

# Racial Justice Ministry

## Race in Focus for February, 2022: The 1619 Project

**“...American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it...”**

James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers”

Delivered on October 16, 1963 in New York as “The Negro Child: His Self-image,” published in *The Saturday Review*, December 21, 1963.

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/baldwin-talk-to-teachers>

This month’s “Race in Focus” is about the **1619 Project** created by Nikole Hannah-Jones and published by the *New York Times* (NYT). The discussion is guided by the following questions taken from a teacher’s guide written by Amanda E. Vickery, Associate Professor at the University of North Texas, and published by Penguin Random House, Secondary Education to accompany *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*:

What is the purpose of history? Who gets to decide what and who is remembered from the past? What are the consequences of those decisions? How does that impact how one sees themselves as a citizen?

With this mind, the goal of this discussion is to step beyond any argument about a particular beginning date (1619 vs. 1776, for example) and consider the implications any date has for the way we think about America in the past and the present.

We’re asking that you watch 2 short videos **before participating in the February 28 discussion**. As you watch the videos, consider these questions

1. What reasons did Ms. Hannah-Jones and the NYT have for developing this project and publishing it in 2019?
2. What history of the founding of America did you learn while growing up? Does that history still make sense to you, based on what you’ve learned since? If not, what do you wish you would have learned earlier?

### Video links:

#### Video #1

1619 Project Symposium: Nikole Hannah-Jones, November 23, 2019. A speech given at the beginning of the 1619 Project symposium at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Video – 15:00. [1619 Project Symposium: Nikole Hannah-Jones - YouTube](#)

In this speech, Ms. Hannah-Jones describes the genesis of her “obsession” with 1619 as a date and summarizes the case for emphasizing, even centering the story of slavery in US history. She begins with the question “What if I told you that the year 1619 was as important to the American story as the year 1776?” and ends by saying that the 1619 Project is “above all, an attempt to set the record straight, to reframe our historical

narrative, and instead of marginalizing slavery and the contribution of Black Americans, we place them firmly in the center of American history.”

## Video #2

Nikole Hannah-Jones interview with Amna Nawaz PBS Newshour, 2021 (video: 6:54).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaegpMi-pJE>

This short interview focuses mostly on *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, a book that was published in 2021. Note that the interview was conducted 2 years after the original publication of the 1619 Project in the NYT Magazine and after the project was criticized by political pundits and by prominent historians. Ms. Hannah-Jones outlines the reasons for including in the book additional essays that would expand the story, make a clearer connection to modern America, and respond to some of those criticisms.

## **Additional resources**

The 1619 Project details the legacy of slavery in America. PBS Newshour, 2019 (video: 14:45).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q14BTdS6BRc>

One of the compelling arguments made by Ms. Hannah-Jones in this interview with Hari Sreenivasan is that “you can’t pick and choose which parts of history we think are important and which ones aren’t; they all are important” and that a narrative that is “inclusive and honest, even if it’s painful, is the only way to understand our times now and the only way we can move forward.”

1619: The first Africans in Virginia and the Making of America, Part 1, 2019 (video: 14:13).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kApL2ELVOhs>

1619: The first Africans in Virginia and the Making of America, Part 2, 2019 (video: 13:02).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03TldzPrbpw>

These videos are **NOT** about the NYT 1619 Project, but they are about the importance of the date 1619. The first video uses the present-day Tucker family, who trace their ancestry back to two Africans who arrived in Virginia in 1619 aboard the slave ship *White Lion*, to emphasize the importance of telling “a complete story” which is critical in “helping a nation begin to heal and move forward.” The second video tells the story of Angela, who arrived in Virginia aboard the slave ship *Traveler*, to emphasize the importance of showcasing “all of the architects of the nation we call America.”

Pulitzer Center: The 1619 Project – Education Materials Collection.

The Pulitzer Center has provided a large and valuable collection of resources related to the 1619 Project, including:

- The full issue of the original NYT Magazine issue.  
[https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full\\_issue\\_of\\_the\\_1619\\_project.pdf](https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf)

- An assortment of curriculum materials for all education levels.  
<https://pulitzercenter.org/lesson-plan-grouping/1619-project-curriculum>

Scene on Radio (March 30, 2017). On Crazy We Built This Nation: Seeing White, Season 2, Episode 4 (audio podcast, 36:30). [S2 E4: On Crazy We Built a Nation – Scene on Radio](#)

The host of this podcast, John Biewen, uses pieces of conversations with Nell Irvin Painter, Ibram X. Kendi, and Chenjerai Kumanyika to outline an essential contradiction behind the founding idea of the country (“all men are created equal...”). This contradiction is embodied by Thomas Jefferson in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Within this history, a key idea is that racist ideas do **NOT** lead to racist policies. Instead racist policies lead to racist ideas as a way of explaining those racist policies.

- The **Seeing White Podcast** began in 2017 and includes 14 episodes.  
<http://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>
- **John Biewen** is the Audio Program Director, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University.
- **Nell Irvin Painter** is the Edwards Professor of History, Emerita, Princeton University; author of *The History of White People*
- **Ibram X. Kendi** is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, the Director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research, and author of *Stamped from the Beginning and How to be an Antiracist*.
- **Chenjerai Kumanyika** is an Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies, Rutgers University.

Adam Serwer (December 23, 2019). The fight over the 1619 Project is not about the facts. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/>

This article outlines critiques lodged by recognized historical scholars against the initial set of 1619 Project materials. The historians’ critiques were based on matters of both factual accuracy and the general trend of US history. It’s important to note that the 1619 Project materials were published in 2019 and subsequently expanded to book form in 2021, partly to respond to some of the criticisms of historians, which highlights the dynamic and ongoing nature of the 1619 Project.

Frederick Douglass vs. The 1619 Project. *Reason*, 2020 (video: 5:32).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajJlu3eoRlk>

This short video uses Frederick Douglass’ opinion that the US Constitution was a “glorious document” to argue that we don’t need to move the founding of the US back to 1619 to acknowledge the “horrific legacy of slavery and honor the major role played by African Americans in the nation’s history.”

*Reason* was founded in 1968 and is published by *Reason Foundation*, a nonprofit education and research organization. The *Reason* website describes it as a libertarian magazine existing “outside the left/right echo chamber” and providing its readers with “fresh, unbiased information and insights.” *Media Bias / Fact Check* describes *Reason* as “center-right” and assesses its factual content as “high.”

<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/reason/>

Naomi Schaeffer Riley (2020). The 1619 Project enters American classrooms. *Education Next*, 20(4). <https://www.educationnext.org/1619-project-enters-american-classrooms-adding-new-sizzle-slavery-significant-cost/>

This article describes use of 1619 Project materials in schools and some of the criticisms that have been leveled against the Project, including critiques from some well-known historians who have written books describing their critiques.

About *Education Next* – The publication’s website says that it “aims to provide news and research to bring evidence to bear on current education policy.” *Education Week* (published since 1981) describes *Education Next* in this way: “The magazine was founded in 2001 out of a school-choice-minded panel at Stanford University, the Hoover Institution’s Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. *Education Next* has been closely associated with such approaches to improving education as charter schools, private school vouchers, greater teacher accountability, and digital learning.”

<https://www.edweek.org/education-industry/education-next-offers-policy-views-with-an-edge/2015/03>