present racial situation, with its dominant racial hierarchy and rationalizing racial frame.

European Colonialism: Bloody Exploitation

Today, many scholars and popular analysts continue to describe contemporary Western societies with terms like "modern" and "modernity." They emphasize as positive certain characteristics of these modern societies: industrialization and technology, market economies, national governments,

and complex bureaucratization. Significantly, however, numerous supposedly positive features of this distinctive modernity have played a major and negative role in the genocide, land theft, and labor theft that accompanied the global expansion and colonialism of European countries beginning in the late 1400s. Strikingly, colonialism, capitalism, modernity, and global exploitation all have a *common* genealogy. European colonialism and capitalism were in their early stages of development when they generated the cross-Atlantic slavery system. European colonialism took on its exploitative wealth-generating form in concert with the enslavement of Africans and other indigenous peoples across the growing north and south Atlantic economies. The bloody European theft of land and super-exploitation of enslaved labor were presided over by ever-growing and bureaucratized nation-states, the latter usually described by Western social scientists as signs of the modernization process. From its beginnings, European colonialism relied heavily not only on a growing entrepreneurial bourgeoisie but also on these nation-states, most especially upon their well-equipped military organizations.¹

The social scientist and political theorist, Karl Marx, once captured the world-shattering significance of this European colonialism and imperialism in a brief statement in a major book on Western capitalism:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. . . . [C]apital comes dripping from head to foot from every pore with blood and dirt.²

The rise of Western capitalism is rooted in the global seizing of the land, resources, and labor of people of color by violent means. Note too that coercing of the labor of Africans and indigenous Americans by European colonizers meant not only the extraction of "surplus value" from the productive work of these coerced workers, but even the extraction of the "subsistence value" of their work, so much so that many coerced laborers (men, women, and children) died from not having enough food, clothing, or shelter under European colonialism. This global theft of Native American and African labor by state-sanctioned capitalistic enterprises did not end after the first century of European wealth generation, but lasted for centuries—in some important ways to the present day.

Significant here is that, for the first time in world history, militaristic colonialism and imperialism were becoming *global* in scope and thus

encompassed several continents. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries the European colonial invasions forced a political-economic and demographic reorganization of a large part of the globe at the expense of many indigenous peoples. The Spanish nation state was the first to colonize and plunder on a large scale various indigenous societies in the Americas for their land, mineral, and labor resources, but its growing wealth and military apparatus were soon countered by the imperial expansion of competing English, Dutch, and French nation-states and private companies also seeking to gain wealth from overseas exploitation. Numerous European nation-states and associated private companies, such as English firms operating in the Caribbean and North America, discovered that there were huge profits to be made from overseas agricultural plantations using enslaved African labor on seized indigenous Americans' lands. Indeed, researchers have shown that by the end of the eighteenth century the lion's share of profits coming into British coffers came from overseas slave plantations producing important agricultural products.³

Well-organized nation-state and private bureaucracies in Europe and the emerging colonies were critical to this aggressive colonization. In North America the English colonies were often state enterprises created under auspices of the king or state-fostered enterprises developed by entrepreneurs, plantation owners, and merchants. The first English joint-stock companies were formed by merchants under the auspices of James I of England. Employees of the Southern Company settled Jamestown, Virginia, the English colony that brought in the first African laborers. A principal objective of this colonization was to secure land and raw materials and to develop markets. Once land was taken from indigenous societies, the Europeans' search for labor led to the extensive use of the African slave trade, which became critical to exploitation of land and other resources of the Americas. At an early point in time, the private-sector and the state-sector collaborated in global exploitation and enslavement, which were soon rationalized in a Eurocentric racial framing. Some recent social science theorizing, such as that of racial formation theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, has greatly expanded our understanding of government actors' role in regularly creating racialized organizations and institutions. Yet, their historical analyses do not go far enough in analyzing how at an early point in time the principal European nation-state actors collaborated with elite economic actors to generate the imperialism, genocide, and slavery that created the racial underpinning of Western countries like the United States.⁴

