

Centering the
“Pupil of the Eye”:
Blackness, Modernity, and the
Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh

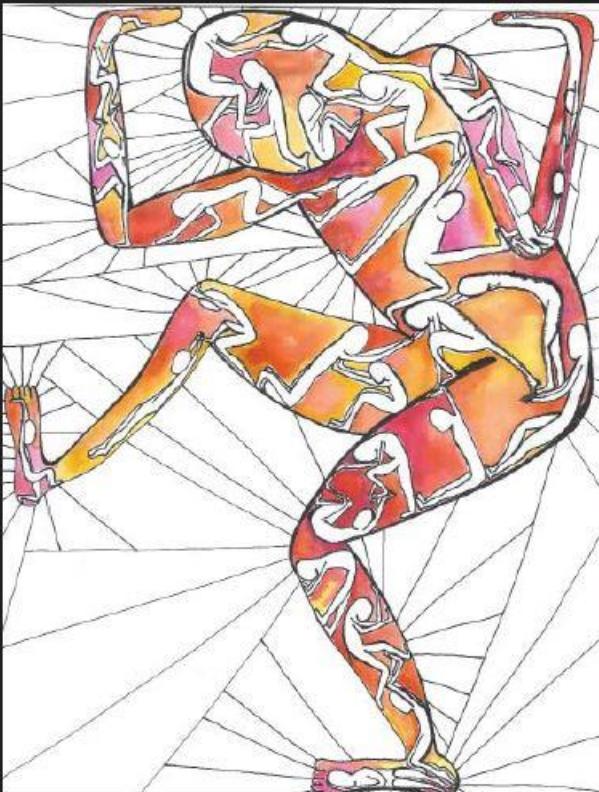
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THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

La Revue des études bahá'íes/La Revista de estudios bahá'ís

Volume 29, number 1-2

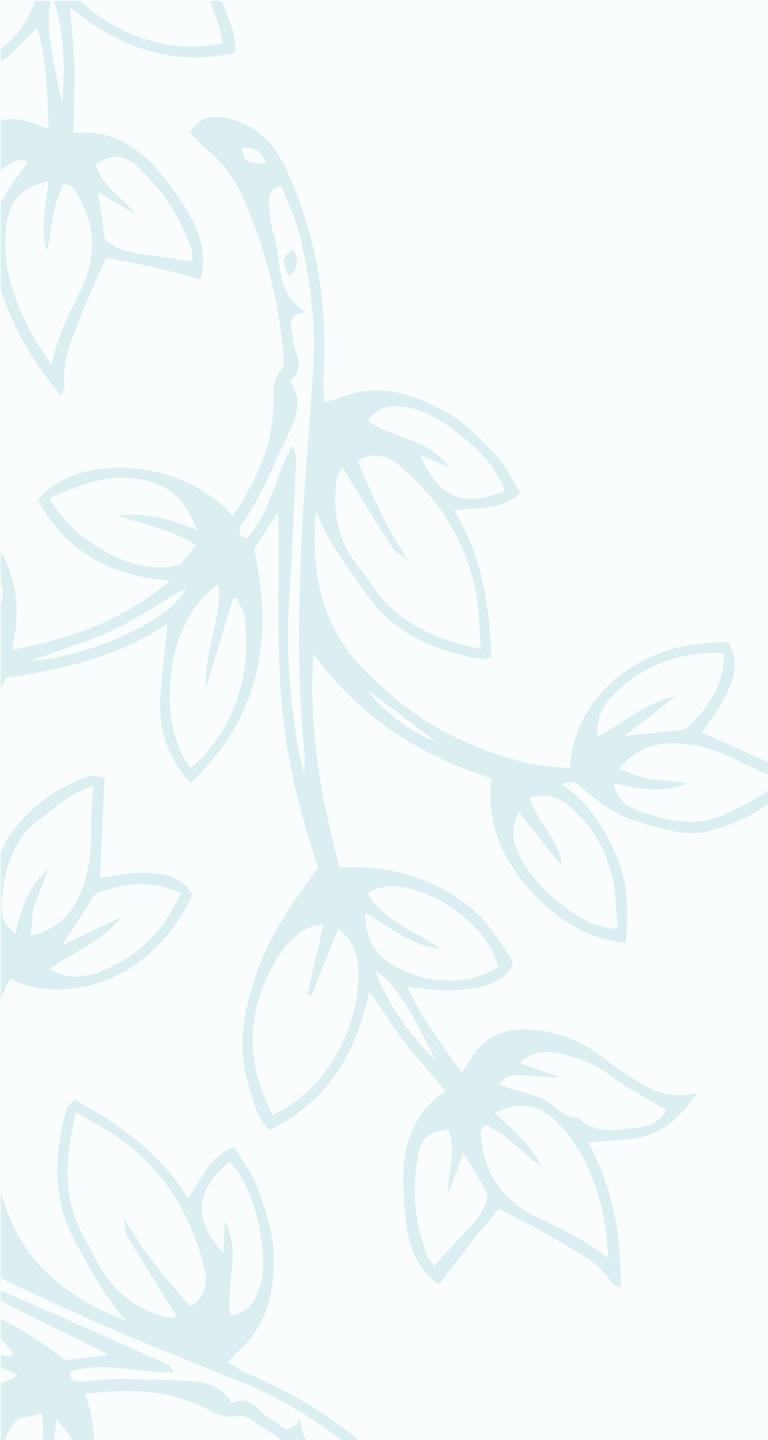
Spring-Summer 2019



A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America

Abstract

In the late nineteenth century, Bahá'u'lláh likened people of African descent to the “pupil of the eye” through which the “light of the spirit shineth forth.” This essay argues that the “pupil of the eye” metaphor is a deeply consequential, distinguishing feature of the transformative social and spiritual system laid out in Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation. Studying the nexus of capitalism, race, and intellectual history, the essay historicizes Bahá'u'lláh’s elevating metaphor, arguing that it amounts to a forceful refutation of anti-blackness and thus a dismantling of one of modernity’s pivotal ideologies. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates that the unique integrity and coherence of Bahá'u'lláh’s system for the creation of universal unity and justice is especially manifest through analytical contemplation of the “pupil of the eye” metaphor.



Bahá'u'lláh

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Shoghi Effendi

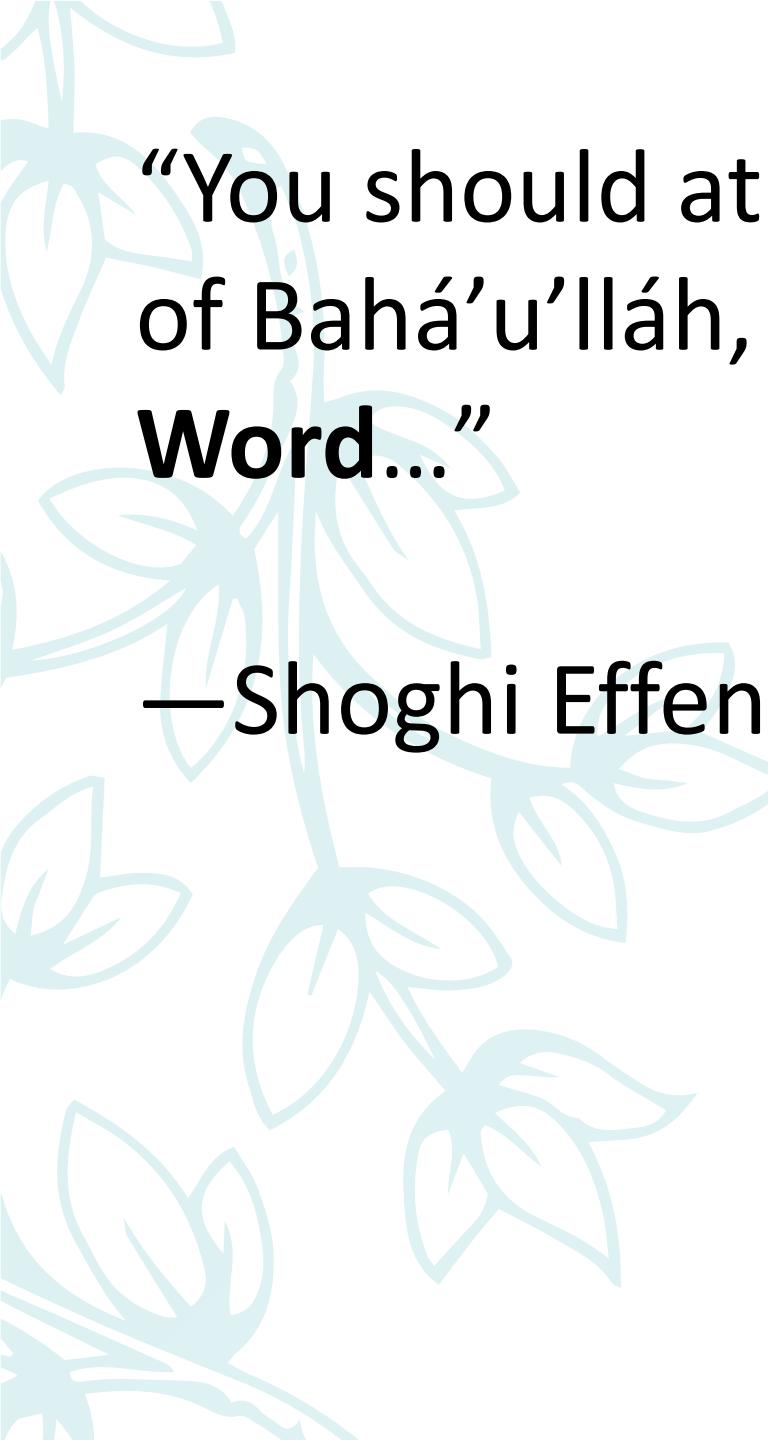
The Universal House of Justice

“Bahá'u'lláh... once compared the colored people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it, and through it the light of the spirit shineth forth.”

