Historian Victoria Bynum replies to the *New York Times*

A historian's critique of the 1619 Project

Victoria Bynum
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Historian Victoria Bynum, author of Free State of Jones *and distinguished emerita professor of history at Texas State University, wrote the following reply to the* New York Times' *Project 1619. Bynum came under attack by the 1619 Project's proponents for her* October interview in the World Socialist Web Site.

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"White privilege," "wealthy elites," "mansplainers," "old white people," "ivory tower elites." These are just a few of the epithets hurled at me and the four historians I joined in protesting the flawed and inaccurate history presented in the *New York Times's* 1619 Project. A quick pass through Twitter reveals that some historians are "ashamed of," even "heartbroken by," our letter to the *Times* editor. One historian chastised us for criticizing the 1619 Project at a time when our "republic" is so dangerously divided! Really, historians? Is it no longer our right or responsibility to critique works of history, at least not when they're about a long, ugly episode of our nation's history? Does history not have to be accurate if the subjects were truly victims, as enslaved Americans surely were? But I digress.

On August 18, 2019, the *New York Times* released its highly-touted 1619 Project, featuring historical essays and original literary works aimed at "reframing" American history with a new founding date—1619, the year that 20 or more Africans were brought to Virginia—to replace 1776, the year the Declaration of Independence was signed. The project offers slavery and its legacies to contemporary American society as the nation's central defining features. *New York Times* journalist and project director Nikole Hannah-Jones provides the project's "intellectual framework," which posits slavery as the dominant feature of North American settlement, and the American Revolution as a duplicitous movement designed to protect slavery from its abolition by the British Empire. Hannah-Jones urges that we remember Presidents Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln first and foremost for their racism rather than their ideals of nationhood. Her assertions on these topics were forcefully critiqued by historians Gordon Wood, James McPherson, and James Oakes in interviews with the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS), and by Sean Wilentz in the New York Times Review of Books (NYTR). My own criticisms, in an interview with the WSWS, centered on the Project's historical treatment of class and race. I elaborate here on those remarks.

After reframing the meaning of the American Revolution, Hannah-Jones moves on to the Civil War and Reconstruction, barely touching on American abolitionism and ignoring the free soil movement, though both were seeds of the antislavery Republican Party. In discussing the nation's wrenching effort to reconstruct itself after the Civil War, she asserts that "blacks worked for the most part. .. alone" to free themselves and push for full rights of citizenship through passage of the Reconstruction Amendments. Rightly emphasizing the vigilante white violence that immediately followed the victories of a Republican-dominated Congress, she ignores important exceptions, including the Southern white "Scalawags," many of whom were nonslaveholders who fought against the Confederacy in the war and participated with blacks and Northern Republicans in passing the Reconstruction Amendments.

To be sure, Southern whites were among the most conservative members of the Republican Party. Nonetheless, important legislation was passed with their participation, enabling the United States by 1868 to begin building a more racially just, democratic

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society before white supremacist Democrats derailed Reconstruction. Furthermore, not only does Hannah-Jones ignore the Scalawags, but also Matthew Desmond, in his essay on capitalism and slavery, ignores nonslaveholding propertied farmers, the largest class of whites in the antebellum South, and from which many Southern Republicans emerged.

Likewise, the 1619 Project ignores late 19th and 20th century interracial efforts to combat the power of corporations by an emergent industrial working class. Instead of studying the methods by which industry destroyed such efforts by fomenting racism, the project continues to argue that blacks struggled "almost alone" in a world where an undifferentiated class of whites controlled the levers of power. Thus, some of our nation's greatest historical moments of interracial class solidarity, the labor struggles shared by working class people across the color line, are erased. For example, the Populist Movement is barely mentioned, the early 20th century Socialist Movement, not at all. And, although Jesse Jackson's rousing Rainbow Coalition speech at the Democratic Convention of 1984 is remembered favorably by one project author, the small farmers, poor people, and working mothers that Jackson included alongside African Americans, Arab Americans, Hispanic Americans, and gay and lesbian people are ignored.

Multiracial communities are also passed over by the 1619 Project. Yet, race-mixing among Africans, Europeans, and American Indians early on presented British colonists with a dilemma—how to maintain the image of race-based slavery while increasing their labor force by enslaving people of partially white ancestry. The essentialist one drop rule, based on a theory of hypodescent, eventually provided the solution. Simply put, African blood was decreed so powerful (or polluting) that a mere fraction of African ancestry was enough to render a person "black," no matter how white that person's appearance. Hannah-Jones herself recognizes the fallacy of "race" when she writes that "enslavement and subjugation became the natural station of people who had *any discernible drop of "black" blood* (italics mine) . The 1619 Project makes no attempt, however, to explore connections between race mixing and the class history of the United States. But make no mistake. The Southern slaveholding class knew that the one drop rule was a game of semantics. Slavery was first and foremost a closed labor system. Racism provided the rationale. Between 1855 and 1860, prominent proslavery author George Fitzhugh had no difficulty urging the United States to merge its systems of class and race by enslaving lower-class whites as well as people of color.

The 1619 Project claims to be a long overdue contribution to understanding slavery and racism over the course of 400 years of American history. It includes literary works of poetry, fiction, and memory that are revelatory and moving. They and many of the short research pieces evoke sadness, outrage, and anger. But they are not well served by the larger project, which sweeps over vast chunks of innovative and ground breaking historiography to tell a story of relentless white-on-black violence and exploitation that offers no hope of reconciliation for the nation. The project's great flaw is its lack of solid grounding in the history of European colonization, the American Revolution, the American Civil War, and racial and class relations throughout.

History is a profession that takes years of training. In his response to our letter to the *New York Times*, editor Jake Silverstein admits that, although the *Times* consulted with scholars, and although Nikole Hannah-Jones "has consistently used history to inform her journalism.". .. . the newspaper "did not assemble a formal panel [of historians] for this project." Perhaps this explains why a number of 1619 Project defenders, including Hannah-Jones, implicitly deny the need for training by claiming there is no such thing as objective history anyway. Too often, the assumption that journalists make good historians leaves us fighting over dueling narratives about the past based on political agendas of the present.

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