

1619 VS 1776: UNSETTLING THE ARCHIVE, AND THE REPRODUCTION OF  
RACIAL IGNORANCE THROUGH NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALIST  
EPISTEMOLOGY

BY

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I have been impossibly and indescribably blessed to grow up among three sisters, two wonderful parents, and a small army of aunts, uncles, and cousins, all of whom have played roles in shaping my beliefs, encouraging me in my pursuits, taking an interest in my work, pushing me to do my best, and/or financially supporting me in my winding journey through six (and counting) years in higher education. There are almost too many points to mention where my parents exemplified both love, counsel, support, and brutal honesty. I will never forget that when I nearly flunked out after my first semester as an undergraduate at Christopher Newport University, my parents neither yelled nor lectured nor demanded that I drop out of school; instead, they chose to impress upon me the importance of choosing for myself. They insisted that whether I decided to continue with my studies or take a semester off, I do it for my reasons and nobody else's. Without this approach, I would never have chosen to step away from college to figure out what I wanted to do and whether I was prepared to work for it. I would never have chosen to return to CNU, where I fell in love with the study of rhetoric and communication. While I hate to choose favorites, it is simply a fact that no one outside my thesis committee has been more actively invested or consistently present in the research and writing of this thesis than my father. While my love of history and my appreciation of the unique benefits and struggles of living neurodivergent stem from him and far predate this undertaking, my dad took it upon himself to learn and grow with me over the past year.

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Experiencing his seminar introduced me to expertise studies as a communication subdiscipline, while this thesis does not explicitly engage with expertise studies, our weekly conversations had tremendous bearing on the work I do here. More important, his consistent investment to minimizing the impact of the pandemic on my cohorts' graduate experience has been meaningful, even when this task regularly proved impossible. It is difficult to imagine a more caring and vibrant teacher or more creative and hopeful rhetorician than Dr. Alessandra Von Burg, who never for a second allowed any of us to doubt the validity our ideas and our work — and consistently invests her entire being to not only growing good scholars, but well-rounded *people*. Alessandra's regular insistence that her students always explicitly answer the question “who is we” continues to show me the importance of specificity and attentiveness to the risks of speaking for others. Alessandra's commitment to fostering interaction and collaboration in and outside the classroom pushes me to stay outside my head and step away from my computer, as well as to think always about how our work as scholars can or should directly engage with the communities in which we live and work. Phillip Cunningham and John Llewellyn have

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I am not sure if I fully understood the truth of what common-knowledge among the communications department at Wake is - that Candice Burris and Janice Jennings are the most important people in the department, and will make or break the student experience. I understand now. Whether walking me through the intricacies of logging expense reports on Workday (and then walking me through again, and again), helping secure funding and plan transportation and lodgings for conferences, or simply being

there to listen and offer wisdom and experience, Janice's presence has made it possible to do the work that I came to Wake to do. Whether leaping into action to assist me when I bit off more than I could chew with courses, helping secure rooms for defenses and social gatherings, or making a morning ritual out of meeting to compare recent Wordle scores, Candice has been there, always, and in so many ways. Both Janice and Candice also deserve acknowledgement for readily offering their experience in helping me weigh *all* the factors, including many I had not thought of, as I planned my future. They are simply rockstars.

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## ABSTRACT

In the years since the initial publication and subsequent expansion of *The 1619 Project*, discourses debating the proper narratives of American collective history have run rampant — as have the accusations of racial biases, anti-American propaganda, and the commodification of white guilt from figures ranging from former President Donald Trump to former Civil Rights participant Bob Woodson, who in 2020 sought to counter *The 1619 Project* with his initiative, *1776 Unites*. While the authors of *Unites* have opposed *1619* primarily on the grounds listed above, in this thesis, I argue that the opposition to *1619* is more due to the *Project's* efforts to insurg against racial ignorance by uncovering the histories and events that many U.S. Americans would prefer to stay buried, histories of the afterlife of slavery. Utilizing developments in the theorization of racial ignorance as actively produced by social epistemologies, I argue first that *1619* functions as a counter-memory in its insurgency. I then consider how *1776 Unites* performs its counterinsurgency; to do so, I also modify the framework of strategic rhetorics of whiteness to consider how in opposing *1619*, *1776* attempts to foreclose the futurity of antiracist work.

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the one thing that U.S. Americans can agree on about race is that U.S. Americans disagree about race. The contours of these disagreements shift and evolve across U.S.'s spatio-temporal spectrum. American existence. Disagreements over race appear at some moments as issues of national identity and origin and surface in other arenas as political and juridical clashes over state rights; the right to maintain chattel slavery and to reconstitute it, to maintain biopolitical control over Black bodies, especially where it concerns Black women's reproductive autonomy. In ways that far precede the US national project, disagreements have characterized the development of theories on the origins of race and racism. The nature and manifestations of racial difference have evolved, driven by cyclical cultivation and subsequent disruption of one or another framing of Black pathology and white superiority. Such developments have proceeded in ways internal to the race-making project of colonialism and imperialism. David Theo Goldberg characterizes the development of racialist rationalizations for colonial/imperial power-grabs by the tension between biologically essentialist theories of racial difference and cultural-assimilationist models of *contingent* racial difference.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they have also proceeded through external developments in critical racial theory, genetic analysis, and critical genealogies of racist science that have contributed to the prevalence of the 'race-as-social construction' framework.

The social constructivist model, which rejects the idea that 'race' has a biological basis independent of its production and substantiation in specific social settings, has been pushed against by cultural assimilationists in governmental or quasi-governmental

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<sup>1</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 11

positions. Here I am thinking of those like Patrick Moynihan and Dinesh D’Souza; though three decades separate Moynihan and D’Souza’s most recognizable postracialist projects, they are linked by their pronouncements of the end of racism. Both writers explain away manifestations of racial inequity stemming from enduring structures of racialism with explanations of cultural pathology.<sup>2</sup> They generally argue that treating race as a social construct overlooks (ostensibly irrefutable) patterns of physiological, cultural, and social difference.<sup>3</sup> However, a very different critique comes from Eric Watts, who charges that “treating “race” as merely a social construction misses a crucial facet of its nature; the power of tropes of “race” emanates through a different order, “inhabiting us as those social and political practices and ways of being made emergent forms of subjectivities and identities with potent aesthetic value.”<sup>4</sup>

Context is important here, as Watts delivers this critique of social constructivist approaches to race within a more extensive analysis of what we might call the ‘state of national racial consciousness’ in the Spatio-temporal location of the United States circa 2010. Specifically, Watts identifies postracialism as the register for the national discourses that circulated in the wake of the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency. The ‘post’ in postracialism names the condition of a break or discontinuation of what came before. It is thus a term that necessarily lays claim to both past and present; insofar as a claim of being ‘post-*x*’ implies both a specific definition of *x* and a particular sense of the ways in which the ‘post-*x*’ breaks from ‘*x*.’ In the particular of post-*racialism* and

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<sup>2</sup> Goldberg, “Wedded to Dixie: Dinesh D’Souza and the New Segregationism,” in *Racial Subjects: Writing on Race in America*; D’Souza, “Improving Culture to End Racism”; Moynihan, “The Moynihan Report.”

<sup>3</sup> Moynihan, “The Moynihan Report”; D’Souza, “Improving Culture to End Racism.”

<sup>4</sup> “What Is This ‘Post-’ in Postracial, Postfeminist... (Fill in the Blank)? - Catherine Squires, Eric King Watts, Mary Douglas Vavrus, Kent A. Ono, Kathleen Feyh, Bernadette Marie Calafell, Daniel C. Brouwer, 2010,” 216.

more specifically post-racialism as a condition of the U.S. American present as of the midway point of Obama's first Administration, the claim is of a break with U.S. America's historical past of white supremacy and racial oppression. Watts describes how countless citizens, newspapers, pundits, and politicians heralded the election of a Black President as confirming the deliverance of the United States from racialism and racism. Ultimately, doing anti-racist work requires understanding that postracialism is a fantasy.

At the same time, "we cannot merely dismiss the term as a "fiction," since there are plenty of "fictions" that structure our subjectivities and social relations that are quite stubborn."<sup>5</sup> For Watts, the fictionality of postracialism manifests in the zombies of white supremacy; it is undeniable that racial chauvinism endures in the United States, despite and perhaps in some cases because of the cognitive and affective attraction of postracialism; by *a priori* displacing white supremacy to a past which they also essentially deny and avoid, postracialists remain "unable to deconstruct "race," to disable it and deliver it to a time and space where we may look back at it and wonder how we were ever that naïve and stupid about our humanity."<sup>6</sup>

Enter the *1619 Project*, initially released in 2019 by the *New York Times Magazine*. *The 1619 Project* is a work designed toward unraveling the postracial fiction that hegemonically dominates U.S. popular historical memory. The title of the *Project* is suggestive of this focus; 1619 is the year that the *White Lion* brought the first enslaved people from Africa to North America, and it is this date — rather than 1776, the year that the 13 British colonies formally declared their independence, and the year popular and historically identified as the 'origin' of the U.S. — that Nikole Hannah-Jones, her

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<sup>5</sup> "Squires et al., "What Is This 'Post-' in Postracial, Postfeminist... (Fill in the Blank)?", 215.

<sup>6</sup> Squires et al., "What Is This 'Post-' in Postracial, Postfeminist... (Fill in the Blank)?", 216

colleagues at the *New York Times* and the diversity of contributing journalists and scholars involved argue best represents the ‘true’ origin point of the United States *as it exists today*. *1619*’s thesis, then, is about both past and present; not only is the introduction of chattel slavery situated as central to the origin of the U.S. but the legacies of chattel slavery are posited as similarly central to understanding the United States in the 21st century.

This thesis is about the contestation between competing histories with contrasting perspectives on the endurance of racial oppression into the present. To put it another way, it is about the contesting epistemologies of racial ignorance and racial consciousness. *The 1619 Project* functions as a counter-memory to the entrenchment of selective amnesia and a counter-history to the whitewashing of American racial history, while *1776 Unites* manifests as a counterinsurgency *against 1619* and in defense of whitewashed US public history and cultural memory. *1776 Unites* demonstrates that Power is quite capable of resisting the challenges enacted by *1619*.

Within the contents of the project are investigations that seek to deepen, broaden, and specify American(‘s) understanding of the institution of slavery in the fullness of its precise practices of brutality and control. In all versions of the *Project*, contributors show the places and spaces in which anti-blackness and racialism remain and reappear today. To briefly exemplify this, consider Bryan Stevenson’s contribution, an essay evocatively titled *Why American Prisons Owe Their Cruelty to Slavery*.<sup>7</sup> The title signifies the interconnectedness of the two institutions, realized through the article itself, which is an investigation into the history of Black criminality, which is simultaneously and

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<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, “Why American Prisons Owe Their Cruelty to Slavery.”

inseparably an investigation into the history of the prison industrial complex, which is thus necessarily an investigation into why and how it is that the U.S. represents four percent of the global population yet 22% of global prisoners.

This thesis assumes that the contestation between *1619* and *1776* represents a broader historical, political, and mnemonic contestation of the postracial in the United States. This thesis, therefore, examines the exigency regarding what groups historically and currently possess (or are endowed with) the epistemic authority to speak on race in the United States and why. Given the interconnection of past and present within both ‘sides’ of this contestation, the insurgency of *1619* also invites both readers and scholars to consider the relationship between individual and group cognition, cultural memory and identity, and racial consciousness.

Put another way, juxtaposing the insurgent practices of *1619* with the counter-insurgent and all too normalized practices of *1776* invites us to consider how racial ignorance is sustained and reproduced by a social epistemology that marginalizes the contributions of Black Americans and universalizes the perspectives of white, pro-patriotic Americans. In this thesis, I aim for such considerations. I argue that *1619* insurges against the social production of epistemic racial ignorance in such a way that goes beyond unsettling the fiction of post-racialism. Aiming beyond the present moment, *1619* targets the epistemological foundations of postracial American identity/cognition by bringing histories of Black Americans *as told and experienced by Black Americans* to the center of national history. By foregrounding Black Americans as subjects and as contributors, *1619* unsettles the givenness of U.S. national history by

suggesting that the gaps in that national history have been sustained by the marginalization of Black Americans.

Conversely, *1776 Unites* operates as a counterinsurgency; counterinsurgencies are offensives against insurgents and thus are offensives in defense of what the insurgent seeks to unsettle. Thus, the counterinsurgency of *1776 Unites* manifests both in its authors' work to distort and misrepresent 1619 and defend the history that 1619 seeks to present as distorted. Ultimately, this work reproduces epistemological racial ignorance.

Chapter 1 of this thesis captures the rhetorical, archival, and epistemological situation in which *1619* was introduced, ultimately describing the epistemology of racial ignorance that *1619* seeks to unsettle. In this chapter, I describe a social epistemology of racial ignorance that has proceeded through the cumulative marginalization of Black history, memory, and interpretation of systemic racial oppression in America, and that is reified in the present primarily through discourses resembling what Nakayama and Krizek refer to as strategic discourses of whiteness. The marginalization and erasure of the history of Black racial consciousness are occluded by discourse that treats white public history and collective memory as 'given' or received white history. These discourses re-secure the archival grounding of racial ignorance by maintaining whiteness as the "invisible center" that treats some histories as "objective" and others as "distortions."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 153-155; An important element of how whiteness forms a field of experience stems from the idea of materialist history, and specifically Ahmed's notion of 'given history' as literally a gift, as in that which is received, that which we inherit, and thus that which we take as 'what is' or as normal. For more on the materiality of history, and the connections between historicism and hegemony, See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

At the same time, the chapter charts how reification also proceeds from the other direction; whitewashed public history and cultural memory guides interpretations of the relationship between race and the American present that disavow and occlude the endurance of systemic racialism (postracialism and racial transcendence.) Retrospectives on American history legitimize Postracialism by disavowing the extent to which racial chauvinism, economic exploitation (chattel slavery and racial capitalism), and racialized violence are intrinsic features of the United States. This chapter includes an analysis of Mueller’s “Theory of Racial Ignorance” and a survey of the literature and theorization produced by rhetorical and sociological whiteness studies. The theory of racial ignorance proposes that the social production of racial ignorance fulfills the symbolic, material, and cognitive needs of white people — and increasingly, select classes of people of color. This chapter also prefigures the necessity of historical revisionist projects like *1619* to challenge the epistemological production of racial ignorance and functions to preview why the *Project* has invited such fierce opposition.

Chapter Two then turns to the *1619 Project* itself, arguing that the *1619 Project* functions as a form of counter-memory and counter-history.<sup>9</sup> Taking seriously the significance of the *Project*’s deliberately organized collection of authors, I first argue that the *Project*’s coalition of experts is a continuation of a Black American tradition of epistemological counter-testimony, exemplified by Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, and W.E..B Du Bois.

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<sup>9</sup> “...tensions between different groups (often with opposed collective memories) do persist within the collective. These tensions allow changes in power relations and thereby re-arrange the cultural coordinates of the broader community. The reactivation of historical openness and the heretical challenge to master narratives originate in moments of hegemonic instability when marginalized or unheard counter-voices force the renegotiation of power relations and of their historical causes.” Molden, “Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony,” 131.

This first movement establishes *1619's* authorial work as a recognition of and response to the erasure of Wells', Douglass' and Du Bois' most damning critiques of the U.S. state and racial capitalism. *1619's* authors work against and connect the marginalization of Black counter-testimony, the delimitation of racism and racialism, and the occlusion of slavery and antiblackness as structural rather than individualistic and as perpetuated through economic exploitation rather than (exclusively) through racial prejudice or legal segregation. The chapter then turns *Project's* engagement with the archive, explicating how its archival methodology works to identify and counteract the structured gaps in white social epistemology that facilitate and legitimize the hegemony of postracialism.

Chapter Three argues that *1776 Unites* should be understood as form of epistemological counterinsurgency. *Unites* should be understood as a rhetorical and epistemological effort that strives to oppose *1619* and discredit, distort, and otherwise misrepresent the vision of enduring racial oppression both within and exceeding the *Project* itself. Connecting *Unites* to the focus of the first chapter, I consider how the rhetoric and epistemic work of *Unites* exceeds *1619*, reifying the epistemology of racial ignorance through a delimited and anachronistic conception of what drives and sustains racial inequity. Connecting *Unites* to the erasure and marginalization of Black counter-testimony, I further discuss how *Unites* reproduces the erasure of Black counter-testimony that has historically opposed the view that racism/racialism is aberrational to the United States project, offering a racially sanitized conception of U.S. American history that takes its cues from the narratives of racial transcendence/post racialism. I initially think through a modified version of Nakayama and Krizek's *Strategic Rhetorics*

*of Whiteness*. Specifically, I direct their framework towards what Melamed has identified as a contemporary discursive formation and racial epistemology of neoliberal multiculturalism. I then identify these 'strategic rhetorics of neoliberal multiculturalism in the texts of *1776 Unites*, illustrating the reproductive and appropriative strategies of neoliberal multiculturalism in claiming the moral and practical superiority of their conception of the past, present, and —most essentially —futuraity of antiracist, anticapitalist, and intersectional struggle in the U.S.

## CHAPTER ONE: EPISTEMOLOGIES OF POSTRACIAL IGNORANCE, AND CULTURAL MEMORY AS A TECHNOLOGY FOR MAINTAINING WHITE SUPREMACY/INNOCENCE

This thesis investigates the exigency centers on the contestation of competing, racially loaded frames for American history, embodied in the competing origin points and corresponding racial-national histories of *The 1619 Project* and *1776 Unites*. This exigency is not primarily about historical accuracy or even the role of identity bias in producing and interpreting history. Instead, the exigency reflects a clash of social epistemologies. Where the second chapter of this thesis will consider how *1619* represents an insurgent project of racial consciousness, this chapter is devoted to capturing what it is that *1619* insurges against racial ignorance. This chapter draws from and describes Mueller's Theory of Racial Ignorance, which builds on Mill's conception of white ignorance as actively produced and sustained as a hegemonic social epistemology. Given that Mills identifies the cumulative effects of a historical exclusion of Black archival work from U.S. politics of history and memory, the framework of racial ignorance illuminates how the production of alternative histories can disrupt racial ignorance by revealing its contingency on the exclusion of alternative racial histories.

### **Theory of Racial Ignorance: Refining and Operationalizing Whiteness Criticism**

I draw from Mueller's Theory of Racial Ignorance, which brings together a diversity of critical whiteness and critical racial theoretical work under Sullivan and Tuas' broader framework of epistemologies of ignorance. The theory of racial ignorance explicates precisely the general cognitive habits, specific discursive practices, underlying motivations, and conditions of change for the production of racial ignorance. However, before we consider racial ignorance as a product of a social epistemology oriented

towards rationalizing and (ostensibly) opposing white supremacy, it is vital to establish what I and others mean when we refer to ‘whiteness.’

Whiteness is rhetorically enacted and socially constructed. It is ‘non-existent’ in strictly biological terms but must nonetheless be treated as something approaching ‘real’ by whiteness scholars. While rhetorically enacted, ‘whiteness’ nonetheless obtains in structures and institutions; it can be inherited through culture and knowledge and ‘deployed’ discursively to justify and occlude from racial oppression. As a matter of demographic trends, whiteness manifests tangibly in what we commonly call white or racial privilege; for example, *1619* notes several statistical trends in wealth accumulation, home ownership, employment, education, and arrest and conviction rates. Cheryl Harris discusses the ‘essentialization’ of whiteness by way of property law, while George Lipsitz discusses whiteness more broadly in its possessive investments. Whiteness to Sarah Ahmed is both an orientation and orienting force; learned habit, cultural inheritance, ontological certainty.<sup>10</sup>

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that approaches such as those above are necessary to appreciate “What Makes Racism Systemic.”<sup>11</sup> To apprehend systemic racism, he explains, it is necessary to “kill the racist” as the analytical unit of racialization. Killing the racist is necessary because the utility of the “racist” as a figure in racial analysis going forward has been compromised by a tendency to dichotomize the world into racists and non-racists.<sup>12</sup> This dichotomy fails to reflect the inescapability of “racial acting” in racial capitalist states in general and particularly in the United States. Moreover, it occludes

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<sup>10</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property”; Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness”; Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.

<sup>11</sup> Bonilla-Silva, “What Makes Systemic Racism Systemic?”

<sup>12</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 514–16.

what both Bonilla-Silva and Ibram X. Kendi have argued is a greater centrality of non-racist actors relative to the overt white supremacist in maintaining the conditions for the exploitation of people of color and the sustenance of white supremacy.<sup>13</sup> Bonilla-Silva notes that a crucial implication of understanding racism as systemic is that whiteness need not exclusively manifest in white people, noting that “not all Whites defend the racial order and not all non-whites fight against white supremacy.”<sup>14</sup>

Attending to the “social mobility of whiteness,” racial rhetorical critics Lisa Flores and Mary Ann Villareal illustrate how people of color can be recruited into the reproduction of whiteness, through the material (citizenship) and symbolic (patriotic) incentives (and coercions) of U.S. national belonging. Their analysis, which focuses on the discursive political terrain surrounding the 1948 campaign by Texan Mexicans to desegregate Corpus Christi public schools, is illustrative of the “unfinished and fractal” manufacturing of racial subjects. Insofar as the Texan Mexican desegregationist strategy involved envisioning the resolution of educational marginalization through assimilation into the values of cultural whiteness, including “a containment of race to heritage and descent, a commitment to education as the path to whiteness and inclusion, and a belief in the power of community to organize on behalf of its ‘people’...that is simultaneously oriented towards whiteness and towards the experience of the Other.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, whiteness studies, by which I loosely mean a collection of scholars working with various methods and from various disciplines including Critical Racial and Critical Legal Studies, sociology, qualitative and rhetorical communication studies, and critical

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the distinction between non racists, racists, and antiracists, see Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to Be an AntiRacist* and Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. “What Makes Systemic Racism Systemic?”, 520.