—’Abdu’l-Bahá

“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the **unity of the human race**, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men.”

— Bahá'u'lláh



“You should at all times fix your gaze on the promise of Bahá'u'lláh, put your whole trust in His **creative Word**...”

—Shoghi Effendi

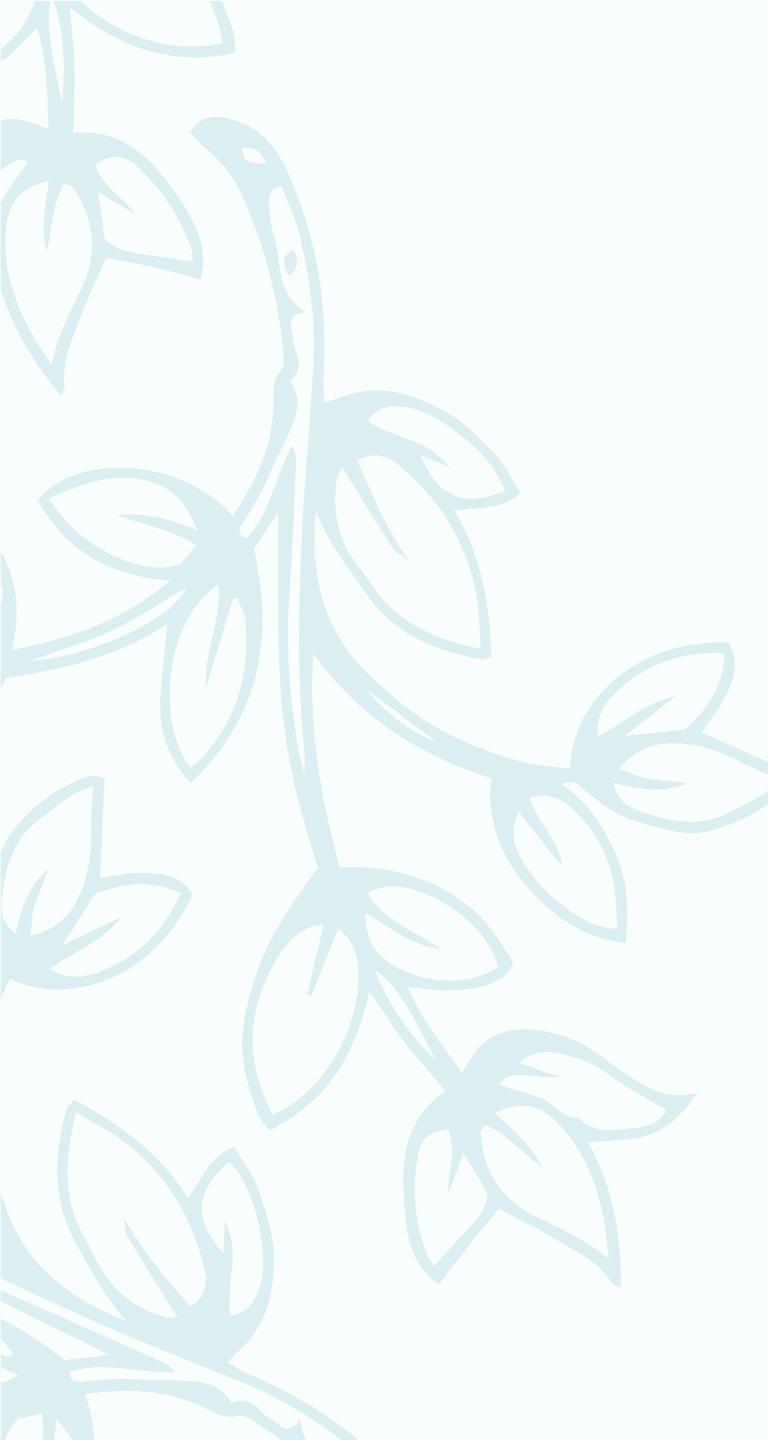
“The Cause needs more Bahá’í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can **correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.**”

“The Cause has the remedy for all the world’s ills. The reason why more people don’t accept it is because the Bahá’ís are not always capable of presenting it to them in a way that meets the immediate needs of their minds.”

— Shoghi Effendi

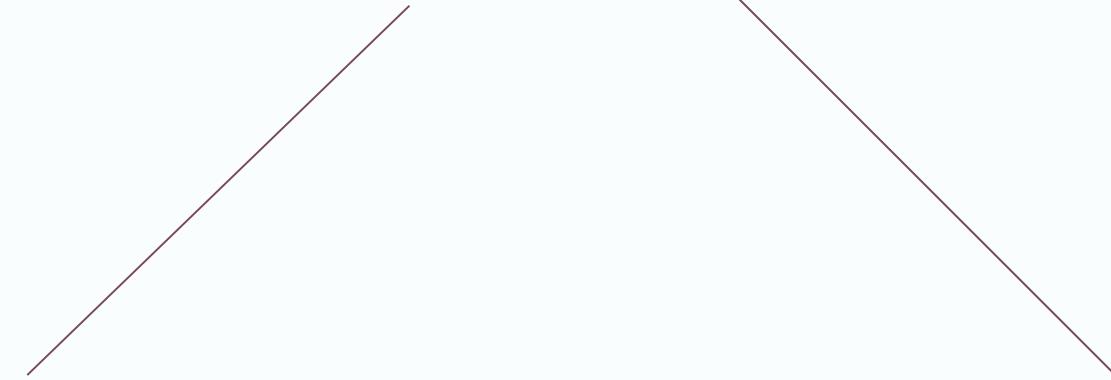
“Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present.”

— The Universal House of Justice



“Pupil of the Eye”

