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Laura Bieger

The 1619 Project as Aesthetic and Social Practice; or, the Art of the Essay in the Digital Age

Abstract: In August 2019, *The New York Times* launched The 1619 Project, a multimedia initiative to commemorate the arrival of the first enslaved Africans on the shore of the land that would become the United States and to reckon with the impact of slavery on U.S. culture and society. This essay seeks to examine The 1619 Project. I argue that The 1619 Project draws on the tradition of the essay – for Frankfurt School thinker Theodor Adorno “the critical form *par excellence*” (1988: 166) – and adapts it to our continually evolving media environment in ways that revamp its form and reinforce its aesthetic, critical, and political potential. Assessing this claim from the perspective of the reading public, I ask: what are some of the strategic advantages of the essay form when it comes to engaging readers as publics?

In August 1619, the first enslaved Africans arrived on the shore of the land that would become the United States. Four hundred years later, in August 2019, *The New York Times* launched The 1619 Project, a multimedia initiative to commemorate this fateful event and reckon with the impact of slavery on U.S. culture and society. Its declared goal is “to re-frame American history” (Silverstein 2019: n. pag.), and in an effort to achieve this goal, *The New York Times* has published textual, visual and audio content by predominantly Black American journalists, scholars, and artists addressing the many ways in which slavery continues to shape virtually all aspects of life in the U.S. Premature as it is to determine the outcome of this ongoing initiative, it is safe to say that The 1619 Project made one of the most powerful interventions in public discourse on race and racism in the U.S. in recent years. This essay seeks to examine the form of this intervention. More concretely, I argue that, in its attempt to reframe U.S. history, The 1619 Project draws on the tradition of the essay – for Frankfurt School thinker Theodor Adorno “the critical form *par excellence*” (1988: 166) – and adapts it to our continually evolving media environment in ways that revamp its form and reinforce its aesthetic, critical, and political potential.

In considering the form of The 1619 Project, this essay seeks to assess the critical affordances of a new, activist journalism of which it is emblematic – a “more personal” journalism, driven by “reporters more willing to speak what

they see as the truth without worrying about alienating conservatives,” some even going so far as dismissing “‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism” as “a failed experiment (Smith 2020: n. pag.). But if pleas to “moral clarity” have become a war cry in the ongoing battle over journalism’s social and political responsibilities, it is important to note that the term elect lends moral legitimacy to partisanship in the domain of news media (the famous “Fourth Estate” in the political architecture of democratic societies); and that the development of which it is emblematic bears the risk of further polarizing an already polarized country. I will return to this issue at the end of this essay. For now, suffice it to say that insiders agree that the new journalism, which gained traction in response to the unrest erupting in Ferguson after the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer in August 2014, has caused a “shift in mainstream American media” that “now feels irreversible” (ibid). Indeed, this shift is further solidifying in the face of the mass protests sweeping the country in response to the murder of George Floyd by yet another police officer – protests fuelled by frustration about the toxic conjunction of structural racism and social inequality that the Covid-19 pandemic had so ruthlessly exposed in the disproportionately high infections and deaths among Black Americans by the time the video of Floyd’s killing went viral.¹ The 1619 Project is not only part of this shift; it crystallizes it. Moreover, and crucially, its use of the essay is indicative of how the new journalism seeks to intervene in public discourse and shape public opinion.

My interest in The 1619 Project and its use of the essay is tied to my larger interest in the reading public as a political actor, which is indispensable to modern democracies (see Bieger 2018, 2019b, 2020). Aligning The 1619 Project with the tradition of the essay allows me to consider it as a work of “engaged literature,” which I understand as a social practice that is firmly committed to the transformative potential of a literary aesthetics, and that aims to impact society at large.² Reading The 1619 Project along these lines employs a praxeological un-

1 The battle over journalism’s social and political responsibility came to a powerful eruption when the Opinion editor of *The New York Times* James Bennett resigned on June 7, 2020 under the pressure of staff members protesting the publication of an op-ed piece by Senator Tom Cotton that called for using the military against antiracism protests. For a lucid discussion of the shift in mainstream news media, see Smith (2020). Smith points out that the development is driven by a new generation of journalists, most of them young, many of them Black, and all of them complementing their journalistic work with articulating their personal views via Twitter.

2 I should note that this alignment goes against Adorno’s rejection of the idea of a socially engaged literature, which was popularized by Jean-Paul Sartre in the aftermath of World War II. See Adorno (1992) and Sartre (1988). For Adorno, the essay’s transformative power resides in an object-oriented aesthetic. From this point of view, social engagement must be rejected at all cost as it threatens the very foundations of the essay’s transformative potential: its art-like

derstanding of literature to trace and explore the political agency of the reading public which it summons into being. A claim recently made about practices is that they are the very stuff out of which the social world is made – with literature being one of these practices.³ So, who are the actors conjointly engaged in the practice of literature, and what brings them together? What structures their interactions, and how do these interactions intersect with other, non-literary practices? These kinds of questions inform my approach to The 1619 Project as a social and aesthetic practice whose power for public engagement both stems from and reinvigorates the essay form.

In U.S. literary culture, the personal essay has often served as a vehicle for public engagement, and the African American essay tradition – powered by writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and, more recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Imani Perry – has been exemplary in mobilizing the essay's critical and political potential to support the struggle for (Black) civil rights.⁴ So yes, The 1619 Project stands on the shoulders of giants, and like them, it draws on the personal essay's capacity for public engagement by creating "a sense of intimacy and concern with someone we have never met" (Fiedler 1958: xi). But to understand The 1619 Project's creative use of the essay in a vastly changed media environment, the tradition of the personal essay is not enough. Rather, gaining a grasp on how The 1619 Project breaks new ground for the essay's capacity for public engagement requires examining the realignment of the essay's aesthetic and political dimensions in and through its expansive multimedial form. Hence it makes sense to commence with an inventory of the main components (and media sites) of this form; and start by noting that The 1619 Project is such a rewarding object of study for the purpose of

autonomy. From the view of Sartre's reception-oriented aesthetics, however, social engagement is not the product of a fixed political agenda inscribed into a text. Rather, it is the result of an interactive process, in which the literary work is co-created by the reader in the act of reading, existing only as long as it is being read, but potentially extendable through a media network that reaches beyond the printed book. It is in this latter sense that I consider The 1619 Project – through its use of the essay form – as a work of 'engaged literature'. For a comprehensive discussion of my praxeological and reception-oriented understanding of 'engaged literature', see Bieger 2019b.

