

Review: The 1619 Project

Written by *History Design Lab*

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Note: This article is supposed to be read in conjunction with “The Case of Liberty in History.”

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The primary goal of the New York Times’s ambitious [1619 Project](#) is to “reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (“The 1619 Project”). The 1619 Project fills in historical gaps and highlights the centrality of slavery and Black Americans within America’s founding, past, and present by analyzing the history and currents of anti-Black racism in the U.S.

As a collection of long-form essays, the 1619 Project has space to discuss the legacy of slavery in everything from capitalism to healthcare to urban planning. The common threads between many of these essays run deep, working to further emphasize the entrenched status and legacy of slavery throughout America’s history and the present moment.

Matthew Desmond’s [essay](#) traces the how slavery was fundamental to the development of capitalism—he states, “Cotton was to the 19th century what oil was to the 20th: among the world’s most widely traded commodities”—Bryan Stevenson’s [piece](#) delves into the echoes of slavery in mass incarceration, mentioning that inmates in some facilities “worked in fields under the supervision of horse-riding, shotgun-toting guards who forced them to pick crops, including cotton.” As Stevenson writes, the U.S. has the highest global incarceration rate, and this prison system was intentionally created to maintain “strategies of racial control” by marking “anything that challenged the racial

hierarchy” as a crime. When read together, these essays artfully pull out the systemically obscured threads between slavery, capitalism, and mass incarceration.

[Trymaine Lee](#) and [Kevin M. Kruse’s](#) essays add layers to the ways in which slavery’s legacy shapes racial inequities today. Detailing the “racial wealth gap” between Black and white Americans, Lee details how “economic terror and wealth-stripping” from the 1860s onward have “left black people at a lasting economic disadvantage” because any financial efforts they made to gain wealth were “regarded as an affront to white supremacy.” Moreover, as Kruse and Lee write, “wealth-building” policies like the New Deal and institutions like the Home Owners Loan Corporation excluded Black people and segregated them into redlined districts, many of which remain impoverished and disinvested-in today.

[Linda Villarosa](#) and [Jeneen Interlandi’s](#) essays detail how pseudoscientific beliefs about racial differences that started as a way to justify slavery —such as the theory that Black people feel less pain than white people—continue to mask the “brutal effects of discrimination and structural inequities” in our current healthcare system (Villarosa). Interlandi’s essay, in particular, illuminates how the National Medical Association (“the leading black medical society” throughout much of the 1900s) began the movement to push for a universal health care system—a fight that is still ongoing.

In considering the ongoing effects of slavery in various parts of society, the 1619’s collection of essays does a fantastic job of revealing systemic racism’s strength today. These essays also importantly demonstrate resistance and joy in spite of this brutal system of inequality. As Nikole Hannah-Jones, the organizer of the entire 1619 Project, states in her [introductory essay](#), it is Black Americans “who have been the perfecters of this democracy” that America as a country has purported to be since its founding. The Black struggle against racism has been present since the first ship appeared on the horizon of the Atlantic in 1619, and this struggle has “helped the country live up to its founding ideals..not only for ourselves [Black Americans]...[but for] every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights” (Hannah-Jones). Wesley Morris’s [article](#) on music gets at both the racism inherent in white America loving “black music,” especially minstrel shows (for “loving black culture has never meant loving black people, too”), but also the hope within this music, for it is “the music of a people who survived, who not only won’t stop but also can’t be stopped.” Another [essay](#), which includes photos and stories of recent Howard University Law School graduates, emphasizes the struggle for equality and freedom in stating that these graduates “represent nothing less than their ancestors’ wildest dreams” (Aduayom). Likewise, many of the poems and creative stories in one compilation-style [essay](#) speak to this legacy of Black resistance. Reginald Dwayne Betts’s piece, for example, artfully redacts most of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1973, leaving only the words that speak to the agency and empowerment of people who fled enslavement (“the fugitive...empowered...he or she...fled”). Other pieces speak to Black uprisings, such as the 1800 Gabriel’s Rebellion (one of the “most extensively planned slave rebellions, with the intention of forming an independent black state in Virginia”) and the “Negro Fort” in Seminole, Florida, a haven for fugitives, Black Seminoles, and free Black people (Jenkins; Jess).

The 1619 Project is an incredible collection of essays that seek to, as the Editor in Chief of the New York Times [writes](#), “expand the reader’s sense of the American past” (Silverstein). The Project itself seeks to tear down the pattern of omitting talk of slavery and systemic racism from American society as a whole, including in public life, healthcare, politics, and school (see Nikita Stewart’s [essay](#), which details how schools barely teach about slavery or sugarcoat it). The Project has even spurred a companion [podcast](#) and [curriculum](#), demonstrating the far-reaching ripples of this alternative reframing of history. Despite nitpicking academic criticisms about the project and political backlash that seeks to intensify white supremacy, blind nationalism, and a lack of critical thinking about American history (see the 1776 Project), the 1619 Project is an instrumental addition to popular and academic thought. In presenting an alternative perspective on history, one that draws threads between the past and the present, the 1619 Project continues to speak to modern resistance movements, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement, that fight to uproot and eliminate anti-Black racism and systemic racism.

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