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Introduction

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Introduction

Adam Fairclough

In 1939 Billie Holiday recorded the song that came to be her signature number. These are the first two verses:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Strange Fruit is one of the most powerful political statements ever set to words and music. Holiday used it to close her live shows, to great emotional effect. Song and performance brought the horror of lynching, which had claimed at least 4,000 victims since 1880, into the mainstream of American popular culture. Even today, *Strange Fruit* is an oft-played evocation of the most abhorrent expression of American racism.¹

Yet in the year that *Strange Fruit* was released on vinyl, lynching in the ‘classic’ sense—a white mob brazenly torturing, hanging, and sometimes burning an African American—was becoming a thing of the past. In 1930, when Abel Meeropol, a New York teacher of left-wing convictions, wrote the poem *Bitter Fruit*, lynching was still a common occurrence, but numbers were fast declining. In 1938, when he set his poem to music and gave it a new title, the last ‘spectacle lynching’ took place, in Louisiana. Shortly after Holiday first sang and recorded the song, Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, a repository of information on the subject, reported that no lynchings at all had occurred between May 1939 and May 1940. By the 1950s, lynching was so rare that the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 attracted worldwide attention and condemnation.

While some celebrated the virtual disappearance of lynching, however, others cautioned that measuring racial progress was not a straightforward

¹ Billie Holiday ‘Strange Fruit’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c52ElU5tQNo>, accessed 31 March 2021.

matter. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), America's leading civil rights organization, argued that the killing of black people continued apace in different guises. Blacks now faced trials rather than lynch mobs, but the bias of white prosecutors, white juries, and white judges made 'due process' tantamount to 'legal lynching.' White people who killed blacks, if prosecuted, were routinely acquitted. Police officers used deadly force against blacks with frequency and impunity. The extent of such violence, however, was impossible to measure. Did the decline of lynching register a diminution of anti-black violence in general? Or, like an iceberg, did nine-tenths of such violence remain hidden from view?²

The killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020 raises a similar question. Following the dissemination of video recordings of that horrific event, racial justice protests swept across America and other countries, demanding an end to the killings of unarmed black people by police officers and white vigilantes. When it comes to establishing the incidence of such killings over time, however, relevant statistics are hard to find. Only in 2019 did the federal government begin to collect data on police use of force. Before then, it had been left to private researchers to track police killings. But even that research is of recent origin. *The Washington Post*, for example, started to gather data in 2015. In short, it is extremely difficult to trace historical trends.³

These problems raise an important question about the history of race in America, and about how scholars should interpret that history. Is anti-black racism a protean force that has changed shape over time but retained its potency? Or has the United States waged a long, uneven, but largely successful battle to universalize the principles of freedom and equality, ostensibly the nation's ideological foundation?

The difference between the two approaches can be illustrated by the claims of the 1619 Project, and the furious reaction to those claims by a group of eminent historians. Sponsored by the *New York Times* to mark the 400th anniversary of the importation of the first enslaved Africans to the British

² C. Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York 2002), 145-47.

³ FBI, National Use of Force Data Collection, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/use-of-force>; Mapping Police Violence; <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>; Police Shootings Database, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>, all accessed 29 March 2021.

colony of Virginia, the 1619 Project placed slavery and racism ‘at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.’ In doing so, it took aim at the patriotic narrative of America’s founding that is echoed, in academic language, by many professional historians. According to Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones, ‘Our Democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written.’ The Revolution was not so much a struggle for ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ as a strategy ‘to protect the institution of slavery.’ The Constitution, a document normally regarded as holy writ, was carefully constructed to preserve and protect the interests of slaveholders. And in their resistance to slavery and racism, blacks found few white allies.⁴

Angered by these assertions, Sean Wilentz and four other prominent historians wrote a stinging public rebuttal. They noted that the first anti-slavery societies were formed in the American colonies, and argued that the Revolution of 1776 marked such a radical break with the past, and voiced such a ringing endorsement of natural rights, that it gave a decisive impetus to the abolition of slavery. They claimed that the Constitution was not a pro-slavery document, and added that blacks who fought for equality always attracted white sympathizers.⁵

