

## **Activists and Journalists as Co-Creators and Co-Revisionists of U.S. Histories: The 1619 *New York Times* Project**

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This article explores the 1619 Project of *The New York Times* (NYT) on the 400th anniversary of the first ship carrying kidnapped and enslaved people from Africa to what would become Virginia in the United States. NYT investigative journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones compiled the works of 27 academics, artists, poets, writers, and other activists to argue that that ship landing represented a more authentic birthday for the United States than the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence. The essays, photo collages, features, poems, and other media reflect what we consider to be an output of Black Radical Thought and Tradition, representative of an emerging genre of journalism that eschews what some are calling “false objectivity” in favor of justice, equity, and authenticity. In this blending of journalism and activism, we use the 1619 Project as a case study of how authors from each tradition can use both journalism and activist practices to articulate traditionally othered or marginalized stories, presenting a possible way forward for a nation forced into a racial reckoning with its past, present, and future.

*Keywords:* 1619 Project, race, activism, journalism, Black Radical Tradition

In 1619, the first ship carrying enslaved people who had been kidnapped from their African homes arrived on the shores of Virginia. The date had meant very little to most Americans and was rarely evoked even in U.S. history classes. For the anniversary in August 2019, the Black-identified Nikole Hannah-Jones of *The New York Times* (NYT) took on the project of retelling America’s true birthday with dozens of historical pieces, art and poetry, and essays and analyses from a wide breadth of African American luminaries, activists, academics, and journalists exploring many of our institutions from the criminal justice system to our highway and transportation infrastructure to the sugar market, popular music, and the health-care system, as Jake Silverstein, editor in chief of *NYT Magazine* (2019b) wrote:

The goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country. (para. 3)

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The project created a tsunami of critique over whether it could be considered “journalism,” and whether the venerable legacy news outlet had crossed some kind of activist line.

This project brings us to the question: How do we attend to “critical distance” in journalism? On the one hand, we see a writing tradition, that of journalism, that holds distance as a key pillar of its objectivity. This distance allows for a reduction of “bias,” replaced with clarity and equanimity as watchdogs. The latent question is: What are they guarding? And, the answer has always been: The formal institutions of the United States that have long operated as systems of oppression. On the other hand, we also explore a writing tradition born out of a desire for the very dismantlement of distance, of being marginalized, othered, and dehumanized, distanced from the promises of a liberal reality. In the Black Radical Tradition, which we employ as our theoretical construct, we mean a “collective consciousness” (Robinson, 2000), and community organizing in which work toward liberation carries proximity but has been strategically and systematically misrepresented and/or ignored by the writers of history, like journalists. Along comes Hannah-Jones, award-winning editor and writer for the *NYT*, who organized and co-authored the anniversary project and object of this study—the massive *NYT Magazine* and an associated full section in the print newspaper about the U.S. slavery history as well as a book. In this work, she intentionally places herself at the very center of this distance dichotomy, stating in various post-project interviews: “I do believe in journalism as activism. I picked this project to force a reckoning with what our country was founded upon, and how slavery is a foundational American institution” (Campos & Kim, 2022, para. 19).

Our major argument centers on the inclusion of an activist tradition not just in the words of the stories but in their very formation and authors, creating a vista that allows journalism itself to speak back to its own role in America’s racist history. Furthermore, when activists take up the values of journalism in their writing, they are able to not simply amplify their voices but also shed an investigative light on how their voices have been and should be received. Here, the 1619 Project serves as a prototype of the blending of journalism and activism in a way that does not diminish either but heightens justice. And though we acknowledge the specialness of the *NYT* as a unique, well-resourced company, we feel the lessons brought by the 1619 Project can be transferred to the contemporary metadiscourse happening right now about objectivity and the press.

