Still Living in the Master's House 250 Years Later

Tasfia Ahmad

On the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, over a million people file through the National Archives to quietly stare at a fading piece of parchment, treating it as a kind of secular scripture (Schaeffer). For many of them, the document functions like a sacred text. I do not meet it as scripture. When I think about the Declaration, I hear Audre Lorde's warning: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 110). The Declaration is one of those tools, crafted for a very specific master, for a very specific house. It was never meant to free me, my family, or my community; it was designed to secure the freedom and property of white men. And yet this same document is constantly invoked as if it were the universal blueprint for freedom and equality. This tension, between what the Declaration claims and what it was built to protect, is where its relevance to me and to American democracy lives.

Audre Lorde's quote refuses the fantasy that we can use the master's tools to remake the world in our image (Lorde 110). The Declaration is one of those tools: its language is elegant, but it is a tool of a project that did not include Black people, Indigenous people, women, or colonized people as full humans (Hannah-Jones). The famous line, "all men are created equal," made equality sound natural and universal, but "men" meant white, propertied, colonial men; everyone else was already written out of the story (Hannah-Jones). The "self-evident" truths were self-evident only to those whose power the document enshrined. Frederick Douglass understood this clearly a mere 76 years after the Declaration, when he asked, "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?" and answered that it was "a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim" (Douglass). To him, white Americans' celebration of liberty was "a sham…your boasted liberty, an unholy license…a thin veil to cover up crimes" (Douglass). Douglass did not view the Fourth of July, or the Declaration behind it, as neutral ground that enslaved people could simply claim; he believed it was a ritual masking their continued captivity. His words expose how the "master's house" was already fortified by 1852, built from ideals that were never meant to include him.

That is why I cannot pretend that the Declaration is a neutral instrument that I can simply pick up and use to promote freedom and equality for my community. At the moment of its signing, Black people were enslaved, Native land was being seized and depopulated, women were legally folded into men's identities, and the Declaration's authors knew all of this and wrote anyway (Hannah-Jones). The master's house was not an accident; it was the point. To act as if the Declaration naturally belongs to all of us is to misname the house and misrecognize the tools.

At the same time, I live in a country where that language, "all men are created equal," "unalienable rights," "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," is constantly cited in courts, classrooms, protests, and speeches as evidence that America was always meant to be better than it is (National Constitution Center; Museum of the American Revolution). Abolitionists, suffragists, civil rights leaders, and queer activists have repeatedly thrown the Declaration's words back at the state, insisting that "even by your own standard, you are failing" (Museum of the American Revolution). Frederick Douglass himself did this in the very speech where he condemned American hypocrisy, reminding his audience that the principles of justice and liberty "bequeathed by your fathers" were

enjoyed by them, not by him (Douglass). In that tradition, the master's tools can be turned into mirrors. But they remain his tools.

Personally, the Declaration is less a source of pride and more an inheritance I never requested. I move through institutions, the schools I attend, the laws that govern my body, the immigration categories that defined my family, that treat the Declaration as their founding myth. In that myth, the story begins with a courageous declaration against British tyranny and ends with a new nation committed to liberty. What disappears in that story are people like me, whose freedom was either delayed for centuries or remains conditional (Hannah-Jones).

I grew up hearing a familiar, hopeful script—each generation removes one more tool from the master's house. My mother and grandmother believed that if they worked hard, adapted, and learned to use the system's language, they could loosen its grip on us. They did everything the master's narrative says one is supposed to do: study, work, sacrifice, obey, and they did see some tools removed. Jim Crow fell; formal segregation was outlawed; voting rights were, at least on paper, expanded. Yet even as some tools were dismantled, new ones were forged: mass incarceration, racialized surveillance, exclusionary zoning, predatory lending, and other mechanisms that maintain racial hierarchy (Solomon et al.; Pager and Shepherd).

Social scientists today describe this as the "enduring imprint of structural racism," noting that racialized structures "persist due to their consistent defense and reinforcement" across housing, education, health care, and criminal justice systems (Bova-Hiatt et al. 2). Studies of discrimination in employment, housing, and credit markets have documented that Black Americans and other racialized groups receive worse treatment than comparable white applicants, even when laws formally prohibit discrimination (Pager and Shepherd 183–84). Research on intergenerational trauma and "post-traumatic slave syndrome" argues that the psychological and social impact of slavery and racial terror reverberates across hundreds of years and multiple generations (DeGruy; Bryant-Davis and Comas-Díaz). These findings confirm what my family's story already knew: the house adjusts; the architecture remains.