<sup>14</sup> Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. “What Makes Systemic Racism Systemic?”, 526.

<sup>15</sup> DeChaine, *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Frontier*.

historians, directs my analysis of both the texts and the situation. For example, a commonly used trope so far in the public discourse by supporters of anti-CRT legislation has been to levy the charge of intellectual or historical bias on opponents of the theory, claiming that all such legislation will do is ensure the objectivity of classrooms. In a cultural and racial vacuum, the defense of objectivity and historical accuracy may appear unproblematic. However, consider how the proposition changes when one understands that one quality of whiteness is its capacity to (dis)appear, wrapped in the illusion of invisibility and neutrality. At the very least, to accept this as a possibility is to problematize the assertion of objectivity.

While critical whiteness scholarship is a broad field, for this thesis, I will utilize a specific theoretical framework that further refines my analysis by foregrounding the construction and maintenance of racial ignorance. The theory of racial ignorance shifts away from an emphasis on explicitly racist ideology as central to the reproduction of white supremacy; in this sense, it attempts to revise and expand the utility of theorizing whiteness. Revitalizing whiteness theory to account for non-racist actors is the goal Mueller explicitly lays out, seeking a corrective to the relative rigidity of so-called ‘colorblind’ theories of racial analysis.<sup>16</sup> Mueller incorporates and seeks to unify a transdisciplinary, sometimes contradictory, range of frameworks and conceptualizations of whiteness that have we might reasonably refer to as currently canonical literature

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<sup>16</sup> Among several concerns reviewed are a lack of predictive and explanatory power of CBT; a concern with the extent to which CBT theory oversells discursive and cognitive processes in attributing the maintenance of racialized systems and thus occludes the material investments and mechanism perpetuating racial inequity; and the relative limitations of CBT when adopted beyond its original praxis in legal studies. See Mueller, *Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance*, 144-145.

among the discipline. I will now briefly describe the tenets and objectives of the theory of racial ignorance and explain how it will direct my analysis of the texts.<sup>17</sup>

The theory of racial ignorance “generates returns by shifting from racial ideology to racial ignorance, and from era-defined structures to ongoing historical processes.”<sup>18</sup> As a process-oriented theory, the theory of racial ignorance focuses critique/analysis on how ignorance, more precisely white ignorance, functions towards maintaining white dominance and the hegemonic status of whiteness. In this sense, the theory expands and specifies the relationship between vernacular racial discourses and the sociohistorical accumulation of socially located knowledge. Racial ignorance theory offers a methodology for critics, insofar as Mueller conceptualizes five tenets by which the (re)production of racial ignorance can be identified and deconstructed, both in its procedural/discursive moves and in its relation to structures of white dominance.<sup>19</sup>

The first tenet of the theory of racial ignorance concerns the “general process” of the production of racial ignorance. Drawing primarily from Mills, Mueller’s first tenet stipulates that an epistemology of ignorance is crucial to the general ignorance of the experiences and evidence of racial inequity (and its converse, white supremacy) most white Americans demonstrate. The theory of racial ignorance builds from the epistemology of ignorance’s core premise that ignorance can be both actively and non-contingently produced within social epistemologies.

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<sup>17</sup> Ahmed’s *Phenomenology*; Harris and Lipsitz complementary analyses of *Whiteness as Property* and of its *Possessive Investments*; Bonilla-Silva’s structural analyses of *Racism Without Racists*; Du Bois’ sociological and capital analysis of the ‘color line’, and Baldwin and Mill’s overlapping interests in the political and social potency of white ignorance in shaping the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural trajectory of the United States post-Civil Rights.

<sup>18</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?,” 142.

<sup>19</sup> The theory of racial ignorance embodies five tenets—epistemology of ignorance, ignorance as ends-based technology, corporate white agency, centrality of praxis, and interest convergence.

The ‘epistemological turn’ to ignorance as a construct and function of whiteness is a relatively recent one even in the young history of critical whiteness studies. While non-empirical literature using the theory of racial ignorance is still quite limited, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuau’s edited book *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* provides a robust foundation of theoretical grounding the framework and a roadmap for its potential usage.

While summarizing and connecting the full scope of the various chapters is beyond the scope of this review, I would like to take the opportunity to elaborate on the initial work of epistemologies of ignorance. While Mueller certainly offers detail, the nature of individual articles and epistemologies of ignorance’s position as one of several components of the theory of racial ignorance means that her explicit treatment of ignorance is primarily limited to Charles Mills’ work on white ignorance. However, while I agree with both Mills and Mueller on the salience and the singular significance of racial epistemologies to U.S. social epistemologies in general, it is worth explaining that the epistemologies of ignorance concept is not necessarily grounded in a theory of race. Instead, it begins with understanding the role that individual and social cognition plays concerning the production and assessment of knowledge claims. Epistemic ignorance thus provides a framework for considering ignorance as more than a gap in knowledge, as socially contingent and structurally produced.

Linda Martin Alcoff contributes to epistemologies of ignorance primarily by adding specific categories that deepen and nuance the initial framework of White Ignorance offered by Charles Mills.<sup>20</sup> She does this, simply put, by extending beyond

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<sup>20</sup> Mills’ concept of ‘white ignorance’ initially appears in his independent book *The Racial Contract*, and he describes his contributory chapter in *Epistemologies* as an elaboration on this

white ignorance, developing a typology of epistemologies. While the first is essentially a relatively individualized understanding of epistemologies of ignorance and is probably the type least relevant to this topic, it does establish two foundational premises:

**Premise One** is that the ‘general situatedness of knowers,’ — that the knowledge any given person can bring to bear on a situation is contingent on their accrued knowledge and the nature of the problem. Establishing knowledge and ignorance as contextual lays the groundwork for the second and third arguments/types.<sup>21</sup>

**Premise Two** is the linkage between knowledge and judgment. Given that a knower's knowledge and ignorance are contingent on social location and given that specific knowledge is sometimes brought to bear on judgment, the situatedness of knowledge/ignorance also implies the situatedness of judgment.

For the second argument of epistemic ignorance, Alcoff's focus narrows from describing the “general features of every epistemic situation [of ignorance]” to the level of communities. In effect, it begins to consider how groups of common background might develop both common gaps in knowledge by adding a premise:

**Premise Three** is that these situated knowledge/judgments (situations of epistemic ignorance) “are correlated in at least some significant respects with social identity and “...can be interpreted as the claim that, on balance, members of oppressed groups have fewer reasons to fool themselves about this being the best of all possible worlds and have strong motivations to gain a clear-eyed assessment of their society.... the point is that in some groups a given justified claim will encounter more obstacles to

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<sup>21</sup> Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types,” in Sullivan and Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.

its fair assessment than in other groups, depending on the social identity of the individuals involved.”<sup>22</sup>

The example Alcoff draws here of the situated knowledge of women borne out of the experience of gendered marginalization and oppression is fruitful. She describes this situation where advantages and disadvantages in terms of knowledge accrual and knowledge acceptance correlate to the experiences of marginalization, minoritization, and oppression. Thus, this formulation of epistemic ignorance possesses the ‘explanatory power’ to explain the marginalization of women historically from academic communities, even as it connects this to gendered gaps in public knowledge. This type of silencing certainly resonates within the rhetorical community, which is still grappling with the charges levied comprehensively by #CommsoWhite.<sup>23</sup>

The third argument Alcoff delivers for epistemic ignorance is the most pertinent for this thesis and draws directly from Mills’ original theme of ‘white ignorance’ — as integral to the maintenance of discourses of white innocence in the face of a racial history of racial exploitation/subjugation/violence and American national narratives of racial progress (postracialism) in the face of diverse and consistent evidence to the contrary. While this third type generally incorporates the same premises as the second type, it departs in its consideration of systems and structures that sustain epistemic ignorance. Ignorance is not only predictable ‘lack of knowledge’ associated with different social identity experiences but is further contextualized by structures of cognition (cognitive norms) particular to ‘oppressive societies’ that regulate (produce) ignorance.

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<sup>22</sup> Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types,” in Sullivan and Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 45–47.

<sup>23</sup> Wanzer-Serrano, “Rhetoric’s Rac(e/Ist) Problems.”

One will likely recognize the similarities between the first premise and the working assumptions guiding CRT insofar as both begin with the presumption that oppressive societies do not perceive themselves as such and will therefore rarely be convinced otherwise. One might also notice the emergence of strategic rhetorics of whiteness in rationalizing or naturalizing particular forms of inequality and exploitation.’ However, one will also notice how the second and third premises essentially explain that they will also rarely be convinced otherwise in the presence of evidence to the contrary.

Here, Alcoff moves from ignorance as a product to conceptualizing ignorance as a production; the operative distinction is that something can be a ‘product’ without agential producers. Whereas the lack of knowledge in the first two types is the ‘product’ either situatedness or a set of experiences associated with a social identity, ignorance in the third type has a means of production, in which “the idea of a cognitive model to ensure distortions of reality renders ignorance an effect of inculcated practices common to a group.”<sup>24</sup>

While ignorance is still an effect in this third type, it is the effect of inculcated practices. Inculcation implies a practice of education, of knowledge-production, and inculcation also implies normativity, right and wrong ways of knowing, judging, and doing, which further points to an intersection with whiteness as strategy and as hegemony. Through this third typology of epistemic ignorance, we can thoroughly remove ignorance from its conception as a negative, a lack rather than actively produced. Moreover, given that the ignorance-production identified by Mills is particular to issues of race and racism and considered in tandem with the orientations and strategies of

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<sup>24</sup> Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types,” 49.

whiteness, it is further evident that the production of ignorance regarding the nature of racial oppression facilitates the reception even as it informs the production of discourses of white innocence.

*Managing Ignorance: A Blueprint for Corporate White Agency*

Elizabeth Spelman establishes a clearer sense of the processes of racially informed ignorance-production in a chapter appropriately titled *Managing Ignorance*. Spelman illustrates how ignorance is managed at the structural level, using the example of Civil War history and memory as they developed in practice post Reconstruction. Spelman illustrates how cognitive norms of racial non-knowing shaped the terms of the national reconciliation that immediately succeeded Reconstruction. White historians, academics, and social groups not only developed their interpretations of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in ways that erased or marginalized primary Black testimonials from their archival work but also extended this marginalization to Black Americans' own efforts to preserve and mainstream their memories of slavery, the War, Reconstruction, seeking to legitimize (in popular consciousness and the institutions and publications of professional archival work) the necessity of an integrated national recollection of the war for emancipation actually to lead to integration, and real, sustainable racial equity.<sup>25</sup>

Drawing on a critical history of the reconciliation of the North and South post-Reconstruction, she covers the collaboration between the Southern and Northern rhetoric and history towards the production and dissemination of cognitive norms governing the

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana.

memory of the Civil War and its legacy. The commitment of American history to ambivalence and the erasure of African Americans out of every facet of the Civil War proceeded out of fear that such memory, left unerased, threatened the comforting stability and promise of peaceful (dis)unity [white unity]. Spelman provides a concrete, historically contextualized grounding of the effort historians, Presidents, veterans, and Klansmen, put towards maintaining white American ignorance and pre-situates the Southern memory work following the same general principles as Baldwin's formulation of white ignorance as a concept.

*Ignorance as an ends-based technology*

However, this still leaves the question of to what end is racial ignorance produced and maintained; who benefits from ignorance? Different scholars thinking along racial lines have produced a variety of answers to this question.

Mills and Mueller agree that fundamental to producing "explicit and tacit practices of knowing and non-knowing" is the affective and libidinal security involved in not knowing white supremacy.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, we can think of the emotional investment in simply being able to think of oneself as not only not racist (or even against racism) but also as individually responsible for one's wealth and success.<sup>27</sup> In the case of some Americans, this affect can also extend to the familial and the communal - being able to avoid thinking of heritable wealth as a direct transference of the expropriated wealth from enslaved people; or, more broadly, of heritable wealth as a means by which the

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<sup>26</sup> Not recognizing that the accrued privileges that most white Americans enjoy today on the continuous exploitation and domination of Black and Brown peoples both within national borders (slavery/Jim Crow/exploitative immigration/profit prisons, etc.) and as a matter of international policy (Cold War capitalist operations, partitioning of Africa, etc.)

<sup>27</sup> Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman, "An Unexamined Life."

inequitable stratification of wealth among previous generations of Americans yields racialized fruit in the present day. Such examples, signifying a blend of material and psychic ‘investments’ in the maintenance of ways of ‘non-knowing’ about racialism/racism, speak to an essential facet of the theory of racial ignorance as a theory of racial discursive formation: the suspension of an effort to privilege either the material or psycho-libidinal investments in whiteness as the aspect in need of preservation defining the ‘ends’ of racial ignorance, in favor of “assuming both shape white cognition and the form white logics take.”<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, we must avoid collapsing our understanding of racists and racialism as we consider the ‘ends’ of sustaining racial ignorance and remain cognizant of the differences between biological/cultural/social racism as an end of itself or as a technology for rationalizing the means of racial formations. To take the former as an end is to remain fixated on a conception of closet racists as the ‘secret instigators’ of racial formation; in a sense, it is to consider the Klan and forget to consider the role of the Bank in sustaining and reimagining racial difference. To take the latter is to comprehend the endurance of racist ideas and racist policies and how even anti-racists can work towards this.

Correcting this conflation of racialism with racism and racial formation with racist formation has been a consistent tradition across decolonial racial scholars and race-radical thinkers within the U.S. W.E.B. Du Bois and Lorenzo Ervin represent a few thinkers and activists who supply frameworks that treat racist epistemology —i.e., the discursive and epistemological production and rationalization categories of racial

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<sup>28</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?”.

difference — as symptomatic of the colonial/capitalist matrix of exploitation, rather than vice versa.

In describing the descent *Back Towards Slavery* that white Americans instantiated in the immediate aftermath of Reconstruction, Du Bois elucidates how, at the bottom, the driving force was not racial hatred or widespread belief in racial inferiority but economic and class-based anxieties. While the sexualization of Reconstruction politics and the circulation of white anxieties over the social dissolution that would accompany the integration of Black Americans into U.S. mainstream society, the mass violence of the Klan and white mobs in Wilmington and Tulsa, and electoral manipulations founded in the Virginia constitutions postbellum signified that hatred and social anxiety were by no means irrelevant, Du Bois remarks that “total depravity, human hate and Schadenfreude , do not explain fully the mob spirit in America”:

Before the wide eyes of the mob is ever the Shape of Fear. Back of the writhing, yelling, cruel-eyed demons who break, destroy, maim and lynch and burn at the stake, is a knot, large or small, of normal human beings, and these human beings at heart are desperately afraid of something...Of many things, but usually of losing their jobs, being declassed, degraded, or actually disgraced; of losing their hopes, their savings, their plans for their children; of the actual pangs of hunger, of dirt, of crime. And of all this, most ubiquitous in modern industrial society is that fear of unemployment.<sup>29</sup>

David Roediger expands on this idea of class and capital as the sustenance of racialization, augmenting Du Bois with his analysis of how poor white workers forsook

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<sup>29</sup> Du Bois and Jones, *Black Reconstruction in America*.

the opportunity for interracial class solidarity in the choice to exclude Black labor activists from white unions, thus opting instead for the psychological and material ‘wages of whiteness’ as the endpoint of labor unionization.<sup>30</sup> Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, as he theorized the interrelationship of racial and class formations to the universalization and perpetuation of capital/ism and the state from the modern point of intersection of the two regimes — the prison — observes that the occlusion of interracial class-based oppression has been a function of racist ontology since prior to the inception of the U.S., noting that the “invention of the “white race” and racial slavery of the Africans went hand-in-glove, and is how the upper classes maintained order during the period of slavery.”<sup>31</sup>

What Ervin is speaking to is the idea that the continuously shifting epistemology and vernacular of racist and racial difference is itself a means towards the end of simultaneously occluding and rationalizing capital’s continuously shifting project; of extracting profit from the labor and accruing wealth to the wealthy while maintaining the impoverishment of the poverty as the condition for its existence. We can view the hegemony of postracialism and the delimitation of the concepts of racial formation to policies, behaviors, and attitudes reflective of notions of explicit racial inferiority/racist difference as precisely the sort of manner of ‘knowing/not knowing’ about contemporary racialism that facilitates the “ twin pursuits [of] maintaining white power, status, and wealth alongside a “lifelong white moral identity [as antiracist].”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For more on both Roediger’s argument regarding the role of whiteness in facilitating the split between working white and Black people and for an explication of the connection between Roediger and Du Bois’ work, see Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 11-15.

<sup>31</sup> Lorenzo Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* | The Anarchist Library.

<sup>32</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?,” 150.

Attending to Nakayama and Krizek's efforts to 'deterritorialize the territory of whiteness,' we might think of one of the ends of whiteness as the resecuring of its invisibility."<sup>33</sup> Preceding Ahmed by roughly a decade, Nakayama and Krizek's influence can be recognized in Ahmed's concern with the essentialization of whiteness as an 'invisible center,' as well as in the conceptualization of whiteness as fundamentally characterized by its capacity for self-reification through discursive and material activity in every day, and finally in the appreciation of whiteness in hegemonic terms. Their objective as critics is not to show how 'whiteness' reifies itself but rather how the reification of whiteness as both invisible and center' is a product/process of contingent yet somewhat consistent rhetoric.<sup>34</sup>

These strategic rhetorics maintain whiteness as the invisible center of social and political life. The six strategies they identify reflect the invisibility and centrality of whiteness as perpetuated and reproduced in everyday discourses and popular culture. They include the naturalization of political dominance, negative definitions of whiteness (defined through the other), and scientific or biological framings.

Nakayama and Krizek's survey respondents associated whiteness with material representations of being in the mainstream or majority - either actual populations or white political representation. This 'majoritarianism whiteness' is acknowledged taken as a given. Whiteness eludes critical awareness through this naturalization since taking white

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<sup>33</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric"; For more on how the invisibility of whiteness is belied in its enduring identity politics, See. Nakayama, "Whiteness Is Not Contained."

<sup>34</sup> Contingent, in that whiteness is defined by its flexibility, and likely manifests different discourses. particular to the specific situation (time, place, issue, etc.) Somewhat consistent, in that rhetorical strategies are identified through patterns or themes that reoccur as structures in whiteness discourse.

political dominance as a given necessarily deflects attention from the history of legal and extralegal violence that produced today's mainstream of white supremacy.

The negation strategy reifies whiteness's invisibility and center by defining whiteness as the 'lack' of other racial attributes (e.g. 'not black'). This language immediately manifests the 'default' of whiteness and the correlating hyper-visibility of Other racial categories. The negative affirmation strategy also informs the linkage between 'All Lives Matter' and "White Lives Matter." The former allows the latter to exist unstated while implicitly distinguishing some Lives from Others on racial grounds.

Another strategy is the discursive association of whiteness to scientific definitions of race; this is to say, this strategy treats whiteness as nothing more than a category of skin color. Employers of this strategy need not delve into melanin and light-absorption or even into the highly contested and critiqued history of 'racial science;' instead, by associating race with science, these strategists avoid or exclude the socio-cultural constitution of racial categories. Thus, this discourse delinks whiteness from the more extensive history of racialization and racism in which all races are constituted. The result is a discourse in which "whiteness is drained of its history and social status: once again it is rendered invisible."<sup>35</sup>

The fourth, fifth, and sixth strategies involve conflating racial labels with nationality (I am not white, I am. It is American); with ethnic heritage (specifically European lineage); and rejecting racial labels as a personal choice (though not necessarily with a rejection of the power of these labels). I group these themes partially for brevity's sake and because each represents the tension between adhering to the invisibility of

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Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," 300.

whiteness and defending/protecting/justifying the privileges white people have continually enjoyed since European colonization began. Conflating whiteness with nationality, particularly with American nationality, avoids naming whiteness and engaging with “American history and tradition replete with relentless efforts to retain and safeguard the boundaries of nationality with whiteness.”<sup>36</sup> We can make a similar point about the conflation with European heritage, which refuses to engage both that European heritage more than any other continent is defined by hybridity, making any ‘purely’ European heritage virtually impossible. Moreover, Nakayama & Krizek remind us that discourses of racial or ethnic purity are themselves functions of white/colonial/racial assemblage.

While these strategies overlap and cannot fully capture the shifting nature of whiteness as a discursive formation, it is the discursive formation that is of most import in *Strategic Rhetorics*. Contradictions between these strategies are taken less as evidence of the limitations of this formation but rather as central to the power of the formation itself.<sup>37</sup> The theory of racial ignorance’s ends-based tenet assumes the conditions of white supremacy orient most white thinkers toward contradictory pursuits: maintaining white power, status, and wealth alongside a “lifelong white moral identity.” Born from analysis of “white students’ efforts to repair “breaches” in non-knowing about familial racism,”<sup>38</sup> strategic rhetorics of whiteness can be thought of as managing these contradictory pursuits.

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<sup>36</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” 301.

<sup>37</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” 302.

<sup>38</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?,” 150.

As a practice of racial ignorance, the subsumption of whiteness into phenotype perpetuates a “non-knowing” of both race itself and the trajectory of white supremacy by avoiding voicing or attending to either the extensive work refuting phenotypical racial difference or the consistent historical utility of pseudo-scientific “research” on racial difference towards rationalizing and justifying slavery and segregation. Similarly, unreflexive reference to political dominance maintains a discursive and cognitive stance that evacuates the contingency of both racial categories and racial, political dominance in the U.S. on the consistency of legal (e.g., gerrymandering) and extralegal (e.g., lynchings, mob violence, political coups) interventions by white citizens to intimidate, invalidate, or otherwise nullify challenges to white political power. Understanding the rhetorical strategies by which whiteness is named/not named brings us into Mueller’s third tenet of the theory of racial ignorance: the centrality of praxis.

