Starting Over

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When I was a child, like most children born during the Space Age, I liked to imagine that I could time travel. But, maybe unlike most children, I had an agenda. I wanted to be a prophet, of a sort. I conjured up elaborate scenarios in which I gave some awed pre-Industrial person a guided tour of the wonders of the modern world. I would show off our televisions as proudly as if I had invented them, and patiently convince them that those weren't real people stuck inside the box. Or they would ride in the car with me, incredulous as we picked up speeds faster than their chariots and carriages could ever attain.

When I got a little older, I only had one fantasy. To free slaves, or to go back and tell them they would be free.

My mother and father, born in the segregated North and South respectively, had no intention of raising a black child naive about the history of her people. By the time I reached the age of six or seven, I knew enough about slavery for the specter of it to haunt my wandering mind. I knew that there were women who screamed as their babies were taken from them. I knew about the desperate running, the hunting dogs foaming at the mouth, and the bloody lash. Most of all, I knew that if I had been born in the past, this would have been my fate.

Time travel was the only form of rebellion I had, and I took it seriously. I spirited slaves away in batches, telling them not to be afraid. I brought them into my house, to show that we could own things for ourselves. I brought them books, to show that we were no longer prohibited from reading. I saw them

cry tears of joy at these revelations, and my little heart swelled with something I couldn't identify at the time—a feeling of being avenged.

In my limited knowledge, I could only imagine freeing the slaves, or at least giving them hope. I could only conceive of correcting wrongs that had already taken place. Maybe if I had been older and known that history is a series of paths taken and deeds done, I would have tried to keep them from being slaves in the first place. I might have tried to start all over. But even now there are questions. How far back would I have had to go? To Plymouth? To Cuba? The Arab slave trade? The very invention of sailing ships? More importantly, what would be lost? Perhaps my little tours of the shiny modern world would come to an end—indeed, would never have happened.

That's the danger of time travel, hammered home in countless science fiction stories. Starting over always has a cost.

In America, most people don't seem to believe this is true. Many think we can simply forget—*move on,* as they like to put it. They would prefer, also, that this happen as quickly as possible and are quick to remind those of us "stuck in the past" that we are only a hindrance to inevitable progress.

By 2060, Census Bureau estimates say, 56 percent of the total U.S. population will be nonwhite. The image of happy, loving interracial families conquering racism is a potent one to a people who praise rugged individualism over state intervention and dream of peaceful solutions to problems rooted in hideous violence. But this ideal wasn't crystalized into an image until, October 2013, in its 125th anniversary issue, *National Geographic* ran the feature "The Changing Face of America," visualizing just such a future. Out of the 25 mixed-race Americans captured in the accompanying photo essay, all with unexpected yet captivating combinations of features, one young woman takes center stage.

She's beautiful. More than beautiful: she is radiance personified. Her soft, rich blond curls are pulled away from her face. Her skin is a smooth honey brown. But it is her eyes that are the most striking. In real life I'm sure they must be hazel, but in the photograph, as she stares straight at the camera, they are bright gold.

Such beauty, we are assured, will be commonplace in the future. Such beauty, neither distinctly white nor black, will solve our problems, for how

could anyone not love a face such as this? And such beauty fills me with a gut-wrenching sadness, because I take these proclamations to mean that "the Negro problem," which is really the problem of all racially homogeneous people of color in the United States, will be solved if, in the future, we no longer look like ourselves.

It has occurred to me that they might be right. Maybe it is the blackness, the stark difference, that is the problem—it is, after all, why we are hated. It is why I have been called pretty "for a dark-skinned girl" since my youth, and why, pushed to the lower rungs of all my social worlds as a child, I would watch favor and praise go to the "bright" black kids whose skins had only the lightest tint of brown to mar them, and secretly wish I could either get rid of them or become one of them.

I hug my unmistakably black body tightly when I think of these things, willing myself not to cry. Would it take us being lost to history? Is this the cost of starting over? Is it worth it?

I get something of an answer when I watch an interview with the Princeton historian Nell Painter, an unmistakably black woman like myself, who spent over a decade researching her book *The History of White People.* She explains how whiteness, and its attendant privileges, has slowly come to encompass the multitude of European ethnic groups it does today. But when she is asked whether the growth of America's mixed-race population will change racial definitions altogether, she speaks like a doctor delivering news of a treatable but ultimately incurable disease. "The salience, the importance of whiteness, is kind of tamping down a bit," she starts off, hedging with the positive first. "On the other hand, the idea of blackness, that is poor dark-skinned people, I think we will have that with us always."