Celebrated social scientist Max Weber wrote famously of the "Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism" in assessing the fostering conditions before and around modern capitalism. However, in this European economic

expansion one sees what might more accurately be termed the "predatory ethic" of Western capitalism. Central to European colonialism and capitalism was a predatory ethic that asserted the right of Europeans to take the land and labor of others by violence for their own individual and collective gain. As we will see in Chapter 7, this highly materialistic and greedy approach to encounters with new environments and peoples baffled Native Americans at the time, and still does today. It has been described by indigenous Americans as a "despiritualized" worldview, and in their view a despiritualized approach to environments and other beings resulted in their dehumanization and exploitation. The expansionist European invaders showed little concern for the lives and livelihoods of indigenous peoples during the bloody process of colonial wealth generation. Indeed, by the nineteenth century, in the United States, this predatory ethic was given an explicit rationalizing name, "manifest destiny," which asserted the right and duty of whites to expand wherever they needed to increase their prosperity, no matter the cost to those killed, displaced, and exploited in the process. Significant too is the fact that this predatory ethic was from the first dressed up in religious language, indeed as something that was God-ordained.

We should underscore another key dimension of this European colonialism, one that even critical white analysts have seldom emphasized: the highly racialized reality of this European colonization. Since Marx's time, Marxist analysts and other critical analysts have usually ignored or downplayed the racist architecture of centuries of Western colonialism. Even for these analysts, the dominant racial frame seems to be a difficult set of blinders to get beyond. Most major groups that were central to early and later European accumulation of wealth in this global colonizing system were non-European, and each of these groups was soon denigrated (the word literally means "blackened") in an increasingly developed Eurocentric framing of colonialism and the colonial societies thereby created. European entrepreneurs and colonists carried with them, or soon developed, not only the often noted realities of Western modernity such as so-called private enterprise and advanced technology, but also social developments ignored or neglected by most historical analysts—that is, systemic racial oppression and a rationalizing racist frame. The concurrent emergence of European capitalism, colonialism, and racial oppression marked the creation of a global racial order with European-origin people at the top, one that has ever since regularly shaped not only individual societies but also world patterns of trade, finance, politics, and communications.

White Prosperity: Native American Lands and African American Labor

As most schoolchildren know, the first task the European colonists undertook in North America was to "settle the land." This is the euphemistic

phrase European Americans have long used for the theft of Native American land—which often required bloody wars, often genocidal wars, because Native Americans usually had resources to resist and did not comply. Once the land had been stolen, the need for labor to work the land soon exceeded the supply of white agricultural workers. Enslaved African Americans became a group that was internally central, as essential labor, to the prospering of the North American colonies. By the eighteenth century, the slavery-centered society directly involved a large proportion of white Americans in all major social classes. These included economically successful slaveholders in southern and northern states, the owners of slave-trading enterprises (often in the North), associated bankers and insurance brokers (often in the North), and leading southern and northern politicians who supported slave plantations and the Atlantic slave trade.

A very large number of ordinary whites in all colonies, northern and southern, worked in occupations linked directly or indirectly to the slavery system. These included white-collar clerks and other white employees working for various slave-related enterprises, overseers on slave farms and plantations, sailors on slave ships, slave-catchers who chased enslaved runaways, small farmers who grew agricultural products needed on slave plantations, lumber workers who cut timber for slave ships, fishers who traded fish meal to U.S. and Caribbean plantations, local and federal government workers policing enslaved runaways or processing the slave-produced products destined for export, and small farmers and urban entrepreneurs who rented their enslaved workers for temporary profit to other whites.⁵ Most benefited economically in one way or another from what I term as the *slavery-centered economic complex*—which encompassed the slave trade, commercial trade with slave farms and plantations, international trade in slave-produced products, and the great array of slavery-supporting occupations across the country and, indeed, across the Atlantic. Over the next century, most whites gained significant material or symbolic benefits from this country's racialized system of African American slavery, as well as continuing anti-Indian oppression.

The word “exploit,” in the sense of taking advantage of another for personal gain, first appears in the English language in the 1840s during the peak period of African American enslavement. For more than two centuries, as pioneering historians like Edmund Morgan have long made clear, this African American enslavement was a major foundation for this country—for its economy, politics, and other important institutions. If there had been no African American enslavement, there probably would not have been the huge North American wealth generation—and possibly no modern wealth-generating British and American capitalism on the massive scale that developed over the centuries. Enslaved workers cultivating

tobacco, rice, sugar, cotton, and other major crops generated very large amounts of economic capital, much of which circulated throughout the European and North American banking and other economic institutions generating much spin-off prosperity, including important industrial breakthroughs. Enslaved black Americans created much of the surplus capital (wealth) of this country for its first two centuries, indeed for half this country's lifetime. They provided the wealth that the white colonists used to fight a successful war against Britain. As Morgan has put it, white Americans “bought their independence with slave labor.”⁶ Without the early enslavement of African Americans, thus, there would quite probably have been no United States and no U.S. Constitution—at least not when it happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Creating a Racial Hierarchy: Racial Capital and Frame Assumptions