Recently, CRT and CWS scholars in communication have identified postracialism as perhaps the defining mode by which Americans come to ‘know’ racialism in the 21st century.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, critical race and whiteness scholars working with ‘postracialism’ designate the various methods of ‘race-neutral speech and thought that permeate discourses of racial equity. Postracialism functions as a foundational logic for the virtue and validity of individual and structural affirmations of ‘colorblindness,’ essentially conflating the refusal to see color with antiracist behavior under a worldview that relegates racial inequity to the past.

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<sup>39</sup> Orbe, “#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy”; Temple, “Communicating Race and Culture in the Twenty-First Century”; Hess and Sobre-Denton, “Setting Aside the “Wise Latina?”; Hoerl, “Selective Amnesia and Racial Transcendence in News Coverage of President Obama’s Inauguration”; Kennedy et al., *Rhetorics of Whiteness*.

The fantasy of postracialism is the belief that racial oppression was permanently and exhaustively rooted out at one point or another in the U.S. past. Postracialism, taken in its hermeneutic implications, thus represents a cognitive dysfunction that forms practice for racial ignorance. The post-racial paradigm secures and stabilizes the endurance of slavery's afterlife —white property and white possession — by disavowing the very salience of racial formation to contemporary white property and white possession. Consequently, white people can simultaneously present themselves as opponents of racism and racial privilege while disabusing themselves of the premise that doing so would necessitate the de-securitization of their proprietary, cognitive, and symbolic investments in white privilege and white supremacy.

Similarly, the meta-narrative of racial transcendence has been identified (independently) by communications scholars Hannah Ollaha-Donaldson and Kristen Hoerl, as well as Africana studies scholar Christel Temple, as functioning similarly to postracialism as a 'not-knowing' of race; interestingly, while the endurance of white victimhood discourses would seem to suggest that at least some white Americans agree that the election of a President of a particular skin color does not, in itself, preclude the possibility of racial inequity among the group for whom the President 'represents,' for the claim that race-based inequities, institutions, and have identified as emerging on the national discursive terrain with the candidacy, campaign, and election of the first Black American President or of a linear historical trajectory from racial oppression to racial equity as Orbe's analysis of All Lives Matter indicates that the apparent refusal to 'see race' in public discourse is a powerful rhetorical device for maintaining a postracial world. He identifies 'All Lives Matter' as a quintessential postracial expression in

relation/response to Black Lives Matter. It does not directly deny that Black lives matter but instead sidesteps the issue by refusing to engage with the impetus behind Black Lives Matter. It has little to say about the impetus behind Black Lives Matter, the denial of which being a constitutive element of the Western state/culture generally and in the United States specifically.<sup>40</sup> However, its silence is only partial, ostensibly positioning the supporters of Black Lives Matter as perhaps less generous in articulating whose lives matter than they are (e.g., “only Black lives matter?”)? Significantly, the validity of responding to #BlackLivesMatter with #AllLivesMatter depends on postracial logic: the refusal to recognize the specific vulnerability of Black Lives to ‘not-mattering.’

Orbe thus shows us how postracial logics interact with colorblind racial epistemology and ‘abstract liberalism’ framings to work against recognition of the materiality of Black lives in at least two ways. First, they implicitly deny the premise of existing racial inequity - at least on a severe or dire enough scale to warrant action, by denying the current-day fungibility of Black bodies.<sup>41</sup> Second, postracialist discourse further obfuscates questioning their antiracist stance by offering a liberal humanist blanket concern for the sanctity of all lives. In other words, Orbe makes apparent how post-racialism facilitates the shift from racially explicit language to race-neutrality, even as he makes evident how colorblind language and the adoption of colorblind logic reinforce the postracial worldview.

However, there is a reason that Mueller seeks to shift away from over-reliance on colorblindness as the primary theoretical framework for maintaining whiteness; simply

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<sup>40</sup> Orbe, “#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy,” 94-97.

<sup>41</sup> Represented on the one hand by the State violence (e.g., carcerality, overwhelming protections for police who murder Black and Brown people) and on the other by the disposability and exploitability of economically vulnerable and socially immobilized Black labor under neoliberal capitalism.

put, colorblindness may not be enough to explain, to stay with this example, #AllLivesMatter. Mueller suggests that the problem with the CBT approach that it is simply too rigid. Because colorblind theory relies on a framework of “racial cognition as a rules-based process that propels racial reproduction,” it cannot account for the often contradictory modes of cognition that converge to reproduce white supremacy/antiracist morality.<sup>42</sup> For example, while CBT might readily explain All Lives Matter as the neatly colorblind response to Black Lives Matter, the rules-forward framework of CBT struggles to reconcile the coexistence, and mutuality, of “All Lives Matter” with the racially-sectarian form of white victimhood.

Essentially then, CBT is hamstrung by its commitment to explaining all of whiteness strategic occlusions and denials through a colorblind stance in such a way that precludes recognition of those discourses in which colorblindness is not actually what is on the table. The theory of racial ignorance, on the other hand, allows for and even predicts such contradictory cognitive stances, as colorblindness and (explicit or implicit) white identity politics unite in terms of their shared end.

Similarly, postracial scholars have explored how the election of Obama to the Presidency catalyzed discourses disseminating post-racialism as a matter of national culture/history. Some of these explorations, such as Kristin Hoerl’s, consider the discourses surrounding the election itself as an event symbolizing racial transcendence.<sup>43</sup> She finds significance in the fact that the election of Obama was so immediately and fervently declared a symbol of America’s completed progression out of slavery, through

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<sup>42</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?,” 158.

<sup>43</sup> Temple, “Communicating Race and Culture in the Twenty-First Century”; Hess and Sobre-Denton, “Setting Aside the “Wise Latina?”; Hoerl, “Selective Amnesia and Racial Transcendence in News Coverage of President Obama’s Inauguration.”

civil rights and Jim Crow, to racial equity. Such declarations are particularly suspect, given that less than twenty years separate the 2008 Presidential election and the dissolution of the bulk of the nation's social safety nets –dissolutions that were justified through racialized narratives of 'welfare queens' and deadbeat dads.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, Temple considers how mainstream media reproduces discourses of race-neutrality and post-racialism through interpretations of the rhetorics of the Obama administration itself. Temple speaks to how post-racialism functions as a filter for potentially race-radical sections of Obama's thought/ discourse. With this filter, the media avoids acknowledging the reality of racial inequity in the 21st century (of the lie of post-racialism.) Notably, Temple contrasts this to the reception of an Eric Holder speech, in which the repudiation of post-racialism was far more overt. Correspondingly, it was subject to both criticisms as anti-patriotic and needlessly racial. Both critiques "deflected attention away from the most salient matters of racial discourse and cultural agency to which he advocated most in his speech."<sup>45</sup>

The conflation of speaking against postracialism with anti-patriotism exemplifies the sort of chilling effect the invocation of postracial discourses and adherence to the postracial ontology exerts on public awareness of racial inequity (and the systems, policies, and voices that contribute to its maintenance). This effect is what Kristin Hoerl identifies as a productive relationship between narratives of 'racial transcendence' – of the delivery of the nation from racial inequity, or indeed from racial classification as a meaningful category, characterized by the Obama election – and selective amnesia. Selective, in that it filters out racial consciousness that challenges post-racialism. She

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<sup>44</sup> Gring-Pemble, "Are We Going to Now Govern by Anecdote?"

<sup>45</sup> Temple, "Communicating Race and Culture in the Twenty-First Century," 56.

highlights the interdependency of the production of post-racialism with the negation (or erasure) of counter-history or counter-narratives, as well as the converse — how the invocation of racial transcendence in discourse reifies racial amnesia in U.S. public spheres and public memory.

The fourth tenet of the theory of racial ignorance is ‘corporate white agency.’ The tenet of corporate white agency asserts that individuals and elite classes (e.g., think tank researchers, public intellectuals, and vocal parents at school board meetings) are the primary agents in spaces where racial ignorance is produced.<sup>46</sup> ‘Corporate’ here refers less to big business and more to the idea of whites across professional/social classes behaving as a collective ‘corporate body’ in producing racial ignorance. Additionally, the emphasis on corporate white agency allows for a focus on the ‘instrumentality’ of systems/institutions as ‘white spaces;’ spaces both primarily populated by white bodies and in Ahmed’s phenomenological sense of being shaped through history and repetition by and towards whiteness (e.g., the institutions of liberal government, the composition of modern prison systems, racial capitalism).

The notion of corporate white agency undergirds this thesis insofar as this thesis takes up the various groups and institutions that have publicly opposed the incorporation of *1619* into mainstream historical pedagogy as a relatively cohesive united front. I consider the various streams of opposition — from historians and political pundits and parents — as a singular, if trans-organizational and trans-political, coalition-against-1619. Under a ‘corporate model’ of racial ignorance production, this analysis considers the legislative work of CRT bans as collaborators, in a sense, with those who testify at the

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<sup>46</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?,” 152-156.

school board meetings. Further, we can consider this legislative movement as collaborative with the public discursive/intellectual work that has rationalized opposition to *1619* on the grounds of both historical inaccuracy and political antagonism as well as on ideological-cultural grounds (e.g., the *1619 Project* is ‘anti-American’ or ‘concerned with white guilt and Black victimhood’).

To consider how corporate white agency is reflected in contemporary U.S. racial politics, I want to place David Theo Goldberg and Casey Ryan Kelly’s complementary analyses of white victimhood produced by racial states and white people.<sup>47</sup> Briefly reading sections from Goldberg’s analysis of racial states alongside Kelly’s various investigations of white victimhood rhetorics reveals the mutually reinforcing nature of public and ‘private’ productions of racialized victimhood/crises in re-securing white racial solidarity

The linkage between the Racial States and rhetorics of victimhood, threat, and instability is only a tiny facet of David Theo Goldberg’s investigation of modern *Racial States*. Part revisionist history, part political theory, part philosophy, part rhetoric, his work journeys past the conventional start point of modernity to the onset of European conquest and the intertwined development of colonialism and liberalism— and then back again — to present the thesis that modern states are racial states; states constituted as both modern and states by their racialization. In what is only one stop on this (return) journey,

Goldberg characterizes racial states as always being made manifest, unable to avoid visibility when crisis – constructed or otherwise – necessitates force/violence.

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<sup>47</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*; Kelly, “Whiteness, Repressive Victimhood, and the Foil of the Intolerant Left.”

Moreover, he argues that the state of colonial/state power is virtually always in crisis.<sup>48</sup> This crisis is partly because all non-European humans in their humanity represent resistance to both the natural and historicist worldviews. However, Goldberg also suggests that Racial States are perpetually in crisis, given that State power needs to be asserted constantly. This conception of European reactionism manifests on all kinds of scales – ranging just within Goldberg from the perceived influence of Caribbean workers' lifestyle in the decline of direct colonialism to current circumstances of famine and the alienation of workers in Britain to the unparalleled and transparent brutality inflicted on the indigenous peoples by the Belgian King Leopold, ostensibly out of necessity, to achieve totalizing control to build the Free Congo State (as essentially a rubber factory on a 'national' scale.<sup>49</sup>

In the context of the transition from colonial rule and slavery to contemporary nation-states and the absence of formalized legal segregation, Goldberg essentially characterizes adherence to whiteness as the primary telos of the (post-)racial state; this insofar as whiteness has historically been the master race of all modern racial states, but also insofar as it is a category in a perpetual state of peril, a race-under-siege.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the trajectory of crises of race that have defined American race relations since Reconstruction, including those informing the racial violence in defense of the possessive investment recognized by Lipsitz, is a process that transcends even as it defines the particularities of the United States. Whiteness is necessarily implicated in this trajectory.

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<sup>48</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*.

<sup>49</sup> For further insight into the overlaps and divergences of racial naturalist and racial historicist reactionism, as well as for further context on the intersection between economic exploitation and racial brutality in the Belgian Congo, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 105-106, 123.

<sup>50</sup> "Whiteness, then, is deemed definitive and protective of the well-bred national stock, defended against the perceived internal threat of working class mores, and lack of social standing as much as from foreign invasion..." Goldberg, "States of Whiteness," in *The Racial State*, 172.

Implicated because it is the constructed victimhood of the white population — whether presented as an injustice of the past or a looming threat — historically has inspired and justified both legal and extralegal movements of white Americans to defend white possession and property.

The construction of victimhood identity through rhetorics of (national and personal) security represents another practice of white racial non-knowing, albeit in a form that partially deviates from strategic rhetorics' prioritization of maintaining the invisibility of whiteness. The deviation exists insofar as white victimhood rhetorics tend to engage directly in racial identity politics explicating grievances from the socio-racial location of primarily poor, conservative white people.<sup>51</sup>

Critical whiteness scholars have scrutinized this particular aspect of whiteness, particularly those scholars interested in specifying how victimhood and crisis function at both individual and systemic levels. Casey Ryan Kelly has recently explored the construction and circulation of white victimhood within contemporary neoconservative/Far-Right political and public spheres. Kelly identifies two well-established attributes or ways of conceiving whiteness that provide the cultural/logical building blocks for a discourse of 'repressive victimhood: neutrality (as in objectivity and as in the invisible normal) and property.

Repressive victimhood as strategic rhetoric specifies yet another way whiteness discourses negotiate the contradiction between white supremacy/privilege and the desire/demands of postracialism/colorblindness. Alternatively, between the invisibility of

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<sup>51</sup> Gries and Bratta, "The Racial Politics of Circulation"; Oliha, "In Love and War"; McCann, "On Whose Ground?"; Kelly, "Whiteness, Repressive Victimhood, and the Foil of the Intolerant Left"; Kelly, "Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of White Ambivalence."

whiteness and its centrality, another way. Neutrality and objectivity regarding race and racial policy are logical and moral virtues within a colorblind/postracial discursive field. Given this race-neutral stance, the ‘foil’ of racial justice advocates can be dismissed as unnecessary and assailed as unjustly threatening to property – both material, legal, cultural – ‘naturally’ accrued (exclusively) by whites—all without it being necessary to use explicitly racist language.<sup>52</sup>

Kelley offers three critical insights in the context of this review of the theory of racial ignorance. First, he corroborates what Jodi Melamed characterizes as the erasure of explicit racial reference under the shifting ‘discursive formations’ in ways comparable to Mueller’s ‘epistemic maneuvers’ of racial discourse: racial liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism. Kelley corroborates Melamed insofar as the strategic rhetoric of repressive victimhood he identifies is distinguishable from the explicitly racialized/racist discourses of victimhood that circulated among the Southern states during the Constitutional period (that attacks on chattel slavery constituted attacks on the white Southern aristocratic slaveholder culture as well as on state sovereignty (to possess, exploit enslaved Black peoples) and still again from the biological and cultural frames of Black inferiority that both Northern and Southern segregationists deployed in the 20th century that sought to situate abolition, enfranchisement, and social/civic integration of Black and Brown Americans as existential threats to the white social body as well as further encroachments on the public/private sovereignty of white Americans (and by proxy, their states) by a Federal government run amok.

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<sup>52</sup> Kelly, “Whiteness, Repressive Victimhood, and the Foil of the Intolerant Left.”

While the repressive victimhood that circulates most between Trump and his base is certainly racialized/racist (by way of xenophobia,) the crucial point of distinction is that, for the most part, white victimhood rhetorics avoid naming explicit racial groups. However, the groups that make white people victims are characterized by racial differences; for example, fears of terrorism serve as a code for Islamophobia. Similarly, the fear of “illegal immigration” does not obtain with white or white-passing immigrants (e.g., Western and Northern Europeans) yet readily obtains regarding Latinx immigrants.

Kelly’s work, alongside that of Paul Johnson, makes apparent that the erasure of racial reference cannot and should not be presumed as a totality. With various forms of white victimhood, whether explicitly racialized or embedded behind proxies and abstractions such as “I the People” it is essential to recognize that while whiteness may thrive behind the shroud of colorblind hegemony, the illusion of colorblindness can and does fracture.

Even if only partially, it fractures when the time comes for white Americans to rationalize their privilege. Alternatively, colorblind logic often fractures when the opportunity arises to re-present the decline of legally enforced white privilege/supremacy as the decline of white people. Through white victimhood, the decentering and integration of the segregated white polity is reformulated as the relegation of white people to the margins of American politics. Similarly, the integration of public primary and higher education institutions and, relatedly, labor industries are perceived through the victim lens as the distortion of an (allegedly) neutral meritocratic system of education and employment to the benefit of (presumed) undeserving individuals and social groups.

Keep in mind that while I describe the veiled racialization in terms that may otherwise imply volitional or conscious subterfuge, it is misleading and probably counterproductive to assume that those who deploy white victimhood are cynical actors, deliberately seeking to camouflage racism as something(s) racially neutral. Instead, as Paul Johnson remarks regarding the Tea Party, the blend of racial and economic anxieties, buttressed by a shared collective (mis)memory of the Great Recession and of the (reasons for) the failures of social welfare, resonated with “enough rank-and-file Americans genuinely concerned about the issues it championed— albeit with motives rooted in a fragile sense of self and nation— to suggest the Tea Party presents a real analytical challenge at the level of American national identity rather than a phenomenon reducible to a Right-wing outlier.<sup>53</sup>

Kelly’s analysis of white resentment, alongside Lipsitz’s recognition of the possessive investments of white Americans in white privilege, also substantiates the theory of racial ignorance’s assumption that white people have agency in the matter of racial knowing. The conception of white people as racial dupes, unaware of what they are unaware of and thus incapable of imagining otherwise, fails to appreciate the fact that while white people may labor under the delusions of racial ignorance, incentives for doing so abound. White Americans are, whether aware or not, inextricably invested in the endurance of white supremacy. The fact that the epistemological inheritance of currently living generations of white Americans has developed in such a fashion as to instantiate cognitive dysfunctions regarding racial interpretation and discourse is not mutually exclusive with the reality that powerful financial, political, cognitive, emotive incentives

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<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *I the People*, 150.

are associated with ‘not-knowing’ or ‘misinterpreting’ the nature of the reality of racial formation in the U.S.<sup>54</sup>

Taking this position would thus come dangerously close to reversing the essence of what distinguishes an epistemology of ignorance; the shift from conceiving of ignorance as an absence of knowledge passively produced to thinking through the ignorance as something that is structurally produced, actively maintained, and relatively consistent in the targeted gaps it ‘produces.’<sup>55</sup> I mention this now to avoid getting lost in the labyrinth of demonstrating intentionality, what James Baldwin once called the impossible task of “taking the will for the deed.”<sup>56</sup> He did so on the Dick Cavett Show in a somewhat heated exchange with former Yale professor Paul Weiss. In watching the brief conversation, I was and am still struck (but no longer surprised) by Weiss, not because of his repeated efforts to turn Baldwin’s achievements and reputation against him as a tactic in service of white innocence, but because of Weiss’ unwillingness or inability to imagine that for Baldwin or millions of Black Americans the concern is not what white people think about Black people, but with the outcomes. Baldwin is concerned about a racial consciousness that only ‘knows’ racism by a declaration of intent. He worries that this fixation on the internal motivations and intentions of white actors that support policies that perpetuated or exacerbated racial inequity derails genuine exploration of the outcomes of racist policy. This distinction is vital because the privileging of the consciously racist actor produces precisely the anachronistic and overly-individualized

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<sup>54</sup> Mueller, “Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?,” 151.

<sup>55</sup> Sullivan and Tuana, “Introduction,” in Sullivan and Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> The Dick Cavett Show, James Baldwin and Paul Weiss Debate Discrimination In America | The Dick Cavett Show.

conception of how racial inequity is maintained that the theory of racial ignorance seeks to correct.

Privileging epistemology and the sociocultural production of racial ignorance liberate critics of whiteness from the binary of racists/antiracists and the question of conscious or intentional racism. The theory of racial ignorance allows for the idea that, whether consciously or not, white Americans are necessarily invested in white supremacy by inheritance and thus have reason to invest in epistemologies that occlude, rationalize, or simply ignore white supremacy and white privilege.

Finally, Kelly identifies from a critical whiteness framework what not only Melamed, but Lipsitz, Harris, Du Bois, and indeed entire movements of race radical thought have explored: the mutuality of American governmental structure (and liberalism in general) and the cultural/rhetorical production of nationalism to the discursive formation and possessive investments of whiteness in the 21st century. Kelly's analysis of the circulation of white nationalism among far-right/white-supremacist internet communities shows how the rhetorics of victimhood transcend both relatively high-visibility figures like Milo Yiannopoulos and Trump and the relative transparency of the public sphere to circulate internally among white nationalists.<sup>57</sup> The circulation of 'Trumpicons,' which are phrases and imagery of Trump's brand (e.g., MAGA, Lock 'em Up), reproduce racial anxiety — in the collective sense of white people as a class under attack from Others — but also racial pride.

Whiteness scholars have further shown how strategies of victimhood and security also reify the marginalization and silencing of non-white Americans who do not conform

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<sup>57</sup> Gries and Bratta, "The Racial Politics of Circulation."

to sanctioned patriotic behavior, simultaneously reifying white-American civic identity while denigrating Others.<sup>58</sup> Duvall's *Too Famous To Protest* considers this dual-process plays out in analyses of alt-right texts responding to Kaepernick's NFL Protests. Duvall identifies how white Americans perceive and discuss patriotism and anti-Americanism in universalized white terms, perceiving America as perpetually under siege, from without and within.

