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## Appendix 1

### Excerpts for discussion from Nikole Hannah-Jones' *The Idea of America*

#### ORIGIN STORIES

My dad was born into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Miss., where black people bent over cotton from can't-see-in-the-morning to can't-see-at-night, just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before. The Mississippi of my dad's youth was an apartheid state that subjugated its near-majority black population through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more black people than those in any other state in the country, and the white people in my dad's home county lynched more black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, often for such "crimes" as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union. My dad's mother, like all the black people in Greenwood, could not vote, use the public library or find work other than toiling in the cotton fields or toiling in white people's houses. So in the 1940s, she packed up her few belongings and her three small children and joined the flood of black Southerners fleeing North. She got off the Illinois Central Railroad in Waterloo, Iowa, only to have her hopes of the mythical Promised Land shattered when she learned that Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon line.

- 1) What is your NYC "origin story"? Are you here because your parents immigrated? What do you know about the life they left behind, and their reasons for wanting to come to the U.S.?
- 2) Hannah-Jones writes of her grandmother's shattered hopes after arriving in Iowa, which she envisioned would be a place less shackled by racist policy. What were the expectations your parents/ you had when you arrived in New York? In what ways did reality differ from those expectations?

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## A LAND OF THE FREE

During this nation's brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process.....Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of that most democratic of American institutions: the public school..... Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, black and white, were now required to attend schools like their Northern counterparts.

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In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, black Americans, exerting their new political power, pushed white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act.... It codified black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property, make and enforce contracts and seek redress from courts. In 1868, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States. Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here to a European, Asian, African, Latin American or Middle Eastern immigrant gains automatic citizenship. The 14th Amendment also, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed equal protection under the law. Ever since, nearly all other marginalized groups have used the 14th Amendment in their fights for equality... Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship — the right to vote — to all men regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

- 1) How are the civil rights described in the excerpt above, and in the rest of the article, evident in your own experiences? How do we exercise them regularly? Consider, for example: guarantees of citizenship, the right to education, protections against employment discrimination, the right to buy property, and the right to vote.
- 2) If you had to give up one of the rights guaranteed above, which one would it be? Why?

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## **HOW WE BECAME OURSELVES**

When I was a child — I must have been in fifth or sixth grade — a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation’s flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no “African” flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher’s desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people’s ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

- 1) Much of our sense of cultural belonging in “the great American melting pot” is shaped by our experiences in elementary, middle and high school classrooms. How was your heritage made visible (or not) at school? In what way did your peers frame that experience, be it as “reminder(s) of the distance” between each other, or in ways that brought you closer?
- 2) The signature of diaspora is often described as belonging neither here nor there. What connection do you feel to your “nation of origin”?