As the colonies expanded over the first decades of the seventeenth century, European American officials, assisted by ordinary colonists, institutionalized a rigid social hierarchy, with group positions arranged in ladder-like levels and with significant socioeconomic benefits associated with the white level at the top, and none attached to the bottom level, which was initially reserved for Africans and Indians. These societal benefits and privileges were a type of *racial capital* reserved for European Americans. From the seventeenth century to the present, whites have gained much racial capital from this country's system of racial oppression.

This important racial capital has encompassed not only *economic and other material capital*, such as greater income and wealth, but also substantial *social status, social networking, and symbolic capital*. Symbolic capital comes from shared assumptions, understandings, and inclinations to interact in certain ways, and much of it is unrecognized and taken for granted. From the beginning symbolic capital has been a central part of whites' racial framing of society, for it operates to link white acquaintances and strangers. Examples of these shared assumptions and understandings can be seen, today or in the past, in the relatively easy ways in which even white strangers relate to each other, as compared to the tensions and other difficulties whites often have in relating to people, strangers or acquaintances, who are not white. Part of this process is what I call *frame assumption*—that is, the assumption that other whites share one's own racialized framing of the everyday social world. Perceiving and accenting white skin privilege in everyday interactions is very important for the operation of the long-dominant racial hierarchy in the United States. Historically, and in the present, most whites have operated as though the racial hierarchy is part of the natural order of things.

This hierarchy has persisted as the heart of systemic racism to the present day. It involves not only recurring racial discrimination and exploitation, but also an alienating racist relationship—at the bottom, the racially oppressed, and at the top, the racial oppressors. These socially separated and alienated groups have significantly different *interests*. The former seeks to overthrow the racial hierarchy, while the latter seeks to maintain it. The interests of the white racial group have included not only a concrete interest in labor and other social exploitation during the slavery and Jim Crow segregation eras, but also a concrete interest later on, in our contemporary era, in maintaining the racial power and privileges inherited from white ancestors. Everyday interactions have thus long involved the calculation of particular racial-group interests. Given the great alienation from one end of the racial hierarchy to the other, and thus the greatly divergent interests of the key groups, it is not surprising that, in dialectical fashion, these great societal contradictions regularly create protests seeking racial change.

Legalizing Oppression: The U.S. Constitution

One reason that the bloody realities of slavery, and later the near-slavery of Jim Crow segregation, have shaped this society so fundamentally is because from the first decades they were firmly imbedded in important private and public bureaucracies, and were firmly legitimated under this country's overtly racist legal system. The early and systematic oppression of Native Americans and African Americans was made possible by the increasing power of bureaucratic organizations, both private companies and the agencies of European nation-states. The norms of these bureaucratized organizations accented written rules, official roles, organizational discipline, and impersonality. Mass killings and attacks on Native Americans would have been possible without military and other bureaucratic organizations, but recurring wars on Indians and a large-scale system of African enslavement were not. Then, as in recent times, extensive oppression requires complex organization and organizational agents carrying out dominant group goals. Elite whites at the helm of colonial organizations collectively presided over numerous lower-level officials and other employees, such as overseers on slave plantations, clerks in government bureaucracies, and police and military agents.

The bureaucratization of oppression was accompanied by a strong accent on written records and laws. Walter Ong has shown how a heavy accent on the written word and literacy is a societal development that represents a different way of viewing society—a viewpoint that typically emphasizes abstraction, distancing of people from one another, and a new kind of dogmatic authority. The written word “distances the writer for

a thought from the receiver” of that thought.⁷ In contrast, the oral worlds of the invaded indigenous peoples have vivid and accessible collective memories and orientations, which tend to make people much more sensitive to and responsive to those around them. Institutionalization of written rules and records in colonial America, and later the United States, helped to assist the white elite and populace in operating effectively to dominate the new country—by means of a growing number of powerful political, legal, and economic organizations. It reinforced the type of distancing thought that went along with the bureaucracies that organized the systemic exploitation directed at Native and African Americans.

