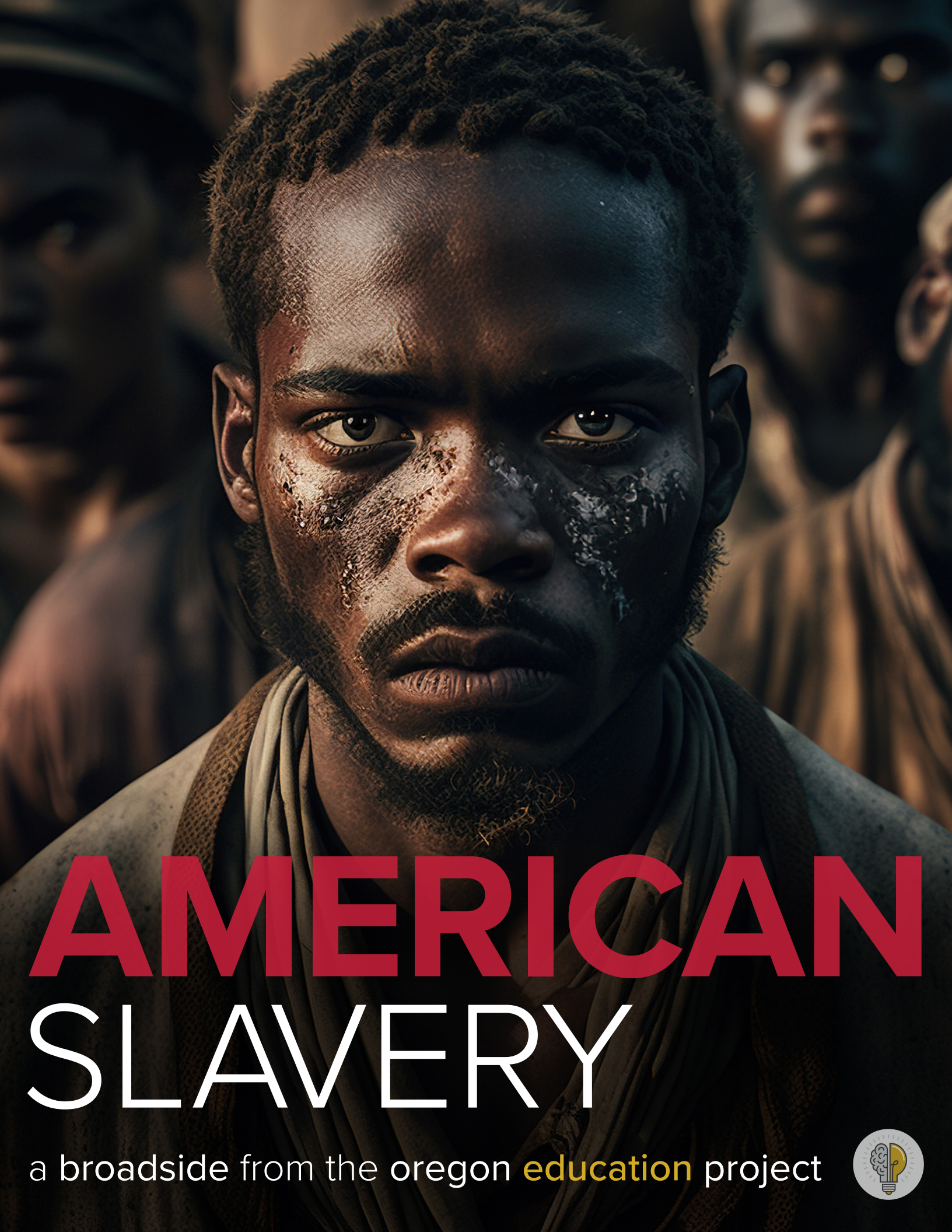


AMERICAN SLAVERY

a broadside from the oregon education project

The recent addition of **Juneteenth** to our national calendar brings with it renewed interest in the history of slavery in the United States of America — deservedly so.



However, it's a topic that has become mired in ideology, especially owing to the aggressive use of Critical Race Theory as the interpretive lens through which that history is **selected** and **framed**. This new scholarly framework relies on the assumption that the United States is *systemically* racist and our involvement in the Atlantic Slave Trade marks the *origin* of "white supremacy" and the racial oppression of black people which continues unabated up to the present day.[1]

Yet this framework misses three important facts that are important to consider if we are to have an *accurate* understanding of the history and development of anti-black racism in America, as well as todays lingering racial disparities:

1. **The Atlantic Slave Trade was an extension of the sale of West African slaves that had taken place for centuries prior to contact with Europeans in the middle of the 15th century.**[2] The capture, enslaving, and selling of "people as property" was an endemic part of West African societies from time immemorial up until Europeans — notably the British, with American assistance — ended the practice *by military force* in the early 20th century. Even so, slavery can still be found in West Africa today, despite being illegal.

