Part 2 – "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.
- ☐ Answer the questions in the margin.
- ☐ Look for evidence of how Black Americans were viewed or treated as **commodities** in the formation of America.

Annotate for: **Rhetorical Choices, Devices, and Argument**	
What document is Hannah-Jones **alluding** to in the opening of Part Two?	**PART TWO** 14 In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self- governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty. As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master's beck and call. His name was Robert Hemings, and he was the half brother of Jefferson's wife, born to Martha Jefferson's father and a woman he owned. It was common [and profitable] for white enslavers to keep their half-Black children in slavery. Jefferson [who would later hold in slavery his own children by Hemings's sister Sally] had chosen [Robert] Hemings, from among about 130 enslaved people that worked on the forced- labor camp he called Monticello, to accompany him to Philadelphia and ensure his every comfort as he drafted the text making the case for a new democratic republic based on the individual rights of men.
What is **ironic** about what Jefferson was writing and who was with him when he was writing it?	
What evidence does Hannah-Jones provide (on this page) of how Black Americans were treated as **commodities**? Be specific.	15 At the time, one-fifth of the population within the thirteen colonies struggled under a brutal system of [racial] slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before. **Chattel**[1] slavery was not conditional but racial. It was **heritable**[2] and

[1] Chattel - personal property; when an enslaved person is rendered as the personal property of the "owner"

[2] Heritable - transmissible from parent to offspring; capable of being inherited

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**. 1. 2. 3. How could the absence of enslaved people as **commodities** have affected the colonies?	*permanent*, not temporary, meaning generations of Black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status onto their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently. Jefferson's fellow white colonists knew that Black people were human beings, but they created a network of laws and customs, astounding for both their precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such. As the abolitionist William Goodell wrote in 1853, "If any thing founded on falsehood might be called a science, we might add the system of American slavery to the list of the strict sciences." 16 [The laws, known as slave codes, varied from colony to colony.] Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised "Negroes for Sale." Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. [In the eyes of the law] enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them. 17 Yet in making the argument against Britain's tyranny, one of the colonists' favorite *rhetorical devices* was to claim that *they* were the slaves — to Britain. For this **duplicity**[3], they faced burning criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English writer opposed to American independence, quipped, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?" 18 Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the **barbaric**[4] institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. The wealth and prominence that allowed Jefferson, at just thirty-three, and the other founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world came from the dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery. In other words, we may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so. It is not incidental that ten of

[3] duplicity - deceitfulness; double-dealing

[4] barbaric - savagely cruel, exceeding brutal

	this nation's first twelve presidents were enslavers, and **some might argue** that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.
By arguing that the founding fathers were hypocritical, Hannah-Jones is utilizing which of the rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos)? Support with textual evidence.	19 Jefferson and the other founders were keenly aware of this hypocrisy. And so in Jefferson's original draft of the *Declaration of Independence*, he tried to argue that it wasn't the colonists' fault. Instead, he blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and called the trafficking in human beings a crime. Yet, neither Jefferson nor most of the founders intended to abolish slavery. In the end, [the other congressmen] struck the passage, which many understood called unwanted attention to an unjust system that was already a source of division among the colonies.
Based on what you've read thus far, who (in your opinion) is Hannah-Jones' intended audience? What textual evidence helps support your answer?	20 There is no mention of slavery in the final *Declaration of Independence*. Similarly, eleven years later, when it came time to draft the *Constitution*, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery <u>without ever using the word</u>. In the texts in which they were making the case for freedom to the world, they did not want to explicitly enshrine their hypocrisy, so they sought to hide it. The Constitution contains eighty-four clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, as the historian David Wald Streicher has written, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the "property" of those who enslaved Black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved Africans for a term of twenty years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had run away seeking refuge.
How do the final five paragraphs support Hannah-Jones' argument that "Our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written"?	Like many others, the writer and abolitionist Samuel Byron called out the deceit, saying of the Constitution, "The words are dark and ambiguous; such as no plain man of common sense would have used, [and] are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe, that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations."
How does **commodifying** enslaved people contradict the ideals of democracy?	21 . . . The Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, ruling that Black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race. This made them inferior to white people and, therefore, **incompatible** with American democracy. Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "*no rights* which a white man was bound to respect." This belief, that Black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the **endemic**[5] racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If Black people could not ever be citizens, if they

[5] endemic - regularly found

	were a caste[6] apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the "we" in the "We the People" was *not* a lie. --- **Exit Ticket:** What, if any, "unvarnished truths" were revealed to you in today's reading? Anticipate the backlash or counter-arguments that NHJ will receive for these truths. Write your responses in the space below.

[6] caste - social class