As I grew from a scrappy girl-child into an anxious adolescent, my relationship with slavery became less visceral. Because I no longer listened to my mother read from storybooks with slave narratives, only reminded of it when it came up (rarely) in the curricula at the predominantly white schools I began to attend, I distanced myself from it. The only thing it earned me was awkward stares from my white classmates, which made me ashamed, for reasons I only dimly understood.

I did, however, keep thinking about injustice. For a paper about landmark

Supreme Court cases in my eighth grade U.S. history class, I gravitated immediately towards the case of Fred Korematsu—it stoked the rebellious spark I'd had within me ever since those early days and confirmed the inkling I had that America's injustices were many, and perhaps not confined to the distant past.

Korematsu v. United States is the story at the heart of the internment of over 100,000 Japanese American citizens during World War II. Fred Korematsu went into hiding, had surgery on his eyelids, and changed his name, all in the hopes of trying to escape the labor camps, but was eventually arrested. In addition to receiving five years' probation for his trouble, he and his family were placed in the Central Utah War Relocation Center—a very innocuous-sounding name for the U.S. version of a concentration camp. With the help of the ACLU, Korematsu took his case all the way to the Supreme Court, which issued the ruling that the internment orders, though constitutionally suspect, were justified.

It took over 30 years for the U.S. government to issue an apology for its devastating actions, which came from President Gerald Ford in 1976 after intense pressure from the Japanese American–led Redress Movement and the Japanese American Citizens League. The Supreme Court's ruling was never overturned and its precedent still stands, although Korematsu's conviction was nullified in 1983. But in 1988, the United States did something rather out of character: it awarded reparations—$20,000 ($5,000 short of what the Redress Movement and JACL had demanded) for each surviving victim of the internments, leading to a total of $1.2 billion. The amount is galling considering that the value of the assets seized by the government from those interned was estimated to have been approximately $400 million during late 1940s congressional hearings—a sum worth $2.5 *trillion* in 1988.

I stopped uttering the Pledge of Allegiance soon after I finished that report.

Guilt can never be separated from debt, because once one admits guilt, there arises the problem of what to do to rectify the transgression. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morality,* Friedrich Nietzsche posits through linguistic analysis that the idea of guilt descends from the very material concept of debts. To him, this means that the idea of something being owed is rooted in commerce, which makes it suspect, but I have my doubts about this. If Joseph Campbell, the eminent mid-century scholar of world myth, is to be believed in his accounts of the rituals and belief systems of various societies in his book

The Power of Myth, humanity can almost be defined by our feelings of guilt and debt to the very earth that sustains us. Something deep within us senses that we take more than we are ever able to give, that this is wrong, and that we must do things—make sacrifices, celebrate rituals, punish ourselves, be baptized—to get as close as possible to equilibrium. When we are cleansed of our sin and our debt, the horrible guilt vanishes, and this is what it means to be reborn.

Sometimes, though, the scale of wrongdoing is so significant that we would be destroyed by accepting responsibility, and the extent of the ensuing debt so large that we cannot even comprehend paying it off. Case in point: The United States has never made an official apology for its legacy of enslavement. Though the House of Representatives and the Senate have each passed resolutions apologizing for slavery, in 2008 and 2009 respectively, the bills could not be reconciled because the two branches disagreed on whether the final apology could be used as future support for reparations. In a darkly humorous way, I can understand their reticence. The cost would be unfathomable.

High school was kind to me. The diverse, specialized arts school I attended was the first setting I'd encountered where being proud to be a person of color was *in*—where being the whip-smart black girl who cut her hair short, wore tall head wraps, brought up important figures of the Harlem Renaissance in English class, and the erasure of Native peoples in American History, and circulated a petition to bring cultural studies classes to our school made me popular. Going into college, then, I was proud and confident—but comfortable. Comfortable enough to feel like the temporary sanctum of my teenage years meant real progress.

Then Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, during the same sweltering August that I moved onto the campus of American University in Washington, DC, and that old childhood need for vengeance came gasping back to life, hot and hungry.

As protests spread from the streets to the steps of university buildings, writing for *The Eagle,* AU's newspaper of record, seemed like the best way to channel the sense of urgency I had. I swung by an open pitch-and-assignment meeting in November and volunteered to cover one of the few unstaffed events: the speaking appearance of a journalist named Ta-Nehisi Coates, who was

making waves after the publication of his novella-length essay "The Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic* earlier that summer.

