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July 4th and "The Immeasurable Distance Between Us" By Bill Fletcher, Jr., BC Editorial Board Sharon Morgan Thomas Norman DeWolf

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Independence Day celebrations began this past weekend, with picnics, parades, and fireworks displays all around the country. In honor of the holiday, we asked several of our authors to share their feelings about Independence Day and what it means to them - good and bad. Three authors who grapple with the complex history associated with the holiday quoted [Frederick Douglass](#) from his speech, "[What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?](#)" We've grouped their responses for today's post.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfricaForum](#). He is co-author of [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA, and is the author of the forthcoming book ["They're Bankrupting Us!" And Twenty Other Myths about Unions](#). Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.

The 4th of July is always a complicated holiday for me. That is largely because it has a complicated historical significance. When I think of July 4th I immediately think about how my African ancestors were largely ignored - except with regard to labor power and some soldiering - in the course of the events that were transpiring at that moment, and particularly ignored in the context of great minds thinking about the future of the new

nation that they wished to create. I also think about how the War of Independence was in part ignited by the indignation of the settlers over restrictions imposed on them by the British regarding going further West - into the lands of my Shawnee ancestors and other Native American nations.

As a result, I cannot uncritically celebrate July 4th. I consider, of course, the *ideal* that is contained in the Declaration of Independence, and am aware of those among the colonial settlers who may have had a more egalitarian vision of the future. I am equally aware of the ideal that July 4th is supposed to represent. But I am saddened each year that there is little historical examination of the contradictory nature of the War of Independence, and that for entire populations the War of Independence came to represent yet another stage on the road to their annihilation.

In the 19th century the great Frederick Douglass posed a question in a now famous speech "What to a slave is the fourth of July?" I would expand that and pose the question that today needs to be asked and answered: *For those of us who believe in democracy, justice and equality, how do we disentangle the web of myth that surrounds the Fourth of July?"*

[Sharon Morgan](#) is co-author of [Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade](#).

Morgan is a marketing communications consultant and a nationally recognized pioneer in multicultural marketing. An avid genealogist, she is the webmaster for [OurBlackAncestry.com](#) and is a founder of the Black Public Relations Society.

We live in fearful times. War, racism, social, economic, employment, environmental, energy, health and food security issues are on the long list of things to be worried about. And I do. Worry.

On July 4, 1776, the day America declared its independence, one fifth of the population was in a state of bondage. Seventy-six years later, in 1852, abolitionist and former slave, Frederick Douglass, articulated, "There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour."

Although legal freedom came in 1865, when four million people were released from slavery, evidence of true emancipation did not come until 143 years later, when Barack Obama was elected the first African American President of the United States. In [his inaugural July 4th address](#), he extolled, "That unyielding spirit [that] defines us as American... It is what has always led us, as a people, not to wilt or cower at a difficult moment, but to face down any trial and rise to any challenge, understanding that each of us has a hand in writing America's destiny."

This July 4th, I will be thinking about history and destiny... And celebrating my commitment to be an agent of change in the world independence has wrought.

*[Thomas Norman DeWolf](#) is co-author of [Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade](#) and author of [Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History](#). He is featured in the Emmy-nominated documentary film *Traces of the Trade*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and on the acclaimed PBS series *POV*. DeWolf speaks regularly about healing from the legacy of slavery and racism at conferences and colleges throughout the United States.*

Celebration of Independence Day ain't what it used to be for me. What I've learned along the road I've traveled the past decade - much of which is horrible, shameful and has been deeply buried or glossed over in America's collective psyche - has led me to reevaluate how I view myself and my country. On July 4, 1852, Frederick Douglass said, "*Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me.*" The deep wound of racism - the legacy of slavery - about which Douglass spoke has never been fully acknowledged and healed. I no longer celebrate "independence" that resulted in the annihilation of millions of indigenous people and the enslavement of millions of Africans. I don't celebrate drone strikes in the name of freedom. I celebrate truth-tellers and peacebuilders. I celebrate the progress we have made and continue to make in the face of strong resistance. Mostly, I celebrate hope - the hope that one day we will live up to the ideals upon which this great country was founded.



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