An interview with the author of *The Free State of Jones*

Historian Victoria Bynum on the inaccuracies of the *New York Times* 1619 Project

Eric London
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Historian Victoria Bynum, author of *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992), spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site's* Eric London on the historical falsifications involved in the *New York Times'* "1619 Project."

The 1619 Project, launched by the *Times* in August, presents American history in a purely racial lens and blames all "white people" for the enslavement of 4 million black people as chattel property.

Bynum is an expert on the attitude of Southern white yeomen farmers and impoverished people toward slavery. Her book *The Free State of Jones* studied efforts by anti-slavery and anti-confederate militia leader Newton Knight, who abandoned the Confederate army and led an armed insurrection against the Confederacy during the Civil War. It was adapted for the big screen in Gary Ross's 2016 film *Free State of Jones*.

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WSWS: Hello Victoria, it is a pleasure to speak to you. The *New York Times* writes that slavery is "America's national sin," implying that the whole of American society was responsible for the crime of slavery.

But Lincoln said in his second inaugural address in 1865 that the Civil War was being fought "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." What was the attitude of the subjects of your study toward slavery? Is it possible to separate those attitudes from the economic grievances that many white farmers and poor people harbored against the Confederate government of the slavocracy?

Victoria Bynum: Direct comments about the injustice of slavery are rare among plain Southern farmers who left few written records. Knowing this at the outset of my research, I was delighted to find clear and strong objections to slavery expressed by the Wesleyan Methodist families of Montgomery County, North Carolina, which I highlighted in my first book, *Unruly Women*. In 1852, members of the Lovejoy Methodist Church invited the Rev. Adam Crooks, a well-known abolitionist, to address their church. Crooks' presence incited violent protests from several slaveholders of the community, while those who invited him protected him from physical harm. Shortly before the Civil War, the same church members were arrested for distributing Hinton Rowan Helper's forbidden 1857 abolitionist tract, "The Impending Crisis of the South." Some of these families, all of whom supported the Union during the war, may personally have known Helper, who was raised in the same North Carolina "Quaker Belt" that the Wesleyan Methodist community inhabited.

In Jones County, Mississippi, anti-slavery views were not so evident, yet are still discernible. The county's leading Unionists came from five interrelated families of which the Collins family was most prominent. The Collinses were prosperous landowners who chose not to own slaves, participated in local politics, and who rallied local citizens to oppose secession. In 1863, three Collins brothers and several of their sons joined Newt Knight's band of pro-Union guerrillas. Jasper Collins, Newt's first sergeant, was interviewed shortly before his death in 1913. At age 85, Jasper expressed pride in his Civil War support for US forces, noting that the "Twenty Negro Law" had enabled wealthy slaveholders to escape the battlefield, as well as that he was unwilling to fight a cause dedicated to keeping blacks enslaved. To make such statements in Mississippi during the era of "Lost Cause" orthodoxy was remarkable to say the least. Furthermore, the Collins family's Unionism extended into East Texas, where a branch of the family migrated around 1852. There, three additional Collins brothers formed their own pro-Union guerrilla band headed by Warren J. Collins. In a 1949 family memoir, Warren's son, Texas Senator Vinson Collins, remarked that the Collinses "were all opposed to slavery and to concession [sic]."

Similarly, Newt Knight's likely mixed-race daughter, Anna Knight, remarked in her 1951 autobiography that her childhood home had been headed by a man (Newt) who did not believe in slavery. Certainly, the openly interracial family and neighborhood that Newt founded in 1870 suggests as much.

Given such evidence—and there are many more examples—I would answer "no" to your question of whether it is "possible to separate those attitudes from the economic grievances they harbored against the Confederate government." Research into the military, county and family records left by Unionist families in North Carolina, Mississippi and Texas reveals a class-based yeoman ideology grounded in republican principles of representative government, civic duty and economic independence. Though we cannot assume that individual Unionists were anti-slavery, their aggregate words and actions indicate that many—especially their leaders—at the very least connected slavery to their own economic plight in the Civil War era.