Among Duvall's insights, particularly significant are the ways that Kaepernick's online critics oscillate rather seamlessly between an abstractly inclusive stance on patriotic practice in American culture (as a signifier and a reflection of the ostensible ethos of multicultural tolerance and freedom of speech and protest as the cornerstone of American ideal culture) and an antagonistically exclusionary, delimited conception of 'proper' expressions of patriotism and social protest, in which the cost of breaching being not only the ceding of the (otherwise) unalienable right to protest and free speech but also public and professional ostracization. Moreover, her work shows how the invisibility of whiteness and the hypervisibility of Black bodies inform this process. Duvall discusses how Kaepernick's critics utilized every facet of Kaepernick's identity to denigrate his character; moreover, she explicates how the denigration itself became a means of demonstrating and reinforcing ties within the alt-right community. This linkage between patriotism and whiteness, like all whiteness relations, is informed by a contradiction rendered invisible; there is no need for Kaepernick's haters/critics/attackers to reconcile the seeming paradox of attacking an expression of freedom of protest in defense of American ideals. Patriotism and nationalism, and whiteness are linked in these

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<sup>58</sup> Duvall, "Too Famous to Protest."

communities, making the normative American identity mutually exclusive with expressions/articulations of antiracism.

The production and circulation of victimhood, security, and purity rhetorics fall under the framework of racial states. Goldberg refers to the production of a facade of homogenous citizenship/population as an integral part of the construction of national identity as much as national boundaries. The fear of heterogeneity, of the integration of Others into the fabric of the nation, falls under a line of thought that Goldberg refers to as racial naturalism, which he associates with the views of racial eugenicists, 'zero-tolerance segregationists - groups sharing a belief that racial hierarchies present irresolvable and permanent gaps in the 'quality' of humanity that make integration a fatal threat to the coherence of a nation/culture.

However, in its iterations throughout modernity, racial naturalism has a foil in racial historicism. Suppose racial naturalism produces racial 'extremists' of history like the Klan. In that case, racial historicism produces an ostensibly gentler form of prejudice. However, Goldberg noted historicism as arguably more subversive and responsible for most contemporary racial/ist thought. While opposed to racial naturalism, historicism still inspires policy with similar intolerance to heterogeneity within a racial state. Historicists generally skew towards assimilation through controlled, stratified integration paired with practices of 'enculturation.'" Goldberg references colonizer schools created to teach the colonized children the superiority of Westernization, backed by liberal humanists' emphasis on (Western knowledge) as the benchmark that determines fitness for political agency. This mandate for assimilation already coheres with Ahmed's identification of Recruitment as a process by which the experience of whiteness is reified and expanded.

Still, it similarly converges with Wilson's analysis of the 'racial politics of imitation' that gained political and social salience during the late 19th century. Imitation was the philosophy of public education in 19th century America. After Reconstruction, Black and White Americans perceived imitation of whiteness to be crucial to developing the skills necessary to emulate white citizenship in Black Americans. They considered these practices the most potent means by which formerly enslaved people could differentiate themselves from slavery and, in essence, 'prove' their fitness for equality and civic responsibility. Racial historicism aside, the response to imitation was ultimately not tolerance or equality but the worsening of race relations and the expansion of the perceived 'gap in humanity' between white and the perceived threat to the homogeneity/purity/superiority of the previously exclusively white state and citizenry.

In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger similarly explores how the mandate for assimilation differed across racial lines, in terms of both what it demanded and what it promised, using the reception of a high volume of Irish immigrants to the U.S. in the early 19th century as a case study.<sup>59</sup> Mainstream white Americans initially relegated Irish immigrants to just 'above' Black Americans regarding the discrimination and hostility the former subjected to the latter. Precisely, they imitated racism and racial terror of Black Americans. The Irish practice of mimesis yielded far better results, enabling their assimilation into the center of the social order. Moreover, the fact that economic anxieties - specifically, fears of jobs competition between white Americans and Others - marked the Irish at both ends of this process demonstrates the interlocking nature of racial tensions with nationalism and economic protectionism.

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<sup>59</sup>Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness : Race and the Making of the American Working Class*.

This intersection persists throughout history, as Flores has argued in an analysis of the rhetorics surrounding the immigration of Hispanic and Latino farm-workers, and as Gomez identified in her study of the rhetoric surrounding the Trump administration's 'Muslim Ban.'<sup>60</sup> Gomez argues that Twitter discourses surrounding Trump's Muslim Ban illustrate the discourses of contemporary whiteness. Analyzing these discourses allows Gomez to mark how hybridity, nationalism, and whiteness come together to defend an ostensibly multicultural but white supremacist Americanism while simultaneously flattening and denigrating Others —switching and interweaving non-English speakers, Muslims, those from certain nations, and those with darker skin as the threats.

### **Cultural Memory as a Technology of Racial Ignorance**

In this thesis, I argue that *The 1619 Project* functions as a form of counter-memory in its insurgency against racial ignorance. While the function of memory is not recognized by Mueller explicitly as functioning in the processes of (re)producing racial ignorance, Mills places memory - both individual cognitive processes of recollection and collective memories, or memories constructed and shared within social groups - as central to the maintenance of social epistemologies of racial ignorance. Memory is central to the reproduction of racial ignorance because the production of racialized modes of memory and amnesia facilitate the invisibility of whiteness, enabling white people to “refuse to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Flores, “Stoppage and the Racialized Rhetorics of Mobility”; Gomez, “Not White/Not Quite.”

<sup>61</sup> Mills, “White Ignorance,” 28–29.

Mills does not focus as Spelman does on the role that the United Daughters of the Confederacy played in producing the sorts of remembrances and forgettings that sustain white normativity and, thus, an epistemology of racial ignorance. However, their activity and influence are precisely that which Mills describes in the management of memory:

Out of the infinite sequence of events, some trivial, some momentous, we extract what we see as the crucial ones and organize them into an overall narrative. *Social memory is then inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, and monuments* (emphasis mine.)<sup>62</sup>

The United Daughters made the erection of monuments to the Confederacy a national project and used their political influence in the South to impose their own set of standards for history textbooks. Their standards for school history textbooks expressly rejected texts that failed to conform to the Southern interpretation of the Civil War known colloquially as the Lost Cause.<sup>63</sup> The legacy of the United Daughters of the Confederacy is the production of a cultural memory that reproduces the marginalization of Black people, slavery, economic exploitation, and white supremacy. Moreover, since cultural memory endures through its capacity to shape interpretations of the *present*, the marginalization managed by the United Daughters' mnemonic and historical work can be directly linked to the hegemony of postracialism, which relies on the erasure or marginalization of Black counter-testimony.<sup>64</sup>

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Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> Bailey, "The Textbooks of the 'Lost Cause'"; Harriot, "We Found the Textbooks of Senators Who Oppose The 1619 Project and Suddenly Everything Makes Sense"; Heyse, "Teachers of the Lost Cause."

<sup>64</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity."

In this sense, United States cultural memory, overdetermined by whiteness as it is, functions as a technology for racial ignorance. This pairs with Mueller's tenet of corporate white agency, providing a cohesive framework through which events, ideas, individuals, and organizations are understood as interactive across times, places, and platforms. It further adds another dimension by which we can recognize whiteness as invisibly informing the movement to control racial pedagogy in public education. However, as *The 1619 Project* demonstrates, cultural memory is never impermeable; it can be challenged, resisted, and unsettled, as the next chapter will investigate.

## CHAPTER TWO: *THE 1619 PROJECT* AND INSURGING AGAINST EPISTEMIC IGNORANCE

The previous chapter elaborated on the functions, practices, and foundations of racial ignorance in sustaining white innocence, the illusions of postracialism, and thus also the mythos of American exceptionalism. Specifically, I reviewed the linkages between postracialism, racial ignorance, the overdetermination of whiteness in the archive of American history and discussed the strategies of denial and rationalization that ‘rhetors of whiteness’ enact in service of occluding the invisible centrality of whiteness in the U.S. past/present/future. I did this to elaborate on the practices, locations, collaborations, and objectives of racial ignorance as specified in Mueller's Theory of Racial Ignorance. As the previous chapter established the epistemic production of racial ignorance as a component of postracial hegemony, this chapter considers how *The 1619 Project* disrupts postracialism and the forms of racial non-knowing that sustain it. I argue that the *1619 Project* functions as a form of counter-memory and counter-history. *1619*'s archival methodology works to identify and counteract the structured gaps in white social epistemology that facilitate and legitimize the hegemony of postracialism.<sup>65</sup> Further, I argue that the *Project* assembles a coalition of experts that continue the Black American tradition of epistemological counter-testimony exemplified by Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B Du Bois, while recognizing and responding to the erasure of these figures' most damning critiques of the U.S. state and racial capitalism; marginalization of Black counter-testimony.

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<sup>65</sup> “The reactivation of historical openness and the heretical challenge to master narratives originate in moments of hegemonic instability when marginalized or unheard counter-voices force the renegotiation of power relations and of their historical causes.” Molden, “Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony.”

The first form of the *Project* was a full edition of the *New York Times Magazine*. In this initial form, the *Project* consisted of several articles of ‘long form journalism.’ interspersed with these articles were a series of photographs, poems, pieces of creative fiction, and an extended ‘literary timeline’ of significant moments in U.S. history.

Publication within and under the banner of the *New York Times* notwithstanding, the *Project* is not, strictly speaking, a work of pure journalism. First, *1619* incorporates multiple mediums and genres: Nikole Hannah-Jones and the contributing authors expanded on the initial magazine form of the project in a book-length version of the *Project*. Both forms feature arrangements of written work, photographs, creative fiction, and poetry, with the latter four mediums complementing the more conventional ‘long-form’ articles (in the magazine form) or chapters (in the book form.)

For example, in the magazine form, the transition from Mathew Desmond’s piece on the linkages between slavery and capitalism and Jineen Interlandi’s exploration of the racialization of American healthcare is interrupted by an illustration from Aaron Sempel of a broadsheet newspaper called “The Daily Lies” with the headline “BLACK PEOPLE ARE FREE.”<sup>66</sup> Additionally, a literary timeline connects other creative works throughout the project. The significance of the literary timeline exceeds the scope of this thesis, but it is worth noting that Hannah-Jones conceived the literary timeline to be a way to account for the absence of primary Black texts for the majority of the country’s existence.

However, the core essays of the press version were revised, expanded, and augmented in the book, titled *1619: A New Origin Story*. In addition to revising the initial articles, the book includes new contributions from legal scholars and historians, several

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<sup>66</sup> Interlandi, “Why Doesn’t America Have Universal Health Care?”; Desmond, “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation.”

of whom initially served as fact-checkers for the press version. Additionally, a collaborative effort between the *Times*, the *Project's* authors, and the Pulitzer Center converted the *Project* into a curriculum; reading guides and exercises encourage students to engage and reflect on the content, developing their interpretations of slavery's legacy the significance of national memories.<sup>67</sup> These materials engage students not only with *1619's* subject matter/content; they also cultivate fluency with the literary and artistic practices that the *Project* employs to deliver its content. For example, activities include *Creating a Quote Museum: Critical Reading and Visual Art*; and *Reframing History Through Creative Writing*.<sup>68</sup>

The Project could best be described as an effort at revisionist history at its core; however, their practice of revisionist history also suggests that all history is revisionist. Specifically, the *Project's* primary purpose is to respond to two interrelated issues: first, the fact that historically, the experiences, perspectives, and contributions of Black Americans to the U.S. national project have been, for the most part, marginalized from the mainstream canon of U.S. history. Second, Americans and mainly white Americans are prone to underappreciate, if not actively avoid, the extent to which the legacy of chattel slavery and anti-Blackness has endured despite, and in some senses because of, the antiracist activity and legislation known as the Civil Rights movement.

In her introductory article in the *Magazine* edition of the *Project*, Nikole Hannah-Jones starkly previews the intent of the *Project* to offer a *counter-history* geared towards correcting the displacement of Black Americans to the margins of collective national memory and public history, writing that “our founding ideals of liberty and equality were

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<sup>67</sup> “The 1619 Project Reading Guide.”

<sup>68</sup> “Activities to Extend Student Engagement | Pulitzer Center.”

false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all.<sup>69</sup>

In the introduction, Hannah-Jones speaks of her father and childhood, of the alienation she felt as she learned the national history as taught in school textbooks, and how this bled into a sort of alienation from her father, as she wondered where his stubborn patriotism could find validation. She previews a defining motif of the *Project's* archival approach, which I later describe as akin to leaving no stone unturned, as the journalists, poets, and scholars who contribute to the Project demonstrate that to center Black American history necessitates retrieving the context, of the figures, events, eras, and movements of American racial history that have been suppressed, erased, or displaced by generations of white archivists; of Thomas Jefferson, as he wrote the lies of the Declaration while Robert Hemings, who would have been Jefferson's brother-in-law if he was not born into slavery and thus denied of legal personhood, "a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master's beck and call;"<sup>70</sup> and of the Constitutional conventions writ large, and how the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word."<sup>71</sup>

Hannah-Jones previews the *Project's* specific interest in the periods of American history where the trajectory of racial progress is forestalled, reversed, suppressed, or resisted by a complementary trajectory of racial violence. For example, the *Project's* authors are particularly interested in the Reconstruction era. Foci include the

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<sup>69</sup> Hannah-Jones, "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One."

<sup>70</sup> Hannah-Jones, "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One," 17.

<sup>71</sup> Hannah-Jones, "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One," 18.

foreshortening and reversal of the first phase of nineteenth-century Reconstruction-era interracial politics by both the gun and the pen; by the white mobs who organized the coup and mass killings of Wilmington's elected interracial government; but also by Andrew Johnson's reversal of both of the critical Reconstruction policies directed towards ensuring that post-Abolition, Black Americans would have both property and protection.

Hannah-Jones's initial recognition of the experience of the national management of ignorance I discussed in the last chapter; from Spelman, the management of racial ignorance through the structured exclusion of Black counter-memory of the Civil War. In the preface to the book edition of the *Project*, Hannah-Jones recounts her experience of the absence of Black history from the "visions of the past I absorbed from school textbooks, television, and the local history museum" and describes the impressions these absences made: of Black people as "invisible at best and inconsequential at worst...not actors but acted upon."<sup>72</sup> Moreover, she describes how conversely, these histories situated white Americans as not only the source of Black oppression but the source of Black liberation; in other words, as ultimately redeemed from the sin of slavery by their efforts to liberate Black people from the oppression they created. With this concern in mind, the *Project* aims to "bring the contributions of slavery and Black Americans from the margins of American history to the center, where they belong."<sup>73</sup> The *Project* thus poses and answers the following questions:

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<sup>72</sup> Hannah-Jones, "Origins," in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>73</sup> Hannah-Jones, "Origins," in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, xxii.

- 1) “what would it mean to reframe our understanding of U.S. history by considering *1619* as our country’s origin point, the birth of our defining contradictions, the seed of so much of what has made us unique?
- 2) How might that reframing change how we understand the unique problems of today?
- 3) Conversely, “How might [the reframing] help us understand the country’s best qualities?
- 4) How would looking at contemporary American life through this lens help us better appreciate the contributions of Black Americans, not only to our culture but to our democracy itself? ”<sup>74</sup>

There are several important implications embedded in these four questions that relate to the concept of racial ignorance as a technology for rationalizing racial inequality.

First and possibly foremost is the implication in question two, that today's problems might be differently understood when viewed through a historical lens that centers on Black Americans. Given that the significance of the year *1619* for the *Project* is that *1619* is the year that the *White Lion* arrived in Jamestown carrying the first enslaved Africans to be sold in what would become the British colony of Virginia, it is apparent from the outset that the commonality *1619* wishes to advance —between economic inequality, the explosion in carceral rates beginning around the 1970s, and the relatively stingy social welfare programs that have managed to become law throughout U.S. history — is slavery and anti-Blackness.

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<sup>74</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Origins,” in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, ed. Jake Silverstein, Caitlin Roper, and Ilena Silverman, First (One World, 2021), xvii–xxxiii.

In describing some of these problems, she previews several of the main chapters of *1619*: Desmond's *Capitalism*, Trymaine Lees' *Inheritance*, and Hannah-Jones concluding chapter on *Justice* deal with "stark economic inequality."<sup>75</sup> Leslie and Michelle Alexander's chapter on *Fear*, Carol Anderson's *Self-Defense*, and Jamelle Bouie's *Politics* deal with the legal construction, social rationalization, and political weaponization of "violence" towards maintaining white supremacy.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the question of "world-leading incarceration rates, political divisions, and stingy social safety net" is taken up anew by Bryan Stevenson in *Punishment*.<sup>77</sup>

Secondly, the idea of 'defining contradictions' is a significant departure from the logic of racial transcendence and postracialism. A definitive premise of postracialism is the idea that slavery and racial oppression, while undeniably present in the U.S. for a plurality of its history, is nonetheless aberrational; a quirk in the model envisioned by the Founders, rather than a central component of the fabric of the nation itself.

Hannah-Jones draws through these questions a linkage between how the U.S. preserves the past and the ways in which the Americans interpret the present. What Hannah-Jones explains here is what Spelman asserts in describing the work of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and other groups to control the recollection and archived history of the Civil War as the work of 'managing ignorance.' Generally speaking, that

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<sup>75</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Origins," in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Justice," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 451–476; Trymaine Lee, "Inheritance," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 293–305; Carol Anderson, "Self-Defense," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 249–66; Matthew Desmond, "Capitalism," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 165–85; Matthew Bouie, "Politics," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 195–208.

<sup>76</sup> Carol Anderson, "Self-Defense," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 249–66; Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander, "Fear," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 97–122.

<sup>77</sup> Bryan Stevenson, "Punishment," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 275–83; Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Origins," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, xvii–xxxiii.

history and its narratives have heuristic value towards how Americans think of U.S. racial history; its progress, salient events, contestations, and, most importantly, the state of U.S. racial relations today.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the management of history can be thought of as one of the practices Mueller describes as working towards the end of racial ignorance.

In this sense, the point of *1619* is not just to provide an alternative history but to demonstrate how the shift in the narrative framing of history prompts and facilitates a shift in the interpretation of *the present*. Leslie Harris describes the function of historical education and reflection as a “practice round for the complexities we experience in real-time” — this is a helpful framework for considering the function of *1619*, which, as a socially and politically engaged history that seeks to complicate the given narratives of American history as predominantly taught in public schools also seeks to foster a sense of critical reflection in its readers, as they move through life and make observations and interpretations about racialization and racism in the U.S. in ‘real-time.’<sup>79</sup>

In *White Ignorance*, Mills speaks to the linkage between racial memory and the contemporary hegemony of postracialism as one of mutual reproduction. First, he describes how white normativity functions epistemologically to erase the sources of white privilege, writing that “White normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today.”<sup>80</sup>

Mills further expands strategic rhetorics of whiteness (e.g., whiteness as political dominance, as nationality, as “not a race”) to include vernaculars of racial denial

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Spelman, “Managing Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 119–31.

<sup>79</sup> 1619 vs. 1776: When Was America Founded?

<sup>80</sup> Mills, “White Ignorance.”

(particularly the strategy of ‘reverse racism’), which are shored up and rationalized by collective memory and collective forgetting. The naturalization of political dominance that Nakayama and Krizek describe as a means of avoiding naming whiteness is rationalized by the ‘forgetting’ of the work that went into maintaining white political dominance. Similarly, the tactic of ascribing an ideology of ‘reverse racism’ to those like Ibram X. Kendi, who recommend that policies of antiracism are necessary to ensure racial equity works through the essentialization of postracialism:

In both cases white normativity underpins white privilege, in the first case by justifying differential treatment by race and in the second case by justifying formally equal treatment by race that— in its denial of the cumulative effects of past differential treatment— is tantamount to continuing it. What makes such denial possible, of course, is the management of memory.<sup>81</sup>

The *1619 Project* contests white American historians’ monopoly on the epistemic authority to speak on the nature of the relationship between race, racism, and the U.S. past, present, and future. The *Project* does this by contesting both the completeness and accuracy of U.S. hegemonic racial history, and by pointing to the ways that the givenness of U.S. history is contingent on the exclusion and erasure of Black subjects and the marginalization of Black counter-history. In the first analytical section of this chapter, I elaborate on how *1619* challenges what Charles Mills calls the “epistemological ghetto” by assembling a collective of experts with the unique professional platform and skillset to bring the Black tradition of counter-testimony to the mainstream. I point to how these authorial moves counter the delimited conception of the drivers and manifestations of

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<sup>81</sup> Mills, “White Ignorance,” 28.

racial oppression that provide the epistemological grounding for postracial hegemony. Appreciating the *Project* contributors' professional and experiential expertise is important for epistemological and rhetorical analysis; as Patricia Hill Collins points out in *Black Feminist Thought*, the assessment of knowledge claims should "simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics."<sup>82</sup>

### **Breaking Out of the Epistemological Ghetto: The Use of Authorial Expertise and De-Limiting Racialist Definition**

*1619* continues in a long tradition of Black responses to white American revisionist history. In assembling its collective of authors, the majority of whom are primarily journalists or contributors to the *New York Times* as experts in various fields, *Project's* designers show an awareness of the history of Black journalism as a check against white revisionism, particularly regarding racial issues. Indeed, Nikole Hannah-Jones aligns herself with the historical role of Black journalists as counter-testifiers to American racial ignorance directly into the introduction of the *Project* when she states that Black Americans "are the stark reminders of some of [the U.S. nation-states'] most damning truths," and that "our nation obscures and diminishes this history because it shames us."<sup>83</sup>

Correcting for this obscuration and diminishment is what the *Project* strives for, connecting it to the work of Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Douglass, for example, criticized white historians in the post-Reconstruction era and their role in making the struggles of Black folk tangential to the recollection of the War. He argued that the push for national reconciliation came at the price of forgetting the "grave

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<sup>82</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 265.

<sup>83</sup> Hannah-Jones, "Origins," xxxi.

hypocrisies” that he believed were at the center of the War.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Wells engaged in investigative journalism to disrupt and refute the national discourse on the nature of lynching.<sup>85</sup> Wells was deeply concerned that while many white Americans opposed lynching, not many seemed to recognize that lynching, far from being an aberration or distortion in the U.S, was, on the contrary, a cultural and civic practice that continued to mark national belonging.<sup>86</sup> Du Bois famously challenged both the idea that the Civil War resolved American racism and that racist *behavior* (as opposed to systemic or structural racialization) was the primary driver of racial violence and inequity post abolition, pronouncing that the problem of the color line would define 20th century America.

