# Slavery & Its Legacy: FACING OUR UNHEALED PAST

## WITH HOPE FOR TRANSFORMATION, JUSTICE, & RECONCILIATION

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*Some time ago, a group of us, friends brought together by a common desire to confront racism, traveled to New York City to see* The Maafa, A Healing Journey.[1] The Maafa *is a moving and enlightening theater piece about slavery and its vestiges through the ages. When a local friend mentioned that she hoped to stage a similar production with a focus on our area of western Massachusetts, we were prompted to think about how we, a group of whites, could contribute to this healing journey. We decided that we wanted to offer a formal apology to African Americans and all other descendants of those who were enslaved in the United States. We hope that other people of European descent might want to be involved in some way – perhaps by adding their names to our statement, joining us in talking with other people of European descent about these important issues, and/or working toward reparations.*

*Who are we? We are not anthropologists or historians; we are ordinary people who are deeply troubled by the racial inequities in our society and by the justifications our culture creates for these inequities. We address this difficult topic as a step toward resolving some of the often unspoken conflict and division between the descendants of European immigrants and the descendants of those who were enslaved. (Because we live in Massachusetts, we have included information from this state in some of the sections below.)*

*This statement of apology is the result of our work.*

*Sharin Alpert, Shelburne Falls MA*
*Teegrey Iannuzzi, Pelham MA*
*Annie Keough, Greenfield MA*
January 2009

## A Statement of Apology and Commitment

Slavery and the years of racial hatred and violation since, encompassing hundreds of years of terror, suffering, and murder, have had a profound role in every aspect of our country's development. Slavery formed the foundation of our economic, political, and social systems. According to the authors of *The Color of Wealth*, "African slavery produced the initial start-up capital for what would become the basis for capitalism in the United States."[2] The wealth it created continues to enrich those families and institutions that originally profited from slavery.

Slavery's role in our history has a deep effect on us emotionally and psychologically, and this history continues to influence us all, every day, in ways both obvious and unconscious. Slavery has done immeasurable harm and, as whites, we know that the effects of it are our responsibility. Because of this, we are compelled to offer our apology to the descendents of all who were enslaved in the United States.

We hope that our government will one day hold itself accountable for the devastation wrought by slavery and its legacy of persistent, and often deadly, racism.[3] In the meantime, we are writing now, as individuals,

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[1] An annual production of St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn NY; https://www.spcbc.com/themaafa *(updated Oct 2022)*
"Maafa" is a Kiswahili word for a great calamity or disaster, and is used to refer to the African holocaust.

[2] Meizhu Lui, Barbara Robles, Betsy Leondar-Wright, Rose Brewer, Rebecca Adamson, with United for a Fair Economy, *The Color of Wealth, The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide,* NYC, The New Press, 2006, p. 74. See www.faireconomy.org.

[3] In the time since we began writing this document, several states and the U.S. House of Representatives, have issued apologies for slavery. For more information, see:
House of Representatives: http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hr110-194
U.S. Senate: https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/senate-concurrent-resolution/26 *(updated Oct 2022)*

to take a step toward healing the wounded relationship between us, people of European ancestry, and you, whose ancestors were enslaved by European Americans. Recognizing that our histories and destinies are bound together, we do this in the hope that the wounds may start to mend.

**History**

In the early 1600's, Europeans and European Americans began kidnapping West Africans, bringing them to the Americas, and forcing them, under threat of extreme violence, even death, to live as slaves for life in conditions of utmost degradation.

Contrary to popular belief, slavery was not confined to the South. In fact, although the slave trade on this continent was begun by Europeans, colonial settlers living in Marblehead, Massachusetts launched a slave ship in 1636. Massachusetts legalized slavery in 1641, the first colony to do so.

