

Another look at the 1619 Project

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by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

In Review



The 1619 Project

A New Origin Story

Edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jake Silverstein
One World

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In 2019, 400 years after the first slave ship arrived in the English colony of Virginia, the *New York Times* featured a series of articles on the ways in which the legacy of slavery has shaped American history. The 1619 Project, as the series was called, provoked immediate controversy.

Many reviewers acclaimed its contributions, and adaptations for classroom use were adopted in some school systems. Others regarded the project as an outrageously tendentious rewriting of history that threw the founders under the bus and sought to impose an ideological tyranny of the left. One conservative scholar wrote that the *Times* was seeking to instill “hatred for the nation’s founding, its ideals, and for America’s majority group.” Before long, the articles and curricular materials were barred from schools in a dozen states, and half a dozen books appeared that claimed to expose the writers’ contempt for patriotic Americans.

Some eminent historians also responded critically, minus the hysteria. A dialogue ensued, leading to some concessions and motivating the authors and editors to dig more thoroughly into available sources. *The 1619 Project* is a hefty anthology that incorporates expanded and revised versions of the original articles and supplements them with historical vignettes, photographs, and works of poetry and fiction.

I must admit that I approached both the original articles and this new collection with some skepticism. I wondered if some of the claims made about the centrality of slavery to the ideology of the new republic and to the rise of American global influence were overblown, intended to provoke as much as inform. But the book’s content—the work of four editors, 18 nonfiction writers, and 36 poets and fiction writers—quickly dispelled my doubts.

This extraordinarily rich collection provides startling new narratives and fresh insights on the nation’s most urgent, and most intractable, political and social challenges. In the essays, historians, journalists, and activists trace the influence of racial identity and the legacy of slavery on every aspect of contemporary American politics and culture. Democracy, race, capitalism, punishment, and church are

among the topics covered. Some of the incidents, laws, and speeches cited in the book filled gaps in my understanding. Others exploded my preconceptions and left me reeling in disbelief. The 55 pages of endnotes are fascinating to browse, as their citations span published works, archival collections, reports by government and nonprofit agencies, and personal interviews.

Interspersed between the essays are paragraphs that trace the history of slavery and racial policy, beginning with the fateful arrival of the slave ship *White Lion* in 1619, continuing through the colonial era and the new republic, down to the present day. Some of these events are familiar: the publication of Phillis Wheatley's poems in 1773, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the 1985 police assault on MOVE in Philadelphia. Others are little remembered today: slave rebellions in Louisiana in 1731 and in South Carolina in 1739, for example, and the White supremacist coup that removed an elected biracial city council in North Carolina in 1898.

The editors also include visual and literary counterpoints. An arresting photograph of an enslaved person or a descendant of the enslaved precedes reflections in poetry or fiction on the themes of the essays and the incidents recounted.

Each time I wondered whether politics had colored the authors' analysis, they surprised me with evidence that it had not. It seems implausible that the rise of American commercial banking was built on the slave economy, for example, until we learn how many bank loans were secured by using enslaved persons as collateral—even by Thomas Jefferson. Our admiration for the Northern legislators who demanded an end to the international slave trade is tempered by the fact that Northern slave owners sold more men, women, and children to Southerners, at ever-increasing prices, in the half century after the slave ships stopped coming than the number of enslaved people who had arrived from Africa in any previous half century. Those who dismiss any thought of reparations for slavery may be surprised to learn that the federal government once paid reparations—not to the enslaved men, women, and children in Washington, DC, who were liberated under an 1862 law but to their owners, in compensation for their loss of property.

Two of the essays especially caught my attention. One is a wide-ranging assessment of the subject of church by Anthea Butler, professor of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Recalling the controversy over Barack Obama's relationship to Chicago pastor Jeremiah Wright, Butler links Wright to his teacher and mentor, Black liberation theology pioneer James Cone. Where 19th-century White

Protestantism focused on personal salvation and moral purity, she writes, the Black churches bore “prophetic witness to the moral outrage of racism in America.”

Many people associate Christianity with plantation owners’ subjugation of Africans and misuse of scripture, Butler observes, but fewer remember the role of African Christians in the struggle against slavery. Slave revolt leader Denmark Vesey, for example, was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina—the very church where a young White supremacist opened fire on Bible study participants in 2015. Henry McNeal Turner, an AME pastor, helped create the first Black regiment in the Union Army and served as the nation’s first Black military chaplain. After the war, as an elected member of the Georgia statehouse and then as a bishop in his church, he was a passionate advocate for Black nationalism.

Butler calls attention to another linkage few have noticed: pastor and theologian Raphael Warnock, elected to the US Senate in 2020, was a doctoral student of Cone’s. Citing Warnock’s dissertation-turned-book, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, Butler observes that the Black church, like the White church, has a mixed record on social justice:

For Warnock, the Black church has exemplified both radical and unradical tendencies. It has been at once the most prominent instrument of liberation within the African American community and the foremost conservative custodian of an uncritical evangelical piety that undermines the aims of liberation.

In the essay after Butler’s, cultural critic Wesley Morris takes up the importance of music in Black history and culture. Enslaved Africans brought with them musical traditions dominated by rhythm, while the music of the New World highlighted melody and harmony. Before long, Morris writes, “rhythm merged with harmony, culminating in survival songs chiefly inspired by the Bible’s most salient tales.” The music that originated on southern plantations was “born of feeling, of play, of exhaustion, of uncertainty, of anguish. Of existential introspection. It was music whose depth could elude its own makers.” These songs inspired Black writers such as Frederick Douglass and Zora Neale Hurston. They were carried across the country by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Singers and became an essential part of the American musical vernacular.

Even more important, in Morris's account, was the explosion of popular interest in jazz and then Motown. In the early 20th century, he writes, "white Americans' principal hunger was for secondhand Blackness." In every major city, Black musicians played in White-only jazz clubs. "Recordings and television broadcasts were putting more Black artists in more white people's homes." Morris's writing is so virtuosic—so musical in its rhythms—that I will let him describe what happened next.

[Sam] Cooke's arrangements were a perfect fusion between the sacred and the secular, between robust Blackness and the American songbook's high snuggle era. Cooke embodied Black pop singing's seamless transition from wailing choirboy to romantic heat source.

Motown went a step further. The chapel became a power station. [Berry] Gordy oversaw a full-scale integration of Western, classical orchestral instruments (strings, horns, woodwinds) with the Black musical experience: church on a Sunday morning (rhythm sections, gospel harmonies, hand claps) and juke-joint Saturday nights (rhythm sections, guitars, vigor). Pure yet busy. What resulted was the Motown sound: a whole daggone weekend in three minutes.

Equally illuminating is Morris's analysis of the origins of Black minstrelsy in northern fantasies of Black southern culture. "The mix that would define the young nation was already underway" when minstrel songs became popular in the 1830s, he observes: "Europe plus slavery plus the circus times harmony, comedy and drama equals Americana." All of the most popular minstrels were White performers in blackface, he notes. Morris uncovers the continuing influence of minstrel shows in stand-up comedy, country music, and other aspects of contemporary culture.

This anthology is not the first or the last word on America's history and heritage of enslavement. But few recent publications offer so rich a tapestry of race in America. My recommendation: put the partisan wrangling out of your mind and read the book.