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Encore: Confronting the Contradictions of America's Past

BILL MOYERS: This week on Moyers & Company... Once upon a time in America.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: History is the building block of all knowledge in our society. And it is the most important part of the most significant tradition that human beings have, which is storytelling.

BILL MOYERS: Welcome. This is once again public television's pledge time, when we remind you that there's nowhere else on your TV dial that you can see programs like the one you're watching now. Please take a moment to contribute to your local station.

Congress is in the midst of its summer recess, escaping the malarial heat of the Washington swampland and the agony of legislative gridlock. Most of the members fled for home but many have run straight into the arms of angry voters questioning whether the incumbents should be returned to office.

The clamor and dissent remind us of another hot and humid summer 236 years ago when the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence and riders on horseback rushed it to the far corners of the thirteen new United States -- where it was read aloud to cheering crowds.

Perhaps, we will remember the Declaration of Independence itself, the product of what John Adams called Thomas Jefferson's "happy talent for composition." Take some time this week to read it -- alone, to yourself, or aloud, with others, and tell me the words aren't still capable of setting the mind ablaze. The founders surely knew that when they let these ideas loose in the world, they could never again be caged.

Yet from the beginning, these sentiments were also a thorn in our side, a reminder of the new nation's divided soul. Opponents, who still sided with Britain, greeted it with sarcasm. How can you declare "All men are created equal," without freeing your slaves?

Jefferson himself was an aristocrat whose inheritance of 5000 acres and the slaves to work it, mocked his eloquent notion of equality. He acknowledged that slavery degraded master and slave alike, but would not give his own slaves their freedom. Their labor kept him financially afloat. Hundreds of slaves, forced like beasts of burden to toil from sunrise to sunset under threat of the lash, enabled him to thrive as a privileged gentleman, to pursue his intellectual interests, and to rise in politics. Even the children born to him by the slave Sally Hemings, remained slaves, as did their mother. Only an obscure provision

in his will released his children after his death. All the others -- scores of slaves -- were sold to pay off his debts.

Yes, Thomas Jefferson possessed "a happy talent for composition" -- but he employed it for cross purposes. Whatever he was thinking when he wrote "all men are created equal," he also believed blacks were inferior to whites. Inferior, he wrote, "to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." To read his argument today is to enter the pathology of white superiority that attended the birth of our nation.

So forcefully did he state the case, and so great was his standing among the slave-holding class, that after his death the black abolitionist David Walker would claim Jefferson's argument had "injured us more, and has been as great a barrier to our emancipation as anything that has ever been advanced against us," for it had "...sunk deep into the hearts of millions of the whites, and never will be removed this side of eternity."

So, the ideal of equality Jefferson proclaimed, he also betrayed. He got it right when he wrote about "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." As the core of our human aspirations. But he lived it wrong, denying to others the rights he claimed for himself. And that's how Jefferson came to embody the oldest and longest war of all -- the war between the self and the truth, between what we know and how we live.

Behind the eloquent words of the Declaration were human beings as flawed and conflicted as they were inspired. If they were to look upon us today they most likely would think as they did then, how much remains to be done.

With those contradictions of American history in mind, this seemed a good time to talk with Khalil Gibran Muhammad. He's made them his life's work. Muhammad grew up on Chicago's South Side, a member of the first generation of African Americans born after the victories of the civil rights movement. He's the author of this award-winning book, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, which brings the past to bear on race, crime and the making of urban America, and connects today's headlines to their deep roots. He was teaching history at Indiana University when the New York Public Library asked him to head the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: I decided right after college that there was nothing more important to me than learning about African American history and culture. Really being able to learn firsthand the experiences and contributions that African Americans have made to this country and to the world.

BILL MOYERS: The Schomburg Center is known the world over for documenting the history of all peoples of African descent with a special emphasis on the story of African Americas. Among its ten million items are classic works crystalizing that experience. I asked Muhammad to talk about how we tell America's story without whitewashing the past.

Welcome to the show.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Thank you very much, Bill, for having me.

BILL MOYERS: Why history? I ask the question because Henry Ford famously said, "History is bunk."