³ For an introduction to what is often referred to as a "practice turn" in critical theory, see Schatzki (2001). For scholarship on the praxeological dimension of literature, see the body of work produced by the Cluster of Excellence 2020 *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* at Freie Universität Berlin.

⁴ On the tradition of the personal essay in general and in U.S. literary culture in particular, see Fiedler (1958) and Lopate (1994). On the African American essay tradition, see Wall (2018) and Junker (2010).

assessing the critical and political affordances of the essay in the present age because most of its content was not published as part of the regular newspaper, and is thus especially free to endorse the aesthetic strategies of the essay and capitalize on their potential for public engagement.

At the heart of The 1619 Project is the one-hundred-page thick 1619 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, published on August 18, 2019, which contains essays, photographs, historical sketches, and literary and visual art by predominantly Black American journalists, scholars, and artists. Contributions address topics ranging from U.S. democracy and capitalism to health care and diet to pop music, mass incarceration, and rush hour traffic. The magazine was published in tandem with a broadsheet: a photo essay on the history of slavery, created in collaboration with the Smithsonian Museum for African American History and Culture, flanked by an essay on the shortcomings of teaching this history. These print publications are featured in nearly full length on a website with an unusually elaborate and flashy design. The website has at least three functions: it makes the magazine and the broadsheet available free of charge to an online mass readership, and it serves as a digital archive, as well as a hub to publicize and interlink the various parts of the project – among them an education initiative with the Pulitzer Center, a public symposium at the Smithsonian, a forum for sharing stories and photographs of enslaved ancestors, and a podcast hosted by The 1619 Project’s initiator and *New York Times* staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones and first published by *The Daily* (a *New York Times* news podcast with over 2 million subscribers). The podcast consists of five episodes, released between August 23 and October 11, 2019, which re-use and expand on the journalistic and literary work produced for the magazine, and are available on demand and free of charge via major podcast distributors. Like the website, the podcast expands The 1619 Project’s public outreach. But in its shift from reading and viewing to listening, usually alone, with headphones – and this receptive mode sets the podcast distinctly apart from its historical predecessor, the radio (see Soltani 2018) – the 1619 podcast makes engagement with the assembled material more personal and intimate. We hear the host and her guests “speaking, quite literally, between our ears, adding a certain reality to the phrase ‘getting inside someone’s head’” (McDougall 2011: 722). It also makes engagement more seamless and coherent; no flipping, scrolling or clicking through pages, no mental combining of texts and images but one continuous, evenly flowing, “mobile narrative track” (McDougall 2011: 715; see also Soltani 2018). So, the aesthetic effect of these mutually reinforcing affordances of the podcast is to make The 1619 Project more accessible, and create stronger affective bonds with an increasingly “consumerist public” (Lombardo 2008: 219) – an issue that I will address in more detail later.

Powered by the reputation and resources of *The New York Times*, the launch of The 1619 Project was a calculated media event. Information about the initiative was disseminated over the internet prior to launch, including via the project's own website, which went public on August 14, four days before the Sunday paper with the 1619 magazine and broadsheet appeared. When the paper did come out on August 18, people stood in line to get a copy, some allegedly stealing the magazine and the broadsheet from the pricy Sunday paper. News media bolstered enthusiasm by covering both The 1619 Project and the craze around it, and *The Times* further fuelled the craze by distributing hundreds of thousands of extra copies of the magazine and the broadsheet (printed with money from private and public donors including pop musician John Legend and the N.A.A.C.P.) at libraries, schools, and museums. The activist move of "taking it to the streets" was key to securing public attention, and in the following months a heated debate ensued across the political spectrum and broad coverage in the mainstream media. The debate reached a peak last December, when a handful of well-known historians (many of them close to or past retirement age) questioned the accuracy of the story told by The 1619 Project in an open letter to the editor, prompting a passionate defense of The 1619 Project on behalf of *The Times* (and providing an occasion for an online publication of the Editor's Note, which explains the design and the goals of the initiative but had not previously been part of the website).⁵

The debate has helped more than harmed, keeping public engagement high and prompting follow-up projects including a book series that expands on the magazine issue and a graphic novel for young readers, both commissioned by Random House and to be realized in close cooperation with *The New York Times* staff. (And I would not be surprised to learn that Netflix had acquired the rights and hired a director of the caliber of Ava DuVernay or Barry Jenkins, who wrote a piece of short fiction for the magazine issue, to produce a mini-

5 Conservative critics include Newt Gingrich and Erik Erickson. But The 1619 Project has also drawn stark opposition from *The World Socialist Website* as well as from Black community leaders such as Bob Woodson, who has voiced concern that the Project's reiteration of the victimization narratives endemic to the insistence on structural racism forwarded by Afropessimist critics stifles Black agency. The letter to the New York Times editor A. G. Sulzberger was initiated by Sean Wilentz, professor of history at Princeton, and signed by James McPherson, Gordon Wood, Victoria Bynum, and James Oakes, all leading scholars in their fields. The perhaps most striking thing about the dispute among historians is that most of those who do not fully agree with the story told by The 1619 Project were unwilling to sign the letter out of disagreement with the harshness of its critique, many adding that they found the debate about the legacy of slavery timely and useful. For a comprehensive summary of the debate and its peak in the letter to the editor, see Sewer (2019).

series.) Which is to say: The 1619 Project's form is open both in the sense of reaching across different media, audiences, and public arenas (and one might think of the social impact that this openness affords as spatial), and it is open in the sense of being open-ended and evolving (and one might think the social impact of this openness as temporal). This openness, which is a key feature of the essay form, makes it difficult to measure the impact of The 1619 Project's intervention in public discourse on race and racism in the U.S. at the present stage. But the sheer fact that this newspaper-based publication sparked a substantial debate gives occasion to think about the lasting significance and shifting shape of the reading public in the digital age, and how this shape is affected by the current shift toward an activist journalism in U.S. mainstream media. And even though The 1619 Project is clearly a work of journalism, its use of the essay raises fundamental questions about the political functions and uses of literature today.