Underlying this dispute over facts was a fundamental divergence over the *longue durée* of American history. To the letter’s five signatories, the essence of that history is the progressive expansion of freedom. In their eyes, the United States has always been, for all its flaws, a beacon of liberty in a world of kings and tyrants—the ‘last best hope of earth,’ in Lincoln’s famous phrase. To the 1619 Project, this notion of ‘American exceptionalism’ is little more than a patriotic fantasy: ‘Nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional derives from slavery and anti-black racism.’⁶

It would be fair to say that the four essays in this issue of *Leidschrift*, which range in time from the early colonial period to the late twentieth century, fall closer to the perspective of the 1619 Project than to that of its

⁴ ‘1619 Project,’ *New York Times magazine*, August 18, 2019, https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf, accessed 23 March 2021.

⁵ V. Bynum, J. McPherson, J. Oakes, S. Wilentz, and G. Wood to editor, *New York Times Magazine*, December 29, 2019, 6.

⁶ A. Server, ‘The Fight Over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts,’ *The Atlantic*, December 23 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/>, accessed 31 March 2021.

critics. At the same time, they try to avoid the polemical tone that has marred the arguments of both sides in that controversy.

In discussing the origins of slavery in North America, Damian Pargas illustrates the rapidity with which slavery became economically vital to colonies like Virginia and South Carolina. These settlements began as ‘societies with slaves,’ but by 1700 had evolved into ‘slave societies.’ Indeed, in South Carolina black slaves came to outnumber free whites. Pargas emphasizes that African slavery only became institutionalized after alternative sources of labor—labor required to produce the tobacco and rice that enriched white people—proved recalcitrant or otherwise inadequate. This solution to the whites’ ‘labor problem’ meant that slavery in North America, unlike slavery historically, was *racial* in character; it classified black Africans as inferior human beings whose status as slaves was fitting and heritable. ‘African outsiders had now become permanent outsiders, without any hope of freedom.’ Slavery and racism were thus mutually reinforcing. No wonder such a deeply-rooted institution, which existed for 250 years, bequeathed a legacy of inequality and injustice that is evident today.

In ‘Red Summer 1919’ Ishany Gaffar portrays the black community as both victim and agent. The riots that swept across America after the First World War resembled pre-war Russian ‘pogroms’ in that the aggression was unprovoked, largely one-sided, and initiated by the majority community. This had been the pattern of race riots throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Common factors included resistance to black economic advancement and a desire to exclude blacks from ‘white’ public spaces. In some cases, whites attempted to eliminate black communities altogether through forcible expulsion. Wartime mobilization, the northward migration of southern blacks, and the return of black soldiers after Germany’s surrender—soldiers who had enjoyed a degree of freedom in France denied to them in the United States—provided a specific context for the violence of 1919.

Yet Gaffar’s analysis is not a simple aggressor-victim model. The postwar race riots, she argues, did not achieve their intended effect: instead of intimidating blacks to conform to the racist status quo, they spurred black solidarity, encouraged racial pride, and fostered collective resistance. The extent to which blacks engaged in armed self-defense is unclear—the balance of force remained overwhelmingly on the side of whites. What is certain, however, is that the black press was outspoken in criticizing white violence, attacking racial prejudice, and disputing the biased and false reporting of

white newspapers. Equally important, the NAACP, founded in 1910, campaigned against racial injustice in general and lynching in particular. It also represented black defendants who were unjustly prosecuted in connection with the 1919 riots, in many cases winning acquittals. Its successful appeal of the death sentences meted out to twelve blacks after a white rampage in Elaine, Arkansas, was especially noteworthy. Six of the appeals went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court which, in a landmark decision, reversed the convictions. The NAACP's strategy of pursuing racial justice in the courts paid off in a spectacular fashion when the Supreme Court, in 1954, ruled that segregated public schools were unconstitutional.⁷

The title of Eduard van de Bilt's essay refers to the 'Lost Cause,' the widely-held belief among white southerners that the formation of the Confederacy, and subsequent 'War for Southern Independence,' was a principled defense of states' rights waged by brave and honorable people who, although defeated, displayed commendable military prowess. Proponents of the 'Lost Cause' also maintained that slavery had been a benign institution that northern abolitionists had unjustly maligned. By 1930 monuments to the 'Lost Cause'—statues of Confederate soldiers and generals—graced virtually every town and city in the South. Washington's National Cathedral even installed a stained-glass window that depicted generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson as saint-like figures.