Central to the legitimation and organization of North American slavery was the colonial legal system. As philosopher Charles Mills has pointed out, this society began with a generalized “racial contract” in which people’s duties and rights were routinely distributed on a racially discriminatory and unequal basis. From the beginning, the legal system was written, formally institutionalized, and distancing. For centuries now, this extensive institutionalization has involved many white judges and other officials, thereby solidifying well white power and privilege. The principal foundation of this country’s legal system is the U.S. Constitution. In 1787, at Philadelphia, fifty-five white men met and created a constitution for what most have viewed as the “first democratic nation.” These founders were of European background and mostly well-off. Some 40 percent were or had been slaveowners, and many others profited as merchants, shippers, lawyers, or bankers from economic connections to the slavery system.⁸

In the preamble to the Constitution these white male founders cite “We the People,” but this phrase did not include those enslaved, then a fifth of the population. They viewed the world from an aggressive white racial framing of society. At least seven sections of the new Constitution protected the already 160-year-old system of racialized enslavement: (1) Article 1, Section 2 counts an enslaved person as only three fifths of a white person; (2) Article 1, Sections 2 and 9 apportion taxes using the three-fifths formula; (3) Article 1, Section 8 gives Congress authority to suppress slave insurrections; (4) Article 1, Section 9 prevents abolishing the slave trade before 1808; (5) Article 1, Sections 9 and 10 exempt slave-made goods from export duties; (6) Article 4, Section 2 requires the return of fugitive slaves; and (7) Article 4, Section 4 stipulates that the federal government must help states put down domestic violence, a provision that the framers included in part to deal with slave uprisings.⁹ As we see in these provisions, enslaved African Americans were frequently on the minds of the white framers, who referred to African American enslavement numerous times at the Constitutional convention and with euphemistic language in the final Constitution. Their constitutional debates revealed that they

generally viewed those enslaved as property, as less than fully human. At this point in time, the white racial frame and the slavery system it rationalized were more than a century old and were aggressively enhanced and imbedded in the new and inegalitarian U.S. political institutions.

Numerous provisions of the Constitution besides those listed above also helped to institutionalize the slavery system. One surprising example is the provision for a required federal population census. While some type of local or national census would have been necessary to apportion the new U.S. House, requiring a U.S. census as part of the Constitution was an idea aggressively pressed by southern slaveholders seeking to insure that the South's growing white and black populations would be carefully counted for the purpose of increased *white* representation. In this way southern white elites would soon be able to counter the North's demographic dominance. Leading northern delegates, however, opposed the provisions for a regular national census in the Constitution, in part because the North then dominated in population and would have a majority in the Congress. When the census provision was passed, it guaranteed that a new government bureaucracy, the U.S. State Department (later, the Bureau of the Census), would do official counts. Soon after the U.S. government was created, in 1790, the Secretary of State used federal marshals to do a federal census of the country, which counted 3.9 million inhabitants. About one fifth were African Americans who were *not* citizens and thus had no political representation under the new U.S. Constitution.¹⁰

These careful federal population counts buttressed the Constitution's infamous three-fifths clause (often termed the "federal ratio"), which counted three-fifths of all enslaved African Americans for the purpose of expanding white political representation in the growing southern slave states. With their large enslaved populations in mind, the representatives of southern slaveholders at the constitutional convention operated out of a strong white master frame and insisted on carefully counting those enslaved and thereby got many extra members in the new Congress—and thus extra votes in the undemocratic electoral college that has chosen the U.S. president ever since.

Thomas Jefferson would not have become the third president of the United States without the extra twelve or so votes that he got in the electoral college because of the white electors who were there only because of the three-fifths counting of enslaved black Americans in southern states. Also, without these extra white members of Congress provided to southern whites by the three-fifths clause, numerous actions of Congress and presidents in the slavery era would have had different results. Slavery would have been banned in the new state of Missouri, the slaveholding President Andrew Jackson would have failed to pass his extreme 1830 Indian Removal Act, and the Kansas-Nebraska bill allowing residents to choose

slavery in these midwestern areas would not have become law. The United States, thus, became a quite different country than it might have been because of the seven long decades of substantial slaveholders' control of our early U.S. political institutions.¹¹

