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***Keynote address to the General Assembly’s meeting to commemorate the International Day of
Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade***

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Good morning.

It is my deepest honor to speak before you today on this day of international remembrance of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. I have dedicated my life’s work to excavating the modern legacy of transatlantic slavery, and so my thoughts are never far from what has become the defining subject of my journalism, and what I believe continues to be the defining undercurrent of life in the Americas – the legacy of slavery.

I stand before you the great-great-grandchild of enslaved men and women born here in the United States of America, part of the millions who lived and died under the brutal, immoral and inhumane system of chattel slavery that existed for the first 250 years of the land that would come to think of itself as the freest nation in the history of the world.

We gather here to mark the global trade that took some 15 million beloved human beings across the Atlantic in the hulls of barbaric ships, the largest forced migration in the history of the world, one that would reshape the entire Atlantic world and transform the global economy. We must never forget the scale and the depth of the horrors that people of African descent suffered in the name of profit, profit that enriched the European colonial powers and built the nascent economy of the United States. We must never forget how the systems of slavery collapsed only to be reborn in other models of violent and racist economic exploitation, such as what we benignly call Jim Crow in the United States, but what is more aptly called apartheid.

But on this solemn day of remembrance, the looking back cannot be and should not be solely defined by African-descended people’s enslavement. Just as defining, just as important to remembering the legacy of the transatlantic slavery, are the stories of Black resistance that would, more than any other force, lead to slavery’s collapse in our hemisphere.

No people voluntarily submit to their enslavement. And by obscuring the role of Black resistance in our collective rememberings of the transatlantic slave trade, we continue to do the work of those who sought to justify slavery by stripping us of our collective humanity.

People of African descent resisted their enslavement from the moment of their capture. They resisted on the long walk from the interior of Africa to the coast. They resisted in the castles before being dragged out to the waiting ships. They resisted so frequently on the water that slave ships had to be specially designed to try to prevent mutiny. The ocean became the final resting place of thousands of Africans who resisted by choosing a final swim with the ancestors over enslavement in a strange land.

As we remember our brutal enslavement by people who believed themselves to be civilized even as they tortured, abused and murdered other human beings for profit, for sugar for their tea, for molasses

for their rum, for cotton to wear, and for tobacco to smoke, we must remember most the fierce Black radical tradition of resistance that did not begin with anti-colonialism efforts on the continent or with civil rights movements in the United States and other places, but with, as the scholar Cedric Robinson argued, the Cimarrones of Mexico who ran away to Indigenous communities or formed their own fugitive communities known as palenques. We must remember Yanga, who led a community of fugitive Africans and fought the Spaniards so fiercely that they won their status as a free Black settlement.

We must remember Brazil's quilombolas, including Palmares, a fugitive Black community that would endure for 90 years in the Portuguese colony, that would import more Africans into slavery than anywhere else in the Atlantic world.

We must remember the Maroons of British and French Guiana, Cuba and the United States, and the "Bush Negros" of Suriname who fought against their oppressors for five decades as they were attempting to re-enslave them.

We must remember the revolts of enslaved people in Jamaica in 1690, New York City in 1712, Queen Nanny in 1720, the Stono Rebellion in 1739, and Tacky's Rebellion in 1760. We must remember the successful uprising of enslaved people – the most successful uprising of enslaved people – in the history of the world, the Haitian Revolution, where enslaved people rose up and defeated three mighty colonial empires, becoming the first nation in the Americas to abolish slavery and establishing the world's first free Black Republic, an audacity that the Western world has punished Haiti for ever since.

We must remember revolts in Barbados in 1816, the Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831 and Nat Turner's rebellion that same year in the United States, as Black people attempted to make manifest the words of Patrick Henry, the famed American revolutionary, who proclaimed "Give me liberty or give me death!" – even as he enslaved African human beings for profit. We must remember freedom fighters such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and Gabriel Prosser.

We must remember that it was not merely the enlightenment ideas, some reckoning amongst white abolitionists, that brought the end to this system that had enriched colonial powers, but that abolition was propelled by constant revolt that forced colonial powers to realize that, as scholar Mary Reckford, wrote, it would remain "more expensive and dangerous to maintain the old system than to abolish it." Black people were actors in their own freedom.

Obscuring and marginalizing stories of Black resistance serves to justify the hypocrisy of colonial Europe and the United States by insinuating that, had slavery been so bad, surely African peoples would have fought harder against it. These are lies of omission that in the absence of truth warp our collective memory.

Resistance, therefore, must be central to any remembrances of the transatlantic slave trade, and must, therefore, be connected to the ongoing resistance movements in the fight for Black liberation across the globe.

I stand here before you today, a recipient of that tradition of resistance.

My father was born in a little shack in 1945 on a cotton plantation in Greenwood, Mississippi. He was born into a family of sharecroppers, the violently enforced system of labor exploitation that emerged at the end of slavery. He was born into a strictly apartheid state – one where Black people could not vote,

could not use the public library, could not attend schools with white children, and were lynched for things such as starting a union, walking into a room where a white woman was alone, failing to get off of the sidewalk fast enough in deference to a white person, or the greatest crime of all in the American South – having the audacity to be a financially prosperous Black person. In Greenwood in the 1940s, life was so devastating that Black children could be put to the fields as early as the age of 3 to start carrying water to workers. So, when my father was two years old, my grandmother, Arlena Paul, a Black woman sharecropper, packed a suitcase and loaded her two young children on a northbound train and escaped the apartheid of the American South.

My grandmother had a fourth-grade education and she would spend the rest of her life as a domestic and a janitor – but that single act of resistance, leaving the racial caste system of the American South with nothing but the determination that her own children would not pick cotton like she had, like her parents had, like her enslaved grandparents before her had, set in motion the events that would lead me to stand before this distinguished body today, addressing this most esteemed convening, representing all of the nations of the world. Hers was an act of resistance that mirrored those of millions of enslaved Black people who resisted every day in ways big and small. She, like our ancestors, resisted in order to plant the seed for freedoms and opportunities that she would never see for herself.

And it is this history, this understanding, that leads me to argue that the defining story of the African diaspora in the Americas is not slavery, but our resistance to it, of people determined to be free in societies that did not believe they had a right to freedom.

We must acknowledge this history as the legacy of slavery can be seen all around us. Today the descendants of slavery fight to resist their conditions in the societies that once enslaved them. They suffer the highest rates of poverty, the highest rates of incarceration, the highest rates of death and the highest rates of violence. And the tradition of resistance continues – in protests against police violence and inequality from Brazil to Cuba to the United States.

But we, the people of the African diaspora, should not have to find ourselves still resisting. It is long past time for the European colonial powers, for the United States of America, to live up to their own professed ideas, to become the great and moral nations that they believe themselves to be. It is not enough to simply regret what was done in the past; they are obligated to repair it.

As I stand before representatives of the countries that once enslaved African peoples and the peoples who were once enslaved, as we collectively remember this day, the way for me to honor those who toiled and died and fought is to say this clearly and without flinching: It is time for the nations that engaged in and profited from the transatlantic slave trade to do what is right and what is just.

It is time for them to make reparations to the descendants of chattel slavery in the Americas. This is our global truth, the truth we as human beings understand with stark clarity: there can be no atonement if there is no repair. It is time, it is long past time, for reparations for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and all the devastation that it has wrought, and all the devastation that it continues to reap.

I thank you very much for your attention as we all remember this crime against humanity together. Thank you.