WSWS: In the 1619 Project, Matthew Desmond writes that the slave system "allowed [white workers] to roam freely and feel a sense of entitlement." Desmond then acknowledges that slavery led to the oppression of all whites. Can you reconcile this contradiction? What were the economic and social circumstances driving men like Newton Knight to resist the confederacy?

VB: It's difficult to reconcile Desmond's above statement with his words that follow, which echo the works of historians such as Keri Leigh Merritt and Charles C. Bolton: "Slavery pulled down all workers' wages. Both in the cities and countryside, employers had access to a large and flexible labor pool made up of enslaved and free people … day laborers during slavery's reign often lived under conditions of scarcity and

uncertainty, and jobs meant to be worked for a few months were worked for lifetimes. Labor power had little chance when the bosses could choose between buying people, renting them, contracting indentured servants, taking on apprentices or hiring children and prisoners."

In 1998, Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure co-edited *The Confessions of Edward Isham*, a terrific volume that features several essays (one authored by myself) that analyze the rare autobiography of an illiterate poor white man. Edward Isham dictated his life's story, one grounded in the class and labor relations of the Old South, to his lawyer on the eve of his execution for murder. Bolton's essay highlights the typical aspects of Isham's life as a male wage earner—his constant search for menial, low-paying jobs such as ditching, rail-splitting, land clearing and mining—which reflected the extent to which poor white laborers in the South functioned as a "supplemental labor force" to slavery. Significantly, the man that Isham murdered was an employer who refused to pay him his wages. More broadly, the essays in this volume reveal that the old stereotype repeated by Desmond, that poor white Southerners "roamed freely," in fact reflected their need to be mobile and flexible simply to make a living. Sporadic short-term work contributed to an unstable, violent world in which such men literally fought over menial jobs or headed West in an elusive search for prosperity. Poor white women labored under similar circumstances, but with far fewer paying jobs available. Time and again, they settled for common-law relationships that promised greater economic security, but which often resulted in their abandonment. As for apprenticeship, my work in *Unruly Women* and Karen Zipf's book, *Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina*, reveal how the children of free women of color and indigent white mothers were routinely apprenticed to propertied white men, where their labor was appropriated in a manner similar to slavery.

The forces that drove men like Newt Knight to reject the Confederacy involved three classes of Southern whites—slaveholders, non-slaveholders (the yeomanry), and the propertyless (poor whites). Pro-slavery leaders defused issues of inequality among whites by placing free blacks below poor whites and regularly touting the superiority of all whites over blacks on account of Southern slavery. To a large degree, the white yeoman class bought into this, priding itself on its superiority to both blacks and poor whites, particularly since white elites blamed the poverty of poor whites on their degradation and inferior heritage. At the same time, however, a sizable slice of the yeomanry developed a keen sense of class consciousness as slavery expanded and became ever more concentrated in the hands of wealthy elites. These were the conditions that led Hinton Rowan Helper, who emerged from the yeoman class of North Carolina, and his followers (as stated above) to condemn slavery and advocate its abolition.

Just as the followers of Helper recognized the secession movement as a scheme to protect and expand slavery, so too did the yeomanry of Piney Woods Mississippi, who armed themselves against the Confederacy under the leadership of Newton Knight and declared their county to be the "Free State of Jones." Throughout the South, as historians Margaret Storey and David Williams have shown for Alabama and Georgia, similar yeoman communities organized themselves into guerrilla bands that temporarily collaborated with poor whites, slaves and free people of color in common cause against the Confederacy. More broadly, Jarret Ruminski's study of Civil War Mississippi locates the stark limits of white Confederate loyalty in the greater devotion of common people to family, farm and community.

WSWS: Do you see parallels between the *New York Times*' references to genetics (the historic "DNA" of the United States) and the argument, advanced by the slavocracy, that "one drop" of black "blood" was enough to count a light-skinned person in the expanded the pool of slave labor. Can you expand on this?