Also unknown to many, whites in North America enslaved Native Americans years before they first brought enslaved Africans to this continent.[4] Beginning in the very early 1500s and continuing into the 1600s, Europeans from Spain, Portugal, and England captured Native Americans by both force and deception. Some were taken to Europe or the West Indies to be sold; others were forced into slavery here in the colonies. According to the Connecticut Valley Historical Society, "This treatment of the captive Indians had a direct connection with the introduction of negro (*sic*) slavery into Massachusetts. The same vessel that carried the Indians to be slaves in the West India islands, brought back, as part of its return cargo, negroes (*sic*) to be slaves in Massachusetts."[5]

Most of us have heard about the horrific conditions during slavery. White owners treated enslaved African Americans as less than human. Slaves had no rights. They were forced to work inhumanly long hours, and were denied their basic human needs, including decent food, medical care, clothing, and education. Husbands, wives, and children were often forced to live separately and even sold to separate owners. While some received better treatment than others, it was common for whites to rape, beat, brand, and kill those who were enslaved.

Sojourner Truth lived in Northampton MA in the 1840s.

From the moment they were enslaved until abolition, Africans and their descendants fought against slavery. Their resistance included**,** but was by no means limited to**:**

- written protests like Frederick Douglass' anti-slavery newspaper
- public speak-outs in the form of sermons and lectures like those of Sojourner Truth
- court proceedings like those of Joseph Cinqué and Elizabeth "Mum Bett" Freeman, who used the legal system to gain their freedom
- civil disobedience like the Underground Railroad, which succeeded because

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Alabama: (in 2007)
Connecticut: http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/TOB/H/2009HJ-00001-R01-HB.htm (in 2009)
Delaware: https://legis.delaware.gov/BillDetail/24327 *(updated 2019)*
Florida: (in 2008)
Maryland: (in 2007)
New Jersey: (in 2008)
North Carolina: http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2007/Bills/Senate/HTML/S1557v0.html (in 2007)
Virginia: http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp524.exe?071+ful+SJ332ER (in 2007)

[4] For more information about the enslavement of Native Americans by Europeans and European Americans, see Margaret Ellen Newell, author, *Brethren By Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery*, (Cornell University Press). *(updated Nov 2020)*

[5] Connecticut Valley Historical Society, *Slavery in the Connecticut Valley*, p. 207.

of the many individuals, of both African and European descent, who risked and sometimes lost their lives to help others escape to freedom; and

- acts of violent rebellion like Nat Turner's uprising.

African Americans were never alone in this fight. Some white supporters were also involved in anti-slavery efforts, both in the United States and in Europe.

Elizabeth Freeman lived in Sheffield MA in the 1700s.

In 1865, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution made slavery illegal.[6] The decade that followed, called Reconstruction (1867-1877), was a time of great gains and losses. There was a movement toward racial equality as African American men gained the right to vote and many who had formerly been enslaved were elected to the U.S. Congress and other prominent positions in the South. There was also a vicious backlash. Fear-filled whites started white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan during this period, which also saw an increase in violent race-based crimes like lynchings. The first Jim Crow laws, in 1881, legalized discrimination against people of African descent.

In the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the mid-twentieth century, African Americans and their allies worked to change unjust conditions in this country. The Civil Rights movement focused on ending racial inequality, such as segregation and the denial of voting rights, and in the 1950s and '60s Congress passed a number of laws which made most acts of racial bias illegal. The Black Power movement worked for cultural, economic, and political self-determination for Blacks, and for a distinct and dignified Black identity. Participants in both movements were persecuted by means both legal and illegal; many were exiled or killed, and many more were jailed temporarily or imprisoned for decades.

We celebrate and honor the courage and strength of all who, over hundreds of years, took a stand for equality and justice.