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: And you clearly disagree.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: I clearly disagree. And I think this is a moment with questions about what the founding fathers intended, when they established our system of government. How large it should be. The debate between Jefferson and Hamilton, about whether there should be central government or small country of farmer republics. This question of what our original history is has shaped almost every aspect of the American experience.

In other words, history is all around us. Whether or not it is an accurate description of what happened in 1776, for example, or what happened in 1865 is secondary to the point that people's ideas about the past, people's sense of memory about the past, shape their own sense of identity and shape how they imagine the world should be. And therefore, in my opinion, history is the building block of all knowledge in our society. And it is the most important part of the most significant tradition that human beings have, which is storytelling.

BILL MOYERS: But how do we know to trust the past or which part of the past to trust? Because as you say, history is storytelling. And we all tend to reach for the facts that confirm our story, confirm our narrative, our interpretation of the past. So how do we learn to trust which part of the past?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Historians, professional historians will be the first to admit that history is about interpretation. It's about taking a fragmentary record and crafting an argument and defending that argument based on evidence. It's very little different than what lawyers do or Supreme Court justices do when they try to argue the merits of a case.

BILL MOYERS: But when you hear someone invoke Thomas Jefferson, what image comes to mind?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: I tend to think of Jefferson's ideas that gave birth to this republic with a whole lot of contradiction. And in that regard, I don't think of Thomas Jefferson as exceptional. The fundamental conundrum that was established in this country in spite of Thomas Jefferson's ideas about independence was that they resolved that slavery would exist after the revolution.

BILL MOYERS: And I, well, I ask that question, because it raises the argument, the story -- which story do you believe of whether this reflected their hypocrisy or their humanity? And therefore is an eternal reality that we want to do good things and we believe certain ideas and ideals, but we also act otherwise.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: So it does. Contradiction is part of the human experience. We wrestle with it every single day, whether we admit it or not. Thomas Jefferson and half of the other slaveholders who were presidents, all lived daily contradictions.

They could literally look out their windows and see enslaved people in the land of the free and the home of the brave, so on and so forth. But the fact of the matter is that they had a great responsibility for building what would become American democracy. And in that regard, they failed miserably.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, it took me a long time, long past college and even graduate school, to figure out that eight of the first ten of our presidents were enriched by their ownership of capital, land or slaves. We were never taught that these men actually created a government, a constitution designed to protect the further acquisition of property for the privileged classes. Which that just didn't get discussed.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Well, it's also the difference between an individual living a contradiction in terms of enslaving another as a proponent of freedom. And the ways in which those same individuals helped to build philosophical and ideological justifications for enslavement. And again, that's where things get a little trickier. So of course Thomas Jefferson penned "Notes on the State of Virginia" in 1787, which was effectively one of the first scientific arguments for why black people should be treated differently from whites, by virtue of their racial inferiority.

In other words, the scientific notion that black people were fundamentally different, whether it was in hair texture or in body odor, which is all part of Thomas Jefferson's analysis, gave birth to the enduring justification that even in America, even in a place that represented a tradition of republicanism in the world, the first modern democracy, that you could actually reconcile freedom and slavery, as long as the people who were enslaved were not equal citizens, were not made of the stuff of equal humanity.

BILL MOYERS: Well, then you had to construct a system that made sure they could never be seen to be equal members of society?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Correct. Well, that system was already self-reinforcing by the economic imperatives of enslavement. So you had the system that provided a modus operandi for reproducing inferiority. But you had to explain it still. And it was to that task that theologians, philosophers, scientists, eventually social scientists, journalists and politicians eventually weighed in and said, "This all makes sense. It makes sense because these people-- I mean, from a religious standpoint, these people are not of the same God even. That they represent a different species created by God to serve White men."

BILL MOYERS: If you can remember, when you first heard the words "all men are created equal," do you remember how you reacted to them?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: When I was old enough, and particularly in college, when these kinds of documents, you have time to critically engaged. You're being inspired to pay attention. I can remember having visible, a palpable sense that this wasn't true. That the framers had lied. That the words didn't match the reality.