Instructive
Meaning

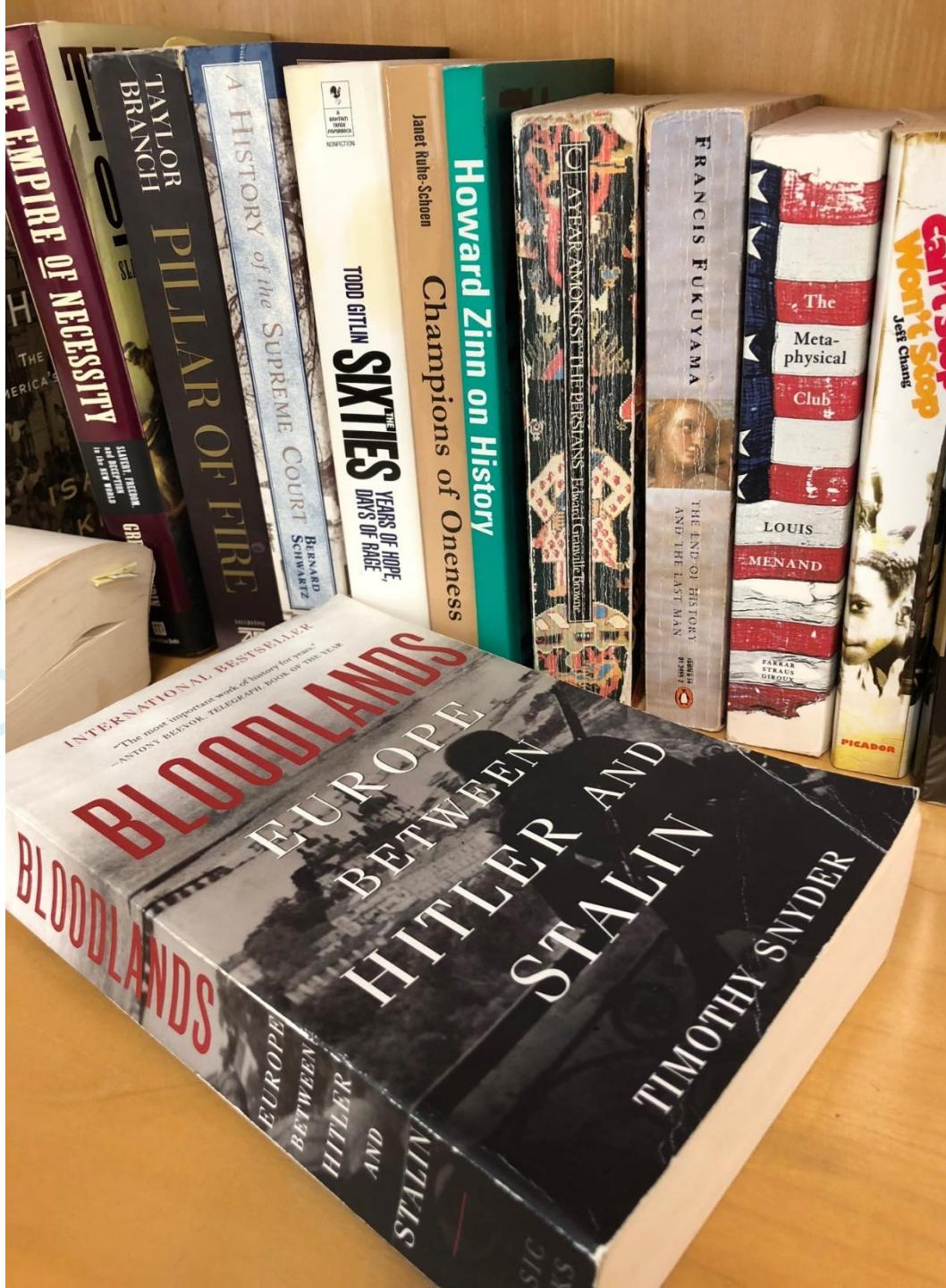


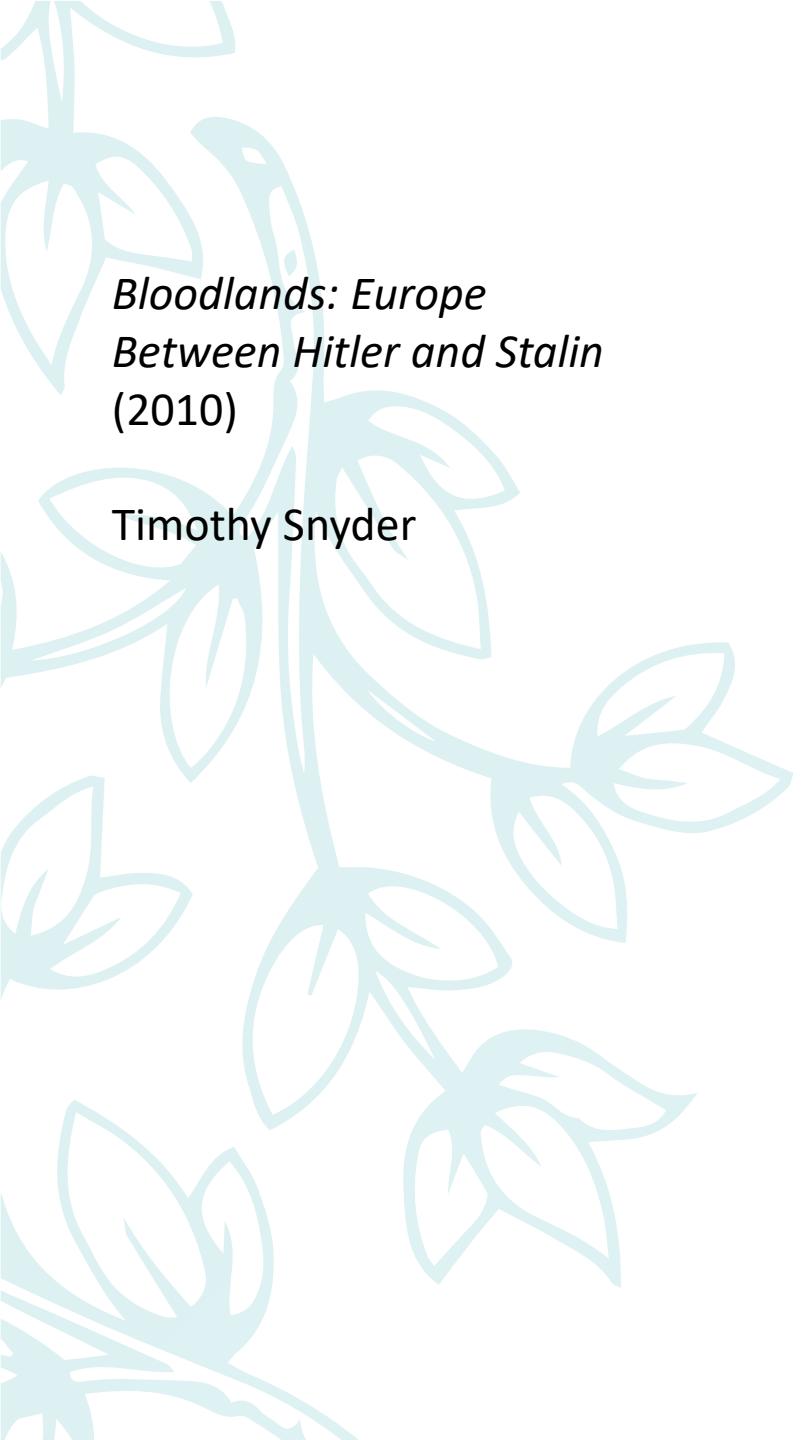
Instrumental
Meaning

“In recent years, historians have started to think about New World enslavement of Africans and African-descended people in ways...that may lead toward new interpretations of the **instructive meaning** of the ‘pupil of the eye’ metaphor. Just as Bahá’u’lláh’s metaphor gives black people a central and vital role in the figurative body of humanity, a fresh form of historiography is showing that the story of modernity pivots on the contributions of black people.”

*Bloodlands: Europe
Between Hitler and Stalin*
(2010)

Timothy Snyder





Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin (2010)

Timothy Snyder

eighty to one hundred and fifty thousand, seventy-five percent of the Belarusians, and fifty percent of the Czechs were to be eliminated.⁸

After the corrupt Soviet cities were razed, German farmers would establish, in Himmler's words, "pearls of settlement," utopian farming communities that would produce a bounty of food for Europe. German settlements of fifteen to twenty thousand people each would be surrounded by German villages within a radius of ten kilometers. The German settlers would defend Europe itself at the Ural Mountains, against the Asiatic barbarism that would be forced back to the east. Strife at civilization's edge would test the manhood of coming generations of German settlers. Colonization would make of Germany a continental empire fit to rival the United States, another hardy frontier state based upon exterminatory colonialism and slave labor. The East was the Nazi Manifest Destiny.

In Hitler's view, "in the East a similar process will repeat itself for a second time as in the conquest of America." As Hitler imagined the future, Germany would deal with the Slavs much as the North Americans had dealt with the Indians. The Volga River in Russia, he once proclaimed, will be Germany's Mississippi.⁹ Here ideology met necessity. So long as Britain did not fall, Hitler's only reliable ally was the United States.





“New World” History

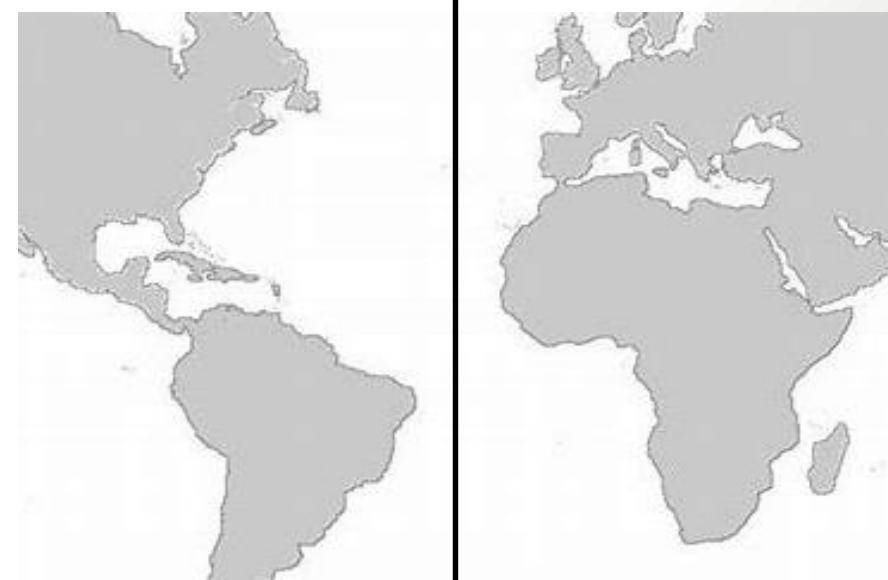


How many “immigrants” shifted from the “Old World” (Europe & Africa) to the “New World” (Americas & Caribbean) between 1492 and 1776?