### **Objective Versus Activist Journalism**

It is important to define journalism’s “objectivity” as a technique of critical distance as well as “activism.” Journalism studies have adopted normative understandings of mainstream news media as being the factual content of the day’s public affairs that is verified to be truthful, relevant, significant, and proportional, and most importantly, some say, to be free from faction and as independent as possible (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Journalists must stand a critical distance apart from communities to be objective, a notion that has been around for two centuries and that emerged in the early 1900s as a standard for reporters to follow (Maras, 2013; Mindich, 2000). Its core tenets demand detached fairness and balance that center “the facts” and not the reporters’ biases and opinions (Mindich, 2000), relayed in a “cool manner devoid of emotion” (Schudson, 2001, p. 150) as an “invisible frame” harboring only reality (Schiller, 1981, p. 1). Objectivity began in the early 1900s largely as a commercial tool to garner more subscribers with more “neutral” content that could appeal to wider audiences (Mindich, 2000).

Activism, on the other hand, is decidedly not journalism, it is said. Activism focuses on proactive work toward social and other kinds of reform, with a specific agenda as to what the change might look like. Some research takes this definition further, suggesting that “it is an open-ended process and stresses the role of investigation in relation to practices within the social situations to which activism addresses itself” (Svirsky, 2010, p. 182).

Of course, journalists have long flirted with activism, been accused of being activists (e.g., having a liberal agenda), and offered space activists to bring important perspectives to the public. Investigative journalism in particular has mirrored “activism” occasionally, particularly in the framing of the resulting analysis from deep interrogation (Entman, 2003; Olesen, 2008). However, journalists and traditional news media advocates make distinctions about how far those investigative pieces can go in calling explicitly for change: “Investigative journalists may also be concerned with social and political change, but they limit their journalistic role to uncovering the unpleasant facts and leave the business of change to politicians” (Olesen, 2008, p. 249). Nonetheless, in the United States, many movements have aligned journalists with reformist notions—think of the Muckrakers in the 1920s, New Journalists in the 1960s. When we refer to these movements, we generally use the term “advocacy journalism.” Furthermore, activists have often been distrusted by reporters, who believe them to have an agenda and as too emotional and biased to be considered “good” sources (Blanding, 2018; Tcholakian, 2018).

In the 2020s, journalism began a reform movement as the industry’s sharp declines demanded new approaches and corresponded to public awakenings around disparities. We started hearing the term “false objectivity” more in the trade press, as in this statement by a *Washington Post* columnist: “For too long, the tyranny of false objectivity has been employed to erase and discredit the work of journalists from marginalized communities and reinforce narratives that make White power structures more comfortable” (Attiah, 2021, para. 7). This is the idea that journalists misuse objectivity, which should be about striving for neutrality and avoiding partisanship, in ways that reify problematic institutions or equivalencies. With the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 and the subsequent unleashing of racism along with a swelling, global protest movement against the killing of Black people by the police, a growing public outcry turned attention to the news media’s complicity in perpetuating intolerance and a toxic climate. This focus also followed on the heels of the #MeToo movement, which forced companies (including many news outlets) to investigate their sexual harassment cultures, and these last five years have witnessed old white guy<sup>1</sup> after old white guy being kicked out of their powerful positions or even being carted off to jail because the public tide had finally edged closer to justice. These movements conflicted journalists, who felt torn between witnessing the need for reform and trying to stay true to a kind of objectivity practiced in the newsrooms (Møller Hartley & Askanius, 2021).

A new wave of research emerged these last few years, calling for a reckoning by the profession. Sue Robinson’s (2018) *Networked News, Racial Divides* suggested reporters partner with activists to help build trust in communities. This would, she suggested, open up networks and bring fresh and important perspectives beyond the typical go-to sources. In their book *Reckoning*, Candis Callison and Mary Lynn

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<sup>1</sup> We capitalize Black and other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) ethnicities but lowercase white, per the style suggested by the Associated Press (2020).