And that was just a response. I didn't have a sense of history enough then to sort of unpack all of that. Because there was so much rhetoric of equality of opportunity. I mean, I can't overemphasize the point enough. I grew up in the 1980s, right? I mean, so this is, you know, John Wayne is the president as

Ronald Reagan. And in all of that rhetoric of opportunity, all of the sanitization of what King's legacy had meant was part of the Zeitgeist of that moment.

And so to all of a sudden encounter those words in a moment of reflection and then to know growing up on the South Side of Chicago that everything wasn't all perfect and equal meant that there was work to be done. There was a reconciliation, a reckoning so to speak, that needed to take place. And for me, that was exciting. It was exciting to have the space and the opportunity when I got to graduate school to study it.

BILL MOYERS: Again, it took me a long time to learn that the man who wrote "all men are created equal," also wrote the words, "money, not morality is the principle of commercial nations." And so I ask you, the historian, is one more true than the other? Is it more true that all men are created equal? Or is it more true that money, not morality, governs our polity?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Well, if we use the benefit of hindsight, I think it's certainly, history has borne out that money not morality is the principle of commercialized nations. At the very moment of course when this country was building its political infrastructure, the set of ideas that would animate three systems of government, with checks and balances, with defined citizenship -- of course property was crucial to who would participate.

And so it took us another 100 years to enfranchise Black male voters. And then another 50 years after that to enfranchise women. So in that regard, history teaches us something about what the relationship between citizenship and property was, which was a contradiction. It wasn't about all men. And in that regard, even the gendered notion of equality--

BILL MOYERS: "We the people" did not include--

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Women.

BILL MOYERS: --blacks, women, Native Americans, right?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's right. Which is, even in this conversation, and let me say this very clearly, the fact of what happened to Native Americans in this country in the 17th century, the fact that it's still not part of the lingua franca of our conversations about this nation's earliest history is evidence of how little it is part of our secondary educational experiences and our colleges.

In other words, I am obviously a proponent of historical literacy that focuses in particular on African Americans. But even as I talk to you, even as we have this conversation about the Declaration of Independence, it's almost an afterthought to think about Native Americans.

It's almost an afterthought to think about how the 19th century the moment of the expansion of the frontiers of this nation, which really was an escape valve for European immigrants, who came here, whether it was from Ireland or whether they came here from Australia as English indentures, was built on the backs of land owned in the Indian sense by many tribes indigenous to this country.

I mean, it's just a moment to reflect upon how just starting with the question of "What happened to black people?" is not sufficient to understanding that at the end of the day, the very notion of settlement in this country was about procuring resources for the purposes of wealth accumulation. That was true for most who came to this country, maybe not true for a small band of Puritans who landed in Massachusetts, who imagined the recreation of a very special, religious community. But even that vision of American society didn't last very long. So it's certainly true, as far as I'm concerned, that over the last 225 years, Thomas Jefferson's second point about money-- has far outlasted and triumphed over the notion of freedom.

BILL MOYERS: The Declaration refers to Native Americans as savages. They were written out, as you say, of the story very early. Do you think it had something to do with the unconscious or even conscious understanding on the part of the white slave-holding property-seeking race that we were practicing genocide, we, the white race, were practicing genocide against these people? Maybe the word wasn't in currency at that time. But they were removed. They were taken to a reservation. They were enclosed. And that's where they spent the last 200 and some-odd years. Why did we write the Native American out of the story?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: So first of all, our experience in the United States was already learning from the experience in South America, where indigenous populations, Taino Indians in various parts of the Caribbean Islands and in South America were first resistant to the encroachments of Europeans, eventually fought against them, and showed such valor in their fighting against European encroachment that there was no sense of incorporation or assimilation.

So their fighting spirit created a kind of contradiction of nobility, which was what eventually gave birth to the notion of the noble savage. That these were a people who were willing to die to protect their way of life. It was disease that wiped them out at the end of the day. That's what got the better of the indigenous populations.

So in that regard, the pure devastation that attended to the original settlement of Europeans in the Americas eventually gave birth to population loss that was akin to genocide by today's standards, but it was done by way of germ warfare. And really in an unintended way.