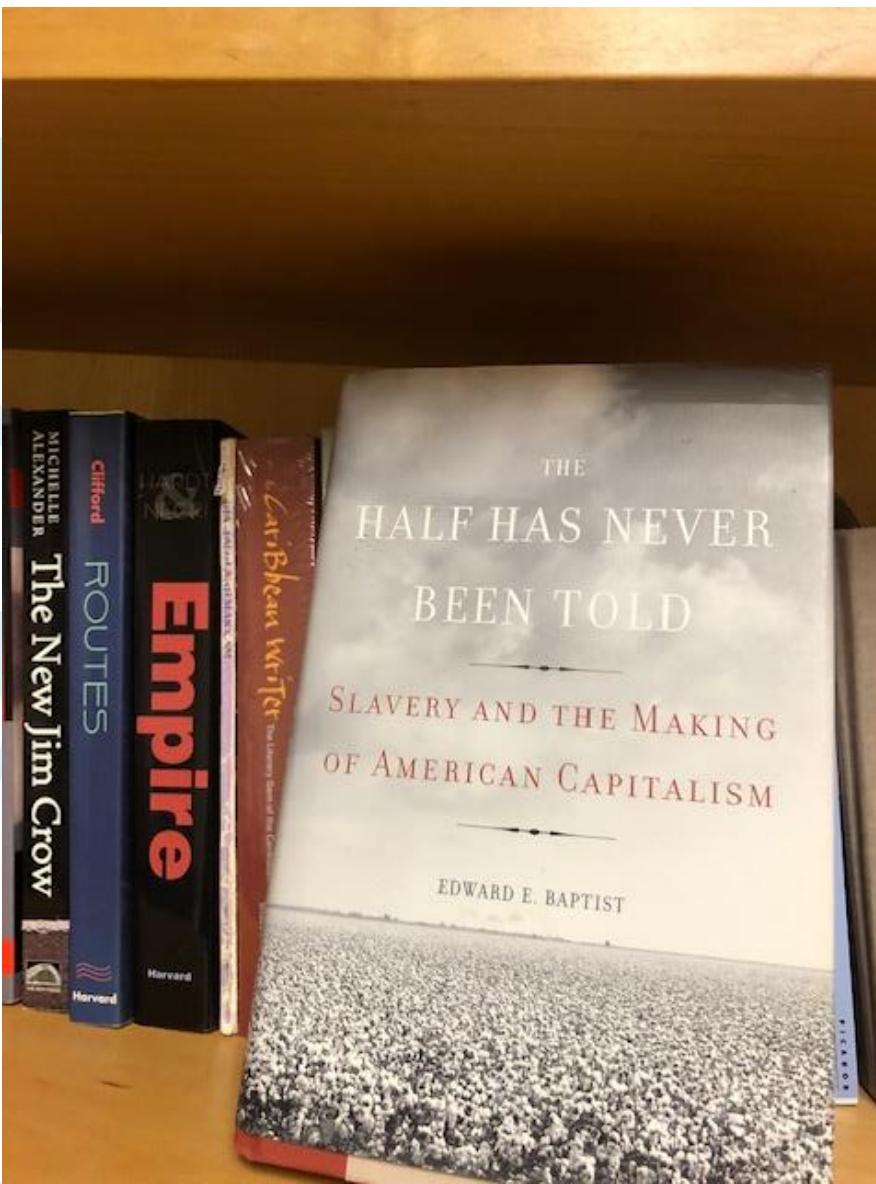
6.5 Million

Between 1492 and 1776 how many “New World immigrants” were African?

5.5 Million



New Histories of Capitalism



The white man in the iron collar watched everything. He could tell that the slave who rested on the oars had gone through dark waters, too. Behind unblinking eyes, the oarsman gave back the collared man's gaze, and remembered the feel of the slave deck's sweating wood pressing against his ritually scarred cheek. Yet this new arrival's experience would be different. Slavery itself was changing from the first story, the sugar-island model that had shaped everything in the New World to this point. This man would carry his collar not to an island or to an isolated belt of settlements clinging to the coast. He was headed into a vast continent. Behind the mists on the mud flats, enslavement would find no geographical limit, only political ones—and enslavers had structured politics to their advantage. Citizens, not colonials, would own him. Owners' property interests—owners who got to vote and run for office and govern—would drive decisions about him, not the plans of distant imperial bureaucrats. And because the man in the iron collar and all who followed him into the depths of the continent would make not a luxury product but the most basic commodity in a new kind of endlessly expanding economy, there would also be no limit to the market for the product of his labor. This meant that there was no numerical limit to the number of enslavers, or to the number of investors who would want to chase enslavement's rewards. Only conscience, or the inability of the world's investment markets to deploy enough savings, could impede the transfer of capital to slavery's new frontiers.

All of this was certain, but for the doubt raised by one big question: whether the United States and all the entrepreneurs who wanted to expand slavery into the great river valley in the middle of the continent could actually hold onto North America's interior. That outcome was still in doubt, even in 1807. In fact, it had been in doubt since the 1790s, and would continue to be so for almost a decade more. For this reason, slavery's expansion was not a foregone conclusion. And four great episodes of violence, three of them played out along the river system whose flow rocked the *Adventure* at anchor, would decide its fate.

As of 1807, four out of every five people who came from the Old World to the New had come from Africa, not Europe; chained in the belly of a ship, not free on its deck. Huddled masses in steerage class, yearning to breathe free of the famine and poverty of Ireland, Italy, or Russia's shtetls—they came later.

Massive Scale of the Exploitation

was essential to the

Massive Scale of the Wealth Creation

“The network of agricultural plantations that first bloomed in the Caribbean basin of the 1500s and eventually spread throughout the Americas produced ‘European capital liberation’ but was impossible without ‘African labor enslavement’...”