That window is now gone. And statues of Confederate soldiers have tumbled, as protesters assailed them as symbols of slavery and white supremacy. This iconoclasm has been gathering strength for years. State flags that incorporated the Confederate battle-flag have been a subject of fierce controversy since the 1990s. The Charleston church massacre of 2015, which left nine black people dead, led to the removal of the Confederate flag from the grounds of South Carolina's capitol. In 2017, the mayor of New Orleans ordered a statue of Robert E. Lee, which stood atop a classical column, hauled away by helicopter and banished from public sight. Later that year, a campaign to remove an equestrian statue of Lee from a public park in Charlottesville, Virginia, provided a rallying-point for Nazis and Klansmen, who instigated a riot that left a young woman dead.

⁷ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* 347 US 483 (1954); M.V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC 1987), 1-20; J.T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York 2001), 21-69.

The myth of the 'Lost Cause' retains its attraction for Civil War re-actors, neo-Confederates, and extreme white nationalists. But the association of Confederate symbols with violent far-right extremism is inescapable, and the link has made any defense of the Confederacy increasingly untenable. Even among white southerners, enthusiasm for Confederate iconography has ebbed. Among historians, 'Lost Cause' interpretations of the Civil War command virtually no support. Few dispute that the white southerners who formed the Confederacy did so in order to defend slavery.

In searching for the causes of the Civil War, however, Van de Bilt argues that acknowledging the primacy of slavery should be the starting-point, not the end-point. An exclusive focus on slavery, he suggests, especially one that adopts an overly moralistic approach, can lead to interpretations that are, in their own way, as misleading as that of the 'Lost Cause.'

In the not too distant past, Van de Bilt reminds us, historians viewed the causes of the Civil War as a complex interaction of economic, political, social, and moral factors. Slavery itself, although undoubtedly the principal cause of the war, was inextricably bound up with debates over the tariff, states' rights, the settlement of the West, and so on. This is not to diminish the importance of slavery: it was so central to America's early development that Edmund Morgan, writing in 1975, argued that the establishment of universal suffrage for white males would not have occurred without it. 'Following Morgan,' Van de Bilt notes, 'more and more historians now argue that American democracy was made possible by slavery: the existence of an 'inferior' group of black people created a form of solidarity and a feeling of equality among white Americans.'

Yet Van de Bilt also points to a counter-narrative advanced by other historians (including four of the five who criticized the 1619 Project) that has become increasingly influential in recent years. This school of thought places slavery as a *moral* issue at the front and center of its analysis of the Civil War's causation. Minimizing northern racism and downplaying economic issues, it portrays the Republican party as an anti-slavery vehicle committed to extending the principles of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' Instead of an avoidable tragedy or a conflict between competing economic interests, the Civil War is portrayed as an idealistic crusade to eliminate human bondage. An emphasis on black agency, exemplified by studies of black soldiers and biographies of Frederick Douglass, reinforces this interpretation of the Civil War as a 'story of activism that put an end to slavery.' It is a morally edifying

narrative that recalls the tradition of American exceptionalism, a belief in the ‘unique role and example of the United States as a free and democratic nation where everyone can make their dreams a reality.’