BILL MOYERS: Did anybody ever teach you, tell you that Chief Justice John Jay said, "Those who own the country should govern it"?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: No, I mean, it reminds me of a quote that George Walker Bush used, which was that this is an ownership society and if you don't own anything, you don't have any say. He didn't actually say the second part. But he did describe America as an ownership society. Effectively meaning that people need to be empowered through the privatization of formerly public services for the purposes of having a stake in it.

And this, of course, was evidenced by his attempt to privatize Social Security, right? But the bottom line is that because of the significance of money in politics, because of the increasing wealth inequality in

this country people who don't own anything are often at the whim and caprice of political and business elites.

BILL MOYERS: Why do politicians whitewash history?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Because it helps them get elected. Why else do politicians do what they do?

BILL MOYERS: This is pledge time for public television. Some stations will briefly step away from us to ask for your support. For the rest of you, Moyers & Company will resume in just a moment.

[Pledge Break]

BILL MOYERS: I read just the other day that 76 percent, three quarters of college graduates are unfamiliar with the Bill of Rights. And almost that many could not say who was America's arch-rival during the 40 years of the Cold War. So pretend I'm a freshman in your class at Indiana University, which you left to come to Schomburg. How do you plan to rescue me from my ignorance of the past?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Well, if I get to meet you, then I'm going to encourage you to take a U.S. history course for starters. The problem is that our colleges and our sense of the public sphere are shrinking. Colleges and universities are giving increasing weight to the STEM fields. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

They haven't cut out the humanities. I don't want to overstate or say that there's a crisis, necessarily. But there is a sense that university presidents, particularly in state university systems, have to be responsive to state legislatures. And if those state legislatures happen to be Republican, there's a lot at stake when it comes to what is the appropriate history lesson to be taught to our children.

And I want to point out that in Texas, for example, a couple of years ago, there was a move by the then state regents to remove or to lessen-- the state's own history of civil rights activism, both statewide and nationally.

They simply removed certain individuals. So Cesar Chavez got less attention in the textbook. And Ronald Reagan and others got more. I mean, that, for practical purposes, in terms of number of words on page, for certain acts of history--

BILL MOYERS: And they wanted to diminish Martin Luther King's role and increase, enhance Newt Gingrich's role, right?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Right. So that in my opinion is of a piece. It's of a piece that both looks at the college as a place where history is less important to the fact of making money.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics produced a report just two years ago, in late 2009, where it identified the top ten growing fields for all Americans. Six of them were low-wage, entry-level service work, the preponderance of which were all in health care. Basically taking care of an aging baby boomer population. So what are we going to do about that? And--

BILL MOYERS: You're not going to study history, though, are you?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Well, you are going to study history. Because if you don't recognize what's at stake for wealth distribution and the fact that money has been a motivating principle for shaping our society. Then people don't have a sense of personal responsibility for changing the reality that they live.

They simply accept it that inequality is a naturalized part of the society. And they will imbibe or accept anything that a silver-tongued politician will sell them. I mean, history is sufficient to making the point that you actually have to protect gains that have been made on behalf of something called justice and equality.

BILL MOYERS: Is that why--

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: The challenge is if they are historically illiterate then they cannot have, they don't have access to those -- that store of ideas. And that evidence of experience that will help them shape whatever they need to shape for this particular moment.

BILL MOYERS: So is that what you meant when you said recently that black history for young people is quote "life saving"?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Yes, that's exactly what I meant.

BILL MOYERS: But that black history begins with slavery, with irons, with lynchings, with auctions, with decades after decades of oppression and repression. How can you say it's life saving?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's interesting. Because it doesn't begin with all of that. And we could debate the finer points of the character of what black history is, right? 'Cause that's what we're really talking about. What is it that most people conceive of when they hear black history? Well, there is that history of oppression. It is a unifying experience in the United States, in the American context.

But many people will argue that the cultures of Africa, many cultures, many tribes, many nations celebrated tremendous achievements by the standards of the world, of the 15th, 16th, and 17th, even into the 18th century before colonization. So depending on what it is you are trying to convey to a child, you can tell them that before the white man came, if you go to Timbuktu, you will see a thriving civilization.

