Part 3 – "The Idea of America" (Democracy)

by Nikole Hannah-Jones

The 1619 Project
The New York Times Magazine

***Directions*:**

- ☐ Read and annotate this excerpt, looking for evidence of how Nikole Hannah-Jones supports her arguments about democracy
- ☐ Look for evidence of how enslaved and free Black Americans were **contributors** to the ideals of American freedom

Annotate for: **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument**	**PART THREE**
What would Lincoln's proclamation allow Black Americans to **contribute** to the freedoms and ideals of this country?	22 On August 14, 1862, a mere five years after the nation's highest courts declared that no Black person could be an American citizen, President Abraham Lincoln called a group of five esteemed free black men to the White House for a meeting. It was one of the few times that black people had ever been invited to the White House as guests. *The Civil War* had been raging for more than a year, and black abolitionists, who had been increasingly pressuring Lincoln to end slavery, must have felt a sense of great anticipation and pride. 23 The war was not going well for Lincoln. Britain was contemplating whether to intervene on the Confederacy's behalf, and Lincoln, unable to draw enough new white volunteers for the war, was forced to reconsider his opposition to allowing Black Americans to fight for their own liberation. The president was weighing a proclamation that threatened to emancipate all enslaved people in the states that had seceded from the Union if the states did not end the rebellion. The proclamation would also allow the formerly enslaved to join the Union army and fight against their former "masters." But Lincoln worried about what the consequences of this radical step would be. 24 <u>Like many white Americans, he opposed slavery as a cruel system at odds with American ideals, but he also opposed Black equality.</u> He believed that free Black people were a "troublesome presence" incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people. "Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals?" he had said four years earlier. "My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.[1]"

[1] Abraham Lincoln's first debate with Stephen Douglas, August 21, 1858, https://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/lincoln/first-debate-with-douglas-august-21-1858/

Annotate for:
Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument

What do you think Lincoln meant when he said that his race "suffers from [their] presence"?

What is Hannah-Jones' intention in sharing the contradictions and ironies of President Lincoln?

What intended effect does she hope this has on her intended audience?

List **five** specific ways that the formerly enslaved began to **contribute** to the country and to our democracy **during Reconstruction**:

25 That August day, as the men arrived at the White House, they were greeted by the towering Lincoln and a man named James Mitchell, who eight days before had been given the title of a newly created position called the commissioner of emigration. This was to be his first assignment. After exchanging a few niceties, Lincoln got right to it. He informed his guests that he had gotten Congress to **appropriate**[2] funds to ship Black people, once freed, to another country.

26 "Why should they leave this country? This is, perhaps, the first question for proper consideration," Lincoln told them. "You and we are different races. . . . Your race suffer very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side."

27 You can imagine the heavy silence in that room, as the weight of what the president said momentarily stole the breath of these five Black men. It was 243 years to the month since the first of their ancestors had arrived on these shores, **before** Lincoln's family, long **before** most of the white people insisting that this was not their country. The Union had not entered the war to end slavery but to keep the South from splitting off; yet Black men had signed up to fight. Enslaved people were fleeing their forced-labor camps, which we like to call plantations, trying to join the effort, serving as spies, sabotaging confederates, taking up arms for his cause as well as their own. And now Lincoln was blaming **them** for the war. "Although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other . . . without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence," the president told them. "*It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated*." As Lincoln closed the remarks, Edward Thomas, the delegation's chairman, informed the president, perhaps curtly, that they would consult on his proposition. "Take your full time," Lincoln said. "No hurry at all."

28 Nearly three years after that White House meeting, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. By summer, the Civil War was over, and four million black Americans were suddenly free. Contrary to Lincoln's view, *most* were not inclined to leave, agreeing with the sentiment of a resolution against black colonization put forward at a convention of black leaders in New York some decades before: "This is our home, and this our country. Beneath its **sod** lie the bones of our fathers. . . . Here we were born, and here we will die."

29 That the formerly enslaved did not take up Lincoln's offer to abandon these lands is an astounding testament to their belief in this nation's founding ideals. Liberated by war, then, they did not seek vengeance on their oppressors as Lincoln and so many other white Americans feared. They did the opposite.

[2] appropriate - devote money to a special purpose

1. 2. 3. **Annotate for:** **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument** 4. 5.	30 During this nation's brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process. With federal troops tempering widespread white violence, black Southerners started branches of the Equal Rights League — one of the nation's first human rights organizations — to fight discrimination and organize voters; they headed in droves to the polls, where they placed other formerly enslaved people into seats that their enslavers had once held. The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with Black Americans elected to local, state and federal offices. Some sixteen Black men served in Congress — including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first Black man elected to the Senate. More than 600 black men served in Southern state legislatures and hundreds more in local positions. 31 Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of the *most* democratic of American institutions: the public school. Public education did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The white elite sent their children to private schools, while poor white children went without an education. But newly freed black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education. So black legislators successfully pushed for a universal, state-funded system of schools — not just for their own children but for white children, too. Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, black and white, were now required to attend schools like their Northern counterparts. Just *five* years into Reconstruction, every Southern state had enshrined the right to a public education for all children into its constitution. 32 Led by black activists and a Republican Party pushed left . . . the years directly after slavery saw the greatest expansion of human and civil rights this nation would ever see. In 1865, Congress passed the *13th Amendment,* making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, black Americans pushed white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act. It **codified** black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property, etc. In 1868, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States. Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here to a European, Asian, African, Latin American or Middle Eastern immigrant gains automatic citizenship. Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship — the right to vote — to all men regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." 33 For this fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could create the

What rhetorical appeal does Hannah-Jones utilize the most on this page? Ethos, pathos, or logos?