2. **West African rulers controlled the procurement and sale of slaves, dictating the terms and reaping large rewards for themselves and their elite subjects.**[3] Contrary to the framing of Malcolm X, and the made-up narrative of Alex Haley's "Roots", black people were not "kidnapped" by white people and brought to America to *become* slaves; they were enslaved by other blacks and brought to America as "African exports" to be *sold as other goods were*.

3. **The toxic racism that developed in the American South** — where the vast majority of blacks lived — **was the *later* result of efforts to justify and defend the enslavement of blacks**, especially from aggressive attacks by abolitionists, and maintain cultural separation from "inherently superior" whites.[4]

These three facts challenge basic assumptions used by practitioners of Critical Race Theory, who have constructed a new mythology about the origins of Black Americans that is popularized throughout our culture today. Importantly, it also forms the basis for K-12 Education in states like Oregon, due to legislative efforts to impose CRT in mandated state curricula. Public schools that once promoted myths of white moral superiority now do just the opposite: presenting a mythology of blacks as the victims of *inherently* immoral white oppressors. The real history is much more complicated, originating with Black Africans, not White Europeans.

West Africans were not enslaved and sold to whites because they were black; they were enslaved and sold because they were *profitable* — to other blacks. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English merchants who traded for them did so because there was an emerging market for cheap labor in the New World. West African slaves were abundantly available and well-suited to fill that role. Anti-black racism was a *consequence* of this arrangement, not the cause.

WHY IS THIS SO?

"Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an *analytical framework* that can be used to explain or examine facts or events." (Khiara Bridges)

[1] Ibram X. Kendi ("Stamped") and Nikole Hannah-Jones ("The 1619 Project") are popular exponents of this view.

[2] It is important to note that slavery was once ubiquitous throughout the world. Scholars estimate that 25 million West African slaves were sold in all — mostly to the Arab world (about 14 million). Of the 11 million transported and sold in the Americas, only 360,000 arrived in what would become the United States. Few people in the US owned slaves, including whites, blacks, and Indians.

[3] Most slaves were the spoils of endless tribal wars, or were criminals, or were sold for profit by family members — a common practice in West Africa which continues to this day, despite being illegal. Due to its *profitability*, African rulers were stiffly resistant to growing calls for the abolition of the trade by American and British leaders up to the very end. (There was no abolitionist movement in West Africa, nor any *moral* opposition to slavery. This was the product of Christian and Enlightenment thinking by Anglo-Americans.)

[4] The rise of "scientific racism" in the late 19th century was an advanced justification that built on folk notions of racial identity originally promoted through distorted Biblical teaching. (And centuries earlier through Muslim teaching. Arabs were arguably the original anti-black racists, as can be seen in their literature, going back to at least the 7th century CE.)

The True Origins of Anti-Black Racism[5]



The cultural disparity that existed between the (mostly) British who settled what became the United States and the West African slaves they purchased to work in their businesses, fields, and homes was daunting.[6] At the time, white Americans were reaping the benefits of the British Enlightenment, enjoying the results of literacy, science, and technology driving an advanced culture that was unprecedented in the history of the world. Their tightly organized, *morally-structured* Christian society — particularly in terms of sexual ethics — had reached levels of social coöperation that allowed liberal republican self-government to take root for the first time anywhere.

Blacks, on the other hand, were thousands of years behind them *culturally*. There was no "reading, writing, and arithmetic" in West Africa until missionaries brought it in the late 1800s — along with sanitation, roads, medicine, healthcare, and the basic know-how to build houses and dwellings of any real substance. West Africans didn't even have the wheel, a basic technology that had been part of "civilization" for millennia.[7] Moreover, their social life, as compared to *repressed* whites, was marked by deep passions and fanciful superstitions.[8] West African culture was the antithesis of British culture, which often led to rash comparisons and narrow-minded skepticism about blacks' basic humanity.

Many whites found the native behavior of their black slaves morally repugnant. Blacks felt humiliation and disrespect, profoundly unprepared for a constraining white society and unfairly judged for the habits and mindset they were born with. This is the true origin of anti-black racism in the United States.

This cultural disparity made future emancipation and assimilation a challenge many saw as insurmountable — notably Thomas Jefferson, a pioneer black emancipator, who wrote about it in his "Notes on the State of Virginia" shortly after the American Revolution.[9] And not just whites: after emancipation did indeed come, Booker T. Washington recognized the fact that blacks were *centuries* behind whites culturally and would need time, investment, and focus to close the gap in morals, intelligence, and marketable skills. His work prioritized social uplift through vocational education to create successful businesses and communities. It was very successful.