Young (2019) demonstrated how journalists used activists performatively, as a way to check the boxes of fairness, but that they should instead take some cues from them. These books followed a long tradition of scathing critique of journalism and journalists, who in their role as the first drafters of history had normalized racism, harmful stereotypes, and discrimination for hundreds of years (Forde & Bedingfield, 2021; Mindich, 2000; Shah & Thornton, 2004). As bell hooks (2014) stated,

Certainly in the space of popular media culture black people in the U.S. and black people globally often look at ourselves through images, through eyes that are unable to truly recognize us, so that we are not represented as ourselves but seen through the lens of the oppressor, or of the radicalized rebel who has broken ideologically from the oppressor group but still envisions the colonized through biases and stereotypes not yet understood or relinquished. (p. 155)

Newsrooms worked as oppressors, complicit in this structuring by engaging in stereotypes that either vilified Black people or framed them as tricksters, over-sexualized, or unidimensional such as the sports star (Lasorsa & Dai, 2007; Shah & Thornton, 2004; Sui & Paul, 2017; Zilber & Niven, 2000). Journalists were complicit in erasing people of color in all their complexity in forms of symbolic annihilation, as described first by George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976). The profession's norms such as objectivity have allowed journalists to allow for racist policies to be debated in binaries (e.g., instead of calling out the policy as fundamentally discriminatory; Entman, 1990; Nielsen, 2020). Furthermore, news outlets even by 2022 remained fairly whitewashed, with 87% of their journalists identifying as white even as the world around them grew increasingly more multicultural, perpetuating the problem of voice and keeping newsrooms physically distant from Black and other communities of color (Woods, Prince, & Chideya, 2021).

### **Activist as a Form of Narrative Co-Creation and Counter Production**

Activists and community leaders had long produced counternarratives in various venues, from zines and alternative ethnic press to books, blogs, conferences, and LISTSERV groups. Consider, for example, Catherine Squires' (2002) research typologizing counter public spheres for African American discursive spaces into an "enclave public," which lives underground, a "counterpublic," which engages in debate meant to challenge more mainstream discourses, and a "satellite public," which operates as its own sphere with only occasional overlap with more mainstream discourse. "These responses—enclave, counterpublic, and satellite—emerge not only in reaction to oppression from the state or dominant public spheres, but also in relation to the internal politics of that particular public sphere and its material and cultural resources," she wrote (Squires, 2002, p. 448). Furthermore, the alternative press has long challenged journalism's take on both historical events and present-day news. For example, Shah and Thornton (2004) contrasted how ethnic publications wrote about immigration and racial strife, noting the difference in understanding from the white press. But always ethnic media had been labeled "alternative"—something apart from mainstream publics, and especially distant from traditional journalism places.

However, by 2017 and the #MeToo movement and then the resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter in 2020, the external pressures on the newsrooms to change increased. Internal discords generated in newsrooms as journalists of color called for mainstream news publications to adopt a "moral voice" to call out racism and lies (Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021; Lowery, 2020). As an example, on June 23, 2020,

Wesley Lowery, a Black-identified, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and correspondent for *60 Minutes*, wrote a *New York Times* column titled "A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists," which suggested mainstream journalists' obsession with objectivity had become an albatross that defeated its purpose. BIPOC journalists advocated for themselves—essentially being activists in their own profession—for equity and equality and "pushing for a paradigm shift in how our outlets define their operations and ideals" (Lowery, 2020, para. 4). But when they spoke up and out about racism, they were told they were being too biased. Meanwhile, he argued, white journalists' covering of these white-focused institutions of oppression was "accepted as the objective neutral" (Lowery, 2020, para. 7).

Neutral objectivity trips over itself to find ways to avoid telling the truth. Neutral objectivity insists we use clunky euphemisms like "officer-involved shooting." Moral clarity, and a faithful adherence to grammar and syntax, would demand we use words that most precisely mean the thing we're trying to communicate: "the police shot someone." (Lowery, 2020, para. 17)

A moral voice (see also Carlson et al., 2021) would eschew political statements but push for justice and reform of our institutions. We will come back to this idea in the conclusion.