The continuity between Douglass, Wells, Du Bois, and *1619* is in the shared work of resisting or countering white American narratives and beliefs — about Black people, racism, and racialism in the nation. However, *1619* is not just following in the footsteps of these figures; it responds to and corrects the marginalization from mainstream racial consciousness of these significant figures and their work regarding race and national identity, lynching and civic identity, and the color line and racism. *1619* argues that psychic and material investments of whiteness led to racialized constraints in the archive; Black counter-testimony could not be admitted into the national canon or permitted to permeate mainstream American racial consciousness or identity, as to do so would bring the “glaring hypocrisies” of race and the nation into the forefront of national history, announcing that these hypocrisies remained unresolved by the Civil War or Reconstruction or Civil Rights. Situating *1619* in the legacy of Black counter-testimony

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<sup>84</sup> Spelman, “Managing Ignorance,” 128.

<sup>85</sup> Libertz, “Amplification by Counterstory in the Quantitative Rhetoric of Ida B. Wells”; Ida B. Wells, ‘Lynch Law in America’ •.”

<sup>86</sup> For more on the rhetorics of lynching, see Ore, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*.

underscores the fact that *1619* is not so much uncovering new perspectives on American history and identity and culture but rather is attempting to bring these marginalized perspectives to the center of national discourses on race and racial consciousness.

*1619* is a response to the cumulative effects of over a century of marginalization, erasure, and misrepresentation of Black American testimony. The 20th century oversaw the universalization of the historical and mnemonic work of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Dunning School. Contemporary historians, such as Gordon Wood, now regard the racial revolution as described by a social epistemology that prioritized agreement among white Americans over the inclusion of Black Americans regarding the history and recollection of the Civil War.<sup>87</sup> Hannah-Jones notes that the exclusion of Black Americans from mainstream U.S. history (as authors or primary subjects) directly shaped her (and, for that matter, my) experience with the history as taught in school textbooks and preserved in museums, that “renders Black Americans, Black people on all the Earth, inconsequential at best, and invisible at worst.”<sup>88</sup>

Significantly, Hannah-Jones explains the purpose of the marginalization and erasure of Black American histories as necessary for the stability and coherence of white racial innocence and the perception of the U.S. state as inherently liberatory and predestined for racial transcendence.

Epistemic authority is significant for understanding the power dynamics at play in the assemblage of *1619*'s authorial expertise. The overall effect of the exclusion of Black expertise in popular racial consciousness is the suppression of contradictions to post racialism, the erasure of ‘evidence’ to the contrary from public history and hegemonic

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<sup>87</sup> *Blight, Race and Reunion*; Spelman, “Managing Ignorance.”

<sup>88</sup> Hannah-Jones, “Origins,” xxiii.

cultural memory. While contemporary ‘race experts’ like Dinesh D’Souza appeal to the liberatory potential of assimilation into U.S. capitalist society, Du Bois’ critiques of racial capitalism — and, for that matter, Black feminist critiques of Du Bois — have been marginalized.

The contestation of epistemic authority concerns who gets to speak on race and who is listened to; when the voices of Black people (as well as all others who speak against the grain regarding race in the State) are suppressed from public history and erased from recollection, the canon of knowledge thus functions towards the ends of racial ignorance. Since certain ways of ‘knowing and not knowing race’ are more or less conducive to the ability of white people to simultaneously maintain investments in the white supremacy and privilege, the denial of Black expertise functions to maintain particular ways of ‘not-knowing’ about slavery’s afterlife. This not-knowing enables white people — and as the case of *1776 Unites* reflects, some *Black* and Brown Americans — to figure antiracism as a matter of opposing racist attitude, opposing bigotry. The problem is that prefiguring antiracism as a matter of prejudice and bigotry occludes the necessity of opposing and dissolving the compounding proprietary and possessive benefits that racial capitalism and white supremacy offers to *all* white Americans. Thus, in the same way that the Reconciliation relied on the exclusion of Black counter-expertise from the discussion of the war and Reconstruction, the national convergence around postracial hegemony is contingent on the denial of Black expertise that might challenge the postracialist worldview.

*1619* challenges this production of epistemic authority by assembling an impressive collective of Black experts who have dedicated their careers to investigating

the persistence of racialization and the legacies of slavery in precisely the areas that postracialists tend to avoid. For example, *1619*'s contributors tackle issues such as self-defense, the weight that capitalist systems give to heritable wealth and property ownership, and issues of access to and quality of healthcare and medicine.

In the Project's initial release, Hannah-Jones and Silverstein bring together a collection of journalists with specific backgrounds in investigating and explaining intersections of race/racialism across the institutions and systems of thought that shape American social life. The *Project* thus constructs itself as a sort of bridge between Black counter-academic work and the popular mainstream. The multi-voice of the authors draws from a mix of social scientists, public historians, and investigative journalists. Aside from NHJ, for whom this book is a continuation of her investigative journalism, the contributing authors share a record of public writing and intellectualism regardless of disciplinary background.

For example, the *Project* brings in Jamelle Bouie, columnist, and analyst for CBS, who regularly writes for the *Times* on politics, race, and the nation, to contextualize the attempted coup by predominantly white supporters in support of outgoing President Donald Trump on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, within the history of racialized electoral politics. Bouie draws the continuities between the current moment and 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century efforts by white Americans to deny, dispute, or otherwise impede the realization and diminish the value of Black electoral agency.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in *Inheritance*, Trymaine Lee brings his journalistic background covering racial violence to a far-reaching discussion of how white mobs often coordinate with local governments or law

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<sup>89</sup> Bouie, "Politics."

enforcement and how the federal government has consistently intervened to disrupt or reverse Black wealth and entrepreneurship.<sup>90</sup>

*1619* also brings in experts to speak against the seeming racial neutrality of social and civic infrastructure. Linda Villarosa, contributing writer for *New York Times* magazine, and Jeneen Interlandi, staff writer on public health issues, direct their expertise in public medicine and journalism to discuss slavery's afterlife in the interlocking fields of healthcare and medical practice, public communication. Writing on *Medicine*, Villarosa's chapter packages into 'mainstream' accessible form a wave of medical/health research on racial health trends along with a catalog of the history of racist science in 19th century U.S.<sup>91</sup> Her chapter also includes past and present personal narratives of racialized medicine and the consequences of medical malpractice.

While some of the chapters of *1619* bring in journalists to engage in academic-style work, other chapters bring in academics with experience with the style of public writing and the form of investigative journalism. The first category of authors works against the marginalization of Black expertise by working against the idea that journalism is not as rigorously accurate or intellectually developed as academic writing. The second category works from the other end, giving academics and practicing professionals the platform and the evocative style of the press. Again, this is not incidental but intentional: in a public response to criticism from historians, Silverstein explains that several scholars initially recruited as historical consultants ultimately ended up joining the *Project* as contributing authors, including Matthew Desmond.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Lee, "Inheritance."

<sup>91</sup> Linda Villarosa, "Medicine," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 315–23.

<sup>92</sup> Silverstein, "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project"

Desmond, who writes the section on *Capitalism*, brings both scholastic and professional expertise in sociological research and experience in using that expertise to produce publicly accessible scholarship in writing. His book *Evicted* takes up the issue of housing inequity as the manifestation of racial power and the legacy of segregation. His work at the intersection of race, class, and policy signifies how racialism and antiracism are only intelligible by considering the classed and gendered dimensions of racial formation.<sup>93</sup>

Experts in law —both lawyers and legal scholars — are heavily featured in *1619*. Michelle Alexander and Leslie Alexander discuss the role that white fear of Black power played in enacting legal protections for racial formation in the first place. Bryan Stevenson brings firsthand experience with carceral injustice and writing for national audiences and the importance of financially accessible and racially conscious lawyers to racial justice in the law and the mutuality of the prison and capitalism to his analysis in the section titled *Punishment*.<sup>94</sup> Dorothy Roberts brings a background in legal studies to her chapter on the legal construction of *Race*. Both are former or currently practicing lawyers and legal scholars with careers in public writing and activism.

The continuity between this diversity of experts is the same thing that makes the fact of their assemblage in *The 1619 Project* a form of resistance to power and epistemic authority. Neither healthcare, capitalism, nor extralegal denials of electoral agency factor into the postracialist interpretation of racial progress, yet all have historically developed as sites of racial oppression or exploitations. These areas have historically been sites in

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<sup>93</sup> Omi and Winant's concept of a racial formation has heavily influenced my thinking, even if a treatment of their work remains beyond the scope of this thesis. For more, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.

<sup>94</sup> Stevenson, "Punishment."

which the Black American radical tradition has previously intervened; the absence of these sites from postracialist thought thus speaks to how the postracial hegemony relies on the displacement of race-radical critique.

*1619*'s authorship alerts us to the need to resist epistemic authority in rhetorical production and cultural memory work. Power not only shapes the institutions that perpetuate racial oppression; power also works to shape the parameters of the conversation about racial oppression itself. Assembling a group of experts from medical, economic, journalistic, and academic backgrounds to consider the continued import of the legacy of slavery in the U.S. challenges both the epistemic authority of the archive and the delimitation of racism that the archive has historically produced. In this sense, the experts of *1619* challenge the white normativity of the archive by disrupting "the centering of the Euro and later Euro-American reference group as a constitutive norm."<sup>95</sup>

### **Turn Over the Stones: 1619's Polemic Archival Methodology**

Through deliberate authorial moves, *1619* contests the white American historians' monopoly on the epistemic authority to speak on the nature of the relationship between race, racism, and the U.S. past, present, and future. However, the archival methodology that the authors employ throughout the *Project* also reveals and contests how this monopolization has yielded specific gaps in the racial memory of the United States. Their approach to the archive, which I call a polemic-archival methodology, works within the gaps authorized by the white domination of the ethno-racial archive. By highlighting the ways that the givenness of U.S. history is contingent on the exclusion and erasure of Black subjects, *1619* contests the completeness and the accuracy of U.S.

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<sup>95</sup> Mills, "White Ignorance," 25.

The idiom I use here, “leave no stone unturned,” signifies the linkage between the modus operandi of *1619*’s archival work and the erasures contained within the archive authorized by 1776. As a counter-history, and in a sense a counter-history to whiteness, *1619*’s archival work disrupts the centering of white American experience by focusing on and staying with specific gaps in public history, adding context in some places, and focusing on new events and figures in others.<sup>96</sup> The work *1619* does within these gaps works towards disrupting the settled racial archive, thus leading to what I call a polemic-archival methodology.

Polemic is a term primarily associated with rhetoric; it refers to a specific argumentative style that “intended to support a specific position by forthright claims and undermine the opposing position.”<sup>97</sup> I repurpose it here as a historical methodology to describe how the investment of the *Project* — to respond to gaps in history and the ‘positions’ about the U.S. those gaps facilitate and legitimize — directs the attention of its respective authors’ historical foci as well as determines the direction of their investigative work.

As a polemic archival methodology, *1619* complements the given history of the Founding Founders by prioritizing rather than marginalizing their investments in slavery, their racist paranoia, and the contradiction inherent in fighting for liberty while defending slavery. In this section, I describe how *1619* unsettle the mythos of the Founding Fathers,

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<sup>96</sup> Multiple whiteness scholars have written about the telos of whiteness critique as the investigating and interrogating of its contradictions, its paradoxes, its erasures, as the moments when its otherwise invisibility can be interrupted. Lia Flores writes of making race visible in the moments of its rhetorical construction, while Hasian & Delgado carry her call for “racial rhetorical criticisms” forward in their framework of racial rhetorical criticism. See Hasian and Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations of Racialized Critical Rhetorical Theory”; Flores, “Between Abundance and Marginalization.”

<sup>97</sup> The authors also employ polemic in this sense, but this pertains more to the interpretive moves the authors make, which comes next.

using *1619's* treatment of George Washington as exemplary of this work. Regarding the Founding Fathers, the position given by the archive pertinent to the project is that slavery is an unfortunate but relatively inconsequential aspect of the Founder's lives and politics. Conversely, *1619's* coverage of the Founders suggests that the tension between slavery and the nation-state, including that which existed at the time of the Founders and today, is both relevant and consequential.<sup>98</sup> Attending to the tension between slavery and liberty directs the *1619's* treatment of the founders. Exploring how the authors of *1619* work with temporal, subjective, and contextual gaps in the archive will serve as an example of polemic archival methodology as a counter-historical practice.

Some of *1619's* interventions concern gaps within a particular temporal-historical period. While the introduction to this chapter considered one such gap in the Reconstruction era, *1619* also focuses heavily on the colonial era between Plymouth Rock and the pre-revolution. Covering this area is particularly crucial for *1619* because, as the name suggests, it posits that the year 1619 and not 1776 should be considered the origin point of U.S. history.

Because of the material and epistemological erasures of the details of chattel slavery, reworking this history is also problematic. Underlying this challenge is the irretrievability of cultural heritage and memory for U.S.-based people of African descent, as a product of the cultural genocide of the transplantation and the Middle Passage and as continued by the enslavers. It is essential, yet beyond the scope of this study, to reckon

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<sup>98</sup> One should notice that the conclusion that the already itself is irrelevant or inconsequential to remembering the founders does not obtain from the premise that slavery is also relevant and consequential. Contrary to what some have argued, misrepresenting the Project as arguing against the geopolitical and ideological and philosophical significance of the Declaration or the Constitution or the ideals embedded within.

with the totality of the epistemic, vernacular, cultural annihilation and the dehumanization, humiliation, and suffering of the Middle Passage and the cultural genocide that accompanied the transplantation of African peoples into an alien world. This project involved not just the denial of personhood but also the denial of one's history, ability to communicate in one's native tongue, and cultural heritage and practice. Moreover, even for those willing and capable of fluent English, under chattel slavery, enslaved persons were widely banned from literacy.

Nevertheless, the *Project* retrieves much that substantiates and amplifies the choice to make *1619* the origin point of U.S. history, making apparent that the gaps in U.S. history, authorized beginning with 1776, occlude a crucial period of race-making. *1619* shows how colonial-era race-making permeated both the trajectory of the American Revolution and the nature of the liberties the revolution would defend.

For example, consider how the shift in origin contributes to Dorothy Roberts's chapter *Race*.<sup>99</sup> Roberts begins her chapter in 2019 with Ashley Ramkishin and Samuel Sarfo, a couple from Virginia who experienced confusion over having to identify their race while applying for a marriage license grounds the subsequent analysis Robert provides of the legal construction of racial-classification systems as a project of governance, and specifically a project rooted in both the capitalist exploitation of chattel slavery and rationalized through discourses using biological and cultural-frames of racial inferiority. She describes how the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 is itself rooted in a "network of laws passed in the colonial era governing sex and race...that were primarily concerned with policing interracial sex."<sup>100</sup> Roberts further describes how Virginian

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<sup>99</sup>Dorothy Roberts, "Race," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 45–61.

<sup>100</sup> Roberts, "Race," 48.

legislatures codified “who was black and who was white, who was enslaved and who was free,” by simultaneously banning interracial marriage, denying Black humanity and making slavery legally heritable by legally classifying *Blackness* as matrilineally descended.<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, Michelle and Leslie Alexander focus on the racial history of *Fear*; their chapter retrieves archival records that explicate the relationship between enslaved Black people exercising their right to revolt for freedom and the white European male-dominated the 1776 revolution. The Alexanders provide archival evidence that enslaved Blacks rather than settler-colonial white elites were the instigators of revolution on American soil. However, they further mark the ways that the agency of the Black Americans was continually but *contingently* denied both prior to and after the successful revolution of white Americans. For example, they find that Stono’s Rebellion of 1739 led “South Carolina legislators, enraged and horrified by Black insurrection” to pass legal measures in 1740 that included criminalizing Black literacy (a practice that would ultimately contribute to the lack of Black testimonial during this period mentioned above) but also, in what appears not only as a foreshadowing of the Klan but also of recent Texas legislation, that deputizes white people into militias with virtually unlimited discretion for hunting, torturing, terrorizing and murdering Black folk, free or enslaved.<sup>102</sup>

These temporal gaps can be distinguished from what we might call ‘subject-gaps.’ For instance, while the ethno-racial archive contains a lot about the men who organized the Revolution and shaped the nation-state that followed, we may note a subject gap

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<sup>101</sup> Roberts, “Race,” 49-51.

<sup>102</sup> Kindy and Crites, “Texas’s Abortion Law Created a ‘vigilante’ Loophole, Inspiring Dozens of Bills from Both Parties - The Washington Post”; Lithwick, “Jan. 6, the New Texas Abortion Law, and the Rising Prevalence of Militias in America.”; Alexander and Alexander, “Fear.”

concerning many of these men's personal or privately held thoughts on slavery. *1619* resists the given history of George Washington, for example, by reversing the logic by which the archive treats his status as a slave-owner. While the fact that Washington enslaved people is not necessarily an erased subject, cultural memory and public history treat this as tangential to the story of Washington, focusing instead on the military events of the Revolution, his acts as President, and his private life in Mt. Vernon. *1619* unsettles this narrative by focusing exclusively on how Washington's investments in slavery and his racial paranoia undergirded his politics and Presidency.

Several of the contributing authors mention George Washington; he appears in Nikole Hannah-Jones' "Democracy, the Alexanders' *Fear*, and Tiya Miles' *Dispossession*. However, a crucial commonality across these chapters is that each foregrounds his individual and Presidential activity concerning maintaining slavery and white supremacy. Hannah-Jones recalls that Washington was one of the many Virginian elites who (astutely or otherwise) had his revolutionary aspirations amplified by the Dunmore Proclamation. In this way, she highlights that Washington, like many revolutionaries, may have believed in freedom among white people but simultaneously interpreted that freedom as the right to enslave and profit off of non-white people.<sup>103</sup> In *Fear*, the Alexanders similarly bring to the forefront Washington's antiblackness, this time specifically in the context of the Haitian Revolution. They highlight the contradiction inherent between the contemporary perception of Washington as a leading figure in the birth of the West's first liberal democracy and his reaction, expressed privately to Thomas Jefferson, of fear and hostility to the birth of the Western

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<sup>103</sup> Hannah-Jones, "Democracy," in Hannah-Jones et al., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, 10-18.

hemispheres' *second* democracy, born in the slave revolt of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>104</sup>

While the Alexanders make clear that Washington merely played a passive role in the measures taken by Virginian and South Carolinian governments to forestall or quell the slave rebellions that the Haitian Revolution would inspire domestically, the counter-historical work here is to upset the master-narrative of liberal democracy by demonstrating the racial parameters of the liberal democracy Washington, Jefferson, and other 'Founding Fathers' envisioned when they sanctioned the idea that 'all men are created equal.'<sup>105</sup>

In *Dispossession*, which covers the intersecting oppressions of indigenous Americans and chattel slavery in ways that exceed Washington, Tya Mills further establishes that the sovereignty Washington fought for over his life was that of white people to oppress and displace non-white people. Mills retrieves the Washington that introduced the core platform of national policy towards indigenous people that would define the relationship from that point forward: equal parts diaspora and coercive cultural assimilation.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, in *Self-Defense*, Carol Anderson situates Washington in a positive (but not that positive) light, in conflict with South Carolina over arming enslaved peoples to fight against the British.<sup>107</sup> The parallel between Anderson's Washington here Hannah-Jones' Lord Dunmore should not be discounted. Both men were enslavers and Virginians (not an uncommon pairing for the time, as Virginia held roughly 40% of the Black

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<sup>104</sup> Alexander and Alexander, "Fear," 107-108.

<sup>105</sup> For more on the relationship between counter-narrative/history and hegemonic resistance, see Molden, "Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony."

<sup>106</sup> Miles, "Dispossession," 144.

<sup>107</sup> Anderson, "Self-Defense," 254-256.

peoples either imported from Africa or born into bondage). Nevertheless, as this example shows, both men supported abolitionist aims (such as Black armament) to gain a possible military advantage over the other.

*1619*'s epistemic and archival methodology shift to privileging Black Americans is inflected in their choices regarding the archive of Washington. The treatment of Washington unsettles hegemonic readings of his life and legacy that marginalize his status as a slaveholder, rendering problematic and historically specious the notion that his investments in slavery are inconsequential to his actions in shaping the original structure of the country.

The ethno-racial archive preserves an exclusionary, whitewashed memory and history of George Washington. The retrievals delivered by the *Project* and briefly recounted here offer a decidedly different impression. A recollection of the powerless caught between power at war with itself, in which the freedoms and rights that would be codified in the Constitution and enshrined in the archive are not only denied to Black people by both Washington and Dunmore but are used by both men as tools of war, offered to Black men not in recognition of their self-evidence but of their potential utility as bodies-with-weapons within the Imperial-colonial conflict.

The treatment of Washington is exemplary of the approach *1619* takes across their archival research. As counter-history, *1619* does not seek to fill in the gaps in the mainstream canon of 1776 but instead unsettle them by revealing their racial distortion and by connecting this distortion to the maintenance of the mythos characterizing U.S. today that postracialism, American exceptionalism, the overall notion that slavery and

antiblackness were dominant, normalized structures at the time of the founding, yet somehow not dominant and normalized structures in the original shape of the country.

By centering Black people's experience and "the contributions of Black Americans from the margins to the center" in their archival approach, *1619* not only disrupts the dominant hegemonic history of the Founders in ways that unsettle the narrative of postracialism and American racial exceptionalism; its authors also unsettle the accepted history of racial progress and complicate given understandings of what it means to practice patriotism. This centering is particularly prevalent in Martha Jones' investigation of the history of Citizenship, which recalls the paradoxical history of Black American patriotism.