In addition, operating out of a strong white framing, these elite founders instituted a U.S. Senate, an antidemocratic political institution designed, as the slaveholding architect of the U.S. Constitution James Madison put it, "to protect the people against the transient impressions into which they themselves might be led." As a result, until the early twentieth century U.S. Senators were elected by state legislators, not directly by voters, and they have always served staggered six-year terms so they can serve longer than members of the more democratic U.S. House. This oligarchical U.S. Senate institution was critical to the protection of the racialized interests of slaveholders and white segregationists for most of U.S. history, from the 1790s to the 1970s. Southern senators frequently and openly articulated accentuated versions of the white racist frame for the general public and the polity, and, using antidemocratic Senate rules, were able to block *every* significant piece of anti-slavery legislation before the Civil War and every significant piece of civil rights legislation between the 1870s and the 1964 Civil Rights Act.¹²

Another undemocratic invention of the white framers is the U.S. Supreme Court. Intentionally created as an unelected body with little democratic oversight, over time the Court has gained great unsupervised power, much of it legislative: "No other tribunal on earth rivals it. No other government reserves the last word for the judiciary to pronounce."¹³ Consider too the racial demography of the Supreme Court over its history. For long periods a majority of Supreme Court justices were southern slaveholders or segregationists. As of 2009, a total of just 110 people, 108 men and 2 women, have ever served as powerful Supreme Court justices. More than 98 percent have been white, and 96 percent have been white men. Given this extremely biased demographic reality, the dominance of a strong patriarchal version of the white racial frame in many U.S. court decisions and in much U.S. law, now over more than two centuries, is certainly unsurprising. That dominant frame has long been central in decisions of the high court. Like the U.S. Senate, from the 1790s to the 1930s, the Supreme Court played a central and overt role in the maintenance of racial slavery and Jim Crow segregation for African Americans, as well as in the oppression of other Americans of color. In this long era, the high court usually rejected accounts of oppression and pleas for redress provided by African Americans in regard to slavery, segregation, and other racial oppression. The all-white-male justices in that era periodically made it clear that African Americans did *not* have any legitimate voice in

U.S. social and legal affairs. In the infamous 1856 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision the Court's slaveholding majority ruled that black Americans were, in the words of that chief justice, "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."¹⁴ A strong racist framing of black inferiority and white superiority was openly articulated by many Supreme Court and other federal judges for the next century, indeed into the 1950s and 1960s.

Another slavery-shaped feature of the U.S. Constitution and of numerous later Congressional actions and judicial decisions is the heavy accent on "state's rights," which emphasis has from the beginning been used to protect racial oppression—first slavery, then legal segregation, and now contemporary racial discrimination. For centuries now, whites in many areas have insisted on strong white-controlled local and state governments, and a relatively weak federal ability to intervene in local government matters. From the beginning, a major reason for this emphasis has been to insure that the federal government cannot interfere forcefully in most matters of white oppression of Americans of color.

The colonial and U.S. slavery system was a direct contradiction of the white liberty-and-justice frame in numerous ways, not the least of which was that major slaveholders would not allow majorities, even of white men, to have substantial power over their economic and political concerns, especially within southern and border states. Once the colonies had banded together in a federal union, these slaveholders, as Robin Einhorn has shown, came to understand that democratic governments at the local level could be a serious threat to slavery. For that reason, the slaveholding elite generally took control over state and local governments in areas where there were numerous enslaved Americans. In the early decades, the areas with little slavery were more likely to have *more democratic* local and state governments (still, usually for whites only) than those with substantial numbers of enslaved Americans. Furthermore, the states' rights and other anti-federal-government rhetoric that has long pervaded this country's legal and political debates is *rooted* in the interests of whites during the slavery and Jim Crow eras—and not just in idealistic conceptions of liberty from the white liberty-and-justice frame.¹⁵ While there are other sources of contemporary anti-government rhetoric, a major early source was the fear of slaveholders and their segregationist descendants in more recent decades that federal agencies might interfere with their "freedom" to oppress and dominate Americans of color.

As noted previously, using the great power given to them by the three-fifths clause and other provisions of the U.S. Constitution, southern slaveholding interests effectively used the federal government to support

their interests until 1860. In 1850, in one especially strong victory for slaveholders, Congress passed a Fugitive Slave Law, which slaveholders won only because of the federal ratio. Under this law, with yet more legitimization of slavery, a federal marshal could command any citizen to "aid and assist" in apprehending enslaved runaways. Such a provision for a federal "posse comitatus" was another support for what white southerners framed in their minds as a white slaveholding republic. From 1850 to 1865 such laws were used to *force* all white citizens, however they felt, to support slavery.¹⁶

