

James P. Meyers on The 1619 Project

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What's at Stake

Determining the legitimacy of the historical narrative put forth by The 1619 Project, as advanced by the introductory essay written by Nikole Hannah-Jones, is crucial. The project seeks to radically alter our society's perception of American history by tying the US's founding to slavery and arguing that America truly became a free country when the Civil Rights Act was passed. If these claims are valid, then how we think and teach about our nation's history will need to be dramatically restructured.

I evaluated the project's narrative by comparing the analysis of the specific historical events Hannah-Jones strung together with concurring historical events; this allowed me to see if her analysis was accurate.

The conclusion I came to by learning about The 1619 Project and comparing it to other concurring historical narrative is that Hannah-Jones's essay sheds light to new perspectives, but it is not a completely accurate representation of American history.

Scope and Native Americans

Hannah-Jones's essay is an Afrocentric story highlighting the contributions and struggles of people of African descent throughout American history starting at 1619. But she ignores the role of other marginalized groups in our country's founding, including the treatment of Native Americans prior to the mass exportation of African slaves to the British Colonies. Hannah-Jones overlooks how indigenous peoples were dispossessed from the lands, enslaved, and oppressed by the early colonial settlers. During King Philip's War (1675-76) indigenous prisoners of war were sent to the Caribbean as slaves. They were sold to Barbados, Jamaica, and even Spain; there, they worked on the tobacco and sugar plantations. These plantations created the exports that were sold back to the colonists that had enslaved and sold them. This important historical narrative is nowhere to be found in Hannah-Jones's essay. She limits the scope of her narrative to the enslavement of Africans brought to the US. Yet that is not the whole story. Before Africans were brought to Jamestown in 1619, Europeans interacted with, fought, killed, and enslaved Indigenous people (Fisher)

Slavery's Revolution

One of Nikole Hannah-Jones's major claims is that slavery was a primary motivator for the Revolutionary War. She claims that American colonists were afraid that Britain was going to outlaw slavery; that is why they wanted their independence.

David Waldstreicher, a historian at Columbia University, generally agrees with Nikole Hannah-Jones about the role slavery played in the Revolutionary war. In a YouTube video, he references a court case where a colonial judge sided with a slave and left the decision of emancipation to English courts. Because of this case, Waldstreicher believes many slave-holding colonialists became afraid that England could arbitrarily take away their human "property."

Dr. John McWhorter, a noted critic of The 1619 Project, disagrees with Hannah-Jones's thesis regarding the American Revolution. As counter evidence, he cites the fact that many Americans, at the time, were abolitionists. Many historians and organizations across the political spectrum have also criticized this claim in the essay. For example, a prominent socialist organization that believed Hannah-Jones's claim undermined the element of class struggle in the American Revolution, which subsequently inspired future communist revolutions.

"Now suppose people had simply said[:] yes, we should begin our country's history in 1619 because of what Nikole Hannah-Jones said, and think of 1776 as just one rather complex year, would she [object]? No. Would she have said[:] no I only said just imagine[?] No."

– John McWhorter

An Indentured Wrinkle

One Hannah-Jones's main arguments is that the enslavement of Africans played a major part of the US's founding, but she does acknowledge the fact that a minority of Europeans were brought over to the New World as indentured servants and in other-unfree forms. (Pease 2017) Although the European indentured servant experience was different from that of enslaved Africans, they did share some similarities. One similarity was that indentured servants and convict laborers had no autonomy and were bound to serve their masters, even if the period of indenture came with an ending date and their children did not remain unfree (Rushton, Morgan, Oldbaileyonline.org). But like their African counterparts, European indentured servants' bodies were highly scrutinized in order that they could be identified if they tried to escape (Rushton, Morgan). Hannah-Jones's essay makes a point of stating that "the stolen labor" of black Americans built this country, but they were not only ones in the colonies whose labor was stolen. It is important to recognize that some European people brought to the colonies (the so-called Redemptioners) traded their labor for passage across the Atlantic but that was not always the case (Pease). Criminals, whose only crime was often petty theft, were sent to the Americas and worked on plantations. These Europeans may have not been as numerous as their African counterparts, and unlike black slaves there was a guarantee of freedom, but their work also helped build this country, a fact that Hannah-Jones ignores, complicating her essay's assumption that enslavement only happened to people of African descent at the hands of Europeans.



Richard Schlecht's rendering of a scene of activity at a warehouse and dock.
NPS/Harpers Ferry Center

"So, this shock comes really from having to listen to Nikole Hannah-Jones and her version of history which she very eloquently and clearly says [in the] long extended version of her essay is that she's engaging in a conversation with her father who was a patriot but who was also very critical [of the US]."

– David Waldstreicher

Takeaways

I do not agree with the thesis of Nikole Hannah-Jones's essay as it tries to redefine American History.

Her essay provides many interesting historical narratives that I was not aware of prior to reading it, and it has opened my eyes to African Americans' contributions and struggles in this country.

My main issue is that her essay, and the other written works for the 1619 Project, were designed to be a curriculum for schools but it only covers the struggles and contributions of one group in the US.

The 1619 project is designed to look at American history through an Afrocentric lens; Hannah-Jones's essay ignores other marginalized groups such as Native Americans and indentured European workers and their contribution to this Nation's founding and the perfecting of its democracy. I think that marginalized people in the US should have their stories told but one group cannot have the monopoly on our history. That is why I disagree with the 1619 Project.