Jones locates the patriotism of Black American people in their activity as the caretakers of American democracy in the face of the ongoing exclusion of Black Americans *from* the formal mechanism and institutions of that same democracy. This activity began as early as 1799 when it became clear to early Black Americans that they would have to push for inclusion in the newly enshrined rights. To put it another way, Jones notes that *free* Black Americans understood the difference between freedom as the presence of rights and protections when white Americans, as *Democracy* details, could thus far only conceive of freedom in a negative relation to slavery.

This delimitation on the parameters of freedom would, on the one hand, prove invaluable to the rhetoric of the American Revolution, as the risks of remaining subject to the British imperial project were unified among all the disparate subcultures of colonial America by way of appealing to their familiarity with the degradations of the enslaved

peoples.<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, Jones recognizes and *reproduces* the ways that Black Americans, through their consistent political activity on the frontiers of citizenship law, forced all Americans to reckon with their internal understandings of what it is to be a citizen, what formalized rights are necessary to ensure the equality of a citizenry that held a great deal of internal diversity along class, wealth, educational, and occupational boundaries - rights such as the freedom to move between states, to sue for legal redress, to not only be allowed to vote but be given consistent access to the mechanisms of voting, were all products of the contestations between the collectives of Black American political actors and the Supreme Courts in the first half of the 19th century.

The 14th Amendment, according to Jones, was the product of the political pressure imposed on the Radical Republicans in Congress by Black activists.<sup>109</sup> The enshrinement of the rights so central to the ideology of American patriotism — due process, citizenship by birth, and perhaps most significantly, the rights of citizens to have their rights protected by law were codified by Black Americans over the objections of white Americans.<sup>110</sup> In the face of such memories, it becomes increasingly difficult to refute the premise that Black Americans are the first and only Americans to struggle against the foundational hypocrisy of freedom/slavery *consistently* and the primary Americans responsible for clarifying and encoding the rights of *all* Americans.

The pushback to this claim has come from historians across the political spectrum, revealing that whiteness and epistemological ignorance exceeds party lines. Historians have taken exception with the *Project* by pointing out that this sort of framing

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<sup>108</sup> Hannah-Jones, “Democracy,” 23.

<sup>109</sup> Jones, “Citizenship,” 232.

<sup>110</sup> Jones, Citizenship, 232-233.

results in a distorted view of history, claiming that such a frame is motivated by racial ideology and distorted, apparently by not recognizing the work of maintaining the primary areas of focus of the given archive. This criticism of content and interpretation primarily fixated on the claim explored by the Project that a primary motivation of some revolutionaries was to protect and preserve the institution of slavery.

These criticisms fundamentally miss the point of the *Project*, which is to consider what is *left* out of the given history of the U.S and demonstrate that what is left out is the that which the U.S. is ashamed of and what the U.S. does not wish to remember or deal with: the endurance of racial formation in the post-Civil Rights era. Specific manifestations of racial inequity in the present are consistent with, rather than distortions of, the U.S. nation-states' original vision: a democracy for white people, a slave-estate for Black people, and imposed material and cultural genocide for Indigenous people peoples.

Critics additionally claim that *1619* oversteps, situating itself as the only accurate History. Bret Stephens penned these objections primarily on a revised comment by Jake Silverstein in the initial form of the *Project*:

What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, *is wrong, and that the country's true birth date*, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619?<sup>111</sup>

Stephens, like Wood and Wilentz, infer from this that *1619* is seeking to supplant the importance of the year 1776, to render the entire history illegitimate, and establish *1619* as the “capital T truth.” This sort of binary thinking leads one opinion writer to claim that

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<sup>111</sup> Stephens, “The 1619 Chronicles”; “We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project”

*Project* seeks to “dethrone the Fourth of July.”<sup>112</sup> It also reflects a misapprehension of the inevitably metaphorical nature of any claim that a year can be an ‘origin point’ and a lack of awareness of the archival marginalization of Black American counter-history.<sup>113</sup>

These critiques reflect a misrepresentation of intent, as *Project* is not only responding to this marginalization but responding to it as an investigation of the racialized conditions of the present. Here is this premise described verbatim by Silverstein in his response to the Wood et al. letter. Compare it to the goal of “dethroning the 4th of July” imagined by Stephens:

The very premise of The *1619 Project*, in fact, is that many of the inequalities that continue to afflict the nation are a direct result of the unhealed wound created by 250 years of slavery and an additional century of second-class citizenship and white-supremacist terrorism inflicted on black people.<sup>114</sup>

In both its authorial and archival moves, the *1619 Project* unsettles the given history of the U.S., slavery, and anti-Blackness. In its assemblage of authors, the *Project* makes a statement about where and how we need to look at racial inequity and the manifestations of slavery’s afterlife. They speak to the endurance of racial inequity as manifested in U.S. politics, healthcare, the Bill of Rights, and the stratification of wealth and expropriation of profit authorized by capitalism. Moreover, in an archival approach that takes its direction specifically from the gaps in given history, the *Project* not only reimagines how Americans ought to think about their past but points out how previous ‘imaginings’ have

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<sup>112</sup> Whatever that means.

<sup>113</sup> Let alone the metaphorical nature of calling a “year” “1776”, or that which informs the slippage between space and time prompted by referring to the measure of the Earth’s solar orbit as a “year”

<sup>114</sup> Silverstein, “On Recent Criticism of The 1619 Project”

universalized the perspectives of white Americans and expressly excluded those of oppositional Black Americans.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Looking Ahead**

*This project is written for every Black person that's had to face the question 'slavery was a long time ago, why do you want me to do something about it' ~Nikole Hannah-Jones<sup>115</sup>*

We are allegedly living in the post-racial era, yet power keeps moving according to race. Because of this, while in substance, *Project* constitutes a work of historical revisionism, I have argued it is in spirit and intent a project of investigative journalism oriented towards counter-hegemony. As such, it is rooted around exploring the origins and the salient details surrounding a problem observed in the social body. In this chapter,

I have discussed this problem in a trio of manifestations. The modern 'problem of race' itself is embodied in the sociohistorical, economic, biopolitical manifestations of racial inequity that structure slavery's afterlife (e.g., racial inequity in wealth, political agency, imprisonment, police killing). I have also discussed how the recognition of this problem as systemic, current, and definitive rather than localized, previous, and aberrational is impeded by the social epistemology of white ignorance, expressed through an inability to recognize the problem in terms of the marginalized as opposed to exclusively in those authorized by power's structuring of the archive as knowledge/Truth. Further, I have traced the roots of this social epistemology in the marginalization of Black American counter-testimony from the archive, which I define consequently as the *ethno-racial archive*.

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<sup>115</sup> West Hartford Community Interactive, Conversation.

The gaps in the ethno-racial archive legitimize Post-racialism. These gaps constitute racial amnesia and validate colorblindness by naturalizing racial power and inequity. Because of this, vast movements of power to establish racialized control and profit extraction in the wake of the Civil Rights movement that has both preserved and transformed, rather than dissolved, the initial racial distribution of wealth, mobility, health, housing, employment inequities moderated by the history of racial inequities and failures of the Reconstructions, are rendered racially unintelligible. Moreover, under the moralism of color-blindness, counter-testimony is readily misperceived as inappropriately racial distortions of ‘legitimate’ history and ‘anti-American’ or ‘reverse racism’ (which simultaneously become increasingly interchangeable in meaning.)

At the intersection of both tendencies are problems of memory, forgetting, and mismemory.<sup>116</sup> Mismemory is the lifeblood of postracialism, sustaining the idea that the “problem of the color line” was resolved at some point in the American past, whether either Reconstruction, Civil Rights, or the election of the first Black American President, requires an incomplete or distorted memory of those events.

I also discussed how *1619* responds to and unsettles both the content and the epistemology of postracialism, directly through collecting and contextualizing counter-testimony and indirectly through unsettling the ethno-racial archive by working within its gaps and against its misrepresentations. I have sought to speak to what I believe is a significant revision of crucial gaps in the mythos of American ideology, history, and cultural memory. *1619* thus exists as a *Project* of speaking truth to power and speaking to the Power to (re)define truth as Truth. The focus of the following chapter recognizes the

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<sup>116</sup> Phillips, “The Failure of Memory.”

fundamental problem of Speaking Truth to Power: to prompt change, Power must be willing and able to listen.

### CHAPTER THREE: 1776 UNITES AND THE COUNTERINSURGENCY OF RACIAL IGNORANCE

I concluded the preceding chapter with something of a warning regarding the potential of *The 1619 Project* to prompt social action: I observed that for acts of speaking truth to power to enact social change, the relevant powers must be willing and able to listen. The purpose of this chapter follows this idea, considering how cultural and social powers within the U.S. nation-state have received, interpreted, and responded to *1619*'s unsettling of both post-racialist epistemology and the ethno-racial archive that functions as its cumulative foundation. Unfortunately, I will be arguing that the cultural epistemology that *1619* seeks to unsettle and critique has proven quite resistant to being unsettled. Assman and Czaplika write that cultural memory, once instantiated, "engenders a clear system of values and differentiation in importance which structure the cultural supply of knowledge."<sup>117</sup> The cultural memory symbolized through 1776 is no different, as this chapter will demonstrate.

George Washington once said that the best defense is a good offense; it is fitting then that the defense of 1776 was publicly initiated by Donald Trump on September 17, 2020, by an attack against *1619*; then-President Trump spoke at "The White House Conference on American History," an event created to give publicity to an executive order he would be signing there, which would call for the establishment of a commission "designed to promote a patriotic education." An excellent preview for the themes of this chapter, the official name for this patriotic project was the *1776 Commission*.

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<sup>117</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 131.

If those watching had any doubt about the impetus for this executive order was, Trump removed this when he began speaking about *1619*:

By viewing every issue through the lens of race, they want to impose a new segregation, and we must not allow that to happen. Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history are toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together and will destroy our country.<sup>118</sup>

Of course, the vernacular of the Trump Presidency invested heavily in hyperbole, misrepresentation, and fearmongering. Fearmongering was a primary motif in his particular brand of populism and has been fundamental to his brand of white nationalist populism, which sees enemies everywhere, and reserves the greatest ire for those it perceives internally. Thus, aside from its appearance in service of a campaign of education censorship that, while ultimately dying at the Federal level, has been taken up nationally at the state and local levels, the fact that Trump envisions *1619* as both ‘fake news’ and an existential threat to the U.S., may not appear particularly notable, at least relative to a President who favors terms like “shithole countries.”

However, in this case, Trump seems to have borrowed this line of attack. Six months earlier, Bob Woodson, a former civil rights activist whose career has predominantly involved starting and working with ‘think-tanks.’ appeared on Fox News to discuss the latest Woodson Center project, named *1776 Unites*. At one point, he responds to a question about *1619* in a way that prefigures Trump’s press conference speech, calling it “one of the most diabolical, self-destructive ideas that I have ever

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<sup>118</sup> “What Trump Is Saying about *1619* Project, Teaching U.S. History.”

heard,” and accusing its authors and supporters of “using the suffering and struggle of black America as a bludgeon to beat America and define America as a criminal organization.”<sup>119</sup>

The two passages essentially characterize the Woodson Centers’ *1776 Unites* campaign, which in many ways is a foil to the *1619 Project*. Firstly, we might note that the name, 1776, represents the origin point of the U.S. in popular/public history. However, the addition of *Unites* further indicates Woodson’s intent to situate the campaign as the antithesis of *1619*, given that both Trump and Woodson accuse *1619* of fostering divisiveness. The overall strategic response of *1619*’s opposition, exemplified by Trump and Woodson, signals the epistemic and rhetorical difficulties of making power listen. More particularly, they reflect a broader effort by *Unites* to simultaneously portray the *1619 Project* and Critical Race Theory, Marxism, feminism, and intersectionality as unsound, dangerous, and Un-American.

This chapter identifies *1776 Unites* as an epistemic counterinsurgency not only against *1619* but against a vast spectrum of knowledge, social movements, and practices. I initially think through a modified version of Nakayama and Krizek’s Strategic Rhetorics of Whiteness; specifically, I direct their framework towards what Melamed has identified as a contemporary discursive formation and racial epistemology of neoliberal multiculturalism.<sup>120</sup> I then apply these ‘strategic rhetorics of neoliberal multiculturalism to an analysis of several texts from *1776 Unites* that illustrate neoliberal multiculturalism’s reproductive and appropriative strategies. *1776* reproduces neoliberal

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<sup>119</sup> Fox News, “Bob Woodson on Supporting High-Achieving Families in Low-Income Communities, Countering NY Times’ 1619 Project.”

<sup>120</sup> Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*; Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism”; Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness:”

multiculturalism's defining qualities —the erasure of racial capitalism and the reintroduction of neoliberal capitalism as antiracist — by and through the distortion of *1619*. In claiming the moral and practical superiority of their conception of the past, present, and —most essentially —the futurity of antiracist, anticapitalist, and intersectional struggle in the U.S., *1776 Unites* exemplifies how the cultural memory authorized by 1776 facilitates the reproduction of racial ignorance.

*1776 Unites* is a collection of individual pieces that, while distinguishable and not necessarily dealing with the same subject matter, are unified thematically under the banner of the origin/thesis. At the organizational level too, *Unites* also shares certain structural similarities to *1619*; both, for instance, are collaborative, multi-authorial projects featuring writers who represent a diversity of fields of experience. Like *1619*, *1776* heavily features academics and journalists, with Columbia linguistics professor John McWhorter, business professor John Sibley Butler, former Princeton professor Carol Swain, joined by columnists Clarence Page and new media contributor Delano Squires. Moreover, similarly, *Unites* is headlined by a single figure who works as both a sort of spokesperson for the project(s) overall theses and a contributing author within the project itself. Finally, *1776*, like *1619*, seeks a history that is useful for the present, but as a foil to *1619*/defender of 1776, the history they seek is characterized by a mission to only remember "the best of America's past."<sup>121</sup>

### **Strategic Rhetoric: From Whiteness to Neoliberal Multiculturalism**

The issue with only remembering the best of America's past, however, is that doing so functions to occlude white supremacy and privilege in the past and present; in

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<sup>121</sup> "Welcome to *1776 Unites*| A Movement FOR America."

this sense, *1776*'s mission statement declares their intent to erase the centrality of white privilege/supremacy from their recollection of US American history, thus deploying what Nakayama and Krizek refer to as strategic rhetorics of whiteness. This section will detail how whiteness is enacted through strategic rhetorics that avoid naming whiteness directly and, in doing so, occlude its recognition as a race, and more specifically, as a race that has defined itself historically through the subjugation of Black and Brown people. Understanding the operations of whiteness is central to unpacking the counter-insurgent tactics of the *1776* project and understanding the power dynamics at work in the reproduction of revisionist cultural memory. Whiteness is hegemonic, yet it is not static; its historical and dynamic shifts aid whiteness in overcoming resistive challenges posed to it. Understanding those changes is necessary to understand why *1776 Unites* is so effective, and so concerning.

To map these shifts in the rhetorics of whiteness, I also in this section explicate some core concepts regarding whiteness and its transformation as what Jodi Melamed calls "neoliberal multiculturalism." The rest of the chapter will trace these strategic rhetorics in *1776 Unites* to consider how strategic rhetorics of whiteness, having been increasingly conflated with Americanness, are no longer enacted exclusively by white people. Doing so will build on Nakayama and Krizek's initial framework by showing how whiteness can be enacted even without white people engaging in strategic rhetorics.

The thrust of Nakayama and Krizek's *Strategic Rhetorics* is to show how the reification of whiteness as both invisible and center is a product and process of contingent yet somewhat consistent rhetoric.<sup>122</sup> Whiteness strategically defines itself negatively

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<sup>122</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness," 292.

against what it is not.<sup>123</sup> This strategy reifies whiteness' invisibility against racial others who are physically and culturally marked as other (e.g. 'not black'). While white people, communities, and hegemonic practices go unmarked and are universalized, racial others are particularized as not-normal. Whiteness manifests the 'default' of whiteness and the correlating hyper-visibility of Other racial categories.

For example, “All Lives Matter” and “White Lives Matter” can become salient rallying cries because the affirmation of Blackness is necessarily seen as a threat to the universal status of value conferred to whiteness under white supremacy. “All Lives Matter” expresses the sentiment of “White Lives Matter” while avoiding accusations of racism; because whiteness is already assumed, the designation “white” exists unstated even as the phrase implicitly distinguishes “All Lives” from “Black Lives” through a rhetorical strategy of negation. Whiteness also universalizes itself through its conflation with nationality (e.g., "I am not white, I am American"). Conflating whiteness with nationality, particularly with American nationality, avoids naming whiteness and enables white people to avoid engaging with "American history and tradition [that is] replete with relentless efforts to retain and safeguard the boundaries of nationality with whiteness.”<sup>124</sup> As Nakayama and Krizek remind us, nationalist discourses presume an unmarked racial or ethnic purity are themselves functions of white/colonial/racial assemblage.<sup>125</sup>

While these rhetorical strategies are certainly in operation in *1776*, the association with whiteness is limiting, suggesting that these strategies seem to work only for white people. And yet, whiteness is a malleable force; it exceeds political party and can be

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<sup>123</sup>Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness,” 299–300.

<sup>124</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness.”302.

<sup>125</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness.”

internalized and promoted by racialized people, even as they are harmed by white supremacy. Jodi Melamed develops the concept of neoliberal multiculturalism to explain how whiteness has historically transformed in step with the transformations of racial capitalism and response to race-conscious liberation movements to shift the historical, political, and discursive terrain of racial politics –within and beyond the U.S.<sup>126</sup> Under neoliberal multiculturalism, the particular binary of white power/Black (and Brown) oppression is no longer particularly useful or accurate in reflecting the processes by which Capital and the State organize and distribute wealth. Melamed’s insights are significant for precisely understanding the logic of *1776* because *1776* expands the strategic rhetorics of whiteness to erase racial references more fully. This expansion maintains whiteness as the invisible power center of socio-political and epistemological reality (the institutions it creates, the epistemology it sustains) while securing white people's racial invisibility and privilege. *1776* occludes recognition of how class, race, gender, neurotypicality, ethnicity, and various other social factors now separate the haves from the have-nots.

The current configuration of U.S. racial formation promises (some) Americans of color social and economic benefits for their allegiance to whiteness while facilitating a pervasive belief that antiracism is intrinsic to or has been progressively incorporated into the nation-state.<sup>127</sup> In tracing the shifting epistemological and discursive formations that 'race-thinking' assumed over the 20th century, Melamed provides insight into the ways

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<sup>126</sup> Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

<sup>127</sup> On the development of the concept of “racial formation,” see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. On the development of the epistemological formation of official antiracisms and their sociopolitical motivations, see Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*; Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism”; Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*.

that the succeeding racial paradigms of *racial liberalism* and *neoliberal multiculturalism* shape the conditions of possibility in which *1776 Unites* can mobilize a collective of Black American authors to employ strategic rhetorics of whiteness. In fact, following Melamed, we might say that the racial representational politics of *1776 Unites* itself is a kind of strategic rhetoric of whiteness. Today, the strategic conflation of whiteness—as an identity, a phenomenology, a social status, and an epistemology—with American nationality has achieved a hegemonic status. Consequently, defending American nationality is functionally equivalent to strategically defending white privilege/supremacy.

Racial Liberalism and Neoliberal Multiculturalism historically and politically emerge in the tensions between U.S. global ascendancy and the protracted struggles of primarily Black and Brown Americans for political, economic, and social racial, ethnic, gendered, and class justice within the American project. Both racial liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism are concerned with managing and rationalizing the contradictory development of 'racial justice' set against the continual reinvention of racial injustice.<sup>128</sup> As hegemonic, ideological, discursive, and epistemic paradigms, both share a function: defending and rationalizing capitalism and defending and rationalizing a restrictive anti-racial project. The racial liberalism paradigm accomplishes this first by *evacuating socioeconomics as a racial reference.*' However, it is exceedingly severe to ignore or deny the circumstances of abject poverty, social stoppage, racially delimited employment, and a myriad of 'secondary' manifestations of racial inequity like the

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<sup>128</sup> For a broader and deeper discussion of the longer history between these two tensions in the U.S. settler-colonial project, see Ibram X Kendi's contributory chapter on Progress.

comparatively poor housing and educational access to Black and Brown Americans peoples.

Consequently, it becomes necessary that the evacuation of socio-economic be replaced with an alternative rationalization. Racial Liberalism accomplishes this by attributing both racism and its manifestations in wealth inequity, labor exploitation, homeownership, and other areas to cultural pathology. Thus, the second element of racial liberalism is the *restitution of racialism and racism as (exclusively) rooted in culture*.<sup>129</sup>

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that this evacuation-replacement is reproduced and essentialized through the recollection, rhetoric, and epistemology of 1776; the erasure of socio-economic racism directly related to one featured author's mystification regarding the connection between slavery, Jim Crow, and the explosion in rates of incarceration along racial lines.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, the reintroduction of race-as-culture facilitates another author's rationalization of contemporary Black and Brown socio-economic injustice/exploitation as the product of cultural pathology; "learned helplessness," or the "cult of victimhood or, more concretely, in the rates of marriage or education."<sup>131</sup>

An essential point about the race-as-culture paradigm is its aspirational or valorizing function for white people. As Melamed explains, the race-as-culture paradigm

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<sup>129</sup> Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 7.

<sup>130</sup> Wacquant recognizes as a symbiosis between the prison and the ghetto; See Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis."