## Our current situation

Despite consistent resistance, and many moments of progress, serious injustices continue. More than four hundred years of horrific treatment, much of it lawful, has left an immeasurable wound, not just in the psyches of the enslaved and their descendents, but in the nation as a whole. Citizens of color are frequently treated as inferior to whites in our country's institutions, from the courts to the employment offices to the schools. Citizens of color are at constant risk of being harmed by hate crimes, police brutality, and inadequate health care. Young African American men are jailed in disproportionately high numbers when compared to young men of other races who commit the same crimes.[7] This is an intolerable state of affairs. In fact, many believe that conditions in our African American communities are best described as genocide.[8]

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[6] The Thirteenth Amendment reads:
"Section 1: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist in the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.
Section 2: Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."
See https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/13th-amendment?_ga=2.75166869.667759058.1666983898-667358500.1666983898 *(updated Oct 2022)*

[7] For more information, see Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New Press, 2001); Updated: https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1596&context=rwu_LR *(updated Oct 2022)*

[8] Here are a few examples:

- Daniel Bakker, *Black Genocide: The Hypocrisy of America Exposed*, KB Publishing
- Robert Johnson and Paul Leighton, *Black Genocide? Preliminary Thoughts on the Plight of America's Poor Black Men*, Journal of African Men, v1 #2, fall 1995

They warn that this situation is likely to worsen as our society becomes increasingly politically, economically, and environmentally stressed in this era of global warming.

*Because we grew up immersed in our racist society, we have been grossly unaware of the extreme disadvantages suffered by people of color at every turn. We have also been oblivious to the unearned benefits and privileges daily enjoyed by whites like ourselves. Since examining the nature of this grave reality, we realize that we are overprivileged at the expense of others who are underprivileged. We are beginning to understand how much white privilege is an integral part of racial oppression. We can see that the economic, educational, employment, and other gaps between the races are not due to the shortcomings of people of color, as many whites believe. Rather, these gaps are created by whites, intentionally or not, as a way to produce and perpetuate our own privilege.*

## Our Apology and Commitment

The institution of slavery was both a crime against humanity and a profound moral wrong, yet the historic and present-day wounds of slavery have been largely unacknowledged by whites. Even after slavery ended, legal segregation, systematic terrorism, and murder continued. Socially sanctioned discrimination, genocidal behavior, and white privilege persist to this day.

We whites benefit materially from the system of privilege, which we created at the expense of our fellow citizens of color. At the same time that we benefit materially, we are harming ourselves spiritually. If we truly value dignity, respect, and equal rights for all, we must work hard to change the system of white privilege, rather than continuing to participate in it unquestioningly.

Words cannot express our remorse for the long history of unrelenting violence caused by our collective white ancestors. Nor can words describe our sorrow for the pain and suffering that continue today because of our destructive attitudes and behaviors and our failure to stop this ongoing devastation. We have a sacred responsibility to right these wrongs.

> ***For all of this, we apologize to people of African descent in this country, to the communities in Africa from which their ancestors were abducted, and to the descendents of all others who were enslaved in this country.***

We have lost any right to your trust. We realize that it will require many consistent, positive interactions and actions over a long period of time until we are able to earn your trust and forgiveness for our grave violations and wrongdoings.

Because we know that an apology is meaningless if not coupled with appropriate action, we commit ourselves to act. Taking our direction from people of color, we will continue our work toward justice and reconciliation.

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- Vernillia Randall, J.D., *Dying While Black, An In Depth Look at a Crisis in the Health System*, Seven Principles Press

The ways we will do this include the following:

1. We will seek mentors to guide us to a deeper understanding and healing of our racist ways and to help us end the system of white privilege.[9]
2. We will educate others about how the systems of white privilege, racism, and internalized superiority create the extreme power imbalance that exists between the races.
3. We will acknowledge and celebrate both the inherent differences that exist among people and the commonalities that result from our shared humanity.
4. We will promote a fair telling of all people's histories and contributions.[10]
5. We will embrace membership in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-faith global community that strives for just and respectful treatment of all. In this way, we will free ourselves from the "white" identity, which is based on domination and privilege,[11] and begin to assume a new identity as global citizens.
6. We will support reparations for descendants of the enslaved, and we will support the leadership of the African Americans who are working to define what forms these long-overdue reparations will take.[12]

Why reparations? African Americans have made incalculable contributions to this country and have also suffered immeasurable losses. As whites, we assert fervently that we are accountable for those damages.[13] We also assert that the ways in which reparations take place must be determined by descendants of those who were enslaved. [14]

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[9] Dr. Enoch H. Page, University of Massachusetts, Amherst MA.

