

Colonial History and African Enslavement: Implications of the Expanded “New Origin Story: 1619 Project”

Nikole Hannah-Jones issues expanded version of a New York Time Magazine report as debates over education and voting rights rages throughout the United States

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African American woman journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones has released a nearly 600-page hardcover book entitled “A New Origin Story: The 1619 Project” as a continuation of the work which began with the release of a New York Times Magazine special issue during the Summer of 2019.

The year represented the 400th anniversary of the kidnapping and importation of approximately 20 Africans from Angola stolen from a Portuguese vessel and transported to the British colony of Virginia.

In August of 1619 the British settlers had occupied sections of what later became known as the State of Virginia for more than a decade. After the introduction of enslaved Africans in the colony, the plantation system accelerated through the production of tobacco and other agricultural commodities which required the acquisition of more human laborers who would never be paid for their work.

By the time of the separation between the British Crown and its possessions, there were 13 colonies extending from the southeast to the northeast of the territories. The formation of the United States of America during the latter decades of the 18th century did not end African enslavement or the confiscation of Indigenous land.

In fact, Hannah-Jones advances the argument made by other scholars that the unprecedented Somerset v. Stewart case of 1772 in Britain, where it was ruled by Lord Mansfield that, “ The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, more or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasions, and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory”, served to undermine the economic status of the Europeans colonized

by London in North America. Many interpreted the Somerset ruling as the beginning of the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade. (See [this](#))

Therefore, the political leadership of the colonial territories which later became the U.S., were motivated not by the ideals of freedom, due process, and electoral representation. They were compelled to break from the British monarchy in order to exert their own economic interests within the expanding world system based upon the Atlantic Slave Trade and the super-exploitation of African people throughout the Western Hemisphere.



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African enslavement and tobacco production (Source: Alamy)

The purported ideals of 1776 did not extend to the liberation of enslaved Africans across the country. For nearly a century after the Declaration of Independence from Britain, enslavement continued until the Civil War (1861-1865) within the U.S.

Hannah-Jones points out in Chapter I of the book that:

“Indeed, when the South seceded from the Union, white Confederates believed they were the inheritors of the founders’ revolutionary legacy and upholders of the true Constitution. Jefferson Davis gave his second inaugural address as president of the Confederate States of America on George Washington’s birthday, vowing that the Confederacy would ‘perpetuate the principles of our Revolutionary fathers. The day, the memory, and the purpose seem fitly associated.... We are in arms to renew such sacrifices as our fathers made to the holy cause of Constitutional liberty.’”

Even after the Civil War and the passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments along with

other Civil Rights Acts from 1866 through 1875, the overthrow of Reconstruction beginning in 1877 resulted in the reimposition of forced labor through peonage, sharecropping, tenant farming and the penal system. By the conclusion of the 19th century, the fallacious concepts of “separate but equal” had been firmly entrenched in U.S. Constitutional law requiring a decades-long struggle in the 20th century to claim the humanity of African people and other oppressed communities.

The new book is an interesting mix of historical essays and literary works. The poetry chapters are based upon significant historical conjunctures.

A variety of issues are discussed in the book including the role of the sugar industry in enslavement and colonialism; Black music; capitalism and its growth spawned by the Atlantic Slave Trade; the contradictions within democratic practice; the importance of fear; healthcare; the Black Church; punishment and the criminal justice system; etc.

Significance of the 1619 Project in the Present Period

The publication of the book comes at a time of contentious debate and political struggle over the status of African Americans and other oppressed peoples within the framework of the U.S. political and social system. Writers such as Hannah-Jones have come under attack by conservatives and liberals for the arguments made in both the New York Times Magazine and photographic supplement of 2019 and the subsequent popularity and praise.

In response to the Hannah-Jones and the New York Times publications, the former administration of President Donald J. Trump, commissioned the “1776 Project” in a hostile attempt to refute the work of African American journalists, artists and scholars who have developed alternative paradigms to the fictional narratives promoted by the educational system and popular culture.

Trump was not acting alone in his release of the “1776 Project” just days prior to his exit from office in 2021. The conservative movement in the U.S. views the ideological struggle over the contours of historical studies and other social sciences as a means to justify the censoring of African American studies, including the banning of books by Black and other people of color authors.

An [article published by Derrick Clifton of NBC News](#) in January 2021 says of the conservative effort:

“During the closing days of the Trump administration, the outgoing president fulfilled a promise to issue a report that promotes a ‘patriotic education’ about race and the birth of the nation. The ‘1776 Report,’ released on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, followed Donald Trump’s September announcement to form a commission to refute teachings on systemic racism, critical race theory, and deeper examinations of how slavery has affected American society. The ‘crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country,’ he said at the time.”

Yet this report does not complete the refutation of the 1619 Project. There is also the “1776 Project Political Action Committee” [which has declared its intentions saying](#):

“We are a political action committee dedicated to electing school board members nationwide who want to reform our public education system by promoting patriotism

and pride in American history. We are committed to abolishing critical race theory and 'The 1619 Project' from the public school curriculum."

Then another effort called "1776 Unites" is a program by conservative scholars, many of whom are African American, to contradict the views advanced in the 1619 Project that the growth of African enslavement during the 17th century is the underlying historical conjuncture which has shaped the political, economic and cultural life of the U.S. The 1776 Unites approach is to emphasize the professional and business accomplishments of African Americans.

[According to their website](#): "We are building a positive movement in response to the overwhelming narratives of oppression, grievance and ignorance to America's history — and its promise for the future." However, despite the professional, athletic, scientific, cultural, economic and intellectual contributions made by people of African descent in the U.S. since the 17th century, the statistics related to impoverishment, educational attainment, incarceration, healthcare, victimization by law-enforcement and the criminal justice system cannot be denied by those seeking to literally "whitewash" history and social studies.

These attacks on antiracist education have extended to public libraries which provide avenues for enhancing literacy through books and other learning materials that are often not available in schools. The enemies of the 1619 Project falsely characterize all education methods that are based upon the actual history and social dynamics of the U.S. and the world as "Critical Race Theory."

Nonetheless, CRT was developed by scholars such as Derrick Bell at Harvard Law School during the 1980s and 1990s. Its tenets are based upon the institutional nature of racial oppression in the U.S. These concepts are usually not taught in a K-12 educational settings.

As Hannah-Jones has stated in several interviews, that no one has produced a fifth-grade teacher who is writing lesson plans based upon the legal concepts within CRT. Obviously, the use of CRT as a wedge political issue by conservatives is part and parcel of the arsenal deployed to halt the further democratization of U.S. society.

These attacks extend into the state legislative campaigns to restrict voting rights all across the U.S. through the passage of bills which prohibit early voting, same-day registration, mail-in ballots, the delivery of water and food to people waiting in line to vote, among other measures. Consequently, with the failure of the Supreme Court and the Congress to uphold the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the midterm elections of 2022 will serve as a measurement of the impact of these right-wing assaults on nationally oppressed communities and their allies.

This updated and expanded 1619 Project book makes an important contribution to the debate and discussion over the history, contemporary situation and indeed the future of the U.S. and the world. The outcome of this struggle against racism and capitalism will not necessarily be determined within the realm of academic discourse, it requires a continuation of the mobilization and organization of the masses for the total liberation of the people.

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