Part 1 – "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 the idea of America and democracy.
- ☐ Look for evidence of how Black Americans were viewed or treated as **commodities** in the formation of America as well as for evidence of how they **contributed** to the early forming of the democracy as we know it today.

Annotate for: **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument**	**PART ONE**
Why might her father have made sure the flag was pristine while the rest of the house needed repair? What does this indicate about his values?	1 My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two- story house was **perennially**[1] chipping; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag *always* flew **pristine**[2]. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the Black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter. 2 My dad was born into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Mississippi, where Black people bent over cotton from *can't-see-in-the-morning* to *can't-see-at-night*, just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before. The Mississippi of my dad's youth was an **apartheid**[3] state that **subjugated**[4] its near-majority Black population through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more Black people than those in any other state in the country, and the white people in my dad's home county lynched more Black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, for such "crimes" as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union. My dad's mother, like all the Black people in Greenwood, could not vote, use the public library or find work other than toiling in the cotton fields or toiling in white people's houses. So in the 1940s, she packed up her few belongings and her three small children and joined the flood of Black Southerners fleeing North.

[1] perennially - in a way that continues for a long time; permanently
[2] pristine - in its original condition; unspoiled
[3] apartheid - a policy or system of segregation based on race
[4] subjugated - to bring under domination or control; to conquer

Annotate for: **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument** What does Nikole Hannah-Jones' father have in common with Isaac Woodard?	She got off the *Illinois Central Railroad* in Waterloo, Iowa, only to have her hopes of the mythical Promised Land shattered when she learned that Jim Crow did not end at the *Mason- Dixon* line. 3 Grandmama, as we called her, found a house in a segregated Black neighborhood on the city's east side and then found the work that was considered Black women's work no matter where Black women lived — cleaning white people's houses. Dad, too, struggled to find promise in this land. In 1962, at age seventeen, he signed up for the Army. Like many young men, he joined in hopes of escaping poverty. But he went into the military for another reason as well, a reason common to Black men: *Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American*. 4 The Army did not end up being his way out. He was passed over for opportunities, his ambition stunted. He would be discharged under murky circumstances and then labor in a series of service jobs for the rest of his life. Like all the Black men and women in my family, he believed in hard work, but like all the Black men and women in my family, no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead.
Provide two explanations for why NHJ was embarrassed by her father's patriotism and dedication to the flag?	5 So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this Black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused Black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? *I didn't understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me*. 6 I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed *little* to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing Black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like *a marker of his* **degradation**,of his acceptance of our **subordination**. 7 Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were **indelible**, that the United States simply would not exist without us. 8 In August 1619, just twelve years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the

Annotate for: **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument** List at least **three** examples of how Hannah-Jones provides evidence to support her argument that enslaved Black Americans were **commodified**. What other **contributions** did Black Americans make in forming America's democracy? List at least **three.**	English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought twenty to thirty enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day [mark] the beginning of slavery [in the thirteen colonies that would become the United States of America.] They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage. 9 Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable **commodity**[5], accounting for half of all American exports and sixty-six percent of the world's supply. They [helped] build the forced labor camps, otherwise known as plantations, of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even [cast] with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South — at one time, the second- richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island "slave trader." Profits from Black people's **stolen labor** helped the young nation pay off its war debts and finances some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world. 10 But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of Black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: **It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy**. The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our

[5] commodity - a product that can be bought and sold

What is NHJ's primary argument in these pages? What evidence supports your response?	Declaration of Independence, [approved] on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of Black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, Black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of Black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — Black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights. 11 Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of Black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all. 12 The very first person to die for this country in the American Revolution was a Black man who himself was not free. Crispus Attucks was a fugitive from slavery, yet he gave his life for a new nation in which his own people would not enjoy the liberties laid out in the Declaration for another century. In every war this nation has waged since that first one, Black Americans have fought — today we are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military. 13 My father, one of those many black Americans who answered the call, knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That Black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true "founding fathers." And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us. --- **Exit Ticket:** Nikole Hannah-Jones claims that Black Americans fought to make [the ideals of America] true. Without this struggle America would have no democracy at all. Defend (agree), Challenge (disagree), or Qualify (yes and no) this response. <u>Defend–Challenge–Qualify that statement in the space below:</u>