I hadn't thought about reparations for years when I read the mammoth essay in preparation for the talk, but I was soon brought up to speed. In equal parts, horror and awe settled over me as I scrolled through the chronicle of unending "plunder," as Coates puts it. Redlining. Denial of mortgages. The seizure and theft of land. Poll taxes. That feeling only grew when I heard him summarize his arguments in the auditorium where the talk was held, furiously scribbling notes and trying to ensure my recorder was set correctly, yet still hanging on his every word. Could it be true? That at the onset of the Civil War, slaves were "worth more than all other American assets combined"? That the wealth and production capabilities accrued from slave labor had essentially underwritten America's rise to prosperity? And all that that meant . . . it was chilling enough to stop the blood.

Guilt and debt—this time, all-consuming. The United States—the West as a whole—is in the process of running away from the haunting enormity of the twin horrors that shaped the New World: the genocide of Native Americans and the capture and enslavement of Africans. White people focus on the pain of guilt and the fear that their very identity will be put in crisis rather than remembering that paying off one's debts has long been the gateway to renewal and liberation, rather than asking themselves the question that Coates posed that night: *Just how big-hearted can a democracy be?*

And yet. I have wondered many times in the years since I read Coates's now-famous essay whether even money or long-promised land is sufficient to clear the slate. Money can cover lost wages and economic opportunities, but it can never pay for stolen life, whether stolen through murder or the theft of freedom. Nor can sacrifice, or any other scheme we have come up with to absolve ourselves. The truth is, recompense and sacrifice are only human approximations for what it means to bring about justice. We know that true justice, the undoing of time and the taking away of the first wrong, is beyond our power to give.

Where are we left when all the money in the world would not balance the accounts and repair the damages that centuries of atrocities have left us with?

I once read a book that asks this very question, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study.* In it, one of the authors, Fred Moten, writes, "I also know that what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It

can't be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new."

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"Decolonizing the Americas means all land is repatriated and all settlers become landless. It is incommensurable with the redistribution of Native land/life as common-wealth."

This is only one of the bold declarations made in the 2012 paper "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, but it is perhaps the most provocative, the most blatantly un-American—which is its intent. It describes how the appropriation of "decolonization" as a nonmaterial concept has created a false innocence for American settlers, both whites and people of color alike. It pulls no punches. It holds nothing sacred. And reading it changed my life.

At first, though, it felt like a betrayal. I was midway through college when it found its way to me, and by that time I was firmly ensconced in the social justice movement that had been awakened by Trayvon Martin and Ferguson and Black Lives Matter—as well as the bevy of social justice–oriented media that had proliferated in the same period. I believed in solidarity between all groups of oppressed people, and I used online magazines like *Everyday Feminism, Xicanisma,* and *Black Girl Dangerous* to educate myself on the many perspectives I knew myself to be ignorant of. In my reading, a term kept appearing that I had never encountered in my classes in an activist context: *decolonization.* I researched decolonization and Native justice and was surprised to find many references to Tuck and Yang's intriguingly titled paper. Putting it on my reading list gave me a quiver of excitement at the idea of a new theoretical framework to put into my intersectional social justice toolbox—another thing to stand together on.

By the time I finished the essay, which seemed to have so little sympathy for the dispossession of black people ("Seeking stolen resources is entangled with settler colonialism and thus almost impossible to reclaim without re-occupying Native land"), I was furious. My people had been uprooted from their native land and were unwelcome here, but these Native authors who, I felt, should have sympathized more than anyone else, were questioning even this fragile sense of home. How could they dare even suggest it? Where was the solidarity? I hadn't yet realized the other flaw of justice: that it could

mean entirely opposing things to different groups with different histories. That sometimes it robbed Peter to pay Paul.

The eradication of settler colonialism (which is the form of colonialism that exists in the United States, as well as in Canada, Australia, and Israel, to name just a few) is so radical a project that it can't be talked about in the terms we are used to using—democracy, solidarity, free exchange, individual liberty. It seems the ultimate in violence and hostility, but that's most likely because its expression has been perhaps the most violently repressed avenue of resistance in human history. Ultimately, though, it is merely a question of consent. It is a wish to have control over what happens and how it happens. Who deserves welcome, and who has given up their right to it.

When I was calmer, more able to read the paper with an open mind, I found a section that illuminated this point to me. In it, the authors are analyzing the resolution of *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper:

> In the unwritten decolonial version of Cooper's story, Hawkeye would lose his land back to the Mohawk—the real people upon whose land Cooperstown was built. . . . Hawkeye would shoot his last arrow, or his last long-rifle shot, return his eagle feather, and would be renamed Natty Bumpo, settler on Native land. . . . Unresolved are the questions: Would a conversation follow after that between Native and the last settler? Would the settler leave or just vanish? Would he ask to stay, and if he did, who would say yes?