I have mentioned that this essay is part of a larger effort to trace how reading in general and reading literature in particular are involved in the constitution of publics as political actors – which is arguably literature's primary political function and use in modern democratic societies. Reading The 1619 Project as an essay aims to link this effort with current concerns about the social implications of form (see especially Levine 2015) while adding to them a transmedial and transnational dimension.⁶ Specifically, I draw on the German intellectual tradition which, spanning from Georg Lukács to Max Bense (and Robert Musil) to Theodor Adorno, has been marked by a shared desire to theorize the essay as a distinctive literary form (see also Hohendahl 1997; Huhn 1999; Alter and Corrigan 2017). And while views of this form and its merits differ, thinkers of this tradition agree that the essay has a distinctly hybrid form – part art, part science or philosophy – and that this hybridity is the source of its critical and political potential. My own understanding of the essay and its capacity for public engagement is firmly rooted in this idea. But in my attempts to read The 1619 Project as an essay – and by this I mean not individual pieces of it but its expansive web of textual, visual, and audio content – the work of film scholars has been extremely helpful. I have learned a lot from their nuanced approaches to understanding the essay film as the transmedial and transnational adaptation of a literary genre, which they trace from early photo essays to the beginnings of the essay film in prewar European avant-garde cinema to present-day multi-screen museum in-

⁶ See also the "Theories and Methodologies" section in *PMLA* 132.5 (October 2017) on Levine's book.

stallations and videographic essays disseminated over the internet.⁷ From them I take as my guiding principle the essay's "capacity to adapt and morph, to be flexible and open, both sponge and probe" (Elsaesser 2017: 247), and especially its ability to communicate among and across different genres, media, and modes of address in an open-ended critical engagement (Papazian and Aedes 2016: 2). Moreover, and crucially, I take inspiration from a recent tendency in film scholarship to view the essay as both a form and an act (or practice): from Tim Corrigan's understanding of the essayistic as a "tactic" that thinks through and assimilates other (narrative, rhetorical) forms with the effect of "inflecting" them (2016: 15–17; see also 2011). And from Rick Warner, who mobilizes an understanding of the essay as an extended act of essaying – "a diachronic affair that spins a web of reflection across the essayist's expanding oeuvre over time" (2018: 7) – to push beyond received understandings of the essay as a unified form. The 1619 Project does not have a unified form. In fact, the form of the project – possibly *the* artistic and/or creative form of our age⁸ – requires that we push even further and think of the essay's form as a set of carefully planned and professionally administered acts of essaying, unified by a shared goal, unfolding unevenly in and across different genres and media, intersecting with and playing off of each other, with the potential effect of broadening and deepening each other's aesthetic and social impact.

"To essay" shares a semantic field with words such as "to attempt," "to test" or "weigh," suggesting an open-ended, evaluative search. For Adorno, "*essay* is a word in which thought's utopia of hitting the bull's eye unites with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional nature" (1988: 164). Using the term for a distinct form of writing goes back to the sixteenth-century social critic and philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who used his *Essais* (1580) to test ideas – "Of Sadness or Sorrow" (on the passing of a dear friend), "Of Sleep," "Of Vanity," "Of Drunkenness," "Of one Defect in our Government;" in short, of (his own) selfhood and subjectivity, and of society. The idea tested by The 1619 Project is to ground the founding narrative of the U.S. not in declaring independence, but in the collective practice of enslaving fellow human beings and the implications of this practice for the emerging social structures. In the words of magazine editor-in-chief Jake Silverstein (2019):

⁷ The essay film has received broad attention in film scholarship. Two recent edited volumes that capture the state of the art are Papazian and Aedes (2016) and Alter and Corrigan (2017).

⁸ I owe this thought to my colleague Kathryn Roberts, who deals with the project as an artistic/creative form in the context of her work on writers' residences, collective creativity, and contemporary literary production.

Out of slavery—and the anti-black racism it required—grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional: its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, its diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain. (n. pag.)

Backed by this sweeping inventory of slavery's social and cultural legacy, Silverstein declares: "The goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year" (n. pag.). Note how achieving this goal is bound to *considering* – spelling out, trying out, weighing – the implications of this thought experiment for U.S. American self-understanding (and in this sense The 1619 Project is indeed involved in thinking about both selfhood and society in a Montaignian vein). Note further how the idea of considering aligns the goal of The 1619 Project with the speculative mode of essay, of which Lukács writes: "two essays can never contradict each other: each creates a different world" (1971: 11). Which is to say: The essay owes its world-making capacity to its literariness, to the ability of creating "as if" scenarios in and through narrative, which it shares with literary fiction.

In the world of The 1619 Project, the act of testing, weighing, essaying "requires us to put the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the center of the story that we tell ourselves about who we are as a country" (Silverstein 2019) (and Silverstein's use of the unifying "us" and "we" is a fixture of the personal essay's repertoire of public engagement).⁹ Turning the arrival of the first enslaved Africans into an occasion for raising fundamental questions about U.S. society and its self-understanding resonates with Georg Lukács's claim that the essay takes a concrete topic as a "starting-point, a springboard" to consider the idea behind it. "A question is thrown up and extended so far in depth that it becomes the question of all questions, but after that everything remains open; something comes from outside ... and interrupts everything" (1971: 14). Which also means: the essay digresses and circles around an idea without bringing it to a scientifically rigorous conclusion. And despite all claims to historical rigor, The 1619 Project is no exception. The springboard of 1619 is used to explore, in a series of powerfully narrated essays, how Black Americans fought to make true U.S. democracy's corrupted founding ideals;

⁹ On the "pronominal tact" of the personal essay and how it moves from "you" and "I" to "we," see Lopate (1994: xl–xli; here xl).

how the brutality of American capitalism was bred at the plantation; how stealing from Black music is such a common practice because this music has been the sound of freedom for centuries; how segregation jams traffic in present-day Atlanta, and the list goes on.

