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Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Ida B. Wells: On Democracy and Abolition

On January 6th, thousands of rioters stormed the Capitol building in pursuit of congresspeople and senators certifying the presidential election for Joe Biden. The insurrectionists, mobilized by misleading, if not entirely untrue, political rhetoric, thought that they were protecting the voice of the people. Without respect for law and order, without respect for the will of the people, without respect for the processes of democracy, they served as evidence for what happens when we take the seemingly abstract concept of the American Experiment for granted. That Wednesday, we all sat witness as the test tubes of democracy bubbled over with distrust and anger, and division and loss.

For us to mend these wounds, we must do more than simply acknowledge what went wrong. We must do more than recognize that the leader of the free world launched an argumentative, and eventually physical, attack on our democracy. We must use optimism as an antidote to cynicism; we must use facts as an antidote to misinformation. Although the task is daunting, it has been done before — not just to uphold democratic or political values, but to support human rights and common civility. Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights movement through his compelling oratory; Ida B. Wells denounced lynchings in her extensive journalism; Frederick Douglass advocated for abolition in his tactful essays; and Olaudah Equiano rejected the slave trade with his vivid narrative. All four of these Black figures

understood that the fight for abolition, like democracy, was not just an acknowledgement of how immoral the system of slavery was, but rather an act to change it.

In the latter half of the 18th century, Olaudah Equiano rose to fame as a former slave, turned abolitionist with his autobiography “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano;” the adjective “interesting” does not do justice to Equiano’s transcendent account of his life in Africa and his experience during the Middle Passage. Throughout the book, he understood that his writing was a liaison for the millions of slaves who could not read, let alone write. He fought for abolition not for himself but for others.

Equiano achieved this by aiming his literary force at one of the pillars of slavery: the belief that Africans were uncivilized. This rumor, spurred by the explorers of Europe, festered until many slave owners and slave traders felt morally secure with their glaringly immoral profession. Equiano set out to debunk this lie, and accordingly, make slavery less tolerable, by writing in exhaustive detail of his life in Africa. “[Our clothes are] usually dyed blue, which is our favourite colour. It is extracted from a berry, and is brighter and richer than any I have seen in Europe. Besides this, our women of distinction wear golden ornaments; which they dispose of with some profusion on their arms and legs.” Equiano continued to profess of African perfumes, an “uncommonly rich and fruitful” land, spices of all kinds, and fruit that he never later saw in Europe, all of which created a purview of African culture as equally as sophisticated, if not sometimes more advanced, than European culture.

Frederick Douglass wrote his slave narrative, like Equiano, with the understanding that he too was arguing for abolition on behalf of the entire slave population. However, the point at which Douglass diverges from Equiano is in how they voice this message. Unlike Equiano, Douglass relies on his own ability to persuade slaveholders and people in power that abolition

would be of a religious and moral benefit to them. In describing Mr. Covey, one of his many masters, Douglass describes a man who staggers through hymns and, in short, leads a life wholly against Christian values. “[Mr. Covey] sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God; and this, too, at a time when he may be said to have been guilty of compelling his woman slave to commit the sin of adultery.” On the following page, he contrasts the actions of his master with his own: Praying to God, Douglass dreamt of being under God’s “protecting wing” and questioned the religious grounds of slavery by likening it to the “hottest hell.” In exposing the conflict of interest between the Christian faith and the system of slavery, Douglass attacked its second supporting pillar: the social standard that made owning slaves commonplace.

Ida B. Wells, like Douglass, was born in to slavery, but only began to publish work in the Reconstruction Era. Most notably her article “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases” was the culmination of years of research on the victims of lynching, including her close friend. Similar to how Equiano and Douglass wrote of slavery, Wells wrote of lynching. At the turn of the 19th century, the casual acceptance of lynching enabled the murders to continue. The police, the prosecutors, and the people of the jury were all surrounded by a society where little, if any, legal punishment was enforced, let alone social burden carried. The pamphlet was the first major effort to highlight the knee-buckling injustice of lynching and pierce the consciousness of conspiring bystanders.

The degenerative social acceptance of slavery or lynching, of racism or anti-semitism, of decadence or inequality was evident in all historical tragedies from the likes of the the slave trade in the 19th century, to the Third Reich in the 20th, and the rise of Trumpian politics in the 21st. But, a communal rejection of groupthink and ignorance has often been a cornerstone of great

historical triumphs. In the case of Black lives and culture in America, the powerful slave narratives by Douglass and Equiano toppled the rhetorical pillars which supported slavery, and anti-lynching pamphlets by Ida B. Wells began a movement against lynch law. They all appreciated that their pursuit was not passive, but active. Now, like them, we must recognize that the American Experiment, the most revolutionary of its kind, was born, and will be kept, not out of contentment but out of initiative. After all, America is a republic, only if we can keep it.