You will see the invention of languages that preceded the lingua franca of the world today, which of course is English. That's one way of inspiring people. And that's one way of defining black history. But alongside that very trajectory that you just described, the one of struggle, of pain, of repression, is one of survival, of triumph, of creativity. And so part of telling the story of black history is to celebrate that ability to exist in a society that is working against you, is attempting to demonize you, and still be able to triumph over it, still be able to produce original forms of art, such as jazz music.

That's powerful. And that's empowering. But it's because of black people's political tradition, starting with political activism in the context of slavery to this day, that America actually is a more democratic society, is a society that has more equality than it did 200 years ago.

And that is also a powerfully inspiring history. Because were it not for black people, for example, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the South might have taken another 50 years to have public education. It was because of black political representatives in state congresses in the late 1860s and 1870s that they passed legislation to establish the first public education systems in the South. That's a major contribution. And it demonstrates how important making real democracy is. And this country has, including many minority groups, including women, have to thank for that tradition of black activism.

BILL MOYERS: So I'm sitting there in the front row of your lecture at Indiana University, where you were teaching before you came to the Schomburg. And I just heard you say there's a thin line separating the past from the present. And I raise my hand. And I say, "All right, Professor Muhammad, if that's the case, what does history have to tell me about stop and frisk?"

I ask that question, because our brethren at WNYC, the public radio station here in New York, recently ran a series in which they reported that one in five people stopped last year by New York City police were teenagers 14 to 18 years old. Eighty-six percent of those teenagers stopped were either black or Latino, most of them boys. Last year, more than 120,000 stops of black and Latino; the total number of black and Latino boys that age in New York City isn't much more than that. 177,000 or so, which suggests that every teenage boy who's black and Latino in this City of New York is likely before he graduates to have been stopped and frisked by the police. So you're a historian. What does history have to tell me about stop and frisk?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: It tells us that it's an old and enduring form of surveillance and racial control. So if we think about the moment immediately following the Civil War, there was the invention of something called the Black Codes in every southern state. And those codes were intended to use the criminal justice system to restrict the freedom and mobility of black people.

And if you crossed any line that they prescribed, you could be sold back to your former slave owner, not as a slave, but as a prisoner to work off your fine after an auction where you were resold to the highest bidder. It tells you something about the invention of the criminal justice system as a repressive tool to keep Black people in their place, from the very moment where 95 percent of the Black population became free. And it's still with us. It's still with us, because ultimately, as a social problem, crime has become like it was in the Jim Crow South, a mechanism to control black people's movement in cities. Just as Douglas Blackmon described in "Slavery By Another Name"--

BILL MOYERS: A great book, by the way.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: A great book--

BILL MOYERS: What happened to blacks after the Civil War, how they were freed.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Right. The invention of convict leasing as a mechanism to-- I mean, they had many sources, but one was an economic project to rebuild the South on the backs of imprisoned, leased African Americans sold to private industry. And the net simply widened, because there was a lot of money to be made in doing that kind of work.

In Douglas Blackmon's work, we learn how elastic were laws like vagrancy laws, intended effectively to empower any citizen and/or law enforcement official to check the papers of a black person moving freely along the world. And if you couldn't prove that you were currently employed, bound to a tenant farming contract or a sharecropping agreement, then you were by definition a vagrant, by definition a criminal, and subject to, in this case, convict leasing. So if you're a sharecropper and you're being cheated by the white landowner. And you tell him to go to hell and you step away. He can call the police and say, "This person left my property. And they don't have a job. They're a vagrant."

You get picked up, you're done. You're off to a convict lease. The point is that that elasticity, that ability to use the law as an instrument of control, the ability to use discretion is exactly what operates in the context of stop and frisk. It operated in New York. Stop and frisk as an explicit policy is not that old, but as an informal practice, "Condemnation" describes numerous instances.

It's happening in Brooklyn, in Harlem, in the 1910s and '20s and '30s. But here's the point. Today's stop and frisk, if you look at the form that a police officer fills out, the boxes create tremendous opportunity for discretion. So "furtive movements," "suspicious behavior." But probably the one that's most indicative of this is one box that says, "Wears clothes-- wearing clothing known to be associated with criminals."