But the pushback of this assault on objectivity urged only a very specific kind of moral voice. In response to Lowery's (2020) column, the next day, Tom Rosenstiel (2020) posted a series of 22 tweets suggesting a "clarification," lest anyone think journalists had turned into activists:

Passionate independent inquiry does not mean mindlessly giving both sides equal treatment. . . . Far from denying personal background, this kind of inquiry recognizes that people's background always enriches their journalism, be it WASP or Buddhist, white, Black, Jew, Latina or Latino, male or female. This is the way to recognize bias and avoid unconscious slant. (Rosenstiel, 2020, June 24)

But here Rosenstiel (2020) missed the larger point being made by Lowery and other Black journalists: It was not just about any "unconscious slant" because of one's identity. A slant of bias is not quite the same as calling out foundationally racist paradigms. What this movement was calling for was much more radical in terms of fundamental reform.

Nonetheless, it was a perspective that more and more journalists had begun experimenting with. Of course, we noted with dismay what others might consider to be "activist" content such as the cable news punditry, which proliferates and spreads misinformation in the name of news. What we are talking about here remains steeped in facts but more applied and relevant as a "unique model of journalism" that Ginosar and Reich (2020) call "obsessive-activist journalism" (p. 660):

Motivated by a strong sense of justice and a passion to make a significant change, these journalists promote their social or political agenda in both spheres: the professional and the public. In the professional, they do it through an obsessive and continuing reporting on the issue they care for, while in the public sphere, they are personally involved in

activities such as lobbying and consulting politicians and bureaucrats, or personal assistance to individuals and groups in need. (Ginosar & Reich, 2020, p. 660)

Instead of an ideal of objectivity as its aim, obsessive-activist journalism represented an ideal built around justice and equity. This particular conceptualization of objectivity could also be found in journalism scholarship, such as Ward's (2015) "pragmatic objectivity" and Maras' (2013) "active" objectivity, which differ from the passive he-she-they said or pro-con structuring (Robinson & Culver, 2019). Ward (2015) proposed a list to guide journalists in their judgment of truth, including standards of attitude, empirical validity, clarity, logic and coherence, diverse and trusted sources, self-consciousness, and open, public scrutiny. Then the *NYT* 1619 Project dropped, and suddenly something altogether different emerged, something collaborative, reform-explicit, and proactive in its kinship to the Black Radical Tradition. For in this new genre of journalism that Hannah-Jones (2021) intentionally offered in her 1619 Project (Feldman & Hannah-Jones, 2021; Hannah-Jones, 2021), we argue that this kind of co-production intends to lift the "Veil" for white audiences—to use a reference from Du Bois (1897). The Veil refers to the double consciousness felt by all African Americans

born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1897, p. 2)

In this article, we posit that this project is an exercise in this exposure, and furthermore, that this work is directed explicitly at the educated, white, progressive audiences that make up the *NYT*. In this article, we note a move beyond objectivity. Here we declare that what Hannah-Jones and her team achieved represented: A new kind of co-created journalism whose facts and accountings may follow Ward's (2015) pragmatic standards for evaluating truths but also offer up multi-perspectival content centered within justice, equity, and authenticity. In this blending of journalism and activism, we find cause for both critique and celebration as a possible way forward for a nation forced into a racial reckoning with its past, present, and future.

### **The 1619 Project: A Case Study**

The brainchild of Nikole Hannah-Jones, the 1619 Project by the *NYT* analyzed the impact and implications of the landing of the *White Lion* ship, a Dutch vessel carrying 20 to 30 Africans who had been kidnapped from their home in (modern-day) Angola and would begin the formal slave trade in the British colony of America. The ship arrived in the Colony of Virginia and so began hundreds of years of a revenue stream for what would become the United States of America based on the kidnapping and selling of humans. Hannah-Jones told the *Daily Show's* Trevor Noah (2020) that she was interested in pointing out the real history:

History has been written, but it's been written to tell us a certain story. The 1619 Project is trying to reframe that story. . . . The 1619 Project is really saying that slavery was so foundational to America and its institutions that we are still suffering from that legacy now. And it's exploring the many ways that we . . . that we still are. (Noah, 2020, 0:22)