I came to understand that my anger was unnecessary, and my conception of solidarity flawed when I realized that I, too, was claiming the land and its fruits without asking. That's what we humans do. We settle in a new land and then conceive of ourselves as the rightful inhabitants of that land. If it happens that we are interested in preserving our moral integrity, we beg forgiveness of the original people, but still do not ask permission, because that involves the possibility of not getting our way. How easily we forget that there is—there always has been—the possibility of coming to terms.

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Nine months into Trump's presidency, I am 21 years old and have made the transition from college student to member of the workforce, and the roiling questions about race and the legacy of my country have faded into a distant

hum in the back of my mind, overpowered by the blunt force and reality of white nationalists and hate crimes. There are so many new lows and shocks to the system every week that I have become numb, and my former intense inquiry into the root of these problems seems almost quaint. Like a mid-century black intellectual quitting Jim Crow America for the freer air of Europe, I escape the grim reality by wrapping myself in my ideals of beauty and romance. Having returned to my hometown of Houston, Texas, I intern for an arts education nonprofit. I watch classic Hollywood films in my downtime. I write about nature and the meaning of home in flower-patterned journals. It is enough to sustain me, even though it demands that I lock away several aspects of my identity.

Eventually I manage to marry the beauty and the romance on a date at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts with an architecture student from Turkey. He is everything I had hoped—gentlemanly, sophisticated, creative—and for several hours we're lost in conversation about our favorite architects, our opinions on the museum's current exhibition, and the blossoming literary scene in Houston. But it has been little more than a month since the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that ended in murder, I am not an expatriate, he is an immigrant from a Muslim country, and these are all facts that are impossible for two brown people in conversation to ignore for very long.

The bloodshed in Charlottesville was waged over the removal of a monument to Confederate Army general Robert E. Lee. But that was not the beginning; it was many incidents coming to a head, spurred by a night on which a 19-year-old boy named Dylan Roof came into Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and murdered nine black churchgoers. He had wrapped himself in the glory of the Old South and the Confederate flag, and suddenly people began to realize that the flags and the statues lionizing these men, that cause, needed to come down. It was only a matter of time before the whiplash of resistance to reshaping the way we remember our history turned into a battle cry.

As the evening progresses and we face each other over empty plates and cocktail glasses, I begin talking about America's original sins being revisited over and over again, and he rejoins with telling me about Turkey's refusal to acknowledge its genocide of the Armenian people, and how this denial has strained relations between the two peoples for decades. We agree that it is this burial of the truth, this *I-do-not-recall,* that does the most harm, a disease

of national memory that spreads its poison beneath every veneer of progress. He tells me something a close friend of his who is Armenian once told him: before there can be a real attempt at starting over of any kind, there needs to be a reckoning. To reckon literally means to tally, to account for. Morally speaking, it means unburying all the bodies, opening all the doors that have for centuries been nailed shut, giving the walls a chance to say their piece. It means standing as our every deed is read to us, restoring truth to memory, forcing us to acknowledge the things that our wish to be righteous in our own eyes—or our shame—has warped or hidden or erased completely.

Soon after the date, I begin writing in search of an answer to the question I've been asking for my entire life. I comb through books and memories to help me form an opinion, but I cannot. I can only put forth possibilities. It becomes an essay in the sense closest to the form's historical and etymological roots: a series of attempts.

As I finish this series of attempts in the summer of 2018, nearly a year after I began it, the century-old remains of black convict laborers in the area of what used to be the Imperial Sugar Plantation have been excavated over two months, a surprise discovery when a local school district broke ground on the site of what was to be a new high school campus. I suspect—no, I *know* that this is just a fraction of the sorrows that are buried beneath layers of American soil. But for those men, worked into an early and undignified grave, perhaps this is the beginning of, if not justice, then honor, and a new life even in death.

The unearthing and its far-reaching implications remind me of a passage in the essay "My Grandmother's Choice," from Amy Tan's memoir *The Opposite of Fate.* In the essay, Tan speaks about reckoning with the heartbreaking personal history in her family, which is part of a larger history of female oppression in twentieth-century China. She imagines journeying into the past with her grandmother, who took her own life due to the desperate conditions of her ostensibly privileged yet tightly shackled life. "Together we come upon a tomb of memories," Tan writes. "We open it and release what has been buried for too long—the terrible despair, the destructive rage. We hurt, we grieve, we cry. And then we see what remains: the hopes, broken to bits, but still there."

The hope. After the reckoning in which every terrible secret is brought into the light, a fresh start, a new foundation, all encompassed in long-buried, forgotten hopes, can be imagined.

So let us beat swords into shovels—and start digging.