What does that mean for an 18 year old black or Latino boy in New York City? He has sagging pants? Is that sufficient grounds for investigating whether or not he's a criminal or not, or carrying contraband? Does he have a white t-shirt? Is he wearing a backpack that could contain drugs? In other words, it's incredibly elastic. And it--

BILL MOYERS: Does that include a hoody in Florida?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: It could include a hoody in Florida. In other words, it allows law enforcement, in this city, just like it did in the 1870s in Alabama, to have the widest berth of discretion to challenge a person, a black male on the streets, to ask them, "Where are you going? And do you belong here?" And as it turns out, if you don't have I.D., you can be subject to arrest in this city.

There's a hallways monitoring program that the N.Y.P.D. uses to go into private buildings for the purposes of making sure that there's no drug dealing happening in those buildings. But as "The Village Voice" reported just a few months ago, a young man walked out in his pajamas to empty his trash.

He happened to come across an N.Y.P.D. officer. The officer asked him for his I.D., to prove that he lived in the building and wasn't a drug dealer. He didn't have one. He was fined. That's discretion. That's abuse of authority. That is the racial context. Because -- and here's where race really matters today. And I want everybody to be clear about this.

Why race matters today and defies the logic of Bloomberg, that this is really about saving black people. And this is a colorblind public safety agenda is because no white community in America would tolerate this kind of treatment in the name of public safety in its communities, period. You couldn't go into any East Side apartment or any West Side co-op anywhere in New York City, and start asking 17-year-old white boys for I.D., when they were out in their pajamas.

Why? Because their political power in this city and in other parts of this country is sufficient to get a politician to question whether or not that's the America that we want to live in. But when it comes to black and brown people, today as was true 100 years ago, they are subject to certain criminal justice policies. Those policies in Alabama lasted way into the civil rights era. And stop, question, and frisk, as informal practices, have been going on for over a hundred years.

BILL MOYERS: You have written a biography of an idea here. And the idea you're writing about is how blacks came to be singled out, nationally, as an exceptionally dangerous people.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Sure. Well, think about it this way, Bill. There's no moment in time, no moment in time exists where race is not a primary factor in the treatment of black people.

And so the crime issue, if we just equate crime or criminalization and racial stigma, there is no moment where race is not an organizing principle for how black people's behavior is defined in American society.

That's the problem. And so policies like stop, question, and frisk evolved not because they were invented in that moment, but because they continued in that moment. And immigrant communities got police reform. And black people got police repression.

BILL MOYERS: The South I understand, but in the North, a hundred years ago, in your home city of Chicago, blacks were only about two percent of the population, maybe four percent of the population. And yet, stop and frisk became very popular there.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's right. And unfortunately, in the aftermath of Reconstruction, there was a meeting of the minds between progressives and white supremacists. And the meeting of the minds wasn't as we might think it was, because this was also the same moment where people like Jane Addams and William Walling--

BILL MOYERS: Great progressive leaders.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Great progressive leaders started the NAACP. They were deeply concerned about political disenfranchisement and civil rights. But crime was the great exception. And in this one space, Southerners were far more influential in terms of telling Northerners that black people were not ready for citizenship, that they were not responsible for following the rules of society.

And Northerners took note and essentially developed policies and practices primarily policing of urban space. Policies like stop, question, and frisk helped to create the ghettos of Harlem, of Chicago, of West Philadelphia that were in their infancy at the turn of the 20th century. And it was only on the basis of criminality that progressives and other liberals said to those black communities that, "We're going to let

you work out your own salvation. We're going to let you stay in these isolated communities until you exhibit the bourgeois behaviors of respectability and law abidingness."

And all of this may sound appropriate to viewers listening today, except that the same didn't hold true for European immigrants, who gave so much trouble to civic reformers. They didn't speak the language. They brought old world cultural traits. They were loud. They wanted to peddle their wares all over the streets. There were too many of them. They lived in really dense places. They were brewing wine and other liquors in their bathtubs. Some were extortionists going around collecting taxes and duties from small businesses. Well, they didn't say, "We're going to let you work out your own salvation." They said, "We've got to get in here and Americanize these people."