Palace of Versailles

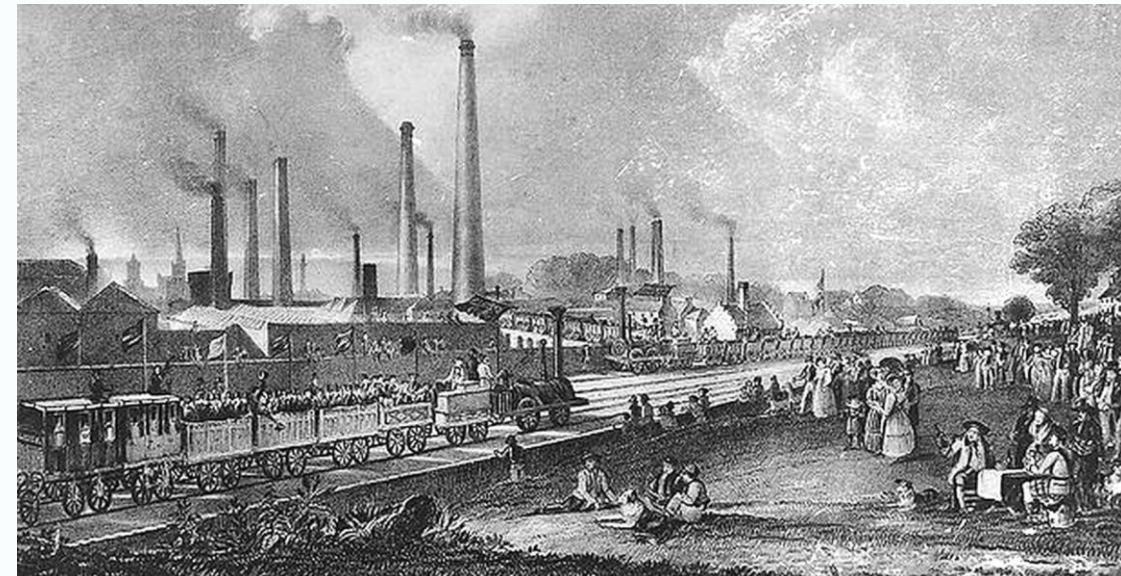


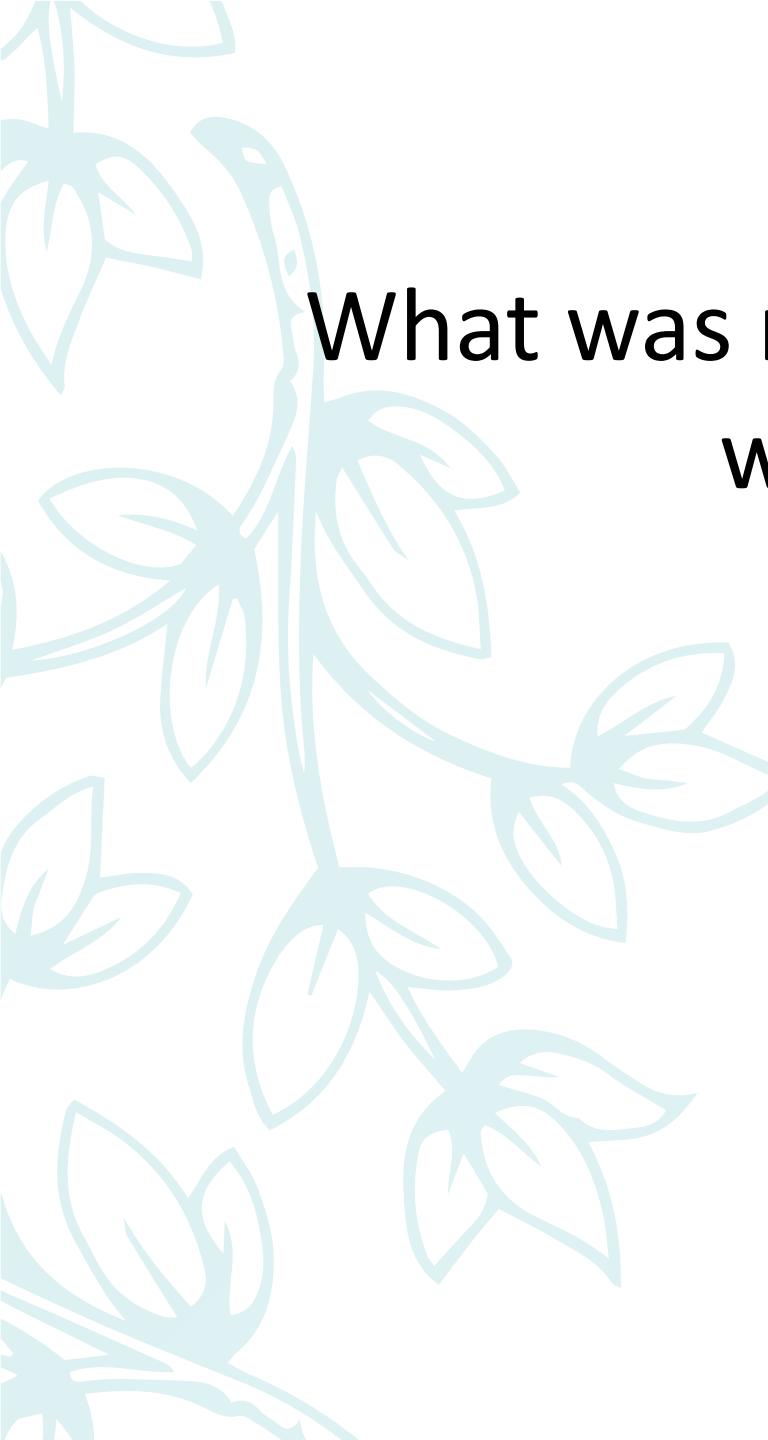
“He mounteth on the ladders of inner truth and hasteneth to the heaven of inner significance.”

“The European Miracle” “The Great Divergence”



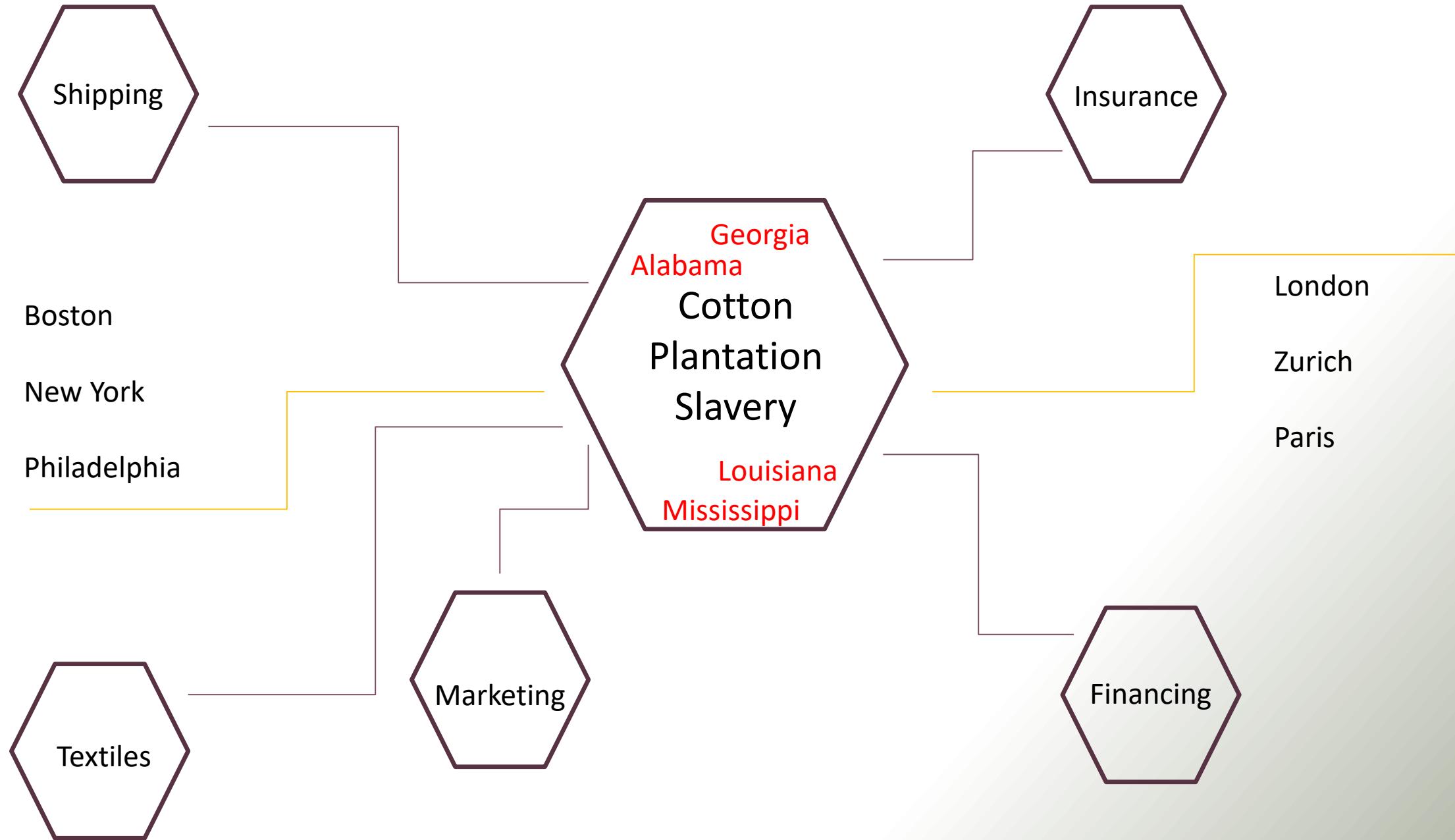
The Industrial Revolution

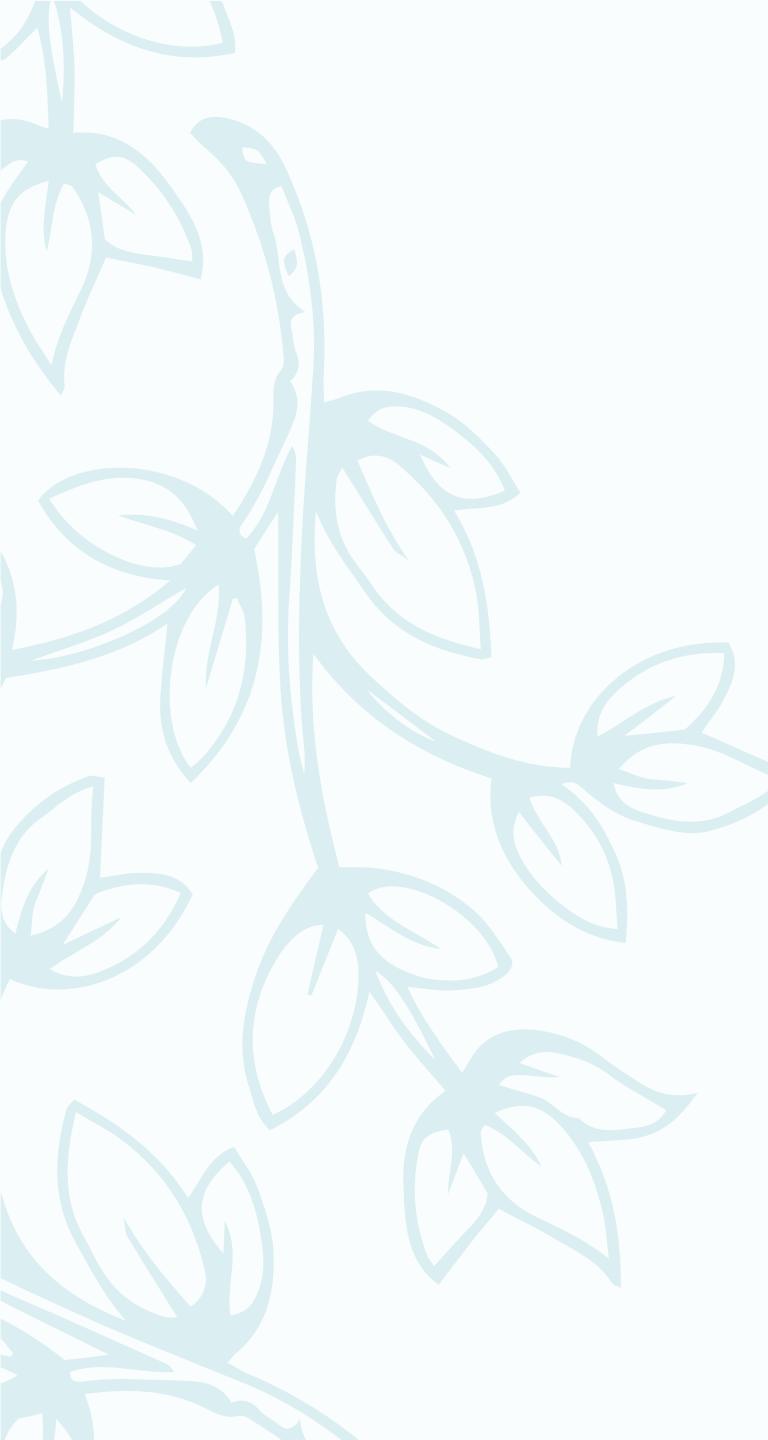




What was nineteenth-century America's most
wealth-generating export?