And yes, all of these essays are personal in one way or another. Hannah-Jones begins her lead essay on U.S. democracy's corrupted founding ideals by telling her readers (whom she frequently addresses as "you") how, as a child, she did not understand why her father would fly the flag of a country that clearly did not love him, and ends by returning to her childhood self to claim that flag as rightfully hers after a historical tour-de-force that shows how these ideals were realized through the struggle of Black people. Wesley Morris, *The New York Times* music critic at large, sets his essay in the kitchen of a friend, where the two men cook dinner while listening to a Yacht Rock station. Matthew Desmond, a professor of sociology at Princeton, links the cotton plantation to the workplace of his readers ("Perhaps you are reading this at work") to drive home his point that the plantation was not a site of a pre-modern agrarianism but "America's first big business" and the capstone in a global economy, where output was carefully monitored and quotas ruthlessly enforced. The reader, whom he imagines being at work "at a multinational corporation that runs like a soft-purring engine," thus becomes linked to another multinational enterprise, in which "the poor slaves immediately feel the effects" of "price ris[ing] in the English market" in being "harder driven" and "the whip [being] kept more constantly going."¹⁰ The podcast shrewdly enhances the essay's capacity for creating personal bonds, for instance when Hannah-Jones and Desmond, in the episode based on Desmond's essay, talk about how their student jobs had required them both to meet quotas, an experience that many listeners can relate to, and that, for Desmond, is the linchpin of the capitalist work regime that started at the plantation. Or when Hannah-Jones opens said episode by telling a story about how her Great-Aunt Charlotte, who grew up in Greenwood, Mississippi ("Cotton Capital of the World"), finally talked about their haunted family history as the two women stood on the bank of the Yazoo River, which runs through Greenwood, prompting the host to reminisce: "the stories were in the land and in the water, in the Tallahatchie that flowed to the Yazoo, and the Yazoo that flowed to the Mississippi ... And that river created soils that were so rich that they led to the expansion of cotton unlike anything that the world had seen."

¹⁰ Unless marked otherwise all works of The 1619 Project are quoted from the website of *The New York Times Magazine*. <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>> The quote above passage begins at 5:15 min.

(And I find it remarkable how the podcast uses the women's return to the land of their ancestors as a springboard to recount the story about the brutality of U.S. capitalism told by one of the few white contributors to the magazine.)

So yes, the majority of the text produced for The 1619 Project consists of a series of sweeping, powerfully narrated, and often personal essays, and these essays also provide most of the script for the podcast. But there is also writing in other genres, and what it adds to The 1619 Project goes beyond the personal in ways that enhance its aesthetic repertoire along with the critical potential that it affords. Historical sketches on topics such as "The Limits of Banking Regulations" or "How Slavery Made Wall Street" by well-known scholars add historical depth and scientific authority to the sweeping storytelling that drives the essays (and these two sketches add depth and rigor to Desmond's essay on capitalism).¹¹ Moreover, and crucially for the form of The 1619 Project, the sketches disrupt the narrative flow of the individual essays. Both in the magazine and on the website they are embedded in the main body of the text in ways that both augments and fractures it. The result is a digressive argument and a polyvocal, multi-layered form – which brings to mind Adorno's observation that, in an essay, "thoughts do not progress in a single direction; rather, the aspects of the argument are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture" (1988: 160). Literary art adds further threads to this tapestry. Each of the sixteen commissioned works explores a date along a timeline: Jusef Komunyakha's poem about March 5, 1770 commemorates Crispus Attucks, the first American casualty in the Revolutionary War, in a Whitmanesque list of attributes:

African & Natick blood-born
known along paths up & down
Boston Harbor, escaped slave
harpooner & rope maker.

And Jesmyn Ward's piece of short fiction about January 1, 1808, the day that ended slave imports to the United States, imagines how an increasing domestic trade ("They always came before dawn") tormented the lives of the enslaved ("We felt it for the terrible dying it was"). Other works deal with planned slave rebellions, the beginning of hip-hop, medical experiments with and police brutality against Black Americans. What all of these works have in common is that, in animating forgotten or misrepresented historical figures and moments

¹¹ The sketch on banking regulations is written by Mehrsa Baradaran, who is a professor of law at UC Irvine, the one on Wall Street by Tiya Miles, who is a professor of history at Harvard.

through the aesthetic prowess of fiction and poetry, they engage in an alternative historiography. In the words of Hayden White, their shared effort “to come to terms with the past involve[s] not only the uncovering of what [has] been ignored, suppressed, repressed or otherwise hidden from view.” It also entails thinking

about the utility, the worth or value, the advantages and disadvantages of the kind of knowledge of the past produced by the new cadres of professional historians that had been established in the late nineteenth century for service to the European nation-state but which, also, laid claim to the status of a “science” (*Wissenschaft*) and authorized to determine what kinds of questions could be asked by the present of the past, what kind of evidence could be adduced in any effort to ask the proper questions, what constituted properly “historical” answers to those questions, and where the line was to be drawn for distinguishing between a proper and an improper use of historical “knowledge” in any effort to clarify or illuminate contemporary efforts to answer central question of moral and societal concern: what Kant called the “practical” (by which he meant the ethical) question: what should I (we) do? (White 2010)¹²

And if this is indeed an apt description of the counter-historiography practiced and endorsed by The 1619 Project, bringing literature into this practice amplifies its force, for literature is even freer than the essay to displace the “historical past” with a “practical past” – which is, for White, a past of “memory, dream, and desire as much as it is of problem-solving, strategy and tactics of living, both personal and communal.”¹³

The podcast further increases the power of literature to decenter the “historical past” by thematically pairing essays and literary works. Ward’s piece on the slave trade, introduced and read by the author herself, brings the podcast episode on capitalism to an especially powerful end by bringing to life how the enslaved (may have) experienced the dehumanizing brutality of this economic regime. And Jacqueline Woodson’s piece on Isaac Woodard, a decorated World War II veteran who lost his eyesight as a result of being beaten by the police on his way home from the battlefield, is picked up and fleshed out by Hannah-Jones in the democracy podcast episode to support her claim that

¹² The quote is taken from the manuscript of a lecture which Hayden White gave at the John F. Kennedy Institute on May 6, 2010. I am grateful for his generosity to share it with me.

¹³ Drawing on Michael Oakeshott, who coined the term, White argues that the “practical past” departs from the “historical past” of professional historiography by referring to “those notions of the past which all of us carry around with us in our daily lives and which we draw upon ... for information, ideas, models, and strategies for solving all the practical problems—from personal affairs to grand political programs—met with in whatever we conceive to be our present ‘situation’” (White 2010). See also Oakeshott (1999: 1–48).

