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A Landmark Reckoning With America's Racial Past and Present

A panel by Jacob Lawrence from his series "Struggle: From the History of the American People" (1954-56).

By Adam Hochschild

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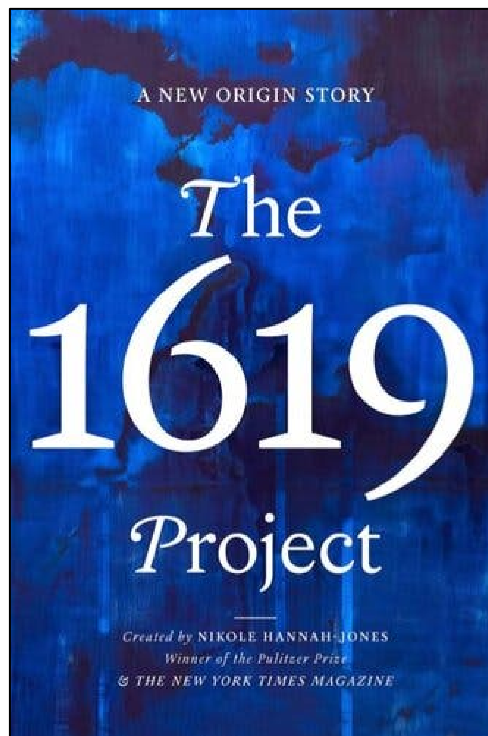
THE 1619 PROJECT
A New Origin Story
Edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman and Jake Silverstein

Has a book ever come into the world when at least four other books were already in print attacking it? Admittedly, these broadsides were against earlier incarnations of The New York Times's 1619 Project, which appeared in this newspaper two years ago, followed by a podcast, public forums, lesson plans for schools and a Pulitzer Prize for the originator, Nikole Hannah-Jones. The project asserted that the full origin story of the United States begins not with the arrival of the Mayflower in 1620, but with that of the White Lion and its cargo of captive Africans in Virginia the year before. This declaration provoked a Twitter firestorm of angry accusations from critics and combative replies from Hannah-Jones. President Trump denounced the project, and lawmakers introduced bills in the U.S. Senate and at least five state legislatures to

strip funds from schools that used its curriculum. The appearance now of an expanded version of the project in book form is sure to provoke yet more assaults.

I picked up "The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story" with some apprehension. Not because I disagree with the project's basic aim, but because I had been troubled by some overstatements and factual errors in the newspaper version, such as the claim that there were "growing calls to abolish the slave trade" in Britain in 1776. (That country's abolitionist movement didn't come to life until a decade later.) A group of respected American history scholars later criticized The Times for these. As the controversy continued, a historian who had been consulted by a fact-checker on the project went public to complain that corrections she had urged were ignored. It was disappointing to see work whose intention I admired marred by missteps.

As I read the new book, however, my worries largely melted away. It is not without flaws, which I will come back to, but on the whole it is a wide-ranging, landmark summary of the Black experience in America: searing, rich in unfamiliar detail, exploring every aspect of slavery and its continuing legacy, in which being white or Black affects everything from how you fare in courts and hospitals and schools to the odds that your neighborhood will be bulldozed for a freeway. The book's editors, knowing that they were heading into a minefield, clearly trod with extraordinary care. They added more than 1,000 endnotes, and in their acknowledgments thank a roster of peer reviewers so long and distinguished as to make any writer of history envious.



The articles in the original Times version have here been extended and revised. There are seven new essays — for a total of 18, by as many contributors — and woven through the book are photographs as well as poems and short fiction inspired by historical events. The contributors have flair: Khalil Gibran Muhammad calls the large slave markets of New Orleans "the Walmart of people-selling"; Wesley Morris speaks of the segregated, all-white nightclubs of a century ago that featured "pasteurized jazz." "If

our dead could speak," Tracy K. Smith writes in a poem derived from a speech given by the first Black senator, Hiram Rhodes Revels, in 1870, "what a voice, like to the rushing of a mighty wind, would come up."

Part of the book's depth lies in the way it offers unexpected links between past and present. New Yorkers, for instance, have long protested that the city Police Department's "stop and frisk" searches for contraband or guns disproportionally snag people of color. But how many had connected it, as Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander do here, to the slave patrols of the old South, in which groups of armed white men routinely barged into the cabins of enslaved men and women to hunt for stolen goods or "anything they judged could be used as a weapon"?

Another contributor, Matthew Desmond, points out that the cotton plantation "was America's first big business." On the eve of the Civil War the monetary value "of enslaved people exceeded that of all the railroads and factories in the nation." That fact alone should silence anyone who claims that slavery is not central to American history.