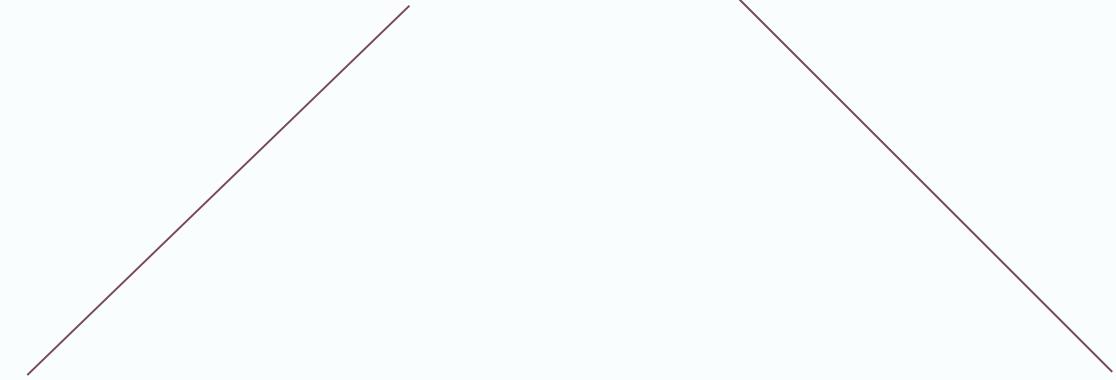




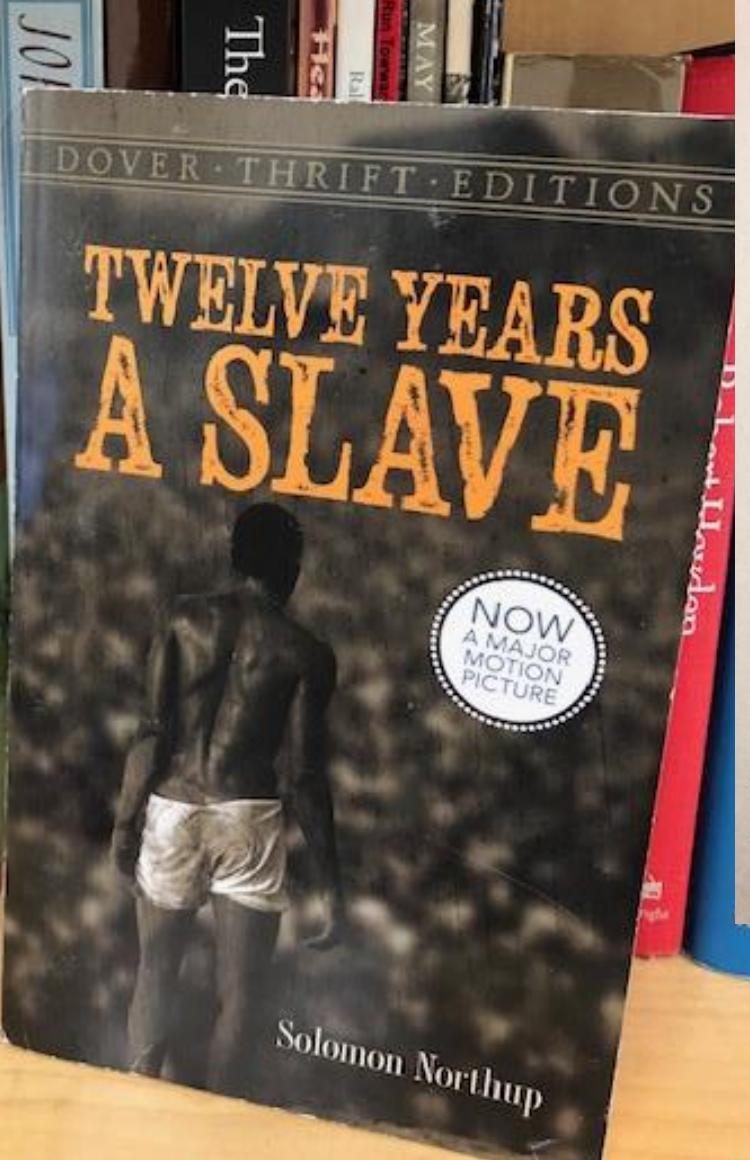


“Pupil of the Eye”

Instructive
Meaning



Instrumental
Meaning



out with Sam and myself to cut trees. They were excellent choppers, the largest oak or sycamore standing but a brief season before their heavy and well-directed blows. At piling logs, they were equal to any man. There are lumberwomen as well as lumbermen in the forests of the South. In fact, in the region of the Bayou Bœuf they perform their share of all the labor required on the plantation. They plough, drag, drive team, clear wild lands, work on the highway, and so forth. Some planters, owning large cotton and sugar plantations, have none other than the labor of slave women. Such an one is Jim Burns, who lives on the north shore of the bayou, opposite the plantation of John Fogaman.

On our arrival in the brake, Eldret promised me, if I worked well, I might go up to visit my friends at Ford's in four weeks. On Saturday night of the fifth week, I reminded him of his promise, when he told me I had done so well, that I might go. I had set my heart upon it, and Eldret's announcement thrilled me with pleasure. I was to return in time to commence the labors of the day on Tuesday morning.

While indulging the pleasant anticipation of so soon meeting my old friends again, suddenly the hateful

An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds. A slave who is accustomed to picking, is punished, if he or she brings in a less quantity than that. There is a great difference among them as regards this kind of labor. Some of them seem to have a natural knack, or quickness, which enables them to pick with great celerity, and with both hands, while others, with whatever practice or industry, are utterly unable to come up to the ordinary standard. Such hands are taken from the cotton field and employed in other business. Patsey, of whom I shall have more to say, was known as the most remarkable cotton picker on Bayou Bœuf. She picked with both hands and with such surprising rapidity, that five hundred pounds a day was not unusual for her.

Each one is tasked, therefore, according to his picking abilities, none, however, to come short of two hundred weight. I, being unskillful always in that business, would have satisfied my master by bringing in the latter quantity, while on the other hand, Patsey would surely have been beaten if she failed to produce twice as much.