She called this revelation at the 1619 anniversary the "lie at our Founding," an important awakening and reckoning for the country. For the *NYT* reporter, Hannah-Jones felt the 1619 story represented an opportunity to make Americans understand not only the central role that African Americans have played in U.S. democracy but also how these democratic institutions originated in the white supremacy that reigned from the time of enslaved peoples and continues to perpetuate oppression even today through problematic structures, policies, and status quos. The resulting 100 pages in the *NYT Magazine*, which ran on August 14, 2019, offered 27 essays, photo collages, poems, fiction, feature stories, and other creative production by 18 journalists, activists, community leaders, academics, and others. A number of accompanying materials followed, including multiple episodes on the podcast *The Daily* called simply "1619" and the larger "1619 Project Curriculum" in conjunction with the Pulitzer Center.

Hannah-Jones (2019) led the issue with her provocative essay titled, "America Wasn't a Democracy Until Black Americans Made It One." The central messages of the project included that (1) America's actual founding should be thought about not as being the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence, but as that fateful date on which these first enslaved people came upon U.S. shores, and (2) a major impetus for the American Revolutionary War was to keep the slave trade alive and well in the colonies as it was being outlawed in other countries, including Britain.<sup>2</sup>

The 1619 Project comprised not only well-known journalists but also many celebrated authors, artists, poets, historians, big thinkers/academics, and community leaders from mostly Black communities. Twenty-seven of these luminaries shared their thinking, from the children's author and poet Jacqueline Woodson to American playwright and Columbia professor Lynn Nottage to Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer, social justice advocate, and director of the Equal Justice Initiative, who made the argument that the criminal justice system in the United States owes its cruelty to the nation's slavery traditions. The *NYT* columnist Jamelle Bouie (2019) wrote an essay titled "What the Reactionary Politics of 2019 Owe to the Politics of Slavery." Harvard professor Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2019) wrote "The Barbaric History of Sugar in America." Professional dancer and photographer Djeneba Aduayom (2019) collaged a photo essay called "Their Ancestors Were Enslaved by Law. Now They're Lawyers." These distinguished ranks included multiple

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<sup>2</sup> These assertions attracted a number of criticisms and attacks from others, including prominent historians of slavery as well as conservatives. In fact, former president Donald Trump and the "1776 Commission" he founded in September 2020 issued their own counter report called "The 1776 Report" shortly before he left office in January 2021. He also announced that any school using the 1619 curriculum would have its funding cut off. President Joe Biden scrubbed the report from the government's website a few days after taking office. Eventually the *NYT* and Hannah-Jones herself walked back some of the more provocative claims, saying, for example, her intent was more metaphorical in suggesting that America's founding of 1776 was an inaccurate date and should not be taught to school children (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021).

Pulitzer Prize winners, MacArthur “geniuses,” and Ivy League pedigrees. In other words, Hannah-Jones collected a very elite crowd to make the arguments in the project.

### **Black Radical Tradition via Critical Discourse Analysis**

For this case study, we examined the 1619 Project by documenting and cataloging the materiality of the works for patterns and themes and approaching all of it with a critical discourse analysis (CDA) in the tradition of van Dijk (2008), informed by the analytical framework of the Black Radical Tradition. In using CDA, his approach helped us consider the power and other kinds of structures at work in the texts and to answer our research inquiries around how this journalistic content represented a shift in tone and appearance from the *NYT*'s traditional, legacy journalism. We paid close attention to who was writing what and in what format as we analyzed what kinds of artifacts (metaphorical as well as visual) were being offered to help with meaning construction and the kinds of perspectives and arguments that were being made.

These questions of power and meaning construction were specifically interrogated using the theoretical framework of the Black Radical Tradition. The Black Radical Tradition is borne of academic and nonacademic spheres of knowledge, both articulating and dismantling global anti-Blackness, centering Black resilience and humanity. For Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), key to this definition for Black Radical Tradition was “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality” (Robinson, 2000, p. 171). Thus, the tradition relies not only on historical interventions to inform community identity and liberation but also on the fact that the refinement of Black collectivity continually demands an understanding of various histories and forms of being, thus situating the Black psyche as always present, past, and future. This then is a central lens to our reading of the 1619 Project and a thread we followed as we examined how journalists and activists created knowledge.