On the Declaration's 250th anniversary, I feel that generational fatigue. I do not want my children, or their children, to spend their lives learning how to wield the master's tools just well enough to survive inside his house. In an optimistic lens, I hope they will live far enough away from that house that they do not recognize the tools at all, that they inherit a different vocabulary of freedom, one not rooted in being tolerated or finally included in a narrative that was never written for them. But I also recognize the pessimism inside that hope: my mother and her mother already wished for the same thing. The very fact that I am still writing about "the master's house" and "the master's tools" shows how much the structure continues, even as individual tools are removed. The Declaration's ongoing significance becomes even clearer when I place it next to another struggle that matters deeply to me: the liberation of Bangladesh. The American Declaration was a declaration of separation from Britain that led to a war for independence; the Bangladeshi struggle, culminating in 1971, was not simply about separation but about existence itself (Islam; "Bangabandhu Declares").

In 1971, the Pakistani military launched "Operation Searchlight," a coordinated campaign of massacres, mass rape, targeted killings of intellectuals, and the destruction of villages across East Pakistan (Genocide Watch; Boissoneault). Estimates of the death toll range from hundreds of thousands to as many as three million people; millions more were displaced as refugees. Decades later, organizations such as Genocide Watch and the Lemkin Institute formally recognized these

atrocities as genocide, describing them as “a systematic policy” intended to destroy a substantial part of the Bengali ethnic and national group and a substantial part of the Bengali Hindu religious group (Genocide Watch). Bangladesh’s independence was born in blood, in mass graves, in the systematic attempt to silence a people’s existence.

The language surrounding Bangladesh’s declaration of independence and its subsequent constitution emphasizes “equality, human dignity and social justice” and grounds sovereignty in “the will of the people” (Sarkar). For Bengalis, independence was not primarily about escaping taxes or parliamentary subordination; it was about the right to speak Bangla without punishment, to live as Bengalis without being marked for extermination (Islam). Independence was the line between annihilation and survival. The difference matters. The American Declaration, for all its lofty language, was about being independent to be free to “do one’s thing,” to trade, to govern, to expand without British interference (Hannah-Jones). The Bangladeshi struggle was about independence to exist at all, to have one’s suffering acknowledged, to prevent further genocide (Genocide Watch). Independence in the American sense is often framed as freedom; independence in the Bangladeshi sense was closer to sovereignty and recognition: a declaration that a people exist and have a right to remain. Freedom versus sovereignty, freedom versus recognition: those are not the same. And yet, in American discourse, the Declaration is often presented as if its version of freedom is the universal template for all liberation movements (Council on Foreign Relations).

For me, as someone shaped by both American and Bangladeshi histories, this mismatch exposes another limitation of the master’s tools. The Declaration’s language does not fully capture what my family’s history in Bangladesh needed: not just freedom, but safety from annihilation; not just rights, but acknowledgement that the violence even happened. Even today, campaigns for international recognition of the 1971 genocide continue, highlighting the “political, social, and legal barriers” to full acknowledgement (Islam; Genocide Watch). When American politicians hold up the Declaration as inspiration for the “world’s struggles for freedom,” I think about how easily Bangladesh’s genocide is minimized or politicized, how the recognition of that suffering still depends on the interests of powerful states. It is hard to view the Declaration as a universal beacon when I know how many struggles for mere existence remain unrecognized. Despite all of this, the Declaration does have a strange, stubborn relevance to the future of democracy in America, not because it is pure, but because it has become a contested site where the definition of democracy itself is fought over. On its 250th anniversary, people stand in the Rotunda at the National Archives and project their hopes and disappointments onto that document (Schaeffer). Some visitors see proof that the United States is a “beacon” for the world; others see a symbol of promises still unfulfilled. That tension reflects American democracy itself: deeply aspirational, deeply compromised, and deeply invested in its own origin myth.