The cotton grows from five to seven feet high, each



Massive Scale of the Exploitation
Massive Violence of the Exploitation

required a

Massive Story of Legitimation
Scurrilous Ideology of Justification

Enslaver

Exploiter

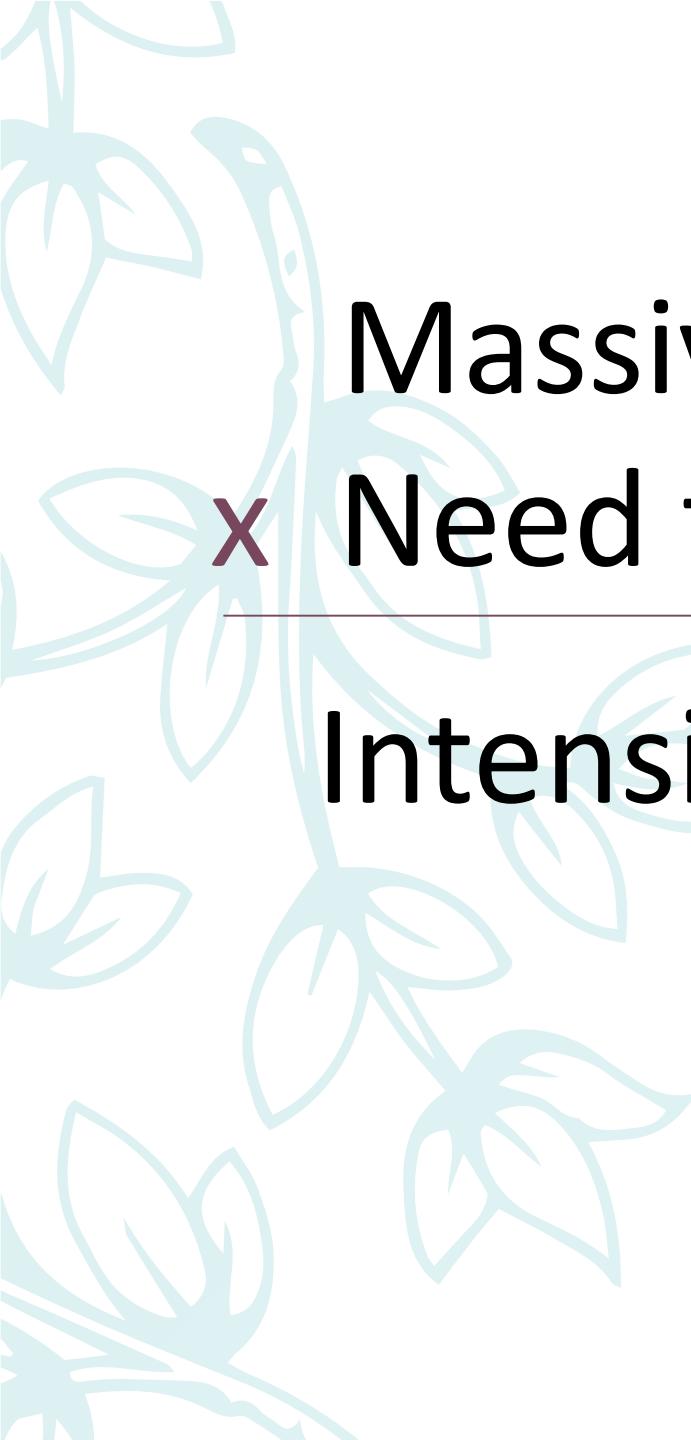
Unequal Power Relations Require
Strategies of Legitimation

Enslaved

Exploited

History

**Stigmatize
the Exploited**



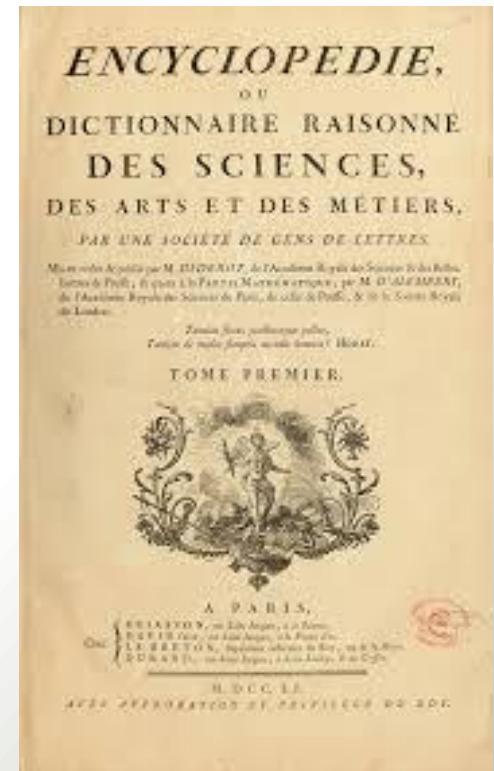
Massive Exploitation

✗ Need for Legitimation/Justification

Intensity of Anti-Black Racism

Propagation of Anti-Blackness

“always vicious...mostly inclined to lasciviousness, vengeance, theft and lies...”
—Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers

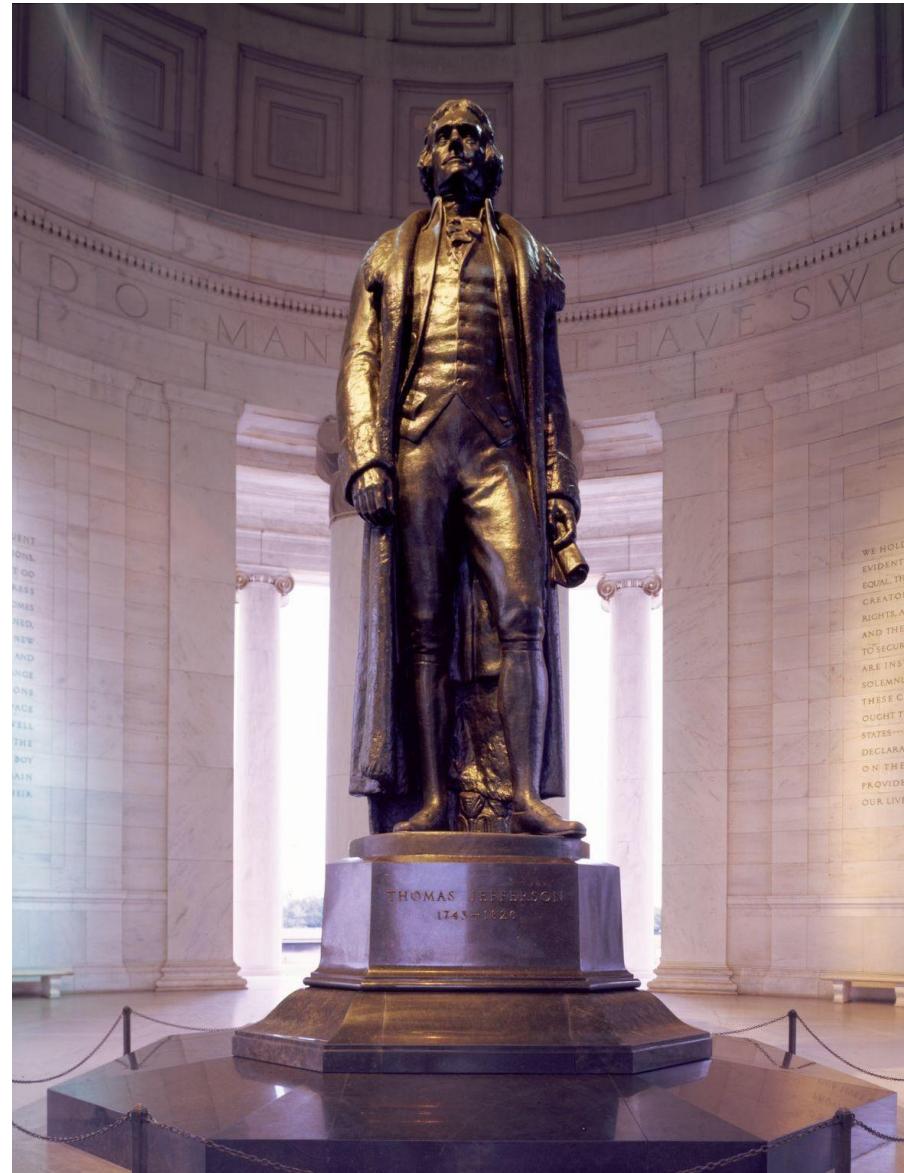
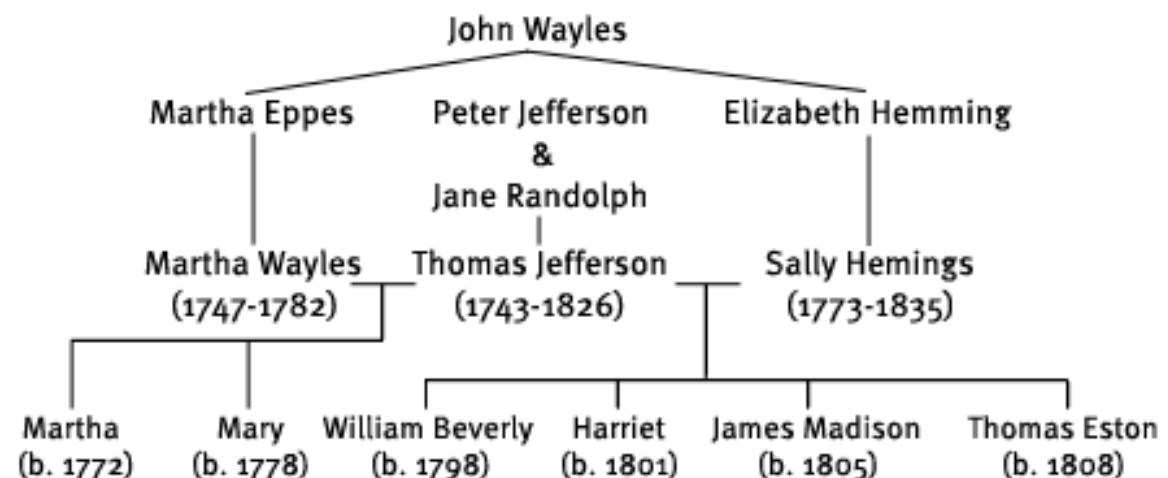


d. 1784

Propagation of Anti-Blackness

“I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.”