Black Americans like Woodard – whose case was taken up by the N.A.A.C.P. and is now commonly viewed as “one of the sparks of the modern civil rights movement” – were essential in realizing the country’s democratic ideals.¹⁴ Neither the magazine (where literary works are interspersed with historical sketches, yet with no clear connection to the texts surrounding them), nor the website (where the literary works form a section of their own) creates this enticing call-and-response effect between and across different genres and media.

Yet even in the seamlessly flowing narrative track of the podcast, the texture remains heterogeneous, patch-worked – essayistic. For Adorno, building on Lukács, the essay “thinks in fragments ... and gains its unity by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over” (1988: 164). In doing so, it “corrects the isolated and accidental aspects of its insights by allowing them to multiply, confirm, and restrict themselves—whether in the essay’s proper progress or in its mosaic-like relation to other essays” (ibid). In other words, and this is indeed key to The 1619 Project’s critical practice: The disjointed, digressive form of the essay enables an open-ended and dialogic mode of reflection, whose networking operations reach beyond the confines of individual essays. This also means that individual acts of essaying, in intersecting with other such acts, are part of a larger, interconnected effort of public engagement. Moreover, and crucially for The 1619 Project’s investment in the essay form, in its expansive media environment the dynamics of multiplication and confirmation that fuel this practice proliferate, not least because much of the same material is featured in print, online, and on the podcast, changing its shape due to the particular restrictions of each medium while consolidating insight – and intensifying impact – through repetition.

Morris’ essay on Black music is a good example of this. The springboard to his story of how Black music is the foundation of U.S. popular culture is the scene described above in which the writer and a friend are listening to Yacht Rock (perhaps the most conspicuously non-Black music) while chopping vegetables. When the friend goes on an errand, Morris (“alone, just me, with the vegetables and the Yacht Rock”) is (like the podcast user) free to immerse himself in the listening experience. The web version of the essay hyperlinks each musical reference to a YouTube clip, which is certainly a great advantage of the digital format. However, using the links to listen to the songs (and watch the clips) disrupts the reading process; in other words, the storytelling is far more powerful in the magazine than on the website. On the podcast music and storytelling are

¹⁴ See <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/23/podcasts/1619-slavery-anniversary.html>> Last visited: February 16, 2019. Hannah-Jones’s account of Woodard’s story starts at 32:20 min.

fully integrated. In the absence of text and image, the act of listening to Yacht Rock prompts an intimate conversation between Morris and the music itself, including Morris singing along to some of the tunes. The transcript of the podcast (which is freely available on the website) gives a good sense of this dialogic structure:

Wesley Morris

There is something jazz-like in the syncopated music of something like Steely Dan.

Archived Recording

[MUSIC – STEELY DAN, “DO IT AGAIN”]

Wesley Morris

You can hear in somebody like Michael McDonald—

Archived Recording

[MUSIC – THE DOOBIE BROTHERS, “WHAT A FOOL BELIEVES”]

Wesley Morris

Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah-ah.

That is, like, a gospel breakdown.

Archived Recording

[MUSIC – THE DOOBIE BROTHERS, “WHAT A FOOL BELIEVES”]

Wesley Morris

What I’m hearing in all of these songs is, basically, blackness.¹⁵

The transcript gives a good sense of the quick and upbeat pace of the dialogue. What it does not capture, however, is the syncopated simultaneity of soundtrack and narrative track, where the music often sets in right before Wesley shares his thoughts about it, thus increasing the listener’s engagement by creating the impression that the music is driving the argument. So yes, the podcast is immensely powerful in telling the story of Black music as the foundation of American popular culture. But the act of sheer listening makes it impossible to keep track of artist names and song titles, which is why the podcast may also direct listeners (back) to the website or the magazine. In short: the essay on Black music as the foundation of American popular culture shows how the densely networked and recursive act of essaying afforded by the multi- and transmedial design of The 1619 Project – in anticipating feedback loops, capitalizing on media restrictions, and incentivizing repetitions – adds new dimensions to the openness of the essay form.

¹⁵ See <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/podcasts/1619-black-american-music-appropriation.html?action=click&module=audio-series-bar®ion=header&pgtype=Article>> Last visited: February 16, 2019. The quoted passage begins at 4:05 min.

Adorno has described this openness as “not vaguely one of feeling and mood” but as one that “obtains its contour from its content” (1988: 165). The 1619 Project’s carefully planned and administered effort of considering the legacy of slavery gives special force to the suturing, networking operation of closing gaps within a disjointed texture. In doing so, it reinforces the essay’s inner drive toward open-ended reflection and dialogue. In Lukács’s words: “The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict ... but the process of judging” (1971: 18). But if the iconic image for openness and (re)interpretation is that of the horizon, this image gains an uncanny twist (or undercurrent) in *The 1619 Project*. The cover photograph shows a horizon, and from the paragraph below we learn that it is the horizon off the coast of Hampton, Virginia, on which “a ship appeared” in August 1619 that “carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists” (figure 1). This is the horizon of the Black Atlantic, grave of countless enslaved Africans who drowned in its waters in the infamous Middle Passage. Encountering it on the magazine cover, we may let our gaze wonder from the horizon in the background across the vast deep blue in the middle to the carefully composed rose-colored text in the foreground, written in an elegant serif font reminiscent of old-fashioned storybooks. And as we read and look, we might imagine the ship with its fateful cargo appearing on that horizon; and further imagine what it must have felt like for those onboard that ship, torn from everything they knew and loved, and about to be sold into bondage.

The magazine cover renders this space of historical horror as a space of critical revaluation, drawing us into this space, placing us (together with all of the other readers of the magazine) in the open water, with no solid ground beneath our feet.¹⁶ We may also encounter the photograph on the home screen of the website, where the middle ground is filled with writing and the font is much larger – so large that we have to scroll down to read the entire opening paragraph, and are pulled into the depths of exploring the implications of the ship’s arrival in the interactive and hyperlinked feed of texts and images animated by our own physical movements (figure 2). The podcast (which uses a miniature of the photograph for its icon) opens at the same historical site, where, engulfed in the melodic chant of seagulls and surf, the host and one of the producers are conversing:

16 Among the profoundest insights of Michael Warner’s work on discursive publicness of the type that sustains the critical potential of *The 1619 Project* is that its ability to bring forth political agency depends on its capacity to create relations among strangers who many have nothing in common but reading the same printed texts. See Warner (2002: 65–66).