Moreover, controlling those workers "helped mold modern management techniques." The plantations' size allowed for economies of scale. And "like today's titans of industry, planters understood that their profits climbed when they extracted maximum effort out of each worker. So they paid close attention to inputs and outputs" — easy to do when you compared harvesters according to how far each had progressed down parallel rows of cotton plants. Every fieldworker's yield was carefully recorded, and rewards or whippings administered accordingly. Spreadsheets tabulated the depreciating value of human property over time. Trade magazines for planters carried management tips on getting the most out of enslaved workers: the best diet, clothing and even the proper tone of voice to use when giving orders.

An enslaved family in Hanover County, Va., 1862.

Again and again, “The 1619 Project” brings the past to life in fresh ways. I knew nothing, for instance, of Callie House, a widowed Tennessee laundress born into slavery who in the early 1900s organized a national movement to demand pensions for the formerly enslaved, like the pensions paid to former Union soldiers. When Congress refused, House sued the federal government, arguing “that the U.S. Treasury owed Black Americans $68,073,388.99 for the taxes it had collected between 1862 and 1868 on the cotton enslaved people had grown. The federal government had identified the cotton and could trace it.” Her boldness so infuriated the white Southerners of Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet that they saw to it that House and her attorney were indicted for mail fraud. She served a year in prison.

Most readers also may not know that a planter could take out mortgages on his enslaved workers. Thomas Jefferson did, to raise the money to build Monticello. If the debtor defaulted, the bank then auctioned off these men and women — adding to slavery’s shattering of families. The book also reminds us that slavery’s stains on our history were not restricted to the South. Nearly 1,000 voyages to Africa to procure captives were made from Rhode Island. Following an 18th-century uprising, 21 enslaved men and women were executed, some burned at the stake and one strapped to a large wheel while his bones were broken with a mallet — in New York City.

Several times, a “1619 Project” writer makes a bold assertion that departs so far from conventional wisdom that it sounds exaggerated. And then comes a zinger that proves the author’s point. For example, Hannah-Jones, who wrote the book’s preface and the first and last of its 18 essays, declares that the way the Constitution allowed Congress to ban the Atlantic slave trade after 20 years (beginning in 1808) is something “often held up as proof of the antislavery sentiment of the framers” but “can be seen in some respects as self-serving.” Self-serving? Virginians, she says, so prominent among the founding fathers, knew that “years of tobacco growing had depleted the soil, and landowners like Jefferson were turning to crops that required less labor, such as wheat. That meant they needed fewer enslaved people to turn a profit” and “stood to make money by cutting off the supply of new people from Africa and . . . selling their surplus laborers” to Southern cotton and sugar growers. Hmm, the reader then wonders; prove it. And she does: Over a 30-year period, “Virginia alone sold between 300,000 and 350,000 enslaved people south, nearly as many as all of the Africans sold into the United States over the course of slavery.”

Another example comes from Ibram X. Kendi, who writes about the “vision of our past as a march of racial progress” from the Emancipation Proclamation to the election of Barack Obama. This has long been a comforting myth, he says, quoting even George Washington as suggesting that slavery was on its way out. But, the reader thinks, can’t celebrating progress coexist with recognizing that we’ve still got a long way to go? How can Kendi claim that the progress narrative “actually undermines the effort to achieve and maintain equality”? Rhetorical overkill? Yes, but then comes the zinger: In 2013, the Supreme Court eviscerated the Voting Rights Act on the grounds, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in his majority opinion, that since it was passed in 1965, “things have changed dramatically.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. at the signing of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965.

In that instance, at least, belief in inevitable progress had tragic results, for that ruling opened the way to the greatest wave of voter suppression laws in this country since Southern legislatures swept Blacks off the rolls in the late 19th century — a pivotal period recalled in detail elsewhere in the book. Despite the striking integration of much of the country's elite over the last half-century — from who's on TV to who's in the White House — Hannah-Jones points out that the gap between Black and white household income has barely changed for more than half a century. The same is true for the far wider gap in overall household wealth. That wealth gap has vast repercussions for everything from whether you're likely to be evicted to whether you can send your child to college. No one saw this more clearly than Lyndon B. Johnson, who, interestingly, is quoted in the book almost as often as Martin Luther King Jr. Progress has come mainly for "a growing middle-class minority" of Blacks, he said in a 1965 speech, while for the Black poor "the walls are rising and the gulf is widening."

The project's writers tell us why. White Southern Democrats demanded that New Deal programs be crafted to exclude Blacks from most benefits. The systematic "redlining" of Black neighborhoods in both North and South meant that from 1934 to 1962, 98 percent of Federal Housing Administration-backed mortgage loans went to white households. Similarly, only a minuscule number of Black people benefited from the Homestead Act of 1862, under which the government gave away 246 million acres. (Most of that was wrested away from Native Americans, whose part in the country's "origin story" began well before 1619.) Some 20 percent of American adults today are descended from beneficiaries of that massive affirmative action program for white people.