The "founding fathers" created a U.S. origins narrative that was (and still is) substantially mythological, a story in which a mostly anti-democratic, often slaveholding, group of elite white men were said to be heroes championing ideals of equality and democracy for a new United States. These elite economic and political leaders created what social scientists call an *imagined community*, that is, a heralded "democratic" society in which all Americans supposedly shared real comradeship. However, contrary to this political mythology, the U.S. Constitution did *not* create a democracy where most people had the right to participate substantially and freely in political institutions. Native Americans and African Americans were completely excluded. As Vincent Harding has put it, the U.S. constitutional convention was "more like a poorly attended dress rehearsal, with most of the rightful and necessary performers and creators *barred from the stage*."¹⁷

From the beginning, this democratic rhetoric was more about public relations than about creating actual democratic social and political relationships. The new U.S. society was highly inegalitarian, with the extreme inequality across the entrenched color line. The new United States was mostly led by men who were overt white supremacists. It was a society that had *no* sense of shared comradeship among its white, black, and Native American residents. In 1843 no less a figure than former president John Quincy Adams asserted in a congressional speech that the United States had *never been a democracy* because it had long been controlled by a few thousand slaveholders.¹⁸ These white-supremacist U.S. political institutions were openly proslavery and in full operation for the first seven decades of U.S. history, and an overtly white supremacist framing and dominance were regularly asserted by white leaders through these institutions until the end of Jim Crow segregation in the late 1960s.

Local Enforcement of Systemic Racism

Operating under the undemocratic Constitution, and under white-framed congressional and presidential actions flowing from it, white elites in slaveholding states enforced and extended the slavery system using local and state governments and private institutions. The abolitionist, Harriett

Beecher Stowe, famous for her anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, put together a nonfiction book with much evidence to support the accounts of brutal enslavement in her novel. In that second book she provides many examples showing the active and assertive role of southern white judges, ministers, and newspaper publishers in routinely protecting and extending that enslavement. As one historian has noted, "Slavery brutalized, made insensitive to the suffering of others not only the masses but judges and magistrates, legislators, professors of religion, preachers of Christianity, persons of property and members of the highest strata."¹⁹ Most whites' capacity for empathy across the imposed color line withered with the rise of North America slavery—an essential condition for the dominance of the white racial frame among white Americans.

In her nonfiction book Stowe reprints many slaveholders' advertisements for enslaved runaways, in which references to scars and disabilities reveal how physically abused they were. These advertisements signal how well-organized and bureaucratized the slave-catching system was across many states. Stowe concludes from extensive research that the "legal power of the master amounts to an absolute despotism over body and soul; and that there is no protection for the slave's life and limb, his family relations, his conscience, nay, more his eternal interests, but the character of the master."²⁰ North American slavery was a "totalitarian" system, one that actually controlled and shaped all major aspects of the lives of African Americans (and some Native Americans) who were enslaved, as well as of those who were technically "free."

Significantly, Stowe does not spare the New England states in her criticism of racial oppression. The official, and slow, abolition of slavery there did not remove the

most baneful feature of the system—that which makes American worse than Roman slavery—the prejudice of caste and color. In the New England States the negro [sic] has been treated as belonging to an inferior race of beings;—forced to sit apart by himself in the place of worship; his children excluded from the schools; himself excluded from the railroad car and the omnibus, and the peculiarities of his race made the subject of bitter contempt and ridicule.²¹

Indeed, these New England whites created the first Jim Crow segregation laws and customs that excluded African Americans from schools, juries, and voting. Even most antislavery organizations were internally segregated, with white northerners in top positions and few black northerners in significant positions. Moreover, in numerous northern areas whites tried to drive out local black residents by means of special settlement laws or tax laws, and sometimes by violently destroying their homes and businesses. In

northern newspapers, as in southern newspapers, there was a recurring racial framing of black Americans as alien, lazy, or dangerous, stereotyped images that rationalized and facilitated the segregation or enslavement of black Americans in those areas. In northern and western areas, as in the South, most whites also held to the idea of the United States being a "white republic." For example, in the 1850s even the celebrated U.S. "poet of democracy," Walt Whitman, asked this rhetorical question aggressively from the white frame: "Is not America for Whites?"²² Both racial oppression and the white frame were omnipresent across the relatively new United States.