Historically, movements for abolition, civil rights, women’s suffrage, and LGBTQ+ liberation have often quoted the Declaration back at the state, using its language to expose its hypocrisy (Museum of the American Revolution). Black abolitionists in the nineteenth century argued passionately for an end to slavery by citing the contradiction between “all men are created equal” and the continued bondage of millions (Museum of the American Revolution). Douglass did this when he described the Fourth of July as a day that “brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie” (Douglass). In the twentieth century, Langston Hughes wrote in his poem “Democracy” that he was “tired of waiting” for rights others took for granted,

insisting that democracy "will not come…through compromise and fear" (Hughes). These voices used the language of American freedom to highlight who remained outside its protection. Contemporary polling shows how conflicted Americans remain about these ideals. A 2024 survey by Nationhood Lab found that 97 percent of Americans agree we are obligated to protect one another's natural rights as defined in the Declaration, yet support fractures when respondents are asked about specific policies or about rights claims made by marginalized groups (Woodard and Nationhood Lab). Pew Research has found that white Americans are sharply divided on whether the country has gone far enough in giving Black people equal rights; while most Black Americans say the legacy of slavery continues to shape their position in society, many white Americans deny that ongoing impact (Horowitz et al.). This gap between near-universal affirmation of abstract principles and deep disagreement about their application suggests that the Declaration functions as a shared slogan more than a shared commitment. The master's tools are admired, but not equally wielded.

This is where Lorde's warning cuts sharply. Quoting the Declaration to the state, demanding that it live up to "all men are created equal," might win concessions, rights, and reforms. It might allow us to "beat him at his own game" for a time. But as Lorde insists, that does not dismantle the house (Lorde 110). The structure that decides who counts as "man," whose suffering is recognized, whose death is mourned, remains largely intact (Baldwin; Du Bois). Using the Declaration as a benchmark might help correct certain injustices, but it also risks reinforcing the idea that the Declaration, and the nation it birthed, are the ultimate horizon of justice, rather than one historical arrangement among many.

For American democracy, this means the Declaration functions as both anchor and limit. It anchors national identity in a story of rebellion and rights, which can inspire resistance to new forms of authoritarianism or exclusion (Hannah-Jones). At the same time, it limits our political imagination to what can be articulated as "rights" within the existing system, instead of inviting us to ask more radical questions: What would it mean to build a democracy not grounded in conquest and racial hierarchy? What would it mean to start our political story somewhere other than Philadelphia in 1776? Scholars such as Hannah-Jones argue that "our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written" and that Black Americans, not the founders, have been the ones to force the country closer to its professed ideals (Hannah-Jones). That perspective relocates the center of American democracy away from the parchment on display and toward the people who were excluded from it.

Consequently, what relevance does the Declaration have to me personally? It is relevant in the way a family secret is relevant: I cannot escape it, but I refuse to be defined by it. I am not interested in sentimental patriotism that treats the Declaration as sacred, nor in simple rejection that pretends it has no power. I am interested in the uncomfortable space of claiming, refusing, and rewriting. Poets and artists have begun to model what that rewriting can look like. Smith's erasure poem "Declaration" takes the original text of the Declaration and removes words until a different story emerges: one that centers slavery and the violence embedded in the founding (Smith). As one critic notes, Smith's poem "turns Jefferson's words against themselves," transforming lines like "He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people" into a haunting fragment, "he has plundered our-/ravaged our-/destroyed the lives of our-," that forces readers to confront who that "our" really was (Mingo). In this way, Smith both uses and refuses the

master's tools, exposing the erasures inside the original document by performing a new erasure of her own.

Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* does something similar at the level of everyday life, documenting the "mounting racial aggressions" that mark Black existence in a supposedly post–civil rights democracy (Rankine). Her work insists that citizenship and equality cannot be measured solely by legal rights; they must be measured by whose pain is normalized, whose anger is policed, whose very presence is treated as a threat. Together with Douglass, Hughes, Wheatley, and many others, these poets form a counter-archive to the Declaration, a record of how people excluded from the founding have narrated their own relationship to its promises and betrayals (Wheatley; Hughes). I claim the right to read the Declaration critically, to see its beautiful phrases as evidence of the master's fluency rather than as a guarantee of my safety. I refuse the demand to be grateful for a freedom that was never meant for me, to perform patriotism that erases the cost paid by enslaved people, Indigenous nations, colonized populations, migrant workers, and genocide survivors for this "experiment" in democracy (Solomon et al.). And I commit to rewriting, building political language and practices that do not depend on being extensions of that founding moment. For the future of democracy in America, this means moving beyond the idea that the Declaration is a finished script we must simply learn to interpret correctly.