VB: The frequent correlation of identity with ancestral DNA continues to mask the historical economic forces and shifting constructions of class,

race and gender that have far more relevance to one's identity than one's DNA can ever reveal. Historically, race-based slavery required legal definitions of whiteness and blackness that upheld the fiction that British/US slavery was reserved for Africans for whom the institution "civilized." From the earliest days of colonization, however, both forced and consensual sexual relations created slaveholding and non-slaveholding households that were neither "black" nor "white," but rather were mixed-race. The frequent rape of enslaved women by slaveholders produced multitudes of such children, but so also were many mixed-race children born to whites and free blacks. Slave law dictated that the child of an enslaved woman was also a slave—and therefore "black"—regardless of who fathered the child. Conversely, deciding the race of children born to free women who crossed the color line was not so easy, and became even more difficult after slavery was abolished. In the segregated South, where one's ability to work, live, love, travel and enjoy the full benefits of American citizenship depended on one's perceived race, such questions might end up in court, as was the case in 1946 for Newt Knight's mixed-race great-grandson, Davis Knight, after he married a white woman. While custom dictated that Davis Knight was "black" based on his great-grandmother Rachel's mixed-race status, state laws required more precise evidence. Under Mississippi law, unless one was proved to have at least one-fourth African ancestry, one was legally—though not socially—white. On this basis, Davis Knight went free.

The crux of the matter is that people of European, American Indian, and African ancestry have long been referred to as "black," regardless of their physiognomy, and still are today. All that is required, regardless of one's appearance, is "one drop" of African "blood." As historian Daniel Sharfstein and others have noted, however, the one-drop rule of race historically has been inconsistently applied, and, as in the case of Davis Knight, rarely upheld by the law. Still, the custom of defining anyone suspected or known to have an African ancestor as a "person of color," served to justify slavery, segregation and the violent treatment inherent to both institutions. Importantly, creating a biracial society has also historically enabled those in power to destroy interracial class alliances among oppressed peoples. Whether it be Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, Reconstruction during the 1870s, labor struggles in the 1930s, or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, interracial alliances have been crushed time and again through the exploitation of racism.

Despite this history, and although denying people civil rights according to their race is no longer legal, socially, the one-drop rule is still very much alive. Many Americans, including liberals who politically reject racism, routinely define white people who have black ancestors as "passing" for white. The same Americans would find it absurd to accuse a black person who has white ancestors of "passing" for black, since the one drop rule is based on hypodescent—i.e., the belief that African "blood" overwhelms all others. Sadly, folks who employ the term "passing" seem unaware that they are repeating two centuries of essentialist pseudoscience developed by white supremacists to justify slavery and segregation.

WSWS: One of the arguments implied in the 1619 project is that anyone living in the mid-1800s who harbored racial prejudice was responsible for slavery, regardless of their political views or activity. What do you make of this argument? What was ultimately the source of racial backwardness in the period you studied?

VB: This is a specious argument that ignores the historical context in which North American racism emerged, as well as the complicated place of race relations within both class and gender relations. With Africa supplying the demand for ever more slaves for the mines and plantations of the Americas, New World chattel slavery became increasingly race-based. Elaborate racist theories enabled the builders of empire to argue as "good Christians" that slavery was part of a God-decreed "natural" order. Historian Ibram X. Kendi and others cite plenty of evidence that European racism preceded the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, but it's also clear

that New World slavery elevated racism by fueling Europe's commercial revolution and justifying the brutal labor demands of colonial plantation agriculture. As Eric Williams argued in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), slavery underwrote early capitalism.