Here is a remarkable FACT: at the end of the Civil War in 1865 very few blacks could read and write — the foundation for citizenship in a Democratic Republic. Yet by the end of the century *most* blacks had achieved that and more. It had taken centuries for whites to achieve what blacks did in a single generation, dispelling the notion that their "backwardness" was due to *innate inferiority*.

The fact that West Africans were brought into the orbit of American culture and, through much adversity over time, *acculturated into it* explains why American blacks are overwhelmingly more prosperous and free than the ancestors they left behind. West Africa today remains disproportionately violent, economically weak, and lacking in democratic norms and the rule of law, despite over a century of investment and nurture from Western countries seeking to close those gaps.

Black Americans have been able to prosper in ways that were non-existent in their ancestral environment, **making enormous contributions** to their adopted homeland *despite* the toxic racism and discrimination that has hindered them.

Race is a "low-resolution" way of looking at ancestral groups with common cultures and genes. It's not simply the product of "social construction."

"Race is not entirely in the eye of the beholder, but it is a social concept with a biological basis."

Thomas Sowell
Intellectuals and Race

[5] Racism is the belief that race accounts for *fixed*, *essential* differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is *essentially* superior.

[6] What is not racism: the *fact* that evolutionary adaptation accounts for *differences* in human character or ability and that particular cultures differ due to a broad set of evolved cultural and social factors at play that are *not fixed*.

[7] Due to geography, West Africa was isolated from the civilizations that emerged on the Eurasian continent and around the Mediterranean about 6,000 years ago.

[8] West African religions were animistic, dominated by witch doctors and sorcerers. The world "was always in flux and dependent on the weather, unruly demons, ineffable gods who ruled the cosmos, or tribal chiefs who had access to them and whose whims and moods determined the moods and nature of the gods themselves" (Jason Hill).

[9] Jefferson tied future emmancipation to the resettling of blacks among their own people for peace, prosperity, and safety. He advocated they be provided with financial resources to give them a good start. He was *skeptical* they could successfully assimilate into American culture *en masse*. This was primarily due to the intense enmity between them — which would evolve into the toxic racism of the Jim Crow era.

Why is this important?

In order to accurately understand the past it is vital that we *begin* with **FACTS**: what *actually* happened, and *why*. Interpretive frameworks like **CRT** begin with a **theory** — an idea rationalized in the mind — and then bend *select* facts to fit an *assumed* narrative. This leads to misunderstanding and **false knowledge**. More to the point: it gets in the way of fixing seemingly intractable problems, like the continued disparity in life outcomes experienced by blacks vs. whites.

It should not surprise us that blacks remain *statistically* behind whites in the various measures of human success. After all, whites have continued to move forward. What many today call "white privilege" is better framed as "**WEIRD** advantage" — taking a cue from Harvard Evolutionary Biologist Joe Henrich's study of "how people in Western countries became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous". At its core is the **WEIRD** mindset that put "whites" ahead of blacks (and others) in their *cultural development* over many generations.

The **WEIRD** mindset of America, including what some call "bourgeois values" (creating two-parent families; being neighborly, civic-minded, and charitable; not using bad language; respecting authority, and avoiding substance abuse and crime) provided great advantage. Blacks who were acculturated with that mindset enjoyed the same outcomes as their white counterparts. This explains the amazing progress blacks have made, especially between 1945 and 1960, as more opportunities became available with less racial discrimination.

Yet that progress began to stall in the post-civil rights era of the late 1960s. **Why?** The rejection of that **WEIRD** mindset by proponents of "Black Power" and the emergence of a grievance culture in black communities inspired by Marxist ideas. (This culminated in academic disciplines like Critical Race Theory in the late 1980s.) Demands for "equity" and entitlements of the welfare state eroded the cultural mindset that had created a growing black middle class. Black neighborhoods began their spiral into dysfunction, with soaring crime rates, rampant drug use, and increasing out-of-wedlock births — creating family and community instability.

Today's lingering racial disparities are not due to racism or the legacy of slavery. They will not be narrowed through redistributing wealth and power — "equity" — or by undermining merit-based performance standards through affirmative action.

More blacks will prosper as they take their rightful place as proud Americans, embracing the culture and values that liberated their ancestors on these shores.

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Amy Wax

Broadsides Learn to Think Critically About the World

Approximately 2,000 words, these easy-to-read essays can be be read in 15-20 minutes.
They include links to online references, resources, and a basic bibliography (in the digital versions).



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