—Thomas Jefferson



d. 1826

1863

American Slavery

Anti-blackness

Propagation of Anti-Blackness

“...on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours.”
—Abraham Lincoln



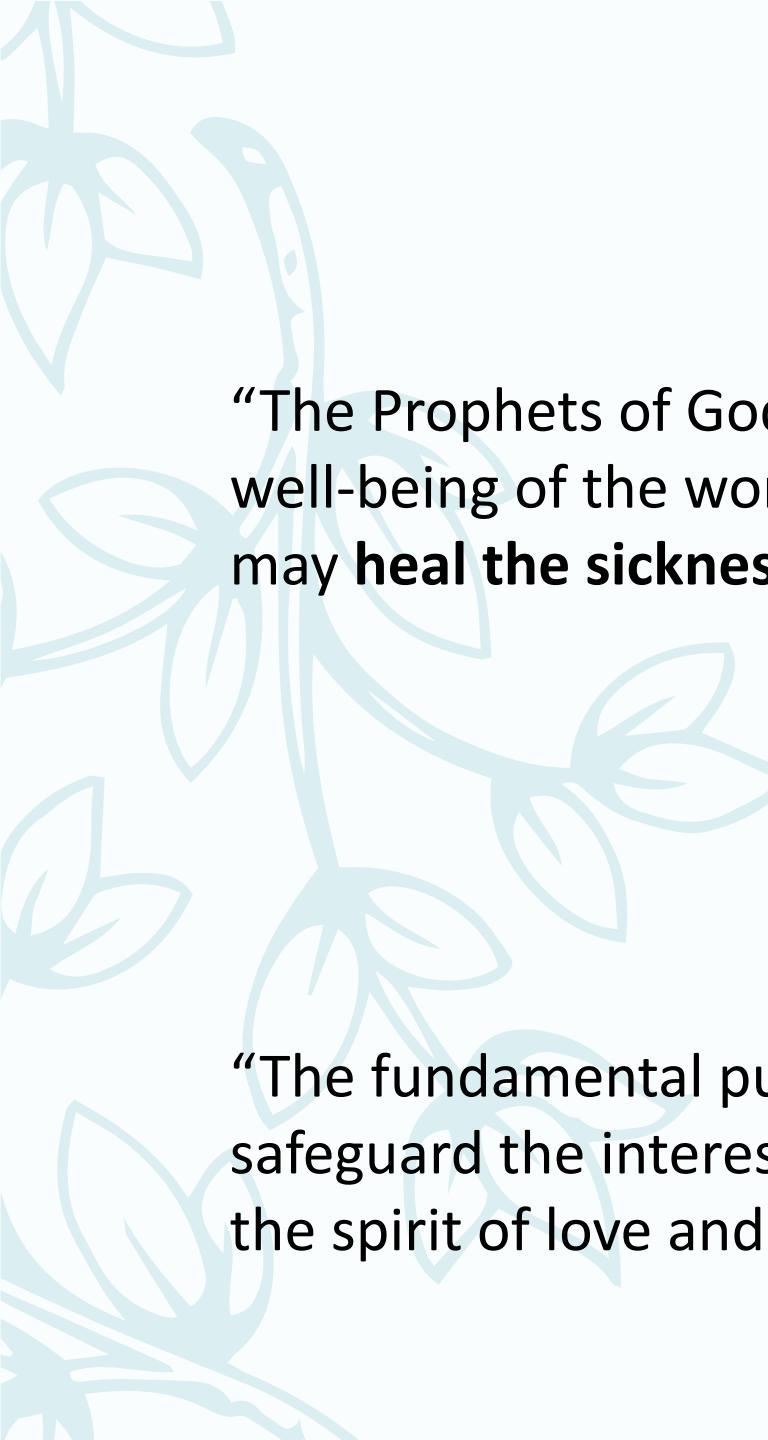
Refutation of Anti-Blackness

Pupil of the Eye as “epistemological rupture”

Pupil of the Eye as Instrument that overturns Anti-Blackness

“Bahá'u'lláh... once compared the colored people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it, and **through it the light of the spirit shineth forth.**”

— ‘Abdu'l-Bahá



Pupil of the Eye as Instrument of the Divine Physician

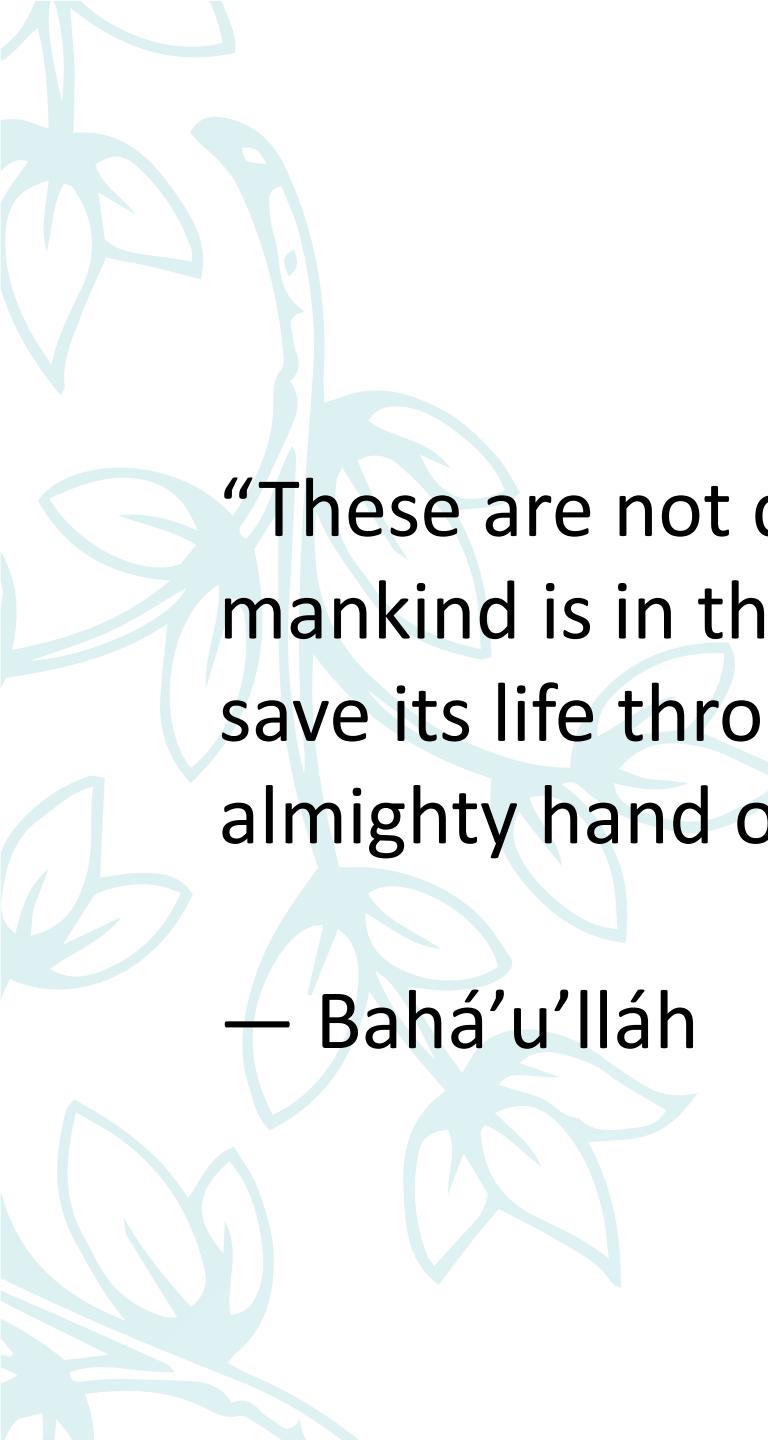
“The Prophets of God should be regarded as **physicians** whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may **heal the sickness of a divided humanity.**”

— Bahá’u’lláh

Pupil of the Eye as Instrument that creates unity

“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the **unity of the human race**, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men.”

— Bahá’u’lláh



Pupil of the Eye as Medicine

“These are not days of prosperity and triumph. The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the **wholesome medicine** which the almighty hand of the unerring **Physician** hath prepared.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

The Pupil of the Eye is one part of a “Wondrous System”

“Therefore, the friends must effectively assess the forces at work in their society and, beginning in neighborhoods and clusters, contribute their share to the process of learning and systematization which, as their numbers, knowledge, and influence grow, will transform their lives, families, and communities. **Only** if the efforts to eradicate the bane of prejudice are coherent with the full range of the community’s affairs, **only** if they arise naturally within the systematic pattern of expansion, community building, and involvement with society, will the American believers expand their capacity, year after year and decade after decade, to make their mark on their community and society and contribute to the high aim set for the Bahá’ís by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to eliminate racial prejudice from the face of the earth.”

— The Universal House of Justice (From a letter dated 10 April 2011)