In a few ways "The 1619 Project" falls short. Hannah-Jones, for instance, still makes too much of Abraham Lincoln's flirtation with the idea of colonization, or encouraging Black Americans to go to Africa. This surely felt insulting to Black citizens (although colonization had some Black backers), but it did not define him. On another point that earlier also drew scholarly criticism, she has made a few changes but basically remains insistent, claiming that "we might never have revolted against Britain if some of the founders had not . . . believed that independence was required in order to ensure that the institution [of slavery] would continue unmolested." But this is untenable.

Yes, it's true that the British colonial governor of Virginia threatened to sabotage the growing independence movement by promising freedom to those enslaved by "rebels" who fled their masters to join the British Army. And yes, this infuriated the likes of George Washington (more than a dozen of whose own enslaved workers took up the offer) and helped persuade some wavering plantation owners to join the revolt against the crown. But the governor was making a fruitless attempt to stanch a rebellion against Britain that, for other reasons, was well underway and had already escalated into open combat at the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

New York City police officers detaining a man in the Bronx on July 11, 2017.

It's fine to take slavery's many defenders among the founding fathers off their pedestals. But there is no need to go out on this shaky limb to do so, for their zeal to preserve the system that so enriched them is beyond dispute. Our Constitution, with its three-fifths clause and fugitive slave clause, is shameful testimony to that.

A broader issue in the book is that, with a few exceptions, such as Muhammad's excellent article about the brutal world of sugar cultivation, the reader can too easily leave with the impression that the heritage of slavery is uniquely American. It's not. The pervasive presence of slavery throughout the hemisphere strengthened the system

here: When Washington had a “Rogue & Runaway” he wanted to get rid of in 1766, he could find a buyer for him where escape was much harder, in the West Indies. And some of the management techniques Desmond describes evolved simultaneously on the large, lucrative British sugar plantations there. From ancient Egypt to czarist Russia, from sub-Saharan Africa to the Aztecs, forms of slavery have blighted nearly every continent. In Brazil and every nation in the Caribbean, descendants of enslaved people are a far larger share of the population than in the United States — and some of their captured ancestors arrived in chains from Africa well before 1619. As the historian Seymour Drescher has put it, several hundred years ago, “freedom, not slavery, was the peculiar institution.”

A final point: I wish the book had included more about the allies of Black Americans who fought against slavery or its ongoing aftermath. It barely mentions the Underground Railroad, whose conductors were both Black and white, and shortchanges the longtime abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison, depicting him largely as a purveyor of the inevitable progress myth. Garrison was not perfect, but the movement he stimulated so enraged his enemies that they burned him in effigy in South Carolina and erected a gallows on his Boston doorstep. And without the deaths of more than 300,000 Union soldiers, most of them white, American slavery would have continued much longer.

Or, to take a more recent example: The Black leader Bob Moses, who died last summer, knew that the country would pay attention to the battle for equal rights in the South only if white people shared some of what Blacks endured. He helped recruit roughly 1,000 volunteers, almost all of them young white Northerners (I was one), to go to Mississippi in 1964 to do such work as registering voters. Two, along with a Black colleague, were murdered. The names of six additional whites who also died in the movement are inscribed along with the many Black names in the granite of the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Ala.

These numbers of course are tiny compared with the nearly 6,500 documented lynchings of Blacks since the end of slavery and the additional Black victims who continue to be killed in disproportionate numbers by police officers today. But they bear mention in a book that I hope will reach a wide audience of high school and college students in a country more than 86 percent of whose people are not Black. Such readers need models to show them that men and women of all ethnicities can try — and have tried — to battle against four centuries of injustice.

To be clear: Eliminating these minor shortcomings would not have prevented the torrent of outrage against this whole venture from Trump and his followers. From people determined to inflame a sense of grievance by proclaiming that any hint of Black advance means white victimization, such venom was inevitable. It may be too much to expect in this deeply divided country of ours, but my hope is that the multifaceted and often brilliant ways in which this book’s authors etch the Black experience will inspire not resentment but empathy. And perhaps emulation: There are other projects about unduly ignored parts of our history to be written. I would love to see one, for example, on how the American working class — white, Black and brown -— has seen its share of the national bounty first rise and then painfully fall over the last century.

Despite what demagogues claim, honoring the story told in “The 1619 Project” and rectifying the great wrongs in it need not threaten or diminish anyone else’s experience, for they are all strands of a larger American story. Whether that fragile cloth holds together today, in the face of blatant defiance of election results and the rule of law, depends on our respect for every strand in the weave.

Adam Hochschild’s books include “Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves,” a finalist for the National Book Award.

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