Instead, we can treat it as one document in a much larger archive of struggles, alongside the speeches of abolitionists, the testimonies of genocide survivors, the demands of workers and migrants, the songs and stories of people whose names never appear in founding narratives (Douglass; Genocide Watch). A democratic future worth living in will not be one where everyone finally agrees that the Declaration was perfect all along. It will be one where we admit that our current house was built with tools that were never meant to serve all and then choose to build something else. The "something else" is not yet fully visible. It will be shaped by people who, like my mother and grandmother, have already spent lifetimes negotiating with the master's house, and by people who refuse to accept that house as the inevitable setting of their lives. It may borrow some language from the Declaration, but it will not be confined to its categories. It will ask not only, "Who has rights?" but "Who is safe?", "Who is remembered?", "Whose existence is never up for debate?" It will take seriously the lessons of Bangladesh and other struggles where the fight was not for the freedom to act, but for the right to exist and to be recognized (Islam; Council on Foreign Relations).

At 250, the Declaration of Independence is less a moral compass and more a mirror. It shows us what this country chose to care about at its founding and what it chose to ignore. My relationship with it is defined by that knowledge. I cannot use the master's tools to dismantle his house, but I can use my understanding of those tools to refuse their inevitability, to teach my children that they are not the only tools available, and to join others in imagining structures where no one's freedom depends on another person's erasure. That is the relevance of the Declaration to me, and that is the challenge it poses to the future of democracy in America: not to perfect the house we inherited, but to build a world where houses like that are no longer possible.

References

Baldwin, James. "James Baldwin and the Moral Crisis of American Democracy." *YouTube*, uploaded by NYPL The New York Public Library, 11 Oct. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=[insert ID].

Boissoneault, Lorraine. “The Genocide the U.S. Can’t Remember, but Bangladesh Can’t Forget.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 16 Dec. 2016, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/.

Bova-Hiatt, Anne, et al. “Measuring the Enduring Imprint of Structural Racism on American Neighborhoods.” *Health Affairs*, vol. 42, no. 11, 2023, doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2023.00643.

Bryant-Davis, Thema, and Lillian Comas-Díaz. “Psychological Trauma and Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome.” *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2016, pp. 397–402.

Council on Foreign Relations. “How Self-Determination Shaped the Modern World.” *CFR Education*, education.cfr.org/resources/how-self-determination-shaped-modern-world.

DeGruy, Joy. *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005.

Douglass, Frederick. “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” *Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Philip S. Foner, Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, pp. 188–206.

Du Bois, W. E. B. “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” *The Souls of Black Folk*, A. C. McClurg, 1903, pp. 1–10.

Genocide Watch. “Recognition of the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971.” 2022.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written. Black Americans Have Fought to Make Them True.” *The New York Times Magazine*, 18 Aug. 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html.

Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, et al. “Race in America 2019.” *Pew Research Center*, 9 Apr. 2019, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/.

Hughes, Langston. “Democracy.” *One-Way Ticket*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.

Islam, Taj Hashmi. “The Bangladesh Genocide: A Call for Recognition and Justice.” *International Affairs Forum*, 2019, ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?ContentID=9840.

Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 110–114.

Mingo, Michael. “Tracy K. Smith’s ‘Declaration’: An Analysis.” *Michael Mingo’s Blog*, 23 Feb. 2019, mgerardmingo.com/2019/02/24/tracy-k-smith-declaration/.

Museum of the American Revolution. *Member Preview of "the Declaration's Journey."* 2025, www.amrevmuseum.org/events/member-preview-of-the-declaration-s-journey. Accessed 28 Apr. 2026.

National Constitution Center. National Constitution Center, constitutioncenter.org.

Pager, Devah, and Hana Shepherd. "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 34, 2008, pp. 181–209.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

Sarker, Probir Kumar. "March 7, 1971: Bangabandhu Declares Independence, Tactically." *Dhaka Tribune*, 6 Mar. 2023, www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/306265/march-7-1971-bangabandhu-declares-independence.

Schaeffer, Katherine. "On July 4, How Americans See Their Country and Democracy." *Pew Research Center*, 29 June 2022, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/30/how-americans-see-their-country-and-their-democracy/.

Smith, Tracy K. "Declaration." *Poetry Foundation*, 2026, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147468/declaration-5b5a286052461.

Solomon, Danyelle, et al. "Systematic Inequality and American Democracy." *Center for American Progress*, 13 Feb. 2023, www.americanprogress.org/article/systematic-inequality-american-democracy/.

Wheatley, Phillis. "On Being Brought from Africa to America." *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, A. Bell, 1773.

Woodard, Colin, and Nationhood Lab. "Survey Results: Americans Overwhelmingly Oppose Election Subversion, Aggressive Book Bans but Split over the Role of Government." *Nationhood Lab*, 16 Sept. 2024, www.nationhoodlab.org/survey-results-americans-overwhelmingly-oppose-election-subversion-aggressive-book-bans-but-split-over-the-role-of-government/.