<sup>131</sup> Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism"; Black, "The Cult of Victimhood | 1776 Unites| Uplifting Everyday Americans"; Page, "Black Patriotism -- Not Victimhood | 1776 Unites| Uplifting Everyday Americans"; Butler, "Black America and the Algorithm of Success | 1776 Unites| Uplifting Everyday Americans." We will also explore how these latter two areas are compounded cases of evacuation. First, the evacuation leads to the erasure of the socio-economic racialism that marks disparities in school quality and birth rates out of wedlock as signs of cultural pathology, which are then redirected as a further rationalization for the evacuation of economics—cyclical shit.

also valorizes a restrictive definition/practice of antiracism at the individual and national stages; colorblind antiracism becomes the necessary individual quality of antiracism, while at the national/policy level, representation in the electorate and politics, and legal integration of markets, labor, and integration becomes the necessary and sufficient conditions for an antiracist capitalist state. Bonilla-Silva similarly observes that the race-as-culture paradigm functions to alleviate white Americans of their complicity with and their beneficence from past and present socio-economic, racial oppression, insofar as racism-as-culture occludes recognition of how under racial capitalism, racism can indeed be produced "without racists."<sup>132</sup>

The frame of abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., "equal opportunity," the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear "reasonable" and even "moral" while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality. For instance, the principle of equal opportunity, central to the agenda of the civil rights movement and whose extension to people of color was vehemently opposed by most whites, is invoked by whites today to oppose affirmative-action policies because they supposedly represent the "preferential treatment" of certain groups. This claim necessitates ignoring that people of color are severely underrepresented in jobs, schools, and universities. Hence, it is an abstract utilization of the idea of "equal opportunity."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*.

<sup>133</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 56.

This contemporary frame does not fully erase economic reference when considering the endurance of racism; instead, it conversely erases racial reference when considering the economic factors of racism. Racial liberalism initially managed the contradiction between the sustained socio-economic exploitation and precarity of non-white people and the endurance of racial formation by deracializing capitalism. Racial liberalism deracializes capitalism by erasing capitalist exploitation and structurally inequitable distribution of resources as a reference for racism. Paradigmatically, neoliberal multiculturalism builds on this partial evacuation of economic, racial reference; in a sense, re-racializing capitalism and the U.S. ascendancy — by presenting the neoliberal State and the American dream as antiracist. As Melamed explains, "like neoliberalism itself, neoliberal multiculturalism is a market ideology turned social philosophy. It portrays an ethic of multiculturalism as the spirit of neoliberalism and, conversely, *posits neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity* (emphasis mine).<sup>134</sup>

Neoliberal multiculturalism builds on the general occlusion of capitalist racial exploitation and the popular understanding of racism as solely sustained by cultural pathology; in this sense, it maintains some continuity with racial liberalism. However, Melamed reminds us that neoliberal multiculturalism is also rooted in the restructuring of racial capitalism under globalization and the directive of the U.S. state under White Reconstruction:

Neoliberal Multiculturalism breaks with an older racism's reliance on phenotype to innovate new ways of fixing human capacities to naturalize inequality. The

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<sup>134</sup> Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 138.

new racism deploys economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinctions to produce lesser personhoods, laying these new categories of privilege and stigma across conventional racial categories, fracturing them into differential status groups.<sup>135</sup>

Essentially, the directive at hand was to naturalize and valorize the global expansion of racial capitalism. Doing so functioned to both (re)secure white privilege by rearticulating it through a partially deracialized lens of capitalism-at-work while simultaneously maintaining the position that capitalism was not only 'colorblind' but also central to the progression of antiracism.<sup>136</sup>

In reviewing both Melamed and Rodriguez's insights concerning the strategic rhetorics of whiteness, I have sought to build toward an understanding of how the rhetorical conflation of whiteness with Americanism is paralleled and facilitated by a shifting U.S. racial paradigm. This paradigm offers the wages historically accrued by whiteness to white people to certain non-white people while maintaining and naturalizing socio-economic inequity on gendered, ethnic, classed, cognitive, and, yes, raced terms. In recognition of these continuities and divergences, the rest of this chapter identifies the specific strategic rhetorics employed by *1776* in articulating their opposition to *1619* and defending their alternative visions of the meaning of racism and antiracism as strategic rhetorics of neoliberal multiculturalism. I argue that *1776* deploys several strategic rhetorics to rescue the invisibility and centrality of racial capitalism in the past and the present and secure and universalize the official antiracism of the State.

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<sup>135</sup> Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 14.

<sup>136</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 5-6.

## **Strategic Rhetorics of Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Oppositional Representation of 1619**

We can see such rhetorics of whiteness at work in the very mission statement of *1776 Unites*: Though not all the authors that wrote for *1776* explicitly couch their essays in opposition to *1619*, the opposition to *1619*—as well as a preview of the rhetorical strategies *1776* will employ in its authors' representation of *1619*— is implicitly announced in the mission statement of *1776 Unites*:

*1776 Unites* is a movement to shape the American future by drawing on the best of its past. Radically pragmatic and unapologetically patriotic, we hope to speak for Americans of all races, creeds, and political convictions who oppose the efforts to demoralize and demonize our country and its foundations from within and to turn its people against one another with false history and grievance politics.<sup>137</sup>

There are several points of note here; first, from the outset, *1776* defines both itself and its constituency in universalized, colorblind terminology; as “Americans of all races, creeds, and political convictions.” Equally significantly, however, is the extent to which *1776* negatively defines its mission and its audience, placing *1776 Unites* in opposition to “efforts to demoralize and demonize” “our country and its foundations” and in opposition to a “false history and grievance project.” While not explicit in this clause, we can infer that many of the featured essays charge the *1619 Project* and its authors with one or more of the above claims.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> “Welcome to *1776 Unites*| A Movement FOR America,

<sup>138</sup> Swain, Critical Race Theory's Toxic, Destructive Impact on America; Mchworter, "1619 Project' and Dumbing Down of America"; Love, "Accurate Black American History"; Black, “The Cult of Victimhood; Wilfred Reilly, "A Positive Vision for Black America.

Chronologically speaking, *1776*'s stated opposition to 'false history' predates *1776*, previously appearing in the rhetoric of the collection of historians who have publicly opposed *1619* — primarily because of historical cherry-picking and overzealous interpretation. For example, take an editorial by Sean Wilentz published in *The Atlantic* with what will we find to be an ironic title of *A Matter of Facts*.<sup>139</sup> In the editorial, Wilentz is primarily concerned with defending and rearticulating the concerns about the *Project*; concerns he previously voiced alongside four other notable American historians in an open letter to the authors of *1619*, published in the *NYTimes Magazine* on December 20, 2019.<sup>140</sup>

I would welcome any interested readers to review and consider for themselves the charges of historical accuracy and interpretation voiced by the authors, the nature of these complaints, many of which are tenuous or reflect misconstruals of intent, and all of which ignore or downplay *1619*'s central point about correcting a distorted history. However, I want to focus on a passage towards the end of the editorial in which Wilentz references W.E.B. Du Bois' germinal *Black Reconstruction*. *Black Reconstruction* is, in many ways, a work of deconstruction: of American capitalism and its symbiosis with white supremacy; of failures of Reconstruction to protect the de jure, but not de facto Constitutional rights of Black Americans, and of the already well-established mythologized archive of the Civil War produced through the United Daughters of the Confederacy and substantiated historiographically by the Dunning School — a significance that Wilentz, at first glance, seems to appreciate:

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<sup>139</sup> Sean Wilentz, "A Matter of Facts," *Atlantic*, January 22, 2020.

<sup>140</sup> Lovia Gyarko, "How the 1619 Project Came Together," *New York Times*, August 18, 2019.

In exposing the falsehoods of his racist adversaries, Du Bois became the upholder of plain, provable fact against what he saw as the Dunning School's propagandistic storyline (sic). Du Bois repeatedly pointed out the "deliberate contradiction of plain facts." Time and again in *Black Reconstruction*, he appealed to the facts against one or another false interpretation... *Only by carefully marshaling the facts was Du Bois able to establish the truth about Reconstruction* (emphasis mine).<sup>141</sup>

Wilentz references Du Bois to punctuate a lecture to the NYTimes and the *1619* authorship about facts' sanctity and persuasive power. However, Wilentz, perhaps overly eager, overlooks Du Bois' initial address to the reader of *Black Reconstruction*, in which he notes that "It would be only fair to the reader to say frankly in advance that the attitude of any person toward this story will be distinctly influenced by his theories of the [Black] race."<sup>142</sup> However, Wilentz's misrepresentation of Du Bois exemplifies how Black American history, theory, activism, and achievement remain marginalized in the archive of hegemonic American public history and the cultural memory produced in history textbooks, documentaries, folk tales, and memorials.

However, the reconstruction of Du Bois signals something exceeding marginalization: Du Bois is not utterly erased in Wilentz's editorial; rather, Wilentz's decontextualization of Du Bois enables his incorporation into arguments antithetical to those Du Bois takes up exhaustively in *Black Reconstruction*, not to mention in the latter phases of his public life and work. *1776* author John Sibley Butler uses Du Bois similarly, situating Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as believers in the necessity of

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<sup>141</sup> Wilentz, "A Matter of Facts."

<sup>142</sup> Du Bois and Jones, *Black Reconstruction in America*.

“Black bourgeoisie culture” for racial uplift. Collapsing Du Bois and Washington’s positions is particularly disingenuous, both because Du Bois and Washington disagreed on the appropriate pathway for racial uplift in their own time and because to situate both Washington and Du Bois as spokespersons for Black bourgeoisie culture is anachronistic and decontextualizes their diverging investments in transforming the antiblack civil and economic systems in their time.

Without dismissiveness towards the significance of thoroughly reflecting on the life, ideas, and works of Du Bois, particularly when one seeks to engage the question of American racialization at any level, I am not strictly speaking interested in adjudicating a laundry list of oversight; rather, these cases exemplify the ways that *1776* and *1619*’s opponents in general deploy gaps in public memory to form misrepresentations of antiracist figures in service of advancing their arguments. Moreover, these distortions are significant given that distorting and decontextualizing is precisely one of the charges *1776* authors deploy to discredit *1619*.

*1776* takes issues less with the veracity of the specific content than with the things with which the Project does not deal, targeting *1619*’s general lack of stories of Black socio-economic success and its narrow and specific treatment of national icons like Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln national icons. For example, Charles Love complains that “the *1619 Project* would be more credible if it had anything positive to say about America. Instead, it takes the “throw it all out approach.”<sup>143</sup> Mcwhorter claims that consequently, *1619* essentially “demands that we abjure complexity,” continuing with the charge of a sort of historical absolutism at work within *1619*:

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<sup>143</sup> Love, “Accurate Black American History.”

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation does not matter because he also, for a while, though enslaved people, once freed, should be transported back to Africa. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society must be remembered as the product of a man who...made nice with open segregationists...we are to keep ever at the forefront of our minds that all of these blights and torts are the spawn of something conclusively revolting that eliminates any reason to seriously consider anything else about these people in evaluating them as human figures or, by extension, America as an accomplishment.<sup>144</sup>

Here McWhorter makes inferences that essentialize and occlude that which *1619* is responding to, especially since the authors of *1619* have discursively and pedagogically situated the *Project* as a necessary but *complementary* addition to the given canon of U.S. history. McWhorter presents an argument that is precisely the sort of one-sided, reductionist, *distorted* presentation of Lincoln that is produced when the historical pedagogy and the collective recollection of Lincoln *only* remembers the Lincoln who wrote the Emancipation Proclamation and *erased* or marginalized the fact that Lincoln did suggest that Frederick Douglass and the Black enslaved people whose labor predicated and predated the U.S. should renounce their birthright for the sake of allowing white Americans to reunite without the problem of the color line.

While McWhorter is technically correct that *1619* privileges the fact that Lincoln “for much of his career, believed that a necessary prerequisite for freedom would be a plan to encourage the four million formerly enslaved people to leave the country and

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<sup>144</sup> McWhorter is ostensibly greatly concerned about the abjuration of complexity; this is somewhat confusing given his later assertion, in absolutist terms, that any theory of the human condition must be able to be universalized to be valid. History is complex and nuanced, but apparently humans are not. McWhorter, “‘The *1619 Project*’ and the Dumbing Down of America, *1776 Unites*.”

spends little space focusing on Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, his rhetoric in the Gettysburg Address, or indeed on the fact that "towards the end of his life, Lincoln's racial outlook had evolved considerably in the direction of real equality.", he refuses to consider that it is the absence of Lincoln's conversation with Douglas in the pedagogy and memory of mainstream U.S. society that gives the reason for *1619*'s inclusion of this fact, as *New York Times* editor Jake Silverstein clarifies:

the letter writers imply that Hannah-Jones was unfairly harsh toward our 16th president. Admittedly...an essay that covered several centuries and ranged from the personal to the historical...did not set out to explore in full his continually shifting ideas about abolition and the rights of black Americans. But she provides an important historical lesson by simply reminding the public, which tends to view Lincoln as a saint, that for much of his career, he believed that a necessary prerequisite for freedom would be a plan to encourage the four million formerly enslaved people to leave the country. To be sure, at the end of his life, Lincoln's racial outlook had evolved considerably in the direction of real equality. *Yet the story of abolition becomes more complicated, and more instructive, when readers understand that even the Great Emancipator was ambivalent about full black citizenship* (emphasis mine).<sup>145</sup>

The effect of decontextualizing *1619*'s historical foci from epistemological and archival absences is a form of strategic negation which functions to otherize *1619* as a distortion of history while maintaining the invisibility and the centrality of *1776*, even as *1776* is

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<sup>145</sup> Jake Silverstein, "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019.

also working as the normative standard of 'objective' history against which *1619* is represented as a distortion.

By setting the partiality of *1619's* treatment of Lincoln in tension, not with the partiality of the "Great Emancipator" narrative-frame<sup>146</sup>, but against an abstracted conception of "the responsibility to engage the vast spectrum of human affairs that history," Mchworter, Wilentz, and Love can reproduce the management of the contradictions of white abolitionism embodied in Lincoln.<sup>147</sup> They can do so because they strategically avoid reference to the specific gaps in public and social history to which *1619* responds, and in this way, universalize and essentialize the existence of these gaps as "The American History;" and thus, advance the misconception that *1619* is advocating a reductionist interpretation of Lincoln when the reality is that reductionist interpretations of Lincoln are precisely what the inclusion of the Lincoln-Douglass White House conversation into the national remembrance of Lincoln is meant to correct.<sup>148</sup>

Directing the strategy of negative definition towards maintaining and occluding the essentialization and universalization of *1776*-history is perhaps the logical and necessary starting point for *1776* in their work to defend racial liberalist epistemology. It is a logical starting point because, I have argued in this thesis, and as the concept of

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<sup>146</sup> The 'Great Emancipator' framing of Lincoln privileges his role in ending the institution of chattel slavery and his general views on human equality. For empirical analysis of the ways in which this framing dominates the collective memory of Lincoln, see Schuman, Corning, and Schwartz, "Framing Variations and Collective Memory."

<sup>147</sup> As an emancipator who simultaneously had misgivings over the possibility of Black people integrating into the white caste system, Lincoln was hardly unique among white abolitionists; many of whom saw slavery as sin yet nonetheless were reluctant to go so far as to support the full civic rights and social capacities of Black people.

<sup>148</sup> For more on the relationship between archival gaps and the sustenance of social epistemologies of ignorance, see Sullivan and Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*; Mueller, "Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?"

social epistemology and the field of memory studies implies, interpretations of the present are contested in the retroactive. To that end, reading Harold Black and Clarence Pages' contributions to *1776 Unites* alongside Mchworter suggests that the negation of *1619* as distortion and the universalization of mainstream history produced by *1776* corresponds to a similar distortion of *1619*'s racial and cultural politics.<sup>149</sup>

At this point, the strategic rhetorics of racial liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism reveal their respective hegemonic functions: the occlusion of capitalism and neoliberalism as racializing structures that sustain white supremacy and, correspondingly, the idea that cultural pathology can explain all evidence of racial inequity. In moves that naturalizing and reproduc3 racial liberalisms' evacuation of socio-economic and corollary universalization of culture in reference to the conditions and determinants of racialism/racism, Clarence Page and Harold Black claim that 1619's interpretation of contemporary socio-economic inequities is distorted by and reproductive of a 'lens of Black victimization.'<sup>150</sup> Both Page and Black betray their investments in neoliberalist epistemology by blaming the rise of "learned helplessness" primarily on Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" and, by inference, social welfare policies.<sup>151</sup> Black severs the linkage between the social welfare programs, slavery, and *racialized conditions* of poverty is not entirely suppressed but rather is reversed; in a contradiction to the *1776*'s "explicit goal of desegregating poverty," Black curiously re-segregates the

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<sup>149</sup> Page, "Black Patriotism -- Not Victimhood"; Black, "The Cult of Victimhood."

<sup>150</sup> "Welcome to *1776 Unites*| A Movement FOR America."

<sup>151</sup> The trope of blaming impoverished people for their poverty reflects the core premise of neoliberalism, which is that social/financial success is entirely rooted in individualistic attributes like 'work ethic' and 'self-determination.' See Page, "Black Patriotism -- Not Victimhood"; Black, "The Cult of Victimhood."

notion of War on Poverty by way of a conflation with the concept of reparations for the descendants of enslaved peoples.

In the context of racial liberalism's evacuation of socioeconomics, the logic of the conflation is clarified: since the paradigm does not consider the stratification of wealth and access to government benefits as manifestations of racial formation, and since the stratification of capitalist wealth remains the primary manifestation of racialized inequity in the U.S. post-abolition, Black in a sense cannot help but consider the initiatives of the Great Society as reparations. In other words, as attempts to respond to historical wrongs, as opposed to attempts to provide economic justice for the conditions of racial casting *in the present*.

Well, he could help it if he broke from or questioned neoliberal multiculturalist epistemology; however, as Case and Ngo observe, the suppression of questioning of capitalism's racializing processes, and thus of the interdependency of capitalism and white supremacy, has been precisely the function of neoliberal multiculturalism as it has come to be the dominant and hegemonic paradigm for U.S. based racial thought and discourse.

Because neoliberal multiculturalism has achieved hegemonic status, and because neoliberal multiculturalism occludes the oppression of capitalism through an individualized and moralized logic that conflates personal character with capitalistic success, Black and Page can reimagine *1619's* general claim that the legacy of slavery delimits the social horizons of Black and Brown Americans today as a claim of cultural pathology; without the qualifier that the barriers to Black and Brown capitalist success are external and political rather than individual and socio-economic rather than cultural,

and under neoliberalism's emphasis on individual self-determination as the necessary and sufficient condition for success, any statement that is pessimistic about the relative capacity of Black people to avoid or escape poverty is interpreted as an attack on personal character, since under this paradigm of thought, personal character *is* the only thing that leads people into poverty, and the only means of escaping.

Thus, we can now identify the second strategic negation by neoliberal multiculturalism, another dimension by which the counterinsurgency against *1619* reproduces neoliberal multiculturalism as the invisible center of racial epistemology: the negation of the racial in racial capitalism and the affirmation of racialism/racism as cultural/pathology. Specifically, the negation of a socio-economic critique of the U.S. racial state is rhetorically enacted through a universalized discourse of neoliberalism by rationalizing away the endurance of the stratification of capitalism across gendered/racial/classed lines by utilizing the trope of (Black) cultural pathology.

As counter-insurgent rhetoric, the trope of cultural pathology has surplus value through the hegemony of neoliberal multiculturalism. First, the authors deploy the trope of cultural pathology to deconstruct *1619's* emphasis on a socioeconomically and socio-culturally grounded analysis of racial politics in the racial State, rationalizing away the racial matrix of the capitalist State. While Black suggests that *1619* contributes to the 'cultural pathology of victimhood,' Clarence Page suggests that doing so is profoundly anti-patriotic, antagonistic to the axiology of the U.S. nation-state (e.g. 'the American Dream, 'Liberty and Justice for All'). Page does not explicitly suggest this; instead, he implies it through his pieces' titular binary of Black Patriotism-Victimhood.

Other authors tag *1619* as anti-patriotic with similar binaries or through association with one or several people, ideas, collectives, or schools of thought that have previously or concurrently been fixed with the moniker of "anti-American." In the former instance, Ismael Hernandez and Carol Swain rely on a strategy that universalizes Christianity as an intrinsic facet of U.S. culture, in which *The 1619 Project* is thus represented as anti-Christian.<sup>152</sup> In one breathtaking demonstration of the extent to which Christian ideology permeates the entire worldview and knowledge system of specific *1776* authors, as well as of the multiculturalist telos at work, Ismael Hernandez asserts that anthropology must be predicated on the Christian doctrine of intelligent design, claiming that "sound anthropology understands that creation as such is imbued with meaning and God made human beings in his image and likeness, with the intrinsic and existential moral capacity for self-realization. He pronounced us "very good." We were created with the capacities of reason and volition and for each other, for mutual self-giving, for love."<sup>153</sup>

While Hernandez takes the universalization of Christianity as a given, Carol Swain deploys the givenness of Christian values in their conflation with U.S. values by setting up a contrast with an implied reference to *1619*. She foils *1619* from the subject-position of 'Christian Communities' - it is logical then, given her worldview, that she describes 1610 in the theology of sin:

Within Christian communities, there is a basis for countering destructive narratives that have invaded our educational institutions and corporate world. The

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<sup>152</sup> Swain, "Critical Race Theory's Toxic, Destructive Impact on America"; Hernandez, "BLM's Marxist Agenda."

<sup>153</sup> Hernandez, "BLM's Marxist Agenda."

solution for hatred, bitterness, and distrust can be found in New Testament principles. *Rather than wallow in the past and revisionists' efforts to build a case for reparations, we, as Americans, need to move forward while practicing the forgiveness and love of neighbor that Jesus espoused* (emphasis mine).<sup>154</sup>

Hernandez also deploys a linkage of *Black Lives Matter* to Marxism as a means of anti-patriotism by association. The weaponization of Marxism is a logical choice, given the past success that red-scare tactics yielded in situating Claudia Jones, Assata Shakur, and many others of the Black Marxist tradition as enemies of the U.S. State, testaments to the destructive power that the specter of Marxism authorizes the State to direct towards the murder, imprisonment, infiltration, and public witch-hunting towards its citizens when identified (correctly or otherwise) \ among the people is a matter of historical record.<sup>155</sup> However, mention of this history was not present in the ‘featured essays’ of *1776* at the time of this thesis.