Annotate for:
Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument

Where does Hannah-Jones use **anaphora** and what argument is she making through the use of that rhetorical device?

multiracial democracy that black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not.

34 **But it would not last**.

35 Anti- black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce white resistance throughout the South. Faced with this unrest, the federal government decided it would leave the white South to its own devices. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic white suppression of black life was so severe that this period between the 1880s and the 1920 and '30s became known as the *Great Nadir*, or the second slavery. Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century.

36 White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws black people had championed, experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black people back into a *quasi*-slavery. As Waters McIntosh, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, "It was the poor white man who was freed by the war, not the Negroes."

37 Starting in the late 1800s, Southern states passed a series of laws and codes meant to make slavery's racial caste system permanent by denying Black people political power, social equality and basic dignity.

38 They [enacted] literacy tests to keep black people from voting. Black people were prohibited from serving on juries. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths. Memphis had separate parking spaces for black and white drivers. Baltimore passed an ordinance outlawing black people from moving onto a block more than half white and white people from moving onto a block more than half black. Georgia made it illegal for black and white people to be buried next to one another in the same cemetery. Alabama barred Black people from using public libraries that their own tax dollars were paying for. In the North, white politicians implemented policies that segregated Black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-Black schools, operated whites-only public pools, and white businesses regularly denied Black people service, placing "Whites Only" signs in their windows.

39 This caste system was maintained through wanton racial terrorism. During the height of racial terror in this country, Black Americans were not merely killed, but

	castrated, burned alive and dismembered with their body parts displayed in storefronts. This violence was meant to terrify and control black people.
According to Hannah-Jones, what other groups have benefited from the bloody freedom struggles?	40 [Racist] ideology — that black people belonged to an inferior, subhuman race — did not simply disappear once slavery ended. If the formerly enslaved and their descendants became educated, if we thrived in the jobs white people did, if we excelled in the sciences and arts, then the entire justification for how this nation allowed slavery would collapse. Free black people posed a danger to the country's idea of itself as exceptional; we held up the mirror in which the nation preferred not to peer. And so the inhumanity visited on black people by every generation of white America justified the inhumanity of the past.
	41 As the centennial of slavery's end neared, Black people were still seeking the rights they had fought for and won after the Civil War . . . In response to black demands for these rights, white Americans strung them from trees, beat them and dumped their bodies in muddy rivers, assassinated them in their front yards, firebombed them on buses, mauled them with dogs, peeled back their skin with fire hoses and murdered their children with explosives set off inside a church.
Annotate for: **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument**	42 For the most part, black Americans fought back alone. Yet we never fought only for ourselves. The bloody freedom struggles of the civil rights movement laid the foundation for every other modern rights struggle. . . The laws born out of black resistance guarantee the [right to vote] for all and ban discrimination based not just on race but on gender, nationality, religion and ability. It was the civil rights movement that led to the passage of the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*, which upended the racist immigration quota system intended to keep this country white. Because of Black Americans, black and brown immigrants from across the globe are able to come to the United States and live in a country in which legal discrimination is no longer allowed.
What argument does Hannah-Jones' make by describing Black resistance?	43 No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it. And to this day, Black Americans, more than any other group, embrace the democratic ideals of a common good. We are the most likely to support programs like universal health care and a higher minimum wage, and to oppose programs that harm the most vulnerable.
	44 The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of Black resistance. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they **espoused**[3], but Black people did. As one scholar, Joe R. Feagin, put it, "Enslaved AfricanAmericans have been among the foremost freedom-fighters this country has produced." For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith

[3] espoused - promoted or endorsed

Why does Hannah-Jones come to value and appreciate the flag that she was once ashamed of her father for proudly representing?	it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best. 45 For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the "Negro problem." They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of Black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that Black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free. 46 At 43,[4] I am part of the first generation of Black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which Black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally "free" for just 50. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there never having been a genuine effort to **redress** the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, Black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans. What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution? 47 When I was a child — I must have been in fifth or sixth grade — a teacher instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation's flag. It was hard enough being one of two Black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher's desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own. 48 I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag. 49 We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.
Exit Ticket: 1. Identify at least **two** of the rhetorical choices or	**Model Response:** Frederick Douglass **<u>utilizes allusion</u>** (in the biblical story of Ham, whose descendants were cursed by God) and **<u>challenges the reasoning</u>** of Christian slaveholders, who believed that enslaved Africans were the descendants of Ham and that, therefore, the institution of slavery was justified by God. <u>These rhetorical choices</u> assist his audience in fully grasping how contradictory and hypocritical their

[4] Nikole Hannah-Jones was born in 1976. She was 43 when *The 1619 Project* was first published in 2019.

devices that NHJ utilized in this excerpt. 2. Then, write a few sentences that analyze the impact of those choices. Finally, explain NHJ's intended effect. 3. Model your response using the example in the column to the right.	justifications of slavery were at the time. Douglass' intended to convince her his that the end of slavery was inevitable. **Use these sentence starters to begin your response:** Hannah-Jones _____ and _____. These rhetorical choices _____. Hannah-Jones' intended to _____.