Conclusion: The Persistence of Racial Oppression

A striking feature of systemic racism in the United States is how long it has persisted with a strikingly inegalitarian racial hierarchy firmly in place. A useful concept here is that of the *social reproduction* of this racial hierarchy. The perpetuation of this hierarchical system has required a constant reproducing of major inegalitarian institutions and their discriminatory arrangements and processes. For systemic racism to persist across many generations, white individuals and small groups have had to participate actively in the ongoing collective and discriminatory reproduction of the family, community, legal, political, economic, educational, and religious institutions that necessarily undergird this system.

Substantial inequality between white Americans and Americans of color has been routinely reproduced over the generations in these areas both by individual actions and by institutional forces. Most white Americans are not aware that a majority of white families today are relatively affluent because of large-scale federal assistance programs and giveaways—such as the 246 million acres of land given away almost exclusively to white families under federal homestead laws from the 1860s to the 1930s. Such *unjust enrichment* for whites has long meant *unjust impoverishment* for Americans of color. Over centuries the social relations of exploitation have created much income, wealth, social status, political power and privilege, and other racial capital for whites, which have in turn provided much racial capital for later generations of whites, indeed to the present day.

The deep structure of racial oppression and inequality has been relatively stable over time because its evolution has gradually ruled out other options as important societal choice points pass by. Still, the development of this deep structure has *not* been inevitable, but has been generated to a substantial degree by elite white choices at key points in time, choice points that have shaped the internal arrangement of its institutional parts and the patterned activities of the actors that constantly reinforce that arrangement. Our racist system exists because of the recurring actions of a great

array of human actors, but especially those of powerful white actors. One revealing bias in many mainstream social science and humanities analyses of North American history is that, while they sometimes depict ordinary whites as racially prejudiced, they rarely discuss critically and in detail the actions of *elite* white actors that greatly shaped and maintained this country's system of racial oppression. Moreover, when they do deal with elite figures, most soften their language rather than discuss critically the bloody realities of their actions propping up the racist system.

The constant reinforcing decisions of these elite whites have perpetuated and reinforced the deep structure of U.S. racism through many reciprocal linkages and social feedback loops. The longer a system is in operation, the more ways its actors, especially its controlling actors, develop connecting relationships among themselves within major institutions, share important socioeconomic resources, and become skilled at maintaining our inegalitarian system. Even if obvious political barriers to significant change in our system of racial oppression can be overcome, there will still be the major problem of the interwoven relationships and greatly unequal resources of the powerful white actors—which have for centuries been constantly regenerated as part of the deep U.S. societal structure.²³

In a society's history early social choice points are often the most important. In the case of systemic racism in North America, to cite a major example, the choice by elite whites to go with African American enslavement to create economic development and white wealth has had large-scale impacts ever since. The elite choice *not* to go with free labor, and the elite and rank-and-file whites' choices to kill off or drive out the indigenous Americans, have had profound longterm consequences for the racial structure of this society. Moreover, when the foundational reality of slavery could have been abandoned, around the time of the 1787 founding of the United States, most powerful white men in charge decided to go with the political and economic choice of greatly expanding the enslavement of African Americans, the large-scale slavery system, rather than to abandon it—in part, of course, to increase their own families' wealth.

Once these critical societal choices are made, the system of oppression has a strong *inertial* force keeping it in place. The first law of physical motion, the famous law of “inertia,” asserts that an object at rest will continue at rest, or an object in motion will continue moving in one direction, until an unbalancing counter-force is exerted on it. Applying this to the social realm, one observes a very strong tendency for racial oppression's exploitative mechanisms, resource inequalities, norms, and buttressing attitudes to remain in force and substantially unchanged until a major unbalancing force challenges that oppression. However, the

everyday operation of racial oppression, its routine and stable equilibrium, is only occasionally disrupted in a significant way. The racist system does sometimes change in order to meet important external shifts and environmental pressures, often significantly, but so far without altering much of its deep racist structure. Important societal turbulence over racial matters can make it seem like there is more social change than there really is, and thus disguise and hide the underlying deep structure from all but the most savvy observers.

Reacting to social turbulence, those whites in power prefer to make *ad hoc* modifications, rather than to significantly change the deep racial structure. For example, when U.S. slavery was finally abolished—in part because of great pressure from black and white abolitionists and much everyday resistance from those enslaved—elite white actors chose to keep as much of the old oppressive system in place as possible by moving to the near-slavery of Jim Crow segregation rather than to just abandon the racial oppression. When our system of racism does finally change somewhat, a “law of social inertia” seems to operate that keeps the society more like it was in the past than like the supposedly changed society that many often celebrate.