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It's quiet out here. There're seagulls. The sun is warm, but it's not too humid. It's actually kind of a great day for fishing, which is why it stinks.

Adizah Eghan

What does it smell like?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

It smells like dead fish. It smells like the water.

Adizah Eghan

What is going through your head right now?

Nikole Hannah-Jones

I don't know, thinking about what they went through.

I don't know. I just wonder a lot what it was, what it was like.¹⁷

Note how the dialogue between the two women rehearses the imaginary and interpretative work inscribed into the cover photograph. When engaging with this work through the podcast, the voices of the two speakers (voices in our head, heard with great immediacy) add a powerful sense of physical presence, which gains a grainy, visceral intimacy in the sniffs or hawks that Hannah-Jones makes when envisioning what happened here. That the conversation goes on for almost four minutes before the podcast is properly introduced adds to the sense of being drawn into a personal relation, and over the course of listening to the podcast the feeling grows, as if one is becoming friends with the host and her guests.

But while consumability increases from magazine to website to podcast hand in hand with the enhanced stimulation of affective bonds, the form itself remains open. An aesthetics of playfulness and experimentation secures this openness, which is rooted in a journalistic format – magazine journalism – with a long tradition of producing readily consumable content.¹⁸ Magazines such as *Leslie's Weekly* (1855), *Harper's Weekly* (1857), *Ladies Home Journal* (1883), *Cosmopolitan* (1886), *Vogue* (1892), and *McClure's* (1893) revolutionized the publication of periodicals in the nineteenth century with an extraordinary will to experiment – with styles and genres, texts and images, fonts and colors. This new magazine culture is the cradle of the essayistic, narrative-driven journalism perfected by *The New Yorker* and *Esquire* in the twentieth century and that is a staple of public discourse in the U.S. today. Moreover, and crucially, it is a viable resource for the more personal and activist journalism of which The 1619 Project and its use of the essay form are emblematic. And this brings

¹⁷ See <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/23/podcasts/1619-slavery-anniversary.html>> Last visited: February 16, 2019. The quoted passage is the very beginning of the podcast.

¹⁸ Only one article, on the topic of ownership in professional basketball, was published in the pages of the regular newspaper.

to mind a third thinker of the German intellectual tradition, Max Bense, for whom experimentation and configuration – the artistic practices at the heart of magazine journalism – define the essay’s form. For Bense, essayistic writing is *writing while experimenting*, turning one’s object this way and that, questioning it, feeling it, testing it, attacking it from different angles, collecting in one’s mind’s eye what one sees, and making it visible in what Bense calls a “literary ‘ars combinatoria’” (2017: 57).¹⁹ In *The 1619 Project* an experimental aesthetics of making something visible about its object of thought qua (re)configuration characterizes not only the writings but also the design. For instance, when the opening pages of the magazine fill the water-and-horizon space of the magazine cover with four gigantic white ciphers and a full stop glaring at us from a black page: an aesthetic effect that suggests that the writing is on the wall (figure 3).

The page design condenses the Editor’s Note to the size of a footnote by the sheer weight of the date while the sans-serif font amplifies its programmatic tone. This (modernist) aesthetics of playfulness and experimentation shapes the engagement with the published material of *The 1619 Project* throughout its expansive multimedial form. And this brings me to one of Adorno’s most evocative points about the aesthetic dimension of the essay. Whether flipping through the magazine, clicking through the webpage, listening to the podcast, or doing a combination of these activities, we engage with a form made up of “elements that crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field by the essay’s gaze” (1988: 161). The debate among historians about the accuracy of the story told by *The 1619 Project* is a case in point, and it reminds us that the essay’s transformative power – its power to change the

19 In Bense’s words: “He who writes essayistically; who composes something experimentally; who turns his subject this way and that, questions, touches, inspects, and reflects upon it thoroughly; who approaches it from different angles, and collects what he sees in his mind’s eye, and formulates in words what his topic reveals under the conditions established by writing” (2017: 52). And: “The transformation of a configuration, in which the object is located, is the point of the experiment, and the goal of the essay is less the revelation of the object’s definition than is the sum of factors, the sum of configurations, in which it becomes possible. That is also of scientific value, because the circumstance, the atmosphere, in which something flourishes wants to be recognized and, after all, reveals something. Therefore, configuration is an epistemological category that cannot be achieved through axiomatic deduction, but rather through a literary ‘ars combinatoria,’ in which imagination has replaced pure knowledge” (57). Among literary scholars, Bense’s work on the essay is much lesser known than that of Lukács and Adorno (who cites it affirmatively in “The Essay as Form”), while film scholars and makers value it for its emphasis of the artistic and critical merits of configuration, which is essential to the genre of the essay film.

world by putting thought against itself – resides in this form, no matter how unbound it becomes. In fact, The 1619 Project shows how an extended non-unified, multi- and transmedial update of the essay’s generic openness becomes a powerful tool of critique.

Emerging from this reading of The 1619 Project’s use of the essay form, we may say that it creates an opening in the discursive and epistemic fabric of public life. How this opening is closed again is not the job of the essay; it is the job of the social actors and institutions that have been mobilized by its gaze. In the case of the opening in public discourse on race and racism in the U.S. created by The 1619 Project, this work revolves around national self-understanding and identity, and the success of this work depends on reconciling the partisanship that drives the activist journalism of which The 1619 Project is emblematic with the need for coalition building around the aching and polarizing subject of race and racism in an achingly polarized country. This also means that The 1619 Project crystallizes one of the most urgent and serious questions about the new journalism: Is it is an agent of polarization or coalition building – or both? And how does the essay form contribute to shaping its agency in this regard?