[10] Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (NYC: Plume, 2000).

[11] Thank you Rita Hardiman for these ideas from *Reflections on White Identity Development Theory*, Chapter 5 of *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development*, Charmaine L. Wijeysinghe and Bailey W. Jackson III, editors (NYC, New York University, 2001)

[12] Some leaders in the reparations movement: the late Queen Mother Audley Moore; Randall Robinson;
- In 2019, The Honorable Sheila Jackson Lee, U.S. Congresswoman reintroduced H.R. 40, now called the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act (see https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/40?s=1&r=6 *(updated March 2023)*
- The Honorable Senator Cory A. Booker introduced the Senate companion bill to HR 40, S.40 (see https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/40 *(updated March 2023)*

[13] The documentary *Traces of the Trade* (www.tracesofthetrade.org) follows white descendants of slave traders as they explore their family history of privilege and discuss the ways they will support reparations for slavery.

[14] Here are more excellent sources of information about reparations:
- National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA):https://www.officialncobraonline.org/ *(updated Oct 2022)*
- Grassroots Reparations Campaign, Truth Telling Project's Premier program: https://thetruthtellingproject.org/ *(updated Oct 2022)*
- NAARC https://reparationscomm.org/ *(updated Oct 2022)*
- Movement for Black Lives, Reparations Tool Kit: https://m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Reparations-Now-Toolkit-FINAL.pdf *(updated Oct 2022)*

We commit ourselves to working individually, collectively, and politically toward payment of the debt owed by whites to descendents of the enslaved in the United States. We believe that, while the amount of time and resources this undertaking will require are enormous, it can be done. Achieving this just goal would benefit all members of our nation, in ways that, now, we can only begin to imagine.

*A note from the writers:*
*This statement was conceived and completed between 2004 and 2008.*

*Writing this apology has been both meaningful and difficult for us. We struggled with many parts of this statement because the topic is so complex.*

*Here are some examples:*

- *This statement does not adequately address Native American history or the need for reparations to descendents of enslaved Native Americans.*
- *Many descendants of slaves come from mixed heritages, and we have not addressed this subject at all.*
- *Some forms of slavery still exist today. According to the American Anti-Slavery Group,[15] more than 10,000 individuals are trafficked into the United States every year and kept captive as, for example, sex slaves, domestic servants, and agricultural and sweatshop workers. While some are European, most are people of color from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.*

Rather than avoid this whole conversation for fear of being incomplete or wrong in our presentation, we have taken the risk to proceed anyway.

THANK YOU to Dr. Enoch Page for your mentoring, inspiration, and immense patience. We are deeply appreciative of the time and energy you took to help us with this effort.

Dr. Page is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. His primary area of specialization is the scholarship of African enslavement, colonization, and global struggles for anti-racist liberation. He has studied and taught about the organization of racism in the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States and currently teaches courses like *The Anthropology of Whiteness*, *Activist Antiracism Through Film*, and *The Anthropology of Genocide*. He is currently working on a book entitled *Bamboozled by Whiteness No More*.

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This apology effort was inspired in part by the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage (1998-1999), which was initiated by Sister Clare Carter and Ingrid Askew. Thank you.

Thank you also to Howard Clark for his valuable assistance with research on the enslavement of Native Americans; to Brother North Star for his steadfast guidance, encouragement, and support; to Dwayne Brewington and La Wanza Lett-Brewington for editorial contributions; and to our fellow members of European Dissent/Uprooting Racism in Our Community for beginning the conversation which led to this statement.

[15] www.iabolish.org; For more information, http://www.polarisproject.org

Note: All images in this statement are in the public domain unless otherwise noted. The individuals pictured lived in western Massachusetts, U.S.A., for at least part of their lives.
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