Compared to Spain and France, slavery in British North America grew relatively slowly despite slaves' noted arrival in 1619. The labor needs of British colonizers were originally met by various means that either failed or proved inadequate: conquered Indians were enslaved on grounds of their "Godless" savagery; lower-class whites from European nations were indentured on grounds of their degradation and burdensome presence in home countries. Edmund Morgan argued that African slaves were initially too expensive an investment in the death trap of North America. That changed when unruly servants began to live long enough to claim freedom dues; replacing temporary unfree labor with chattel slavery helped to defuse class conflict.

By the 19th century, racist dogma was deeply entrenched and practiced with special urgency among elite Southerners whose wealth and leisure depended on slavery. Beliefs in white superiority resonated as well among non-slaveholding whites who defined their freedom from chattel slavery on the basis of being part of the "superior" race. Still, regardless of how successful slaveholders were in inculcating the common people with racism, the idea that anyone "that harbored racial prejudice was a priori historically responsible for slavery," appears to be a rhetorical device aimed at rendering racism timeless and immutable.

WSWS: What was the experience of people like Newton Knight in the Reconstruction Era? What did they think about the changes that took place in Southern society following the war? Did they have any relationship to the Populist movement, for example?

VB: Alongside Northern Carpetbagger Republicans, Scalawag Unionists celebrated their victory over Confederate forces. In Jones County, as elsewhere, Unionists such as Newton Knight and Jasper Collins eagerly sought and received political appointments. Newt was appointed relief commissioner by Republican governor William Sharkey in 1865 and, in 1872, Gov. Adelbert Ames appointed him deputy marshal of the Southern District of Mississippi. As a Reconstruction Republican, Newt fought election fraud and protected the rights of freedmen. In 1870, he optimistically applied to the US government for financial compensation for himself and the band of 54 men who had "held out true" to the Union cause during the Civil War.

Newt Knight's optimism was doomed to defeat. With crucial aid from the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups, defeated Confederates waged a counterrevolution against Reconstruction that succeeded in less than a decade. The Republican Party proved inadequate to the task of winning the postwar battle to reform the South in the name of racial justice and expanded democracy. In the Compromise of 1876, Republicans agreed to remove troops from the South in return for Democrats granting the disputed US presidential election to Rutherford B. Hayes. The Republican Party thus promoted its own narrow interests in the name of national prosperity and civility by accepting a "New South" led by former slaveholders. This move facilitated the rapid industrialization of the nation while simultaneously handing the fate of freed people and pro-Union whites to their oppressors. Republicans' abandonment of Reconstruction ushered in a dark, violent period in which people of color faced segregation, poverty and the constant threat of lynchings, while former Unionists were vilified and some even murdered. Working the land often meant sharecropping for blacks and tenant farming for whites rather than owning one's own plot. The poorest people scrambled for day labor jobs, just they had before the war.

The tentative Civil War alliances between whites and blacks were destroyed by shrill white supremacist campaigns backed up by segregationist laws. In time, wartime Unionism was virtually erased from Southern history and literature, replaced by Lost Cause dogma that insisted the "noble" Confederate cause had been spurred by devotion to Constitutional principles rather than slavery.

Despite the devastating defeat of Reconstruction, Newt Knight applied for federal compensation until 1900, when his claims were denied once and for all from a federal government no longer interested in Southern Unionists. After leaving politics and retreating to his interracial community, an embittered Newt told one interviewer that the non-slaveholding farmers of the South should have just risen up and killed the slaveholders rather than fighting for the Union side. His old ally, Jasper Collins, took a different path. During the 1870s, Jasper left his pro-Confederate Baptist church and joined a newly established Universalist Church. During the 1890s, he became active in the Populist Party, and in 1895, founded Jones County's only Populist newspaper. Several of Jasper's descendants took his rejection of the two-party system even further by running for local offices on a Socialist ticket around the time of his death in 1913. Likewise, in East Texas, Jasper's brother, pro-Union guerrilla Warren J. Collins, ran for office as a Socialist in 1910. For white Southerners who'd fought against the Confederacy during the Civil War in hopes of achieving a democratic revolution, the Republican Party's betrayal of Reconstruction was a bitter pill to swallow.

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