BILL MOYERS: That's what the progressive--

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's what the progressive movement was about.

BILL MOYERS: -movement was about. Social welfare, public parks, job opportunities, social mobility, but not, you say, for blacks. They were penned off?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: They were penned off. And they were penned off in a way that crime became the legitimate reason and rationale for that segregation. In other words, crime among immigrants and even native-born working class whites was understood to be a consequence not of their moral character or of their cultural framework, but in fact of economics and class.

So even Europe's peasants, even Europe's marginalized and dispossessed, who came here in search of opportunity, benefited from a civilizationist discourse, from a way of ranking the world's people that said, "Any European, no matter how dastardly or despicable has the stuff of Europe, has the stuff of civilization, with just a little bit of help, will be on their way to greener pastures." But black people were still understood, even in places like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia as being fundamentally flawed in their nature.

BILL MOYERS: But you go on to say in the book that blackness was refashioned through statistics. That statistics about black crime were ubiquitous. But statistics about white crime were invisible. Was that deliberate?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: It was over time. So it wasn't that way from the very beginning. The problem is that black people were enslaved. There was no point in tracking them statistically, because they weren't a population problem. They were enslaved. Well, once they were free, the demographers now turned immediately to statistics and said, "We've got to figure out how many babies, how many black babies are born each year? How many black babies die? What are the diseases that they die from?"

And eventually they turned to crime statistics. Their initial point in using statistics was not to celebrate the presence of black people, but to determine how much of a presence, physically, black people would have in the nation. And as it turns out, because enslaved people don't go to prison, they're dealt with summarily as plantation justice. Now as free people they're going to prison.

And in 1890, for the first time, a statistician looked up and said, "Wow, there's a disproportionate prison population of black people. They're 30 percent of the nation's prisoners. And they're only 12 percent of the nation's population. Well, as it turns out, if we just let them be, they will commit enough crimes and go to prison and we won't have to worry about the economic resources that have to be distributed amongst the Italians, amongst the Irish, amongst the Polish Catholic and now amongst the black people."

And so the very notion of refashioning their identity as a criminal identity was intended to be a mechanism to limit social resources on behalf of black communities. To effectively say, "Because they are criminals, they don't deserve even education."

BILL MOYERS: You're not denying that there were crimes.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: I'm not denying that there were crimes.

BILL MOYERS: Black violence on violence. I mean, the book doesn't deny that. I want to make that clear to the audience. But that somehow the black criminal became a representative of his race.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Correct.

BILL MOYERS: Right. "To think and talk about African Americans as criminal," you write, "is encoded deeply in our DNA."

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Correct, but the question became, "Are we going to help black people like we help the immigrants?"

BILL MOYERS: And the answer was?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: The answer was, "Because they are criminals, no." And that was a rationale rooted in racial logic. It was a rationale tied to sets of ideas that privileged Europeans as people who could benefit from the help of native white reformers, elites like Jane Addams, and black people could not. It effectively created the circumstances that gave birth to modern segregation in our biggest cities. So as those populations grew, the basic infrastructure remained the same.

BILL MOYERS: It was -- it's amazing to me, astonishing to go through here and find so much of the evidence you've collected. You have even President Roosevelt telling black college graduates in 1904 that, quote, "Criminality is in the ultimate analysis a greater danger to your race than any other thing can be." And one sociologist after another saying, "You blacks are your own worst enemies, because of your criminal--"

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: "--nature." And that took hold in the ideology of dominant America, did it not?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: And that's the same dominant ideology that we have today. I mean, it's not packaged in the same explicit rhetoric. But it has given birth to policies like stop, question, and frisk

that Mayor Bloomberg has --consistently defends, Ray Kelly consistently defends. Policies such as mass incarceration.

We are still living with the same basic ideas and arguments about the relationship between black criminality and social responsibility, between segregation and public safety today as we were in the 1890s in this country.

BILL MOYERS: Here's the testimony of one of the most influential scholars of the time, Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, a Harvard scientist and prolific writer on race relations. Here's what he wrote in 1884, quote, "There can be no sort of doubt that judged by the light of all experience, these people," -- blacks -- "are a danger to America, greater and more insuperable than any of those that menace the other great civilized states of the world."