My own essay makes a similar point regarding recent interpretations of Reconstruction, the Republican party’s abortive effort to remake the South after the Civil War. To historians who view the Civil War as a ‘battle-cry of freedom’ (to quote the title of James McPherson’s best-selling account of the conflict), Reconstruction presents a problem. To accept that the war abolished slavery but condemned blacks to a century of second-class citizenship (and worse) would diminish both the moral significance of the Union’s hard-won victory and the liberating effect of emancipation. It would also contradict the image of the United States as the exemplar of freedom and democracy. Many historians are therefore reassessing Reconstruction, long taken to be a disastrous failure, in a more positive light. Some even contend that the partial success of Reconstruction paved the way, sowed the seeds, or laid the groundwork (the metaphors vary) for the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century.⁸

Debates over the significance of race in America always run the risk of overemphasizing the grimness of the historical record on the one hand, and exaggerating the nation’s commitment to democratic ideals on the other. One way to avoid these pitfalls is to place the American case within a wider context. If we examine racial and ethnic conflicts in other parts of the world, it is easy to find examples of massacres, genocides and ‘ethnic cleansings’ against which America’s own conflicts pale by comparison. To make such an observation is not to engage in ‘whataboutism;’ it merely keeps things in proportion and discourages facile moralizing.⁹

A similar point can be made about slavery. It would be obscene to speak of a ‘mild’ slavery, but it is accurate to note that the United States was the only slave society in which the enslaved population grew by natural

⁸ See for example E. Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York 1988), 611-12; J. Oakes, et al., *Of The People: A History of the United States since 1865* (New York 2011), 479.

⁹ For a sobering account of such massacres, genocides, and ‘ethnic cleansings,’ see John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton, NJ 2020).

increase.¹⁰ One can also acknowledge, without romanticizing the Old South, that paternalism played a far greater role in the relationship between masters and slaves in the United States than it did in other slave societies.¹¹ One needs to concede, too, that race has been an especially large and intractable problem in the United States because slavery developed as an *internal* institution. For Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, slavery was *external*, a system of exploitation practiced in their overseas possessions. This made it easier for those nations to abolish slavery, but their post-emancipation colonies were no strangers to racial discrimination. Moreover, even when European colonizers failed to enslave native populations, they still exploited and oppressed them.

When viewing American race relations, the persisting inequalities and recurring brutalities tempt us to conclude that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. But that would be an error. King's insistence that 'the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice,' reflected his Christian faith and may appear naively optimistic. But it was also informed by a reading of history that, following Hegel, held that progress toward freedom comes about through conflict. The defeat of Reconstruction followed the victory of Emancipation, but the resulting synthesis, a combination of legal segregation and informal discrimination, was not a return to slavery. The confrontational protests of the Civil Rights Movement elicited a vehement 'white backlash,' but that dialectic produced a higher synthesis in the form of partial integration and greater economic opportunity. Black advances were subsequently blunted by widening economic inequality, mass incarceration, and renewed efforts at voter suppression. Nevertheless, forward movement continued, and record black voter turnout helped to elect Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012. The Trump presidency, which poured the old wine of racism into the

¹⁰ R.W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York 1989), 116-53. It should be emphasized there is no simple correlation between slave population growth, positive or negative, and the rate of exploitation.

¹¹ Paternalism is the central theme of E.D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York 1976). Paternalism, in Genovese's quasi-Marxist analysis, refers to the dialectical relationship between masters and slaves, not to the manner in which the former treated the latter in terms of 'kindness' or 'benevolence.' More recent studies of slavery minimize the significance of paternalism and emphasize harsh exploitation within a capitalist economy; see for example W. Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Athens, GA 2000); E.E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York 2016).

new bottle of white nationalism, seemed like a brutal reversal, but the Black Lives Matter movement, and a reinvigorated Democratic party, provided an antithesis. In short, progress in the matter of race has always been a question of two steps forward and one step back.¹²

Of one thing we can be certain: in 2020 the issue of racial injustice, both current and historic, acquired new urgency. The phrases ‘racial reckoning’ and ‘systemic racism’ became ubiquitous. Not since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had so many people taken to the streets to call for racial justice. Never before had the nation’s police forces been subjected to such widespread criticism—from whites as well as blacks—for their treatment of African-Americans. The essays in this issue of *Leidschrijft*, we hope, will help readers place the current turmoil in its historical context the better to understand it.

¹² For a scientist’s analysis of human history as moral progress, see S. Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York 2012).