

Book Review: The 1619 Project

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The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story. 2021. Eds. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Gaitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jake Silverstein. New York: One World. (Cloth, ISBN 9780593230589; ebook: 9780593230572).

Origins of this award winning anthology emanate from the *New York Times Magazine* that “began in August 2021, the four hundredth anniversary of the beginning of American slavery.” It reveals a disturbing “vision of the American past and present.”

History need not be deterministic, Eric Foner contends. However, it may take a century or more to correct the errors of the past. We grew up learning about the glory of the founding fathers and the ideology of 1776 without knowing much about 1619:

In late August 1619, a ship arrived in the British colony of Virginia bearing a cargo of somewhere between twenty and thirty enslaved people from Africa. Their arrival led to the barbaric and unprecedented system of American chattel slavery that would last for nearly 250 years. This is sometimes referred to as our country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the source of so much that still defines the United States¹.

The editors have avoided using terms like the “slave.” “Enslaved person” contextualizes the narrative of chattel slavery. Two hundred and forty four years before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and a year before the arrival of the fabled *Mayflower*, the *White Lion* sailed into the muddy waters of Jamestown and dropped about 30 enslaved Africans, August 1619. Somehow their arrival was never recognized, nor ever discussed. The plight of this obscured human cargo

¹It’s the opening statement on the left blurb of the cover. All citations are from the book under review.

defines the essence of America and her DNA. Modern history owes a tremendous debt to the genius of Nokole Hannah-Jones, the main editor, who had the courage and conviction to excavate the truth buried under the hideous mountains of bigoted falsehood, cruelty, and *White Privilege*.

The backlash against this book and its creators has been fiercely unkind and hypocritical. Lately, the Trumpian red states have passed laws to ban the teaching of the so-called Critical Race Theory. Nothing could be more disingenuous than lynching of truth at the altar of lies and falsification. Narratives of black lives—which matter—have been marginalized. This book is decidedly a monumental achievement that unravels the legacy of 1619, its damning truths, and the horrors of American anti-blackness and brutality of slavery².

What is “chattel slavery”? I called 10 people and no one answered my question. Certain facts unraveled by different authors are heartbreaking: Hannah-Jones contends that colonists fought the Revolutionary war to preserve slavery. Historian Mathew Desmond shows how slavery has shaped capitalism and workplace norms. Jamelle Bouie compares pre-slavery politics with present day Alt-right ideology³. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, David Brio Davis asserts “Tyranny is a central theme of American history” and “racial exploitation and racial conflict have been part of the DNA of American culture.” Quoted by Hannah-Jones, Ch. I on Democracy: 29). The following quotes from this essay on Democracy reveal what Americans hardly remember:

In June 1776, as Thomas Jefferson famously composed his avowed words on the inalienable rights of “Life, Liberty and pursuit of Happiness,” a teenage boy named Robert Hemings, “half-Black brother of Jefferson’s wife Martha, born to her father and a woman he enslaved” awaited nearby to serve at his master’s beck and call.... Later, Jefferson chose this boy from amongst “130 enslaved people who worked on the forced labor-camp he called Monticello” to accompany him to Philadelphia. (Text: 12)

“Chattel slavery,” Hannah-Jones depicts, “was not conditional but racial.” A harrowing account of this inhuman condition is painted below:

It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of Black people born were not recognized as human beings but were

² It’s worth a note to say a few words about a miniaturized version of this book—containing about 20 pages or less—released by the University Press in paper: *The 1619 Project: A Brief History*, 2021 (TX: Coppel). It’s summary is stated in these words: “This short book peels back the veil and provides a clear-eyed glimpse into the explosive history of the 1619 Project—a glimpse that you can read in about an hour.” This expensive booklet is an incomplete and inadequate introduction to a historical tragedy.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_1619_Project (Retrieved. 3/6/2022; highly recommended website for those who cannot access this authentic book)

considered property that could be mortgaged , traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently.... Enslaved people had no claim to their children who could be bought, sold, or traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle, or behind storefronts that advertized NEGROES FOR SALE. (p. 12; quoted as original)

Eighteen Chapters are expertly written—and arranged in accordance with their context rather than chronology—by distinguished historians and journalists on varying aspects of the African American experiences. Each chapter has an archival photograph, and/or a poem, or an authentic piece of fiction which humanize historical injustices:

Democracy	<i>Nikole Hannah-Jones</i>
Race	<i>Dorothy Roberts</i>
Sugar	<i>Khalil Gibran Muhammad</i>
Fear	<i>Khalil Gibran Muhammad</i>
Fear	<i>Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander</i>
Dispossession	<i>Tiya Miles</i>
Capitalism	<i>Mathew Desmond</i>
Politics	<i>Jamelle Bouie</i>
Citizenship	<i>Martha S. Jones</i>
Self-Defense	<i>Carole Anderson</i>
Punishment	<i>Bryan Stevenson</i>
Inheritance	<i>Trymaine Lee</i>
Medicine	<i>Linda Villarosa</i>
Church	<i>Anthea Butler</i>
Music	<i>Wesley Morris</i>
Healthcare	<i>Janeen Interlandi</i>
Traffic	<i>Kevin M. Kruse</i>
Progress	<i>Ibram X. Kendi</i>
Justice	<i>Nikole Hannah-Jones</i>

The relevance of *The 1619 Project* in this journal cannot be overstated. Our studies of economic and social aspects of developing nations—in isolation from their impoverished past—tend to avoid “the third rail” of colonial–imperial subjugation. Capacity-building and empowerment models of Social Development (SD) neither heal nor mitigate the wounds “branded” on the *Third World* psyche. The violence and terror of their horrid past is embedded in the post-war developmental programs and projects. What is dubbed as *Whiteman’s Burden* conceals white-guilt which, I believe, implies “crimes against humanity.”

The 1619 Project vividly attests to the roots of racism in the United States and beyond. This 590 page book offers an encyclopedic view most appropriately dedicated: *To the more than thirty million descendants of American slavery.*