

# How Did We Get Here?

163 years of *The Atlantic's* writing on race and racism in America

GILLIAN B. WHITE

JUNE 16, 2020

America recently passed the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first captive Africans brought to what would become the United States. September 2019 was chosen as an imperfect but significant date to mark the start of American slavery and the systems of inequality perpetuated by the nation's original sin.

For 163 years, *The Atlantic* has discussed, argued, and analyzed America, its lofty ideals and the reality that often falls short of them. This magazine was founded, in part, to argue in favor of abolition, and has been a home for black voices such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington—each calling upon the country to realize its promise of freedom and equity for all its citizens.

Amid a pandemic that is disproportionately killing brown and black people and an economic recession disproportionately devastating the finances of people of color, a major moment of racial reckoning has arisen after yet another series of police murders of black Americans—the latest in a generations-old trend of disproportionate killing and violence against black communities by those sworn to serve and protect.

There have been protests, looting, and more police violence. Major companies and individuals are being called to account for discrimination, leaders in the public and private sectors are losing their jobs for failing communities of color, and many Americans are seeking new ways to support the movement toward racial equity. Confronting the continued realities of racism and its steep cost is painful and complex, and forces a question: How did it come to this?

Understanding the present moment requires grappling with a history stained by racial inequity, violence, and the constant fight for forward progress. In a century and a half of writing stories about race in America, *The Atlantic* has published works that have improved the broad understanding of injustice in America, and also works that furthered ideas and theories that ultimately were proved wrong or harmful. To comprehend the current state of the country, we must consider the aftereffects of both categories. We must also take into

account the fact that these stories, in aggregate, are overwhelmingly written by men.

The following reader encompasses writing on race and racism that spans *The Atlantic's* lifetime—from our founding, in 1857, to the present day. In it you'll find historical works from the archive, as well as more recent stories that provide critical analysis to contextualize the importance of a given event, policy, or era.

We hope that our readers can use this compendium for their own education—to digest more fully the difficult but rich history of this country—and to spur deeper conversations. Understanding race in America is an essential starting point for understanding America itself, and what it might become. As Alice Walker said in a 2012 interview published in *The Atlantic's* pages, “America is not nearly done. We're only in the beginning. Who knows who we will be?”

### **Calls for Abolition, Civil War, Emancipation**

- [Where Will It End?](#) (Edmund Quincy, 1857)
- [The Election in November](#) (James Russell Lowell, 1860)
- [The Pickens-and-Stealin's Rebellion](#) (James Russell Lowell, 1861)
- [The Battle Hymn of the Republic](#) (Julia Ward Howe, 1862)
- [The Freedman's Story](#) (William Parker, 1866)
- [Reconstruction](#) (Frederick Douglass, 1866)
- [An Appeal to Congress for Impartial Suffrage](#) (Frederick Douglass, 1867)

#### *Modern analysis:*

- [Frederick Douglass, Refugee](#) (David W. Blight, 2017)
- [Why There Was a Civil War](#) (Yoni Appelbaum, 2017)
- [The Myth of the Kindly General Lee](#) (Adam Serwer, 2017)
- [The Quintessential Americanness of Juneteenth](#) (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2017)
- [Balancing the Ledger on Juneteenth](#) (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2019)

- What Trump's Generation Learned About the Civil War (Matt Ford, 2017)
- The Confounding Truth About Frederick Douglass (Randall Kennedy, 2018)
- The Hopefulness and Hopelessness of 1619 (Ibram X. Kendi, 2019)
- Frederick Douglass's Vision for a Reborn America (David W. Blight, 2019)
- We're Still Living and Dying in the Slaveholders' Republic (Ibram X. Kendi, 2020)
- The Conspiracy Theories That Fueled the Civil War (Annika Neklason, 2020)

### **Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Segregation**

- Lincoln's Plans of Reconstruction (Allan B. Magruder, 1876)
- The Result in South Carolina (Anonymous, 1878)
- The Freedmen's Bureau (W. E. B. Du Bois, 1890)
- The Awakening of the Negro (Booker T. Washington, 1896)
- Strivings of the Negro People (W. E. B. Du Bois, 1897)
- Of the Training of Black Men (W. E. B. Du Bois, 1902)
- The Negro in the Regular Army (Oswald Garrison Villard, 1903)
- The Heart of the Race Problem (Quincy Ewing, 1909)