He wrote that in the "Atlantic" magazine. Here's Hinton Rowan Helper, arguing that America would self-destruct if it gave blacks the right to vote. He said "Negroes with their crime-stained blackness could not rise to a plane higher than that of base and beastlike savagery. Seeing then that the negro does, indeed, belong to a lower and inferior order of things, why in the name of Heaven, why should we forever degrade and disgrace both ourselves and our posterity by entering of our own volition into more intimate relations with him? May God, in his restraining mercy, forbid that we should ever do this most foul and wicked thing." Now this is not talk radio back in the 1884 or 1904. These are prominent scholars, Harvard, "Atlantic" magazine writing this. And you're saying that in some interior structural way, these sentiments still affect how we deal with each other today?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Absolutely. We've got the biggest prison system the world has ever known, a prison system, by the way, that came of age in this moment right after the end of the Civil Rights Movement. So at precisely the moment that black people have their second shot at equality in America, legally, legislatively, right? I mean, we could -- you know as well as anyone that we didn't need the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the '65 Voting Act if the 13th and 14th and 15th Amendment had really been sufficient to creating equality.

So right after that moment, even under Lyndon Baines Johnson, there is an expansion of federal support for local law enforcement on the basis that black people's crime is a danger to civil society. And again, all of this may make sense to a viewer and to a listener, if they didn't know that those same threats to civil society, posed by European immigrants weren't treated in a fundamentally different way. That's the point. Crime in and of itself was not sufficient to justify a punitive, law and order political response or a set of ideas that exist today as they did then that saw black people's crime as evidence of some moral inferiority, some natural propensity to want to hurt people or to steal things.

For the European immigrant in the hands of a eugenicist, that was all true. "These people can't help themselves. They're a threat to society." But the progressives said, "No." And what's more telling about the progressives is they actually got rid of statistics. They stopped using the language of statistics, "15 percent of all crimes in this city are committed by the Irish, another 45 percent by the Italians."

They stopped talking that way. And saying that "These are the children of immigrants, who are becoming Americans. And we must help them. We must put them on the path to success." That's how they started talking to them. So much so, and this is an important point. By the 1930s, the federal government started collecting arrest data across the nation. And this information is produced quarterly and annually, it's called The Uniform Crime Reports.

So soon you will see in "The New York Times" the latest data, which tells us whether crime is rising or falling overall in our nation's cities. That was invented in 1930.

But here's the point. This is a really important one. Prior to that Uniform Crime Report, which nationalized and standardized arrest statistics, local arrest data was collected in Philadelphia, in New York, et cetera. And if you pull out an annual report, the page would look like this, tracking offenses by category.

Because it would say, "Italian, Irish, German, Scandinavian, Mexican," so on and so forth, all the way across. It'd look like an Excel spreadsheet today. By the 1930s with the federal government systematizing national arrest data and really becoming the most authoritative basis for understanding crime at the local level and national level, guess what it was? "Whites, Blacks, Foreign Born, Other." That was the for the first three years.

But 1933, it was, "White, Black, Other." So effectively, what it did was erase, it simply erased the category of the white ethnic criminal. Black became the single defining measure of deviance from a white norm.

So as long as blacks in that accounting showed disproportionate levels of any activity across those categories, white was always normalized. And in effect, it made invisible white criminality. We don't talk about white criminality. We don't talk about the white prison population. Nobody, no average person on the street can tell you how many white men are in prison or white men between the ages of 18 and 35, who are likely to spend time in prison.

Actually, the truth is the number is greater now today than it was 30 years ago, because the size of the prison system has also increased the number of white men.

BILL MOYERS: So this is how black criminality emerges along with disease and intelligence, the size of the brain?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Correct.

BILL MOYERS: As a fundamental measure of black inferiority?

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: Correct.

BILL MOYERS: With consequences down to the moment.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: Khalil Muhammad, thanks for joining us.

KHALIL GIBRAN MUHAMMAD: It's been great.

BILL MOYERS: That's it for this week. See you next time.