Johannes Voelz makes a lucid point about the political logic of polarization when noting that it “gives rise to a perverted form of politicization,” one that is not invested in “open[ing] up what is being politicized for democratic debate” but in “build[ing] up and consolidat[ing] the identities of ‘us’ and ‘them.’” Which basically means that all politics have become identity politics: “Not the type of identity politics that pushes for the recognition of marginalized groups, but one in which taking sides in political struggles is a matter of people’s identity as liberals or conservatives, or better: Democrats or Republicans” (Voelz 2020). For the politicized, activist journalism of the kind crystallized by The 1619 Project this means an almost default participation in identitarian block building – and the risk of becoming an agent in foreclosing democratic debate. So yes, within the sectarian logic of polarization that has come to dominate, and indeed pervert, political life in the U.S., a politicized journalism is pulled into the game of building and consolidating “us” vs. “them” identities. (And the polarizing force of the claim that some journalists work in the service of “moral clarity” while others cling to the “failed project” of “‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sidedness” [Smith 2020] is a powerful token of the partisan logic pinpointed by Voelz). So yes, it is apt to say that the activist journalism crystalized by The 1619 Project is an agent of polarization. And yet, within the game of identitarian block-building which has come to dominate not only politics but also public discourse in the U.S. – and which an activist journalism endorses and enforces rather than resists – the political potential of The 1619 Project lies in building a coalition of social

actors with the power to revise the liberal script of national belonging in ways that might broaden its identitarian base. And my point about The 1619 Project's use of the essay form is that this potential stems to a significant degree from its use of the essay form.

But is this not a blunt exaggeration of the political agency afforded by this form? And is this form even as open as I have claimed? Does The 1619 Project not focus on establishing 'race' as the question of all questions (and the answer, too)? And does its declared goal to reframe U.S. history not amount to an attempt to establish a new founding narrative, one that makes use of a playful, transmedial aesthetics to replace the old premise of 'liberal democracy' with that of 'slavery' and the anti-black racism that it requires, all with the aim of building a new liberal identity based on the new narrative? In other words: how open is The 1619 Project ideologically? Does it, for instance, question its own assumptions about history writing? Or does it subscribe to and promote an educational goal that is exempt from its expansive acts of considering, testing, weighing? And if this were the case would it not make its form substantially less searching, and indeed rather clearly committed to realizing a concrete and pre-set political goal? And linked back to the question about the political affordances of its form that drives this inquiry: how much room does the playful and experimental aesthetics of The 1619 Project leave for the kind of multi-directional irritation that in Adorno's, Lukacs', and Bense's view is the basis for the essay's capacity to engage its recipients in an open-ended process of reflection? These are all valid questions about the political agency of The 1619 Project and its use of the essay form, for sure. And the first thing one may hold against them is a certain skepticism about the ideal of radical openness endorsed by the 'old world' thinkers. Was their essayistic practice really as free from the desire to show that some things are better or truer or more just than others as their theorizations imply? Be that as it may, the political agency that lies in the essayistic practice endorsed by The 1619 Project resides in an openness that is relative rather than radical – yet open nonetheless. In my strong reading of this relative openness, the critical and political affordance of The 1619 Project's use of the essay form lies in its capacity to unsettle and disrupt the liberal democratic founding narrative through its expansive act of considering an alternative narrative based on slavery and the anti-black racism that it requires – not to replace the old founding narrative with new one, but to open up an intellectual and imaginative space for the possibility of revision and renewal through the essay's expansive capacity for self-reflection and public engagement. Tied back to the question of The 1619 Project as an agent of coalition building, this means that its efforts in this regard are geared less toward consolidating a new liberal identity based on a new founding narrative, and more toward achieving a broad and solid consensus within the liberal

camp that the old founding narrative must be revised in ways that reckon with the legacy of slavery with unprecedented rigor and sincerity.

So, at best The 1619 Project has the critical and political potential to expose the need to revise the liberal script of national belonging and broaden the base of those identifying with it. But it must be stressed that this transformative power is not radical. It is confined to the bourgeois and educated clientele of *The New York Times* – which may, in turn, hope to strengthen the ties with its readers. Indeed, if the shift toward an activist journalism “is driven in equal parts by politics, the culture and journalism’s business model, relying increasingly on passionate readers willing to pay for content” (Smith 2020), The 1619 Project makes *Times* subscribers active participants (and potential activists) in the ongoing struggle over “who we are as a country” (Silverstein 2019). Moreover, and crucially, The 1619 Project can help *The New York Times* to correct its image and practice of racially biased reporting.²⁰ This practice was recently spotlighted by concept artist Alexandra Bell in a series of works that stage and expose how mainstream “quality” media marginalize Black experience in the U.S. to this day by showing how headlines, choice and placement of photographs and articles, and a racially biased language perpetuate racist assumptions and stereotypes (figure 4). In a prominent work of the series, Bell exposes how *The New York Times* front page of August 25, 2014 uses racist stereotypes to pit the lives of a white and a Black man from Ferguson against each other. In step (and picture) one, problematic passages are highlighted with red ink and a text marker, in step (and picture) two these passages are blackened out (with the result of blackening the entire article), and in step (and picture) three, a new page is offered: the black boy, described in the original article as “A Teenager Grappling with Problems and Promise,” is shown in a graduation gown in a picture that fills the entire page, complemented with a new heading, describing him as “A Teenager with Promise.”

Both Bell’s artworks (in which *The Times* is indeed a main target) and The 1619 Project are interventions in public discourse on race and racism, for sure. And they are politically motivated and even activist in similar ways (Bell also

²⁰ Ironically, *The Times*’ decision to abstain from calling Trump a racist led to an internal town-hall meeting in the week prior to The 1619 Project launch, in which one staffer asked whether *The Times* was not inviting “even more criticism from people who are like, ‘OK, well you’re saying this, and you’re producing this big project about this. But are you guys actually considering this in your daily reporting?’” A recording of the meeting was transcribed and published by *Slate*, with the effect of intensifying the debate about *The Times*’s policy on racism and the status of The 1619 Project; see <<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/08/new-york-times-meeting-transcript.html>>.

took her work to the street, pasting it on walls in her Brooklyn neighborhood). But unlike Bell's works, The 1619 Project is not a work of art but a work of journalism, powered not by the prestige and the consecrated display space of art institutions (Bell's work was shown at the 2019 Whitney Biennale when The 1619 Project was launched), but by the reputation and resources of one of the country's leading newspapers. And this brings me back one last time to Adorno, whose elaborations on the essay have been a such prominent guide to my reading of The 1619 Project's critical and political potential as aesthetically grounded. For Adorno, the aesthetic dimension of the essay protects it against reification, making it autonomous, art-like. The 1619 Project contradicts (or dare I say, *inflects*) this line of thought and the intellectual structure – Frankfurt School commodity criticism – of which Adorno's view of the essay is emblematic. The 1619 Project is a work of journalism that follows the logic of the cultural commodity. Its playful aesthetics is indeed at times so commercial that it is difficult to distinguish journalistic content from the advertisements surrounding it.