Whether via Christianity or Marxism, the function is the same: negation. This negation can be understood not as the denial of the existence of *1619* but rather as a negation of the epistemic authority of Americans to speak on and act on their principles, to bear witness and offer interpretations of their location and the events they observe within them, and to engage in the continual debate over the meaning and the direction of the U.S. as an idea and as a nation-state. Melamed describes the "most chilling" function of racial liberalism as the way it forces Black Americans into a binary of white patriotism or Black pathology:

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<sup>154</sup> Swain, “Critical Race Theory’s Toxic, Destructive Impact on America”

<sup>155</sup> “Assata Shakur Speaks!”; Johnson, “Reclaiming Claudia Jones.”

Black politics, culture, experience, and analysis incompatible with American cultural norms and nationalist sentiment (notably black socialist internationalism) become signs of black pathology, alongside poverty and underachievement. Racial liberalism's culture model for race thus worked to restrict racial meanings and politics to comply with "official" liberal antiracism and to foreclose discussions of African American political and cultural autonomy and the dynamics of race and racism in the postwar expansion of transnational capitalism.<sup>156</sup>

The price of equity and justice becomes conformity. Conformity to Christian values as the foundation of national and cultural axiology; unquestioning consent to capitalist labor as the cost of living and belonging, The cost of nonconformity is not only the foreclosure of life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness, but also expulsion from the discursive and social boundaries of national belonging. Under this system of conditional liberty, one cannot be both American and Marxist or non-Christian, and if one is, then the expectation is to accept scant survival as the necessary and inevitable price of one's convictions. The price of nonconformity, in other words, is negation.

However, "with every negation, there is an affirmation."<sup>157</sup> To punctuate the discussion of this chapter, I would like to pivot from how *1776* negates *1619* and consider how these negations constitute an affirmation of the official antiracism of the State. In a sense, this final movement closes the circle in which the reproduction of neoliberal multiculturalism reaches completion.

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<sup>156</sup> Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 8.

<sup>157</sup> Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness," 299.

## **Affirmations of Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Official Antiracism**

*1776 Unites* is not only concerned with critiquing the antiracism of *The 1619 Project* grounded in socioeconomically grounded, anticapitalist antiracism; several *1776* authors also submit their takes on antiracism in ways that reflect and reproduce neoliberal multiculturalism's breakdown of racial progress in individuated and marketized terms. *1776* accomplishes this primarily by negating *1619's* antiracist position, as previously discussed. Implied in opposition to *1619* that is based on a 'victimhood narrative' is the affirmation of the autonomy of the liberal Human individual To shape their fortunes (literally and figuratively.)<sup>158</sup>

The strategy, in broad strokes, is this: first, *1776* authors represent an argument or passage of *1619*, or more frequently, an author associated with *1619*, as a claim of victimhood or dependency. Then, they build on the previously established premise of *1619* as distortion or incomplete history to claim that this ignores, overlooks, or contradicts one or another neoliberal/American virtue. Because of this, *1776* claims that *1619* is dismissive or insulting to the struggles and achievements of Black Americans. Squires, for example, affirms the neoliberalist belief in individual autonomy when he claims that Ibram X. Kendi's "worldview creates no space for the efficacy of self-determination."<sup>159</sup> While he infers from Kendi's belief in the necessity of antiracist policies of restorative justice that Kendi believes that Black people are "passive recipients of their actions, confined to a supporting role in our own autobiography," this interpretation only makes sense in a worldview that creates no space for the possibility

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<sup>158</sup> Squires, "Authentic Antiracism."

<sup>159</sup> Squires, "Authentic Antiracism."

that self-determination can be impeded by structural disadvantages that sustain poverty and delimit social mobility.

Lastly is what could be called the “Apologist Method,” insofar as several authors reference individualized or isolated cases or cherry-picked statistics and argue that these examples 'prove' the autonomy of the neoliberal Black subject as the *genuinely representative* of antiracism/racial uplift (read: more representative than 1619's focus on structural impediments, or Black Feminist Marxists class/gender/racial/colonial critique).<sup>160</sup> John Sibley Butler presents the existence of HBCUs and their role in facilitating the formation of a "Black Bourgeoisie" social class of college-educated, entrepreneurial Black men as refutative proof of structural racialism and as a model to be followed for all suffering and struggling under neoliberal multiculturalism:

"Urban blacks" is only one tradition of black America. One should not seek an explanation for the "plight" of black males but instead look to the archives of Morehouse College, which has been graduating blacks for generations for over a hundred years. Martin Luther King Jr. was a third-generation Morehouse man from the prosperous Sweet Auburn Avenue section of Atlanta, and these kinds of communities existed throughout the South. His educational success originated with the entrepreneurial spirit of black America, a tradition he did not enhance during the modern civil rights movement.<sup>161</sup>

While Butler focuses on Morehouse college, he also references the cultural pathology through the contrast of 'Morehouse Men' to "urban blacks." Ultimately, urban black *people* themselves are represented as something profoundly un-American by the

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<sup>160</sup> Gates, “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.”

<sup>161</sup> Butler, “Black America and the Algorithm of Success.”

difference between them and "third-generation Morehouse man" like Martin Luther King, Jr. . Indeed, "under racial liberalism, the Negro either is folded into state representation as an equivalent for the American ideal (a race-erased "general American culture") or is pathologized."<sup>162</sup>

However, remember that the coordinated projects of *White Reconstruction* and neoliberal multiculturalism, both as corporeal technologies of government and biopower and as social epistemologies and discursive formations, "breaks [*sic*] with older racisms reliance of phenotype to innovate new ways of rationalizing inequality" and "legitimate and obfuscate contradictions that manifest within and beyond color lines."<sup>163</sup> 1776 rationalizes the 'plight of urban Black people' in a way that occludes the role of capitalist exploitation and neoliberalism's racialized deprivation of social welfare programs in sustaining Black poverty and Black carcerality. This rationalization also avoids consideration of how both capitalism and state welfare have historically facilitated the wealth accumulation of elite and non-elite white people. Thus, Black 'legitimizes and occludes' the ways that neoliberal multiculturalism, even as it has broken from the strictness of 'phenotype,' reproduces and invents new categories of identity for targeted control, expropriation, marginalization, and other forms of violence along the lines of cisheteronormativity, ethnicity/nationality, class/social status, dis/ability, and even religious/ideological affiliation.

Again, and of course, power rarely declares its intent: given that the existence of such categorical violence would directly contradict the spirit of neoliberalism (in its blind optimism of the universal liberal human subjects' autonomy) and of U.S. mythos

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<sup>162</sup> Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 8.

<sup>163</sup> Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*; Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 14

multiculturalism (i.e. 'the Great American melting pot,") that *1776* seeks to defend, its authors cannot come out and declare their disaffection and neglect of Queer people, Black and Brown people, immigrants and refugees, and indeed people of all skin colors (this includes white people) who are chronically and systematically impoverished. They cannot or likely are reluctant to directly claim that drug addicts and physically and mentally disabled people, and people imprisoned for crimes against property do not deserve life, liberty, and happiness. However, the *1776* authors cannot fully occlude the identity politics embedded within their worldview, nor the permeation of those politics in their conception of the union between State and Capital they wish to legitimize; evidence of these beliefs can be retrieved from Wilfred Reilly's *Positive Vision for America*, and more specifically, from the universalized 'success path' he offers, seemingly accessible to all Americans (despite being grounded in Judeo-Christian moralization):

Preachers and rabbis have said from the pulpit for centuries that one has to do only three or four things in life to avoid poverty and failure: Finish high school, take a job and work hard, wait until marriage to have children, avoid being convicted of a serious crime, and so forth. Empirical social science indicates this is very true — and this, rather than victimology, is the message to teach young people.<sup>164</sup>

In this vision is everything tragic, dangerous, and powerful about neoliberal multiculturalism as a globalizing system of governance and as an epistemology of (non)race: the production of white respectability politics, including cisheteronormativity and capitalist labor as well the civic decorum of blind patriotism, as the conditions for

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<sup>164</sup> Reilly, "A Positive Vision for Black America."

survival and acceptance within the social body. Structural gendered and sexual violence is both legitimized and occluded in the universalization of marriage itself and the containment of sexuality through the institution of marriage, which occludes the extent to which marriage is a socio-religious construct that already regulates access to tangible financial and social resources based on cisheteronormativity. Similar, violent gatekeeping past and present permeates both access to quality high schools and the capacity to prioritize education overwork (which disappears in proportion to extreme poverty); in the case of those with physical or mental disabilities, this violence is exponentially amplified, as access to education and employment, and thus, access to health insurance and medical care, is delimited by dis/ability under neoliberal capitalism governance. Violence against criminals' doubles if we consider the theorizations and lived experiences of Black and Brown radicals who recognized that since most crimes are property-related, all crimes can be traced back to the deprivation and systems of containment that racial capitalism produces and the State enforces and legitimates.<sup>165</sup>

### **1776 Divides**

In this chapter, I have sought an analysis of *1776* that attends to its counter-insurgent functions as it voices its opposition to not just *The 1619 Project* itself but against any who associate themselves (or can be associated, willingly or otherwise) with the Project, its theses, or its vision for an antiracist future. To encapsulate both the outcome of their rhetoric and attend its investments in the indefinite and universalized endurance of racial capitalism *and* racial states, I have sought to demonstrate how the processes of counterinsurgency against *1619* are ineffably and simultaneously the

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<sup>165</sup> “Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* | *The Anarchist Library*,

processes of reproduction for the hegemony of neoliberal multiculturalism. As a social epistemology, neoliberal multiculturalism rationalization of racial capitalism coheres with facilitates the strategic maintenance of whiteness as invisible and central, simply by mystifying the socio-economic predication of present-day class/race/gendered privilege. Simultaneously, it reproduces antiracism in such a fashion that coheres, rather than contradicts, the centrality of whiteness. It can do so because, in a sense, whiteness is no longer just for 'white' people — all people who are willing and capable of conforming to the privileged categories neoliberalism authorizes for success. However, the underside of this is the occlusion of the continual exploitation of the 'stigmatized' authorized by racial capitalism.

Given that capitalism is the driver of racial formation and social inequity both within and beyond the U.S. and the fact that neoliberal multiculturalism presents capitalism as antiracist, the result is a particularly insidious discursive formation that occludes what it claims to oppose: the perpetuation of oppression, exploitation, and oppression.<sup>166</sup> As Melamed indeed describes, "With the apotheosis of the individual in neoliberal rationality, it has become even easier for seemingly antiracist or multicultural thinking to misrecognize systemic failures in social-economic relations to be the result of individual characteristics, choices, and personalities."<sup>167</sup>

True enough, Case and Ngo find that the discursive formation and epistemology of neoliberal multiculturalism "commodifies antiracist models and reshapes "controversial" or "offensive" statements that name White supremacy into more

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<sup>166</sup>: Case and Ngo, "Do We Have to Call It That?"

<sup>167</sup> Melamed, "Making Global Citizens: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Literary Value," in *Represent and Destroy*, 140.

consumable language and colorblind approaches that do not disrupt the status quo."<sup>168</sup>

Regardless of institutional or social location, neoliberal multiculturalism produces a 'softening effect' on the proposals and policies of antiracist action among higher education institutions, reflecting a desire to consider (anti)racism in commodified terms and yielding policies that are "cosmetic."

I hope that this investigation is illustrative of a possible means of fracturing the hegemony of neoliberal multiculturalism. This chapter has outlined the ways that its paradigm is rhetorically produced like that of whiteness. In that case, exploring the contradictions contained and managed through the strategic rhetorics of neoliberal multiculturalism may provide the means to defend projects like *1619*, which are rendered unintelligible and displaced from national belonging through universalization. Moreover, mapping the rhetorical enactment of neoliberal multiculturalism may also shed light on the means to contest and disrupt the universalization of neoliberal multiculturalism itself. Only then will racial capitalism maintain the special attention of those with genuine antiracist aspirations across the nation, if not the world.

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<sup>168</sup> Case and Ngo, "Do We Have to Call It That?," 219.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has proceeded in three parts. In the first chapter, I explained and justified my position on Mueller's theory of racial ignorance and the framework of social epistemologies of ignorance. These frameworks are integral to understanding the significance of *1619* as both a practice of revisionist history and an epistemological insurgency against postracialism. I discussed the archival grounding, the discursive practices, and the functions of specific ways of knowing and not-knowing race to maintain postracial hegemony, which enables symbolic and material investments in white supremacy while simultaneously maintaining a veneer of antiracism. The second chapter examined how *1619* performs this insurgent epistemology by deconstructing racial ignorance through counter-memory and counter-testimony that challenges white supremacy's central archival feature. The archive serves white supremacy through the universalization and essentialization of whiteness in cultural and historical memory, which functions to displace socioeconomically grounded racial knowings consistently offered by the Black American antiracist tradition developed by figures like Du Bois and Ida B. Wells.

Finally, this thesis turned to *1776 Unites* as a counterinsurgency rhetorical production of cultural memory and historical revisionism designed to forward the very power dynamics against which *1619* insurges. Considering the strategic rhetorics of neoliberal multiculturalism as a variant of whiteness' project to secure itself was central to the discussion of how these strategic rhetorics functioned towards the reification of racial ignorance. *1776 Unite* taps into neoliberal multiculturalism both by continuing the universalization of the white ethno-racial archive through the presentation of *1619* as a

distortion of history; it sustains neoliberal multiculturalism's evacuation of socioeconomics generally and racial capitalism specifically from its conception of racialism. Further, I detailed how this delimited conception led 1776 to an anti/racist framework that forecloses the necessity of further antiracist work on a national scale. This delimitation of antiracism and its necessity essentially depicts neoliberal governance as already containing the possibilities of equity; as such, proponents of this neoliberal antiracism occlude the fact that neoliberal governance has already overseen the continuation of slavery's afterlife because capitalist movement replaces the State as the primary driver of (increasingly intersectional) stratifications of wealth and poverty, freedom and bondage, citizen and criminal.

The purpose of this thesis has been, in a sense, to explore the systems of knowledge, memory, history, and discourse that characterize what Hannah-Jones calls the definitively American approach to considering “anti-Black racism and its social and material effects” — “bandage over and move on.”<sup>169</sup> Hannah-Jones touches on many of the themes of racial ignorance, including the “imperviousness to facts when it comes to white advantage and *architected* Black disadvantage;” the role of selective amnesia in the rationalization of white innocence and postracialism; the manipulation and decontextualization of figures like Martin Luther King Jr. to support postracial hegemony; and the separation of antiracism from critiques of capitalism, that reduces racism to a mere matter of prejudice or behavior rather than economic and social structures.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, this thesis argues that we must consider the interconnected

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<sup>169</sup> Hannah-Jones, “Justice,” 468.

<sup>170</sup> Hannah-Jones, “It is Time for Reparations.”; Hoerl, “Selective Amnesia and Racial Transcendence in News Coverage of President Obama’s Inauguration”; Mills, “White Ignorance”; Bruyneel, “The King’s Body”; Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism.”

rhetorical production of selective amnesia, the manipulation of antiracist figures, and the delimitation of racial oppression to appreciate the counter-memory work that Black rhetorical production can offer.

In the spirit of this interconnectedness, Hannah-Jones delivers the climactic statement that captures the purpose of the *Project*. She writes that having read *1619*, one can no longer use ignorance to justify inaction, arguing that “it is one thing to say you do not support reparations because you did not know the history...how things done long ago helped create the conditions in which millions of Black Americans live every day. *But now you have reached the end of this book, and nationalized amnesia can no longer provide the excuse* (emphasis mine).”<sup>171</sup>

This thesis also suggests that there are limitations, and even dangers, of investing exclusively in the undoing of racial ignorance for the undoing of racial formation. *1776 Unites* demonstrates that we cannot simply assume that most Americans are only invested in racialism because of their racial ignorance. The problem is not that Americans do not know about racism, but rather that many Americans *do not know and do not want to know*. We have to consider whether or not assailing national amnesia alone is an achievable goal and whether it would be sufficient to force the material confrontation with white supremacy on a scale necessary for the vision of a “land of the free” to be realized in earnest.

In the end, both *The 1619 Project* and *1776 Unites* remind us of the limitations of merely knowing about racism; that even progressive visions of US redemption beg the question of whether or not the US is capable of redeeming itself; whether or not the

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<sup>171</sup> Hannah-Jones, “Justice,” 475.

framing of antiracism in an exclusively national sense does not reproduce the similar —if significantly more reflexive and critical —notions of American exceptionalism, insofar as modern nation-states are brought into existence through their being as racial states. There are inherent risks in assuming that the solution to antiblackness, coloniality, racial capitalism, and systemic racism in the U.S. and globally can fit within the national form. Liat Ben-Moshe reminds us of the dis-epistemology of abolition:

This does not mean letting go of only hegemonic knowledge, although that is certainly part of the abolitionist critique. What I mean by dis-epistemology is letting go of the idea that anyone can have a definitive pathway for how to rid ourselves of carceral logics. It is this attachment to the idea of knowing and *needing to know* that is part of knowledge and affective economies that maintain carceral logics. I suggest that abolition is dis-epistemology in three ways: it is about letting go of attachments to forms of knowledge that rely on certainty (what are the definitive consequences of doing or not doing); prescription and professional expertise (tell us what should be done); and specific demands for futurity (clairvoyance- what will happen.)<sup>172</sup>

Writing at the intersection of carcerality, abolition, feminism, and (dis)ability, Ben-Moshe is speaking of the problems of reforms presume that the systems responsible for creating and sustaining oppression on global scales can furnish the dissolution of oppression, noting that “the push for specific solutions (especially those that translate into demands of the State) "rarely end well" for those whose ostracization, suffering, Othering, and/or oppression the solutions are meant to rectify.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ben-Moshe, “Dis-Epistemologies of Abolition,” 347.

<sup>173</sup> Ben-Moshe, “Dis-Epistemologies of Abolition,” 349.

Thinking with abolition's dis-epistemology might help us regard *1619* more holistically. Rather than read *1619* as purely reformist, we might note the connections many of its contributors draw across racism and capitalism, found in the call to question our investments in institutions, histories, and myths. The Alexanders call for Americans to question investments in “punitive systems of organized violence” like the police and the prison; Desmond embeds in *Capitalism* a call to question the continuities between chattel slavery and capitalism.<sup>174</sup> At the crossroads of these two calls, we see a further urge to question the interrelationship of capitalism, the prison, and intersectional oppression. This call to question reflects an abolitionist tendency in the counter-memory project that links up with the radical legacies of the Black Panther Party, Angela Davis, James Baldwin, and many others.<sup>175</sup>

At the close of this thesis, I want to suggest that it is the call to questioning, rather than the vision of the future, that makes *1619* so unsettling, and conversely, that it is the demand for unquestioning compliance with oppression, violence, and exploitation as much as the insistence on exclusionary conformity that makes *1776 Unites*, and racial ignorance, so dangerous.

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<sup>174</sup> Desmond, “Capitalism”; Alexander and Alexander, “Fear,” 122.

<sup>175</sup> Davis, “Prison Interviews.”

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## CURRICULUM VITA

### Contact Information

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9434  
Winston-Salem, NC 27106

### Education

#### Master of Arts in Communications, 2020- 2022

Wake Forest University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Department of  
Communication Winston Salem, NC, 27109

##### Relevant

Courses/Mo  
dules  
Rhetorical  
Theory  
Rhetorical  
Criticism  
Special Seminar: Speaking Truth to  
Power Special Topics: Deliberation and  
Expertise  
Communication and Popular  
Culture Black Popular Culture  
African-American Rhetoric of the 20th  
Century Qualitative Research Methods

#### Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies, 2014-

2019 Christopher Newport University, Newport  
News, VA Minor in Philosophy and Religious  
Studies

Borgenicht Fellowship Prize for Writing on Human Rights/Conflict  
Resolution

Academic Dean's List, Spring/Fall 2018, Spring 2019

### Research and Work Experience

#### *Works in Progress*

Book Review: Caricature and National Character, Christopher J. Gilbert  
Research Project: Challenging Scientific Expertise with Identity,  
Objectivity, and Legal Agency in LGBTQ Jurisprudence

### *Completed Works*

Research Project: Framing Britney, or Already Framed?  
Chapter Editor: Rhetoric in Everyday Life (2021, Wake Forest University Press)

### **Teaching Experience**

Graduate Course Assistant: Communication and Popular Culture,  
Department of Communication, Wake Forest University, 2020-21

Graduate Teaching Assistant: Debate and Advocacy, Department of  
Communication, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem NC, 2021-2022

### **Conference Presentations and Guest Panels**

Rister, A; Acheme, D; Johnson, T; Webber, K; Nasrin, S; Rauchberg, J;  
Tabackman, R (2021, November 28) Transforming Research into  
Action: Graduate Student Research in the Activism and Social Justice  
Division – Panel Presented at NCA Annual Convention (Seattle, WA,  
2021)

Tabackman, R. (2021, October 7) Framing Britney, or Already Framed?  
Celebrity Studies, Cruel Knowledge, and the Necessity of  
Intersectional Feminist Criticism – Paper Presented at Popular Culture  
Association of the South Annual Conference (Virtual)

Tabackman, R. (2021, November 2) 1619 vs 1776: Contestations in American  
Cultural Memory – Lecture Delivered at Grad Speaks (Wake Forest  
University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA)

### **Professional Service**

#### *University Service*

Graduate Student Representative –Wake Forest University Department  
of Communications Faculty Committee Spring Term, 2021

#### *Disciplinary Service*

Peer Reviewer – NCA Convention (November 2021) Affiliation:  
American Society for the History of Rhetoric

### **Professional Memberships**

Regular Member: National Communication Association \

Regular Member: Popular Culture Association/American Culture

Association of the South

Regular Member: Southern States Communication Association