#### *Modern analysis:*

- Slavery Did Not Die Honestly (David W. Blight, 2015)
- What If Reconstruction Hadn't Failed? (Annette Gordon-Reed, 2015)
- America's Health Segregation Problem (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2016)
- The Supreme Court Is Headed Back to the 19th Century (Adam Serwer, 2018)
- A Lynch Mob of One (Ibram X. Kendi, 2019)
- Civility Is Overrated (Adam Serwer, 2019)

---

## Civil Rights

- Martin Luther King Jr.'s Protest Against a Racist Court System (Martin Luther King Jr., 1958)
- Must We Hate? (Archibald Macleish, 1963)
- Letter From Birmingham Jail (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963)
- A Freedom Budget for All Americans (Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, 1967)
- Death at an Early Age (Jonathan Kozol, 1967)
  - Part II: Where Ghetto Schools Fail (Jonathan Kozol, 1967)
- Dynamite (Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, 1967)
- The Crisis In American Cities (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967)

### *Modern analysis:*

- Segregation Now ... (Nikole Hannah-Jones, 2014)
- School Districts Still Face Fights—and Confusion—on Integration (Nikole Hannah-Jones, 2014)
- Freedom Summer, 1964: Did It Really Change Mississippi? (Nikole Hannah-Jones, 2014)
- King Wanted More Than Just Desegregation (Eve L. Ewing, 2018)
- The Civil-Rights Movement's Generation Gap (Bree Newsome, 2018)
- Coretta Scott King and the Civil-Rights Movement's Hidden Women (Jeanne Theoharis, 2018)
- King's Message of Nonviolence Has Been Distorted (Dara T. Mathis, 2018)

- Is King All That We Are Allowed to Become? (Mychal Denzel Smith, 2018)

## **Policing, Incarceration, Disinvestment**

- Broken Windows (George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, 1982)

*Modern analysis:*

- The Criminalization of Gentrifying Neighborhoods (Abdallah Fayyad, 2017)
- How the War on Drugs Kept Black Men Out of College (Tamara Gilkes Borr, 2019)
- Race and the Schooling of Black Americans (Claude M. Steele, 1992)
- The Prison Industrial Complex (Eric Schlosser, 1998)
- When They Get Out (Sasha Abramsky, 1999)

## **Economic Inequality, Police Violence, COVID-19**

- The Case for Reparations (Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2014)
- A Matter of Black Lives (Jeffrey Goldberg, 2015)
- The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration (Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015)
- The Paranoid Style of American Policing (Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015)
- The Failure of Race-Blind Economic Policy (Adia Harvey Wingfield, 2017)
- The Poisoned Generation (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2017)
- Stanching the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Mimi Kirk, 2017)
- The Nationalist's Delusion (Adam Serwer, 2017)
- America's Moral Malady (William J. Barber II, 2018)
- The Unfulfilled Promise of Fair Housing (Abdallah Fayyad, 2018)

- How *Shelby County v. Holder* Broke America (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2018)
- Voter Suppression Is Warping Democracy (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2018)
- Being Black in America Can Be Hazardous to Your Health (Olga Khazan, 2018)
- What I Learned by Studying Militarized Policing (Jonathan Mummolo, 2018)
- A House Still Divided (Ibram X. Kendi, 2018)
- Who Will Hold the Police Accountable? (Ted Alcorn, 2019)
- The Bad-Apple Myth of Policing (Osagie K. Obasogie, 2019)
- The Great Land Robbery (Vann R. Newkirk II, 2019)
- The Electoral College's Racist Origins (Wilfred Codrington III, 2019)
- Stop Blaming Black People for Dying of the Coronavirus (Ibram X. Kendi, 2020)
- The Coronavirus Was an Emergency Until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying (Adam Serwer, 2020)
- Trump Gave Police Permission to Be Brutal (Adam Serwer, 2020)
- The Shooting of Jacob Blake Is a Wake-Up Call (David A. Graham, 2020)