But this commodity aesthetics neither questions nor dwarfs The 1619 Project's ambition to change public discourse – a discourse powered by an imperative need for attention that in the U.S. developed, in the absence of a publicly funded media system, *under the conditions of capitalist mass media*. This commodity aesthetics does not diminish The 1619 Project's political zeal. But it reminds us that the aesthetic practice that is the driving force behind the essay's critical potential does not follow the logic of art, which may best be described as the logic of the "socially symbolic act" (Jameson 1981). The aesthetic practice driving the essay follows the logic of social reform through reconfiguration. The 1619 Project renews this practice in and through its extended multimedia form.

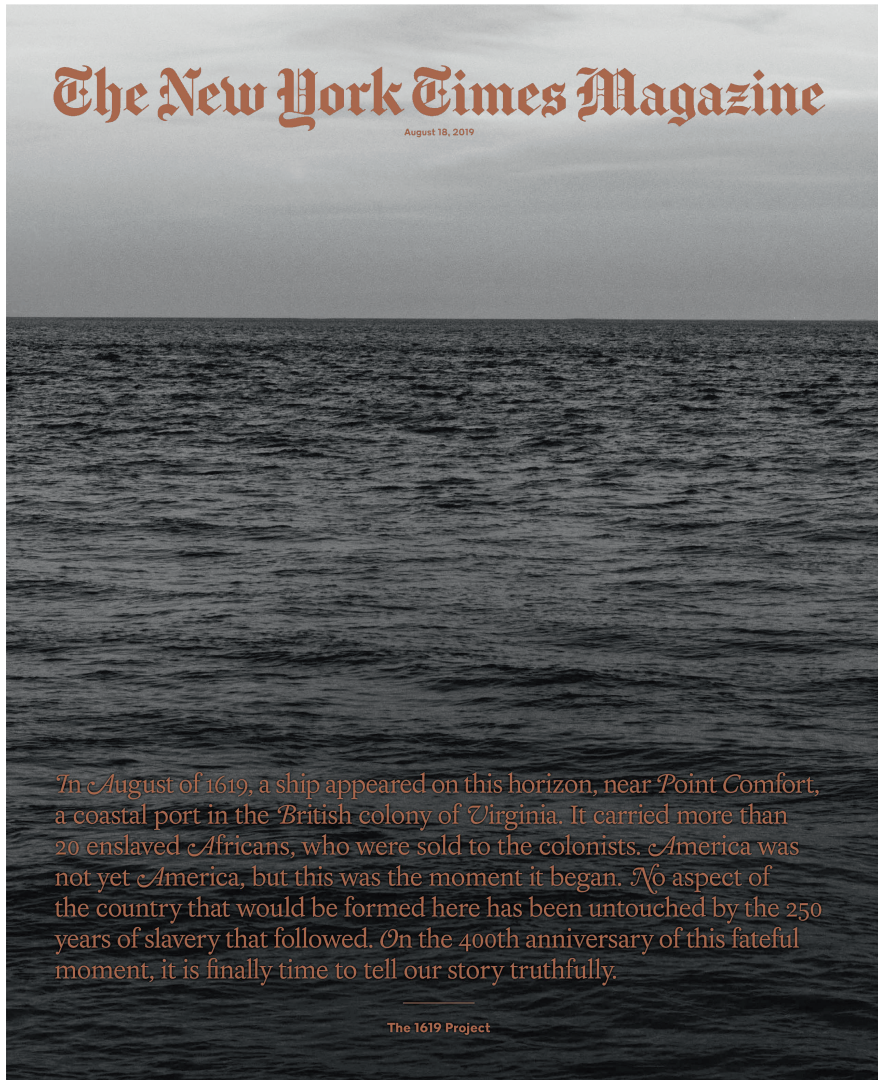


Figure 1: Cover of the 1619 issue of The New York Times Magazine.

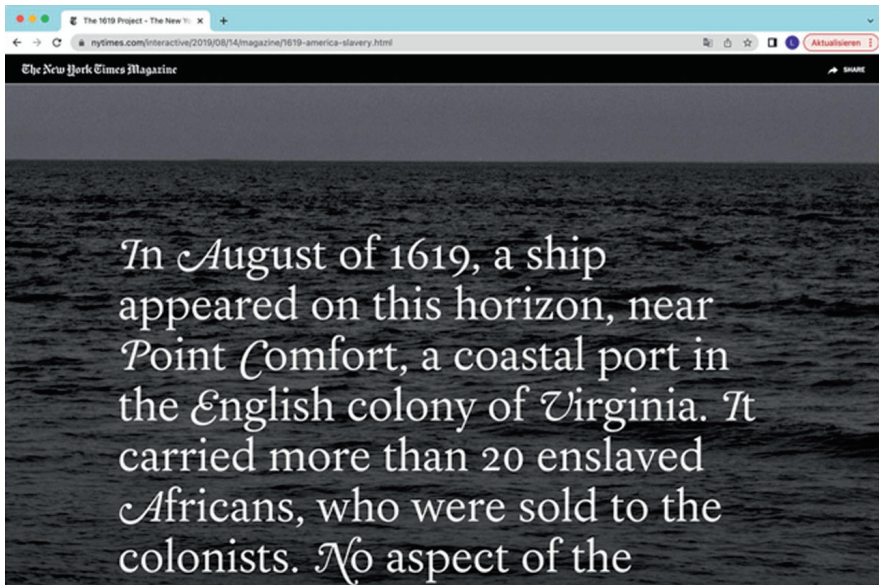


Figure 2: Home screen of The 1619 Project's website.



Figure 3: Double spread with Editors' Note in the 1619 issue of The New York Times Magazine.



Figure 4: Alexandra Bell, Teenager With Promise.

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