Importantly, as George Lipsitz (2017) noted in the collected volume *Futures of Black Radicalism* (Johnson & Lubin, 2017), “The ‘Black’ in the Black Radical Tradition is a politics rather than a pigment, a culture rather than a color. Yet this Blackness does not presume a unified homogenous community with only one set of interests, needs, and desires” (p. 271). This rich tension and emphasis on the collective, the psyche, and liberation has been the subject of canonical texts, such as Fanon’s (1967) psychoanalytic *Black Skin White Masks*, Hartman’s (2008) *Venus in Two Acts*, Gilroy’s (1995) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, or Hill Collins’ (1990) *Black Feminist Thought*. These books center on critical interventions that hold race (and in later texts, gender) as integral for not only history and economics but also understanding how the modern world as a whole operates.

Zophia Edwards (2020) explained, “Theorists in the Black Radical Tradition were the first to develop and advance a powerful research agenda that integrated race-class analysis of capitalist development” (p. 155). In Robinson’s (1997, 2007) works, he noted that the Black Radical Thought has taken place not simply in books or historical archives but also in political parties, films, and commercial products where “venues served as contradictory sites where new social imaginaries could be envisioned and enacted” (Lipsitz, 2017, p. 272), including, importantly, in expressive culture and artistic production. That the text of the Black



Radical Thought is soluble unto multiple mediums makes it a poignant tool of analysis for our work with the 1619 Project.

What separates Black studies and the Radical Tradition from other social and humanities traditions is not merely a focus on race, but a focus on centering Black voices as active co-creators of knowledge. For instance, Gwaltney's (1993) *Drylongso*, which could merely be read as an ethnographic endeavor, serves as a classic Black scholarly text exactly for his insistence on not simply observing his participants but knowing them deeply, allowing for their perspectives and histories; Gwaltney's own relationship to each participant allowed for thick, rich chapters that centered Black voice over sociological trends and thoughts. Indeed, *Drylongso* as an example pointed to the theme of speaking back to extant, mainstream sociological approaches to knowledge production, which, if it did not exclude Black life and agency, regulated it as something to be solved or fixed (but never pointing that finger to modernity and coloniality itself). It is a tradition not simply of reclamation but of a new future; as Christina Sharpe (2016) writes in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, if racial capitalism and the impacts of Atlantic modernity are the very air we breathe, how do we change the weather (p. 21)? This is the framework that lies at the heart of the 1619 Project.

We then used a CDA, specifically van Dijk's (2008) guide on how to interrogate power within texts to interrogate the meaning construction happening and the dominating discourse it was demanding. Therefore, in our analysis, our understanding of critiques of power came from a central understanding of who is present or absent in the collective making of U.S. history, and how Black interventions explicate the impact. In the next section, we begin answering our research questions, thinking about notions of distance in all of its tangible and symbolic manifestations related to the journalists and the activists in the context of the Black Radical tradition. First, we consider how the 1619 project offered a new kind of model for journalism, perhaps similar to the "obsessive-activist" framing mentioned earlier, in which journalists perform as activists. But we then quickly move to this emergent notion of Hannah-Jones and her aggregation of a bunch of highly elite, high-profile activists and community leaders, to revise our history, as journalists.

### **Journalists Perform as Activists**

#### ***When Activists Provide Form, and Journalists Provide Substance: Journalists Writing on 1619***

Black studies necessitate a critical eye toward history and its various objects, notably that the archive intentionally excludes Black agency and life, distancing Black bodies to the necrozone of invisibility or, in history, of no memory. Therefore, a resistive reading of texts is established as a key structure, along with attending to objects and creative projects as supplementary sites of history. We see this very practice followed through the 1619 Project, with the inclusion of visual art objects, poetry, and Hannah-Jones' inclusion of her own history as various access points to history. Through the form, journalists and writers in the 1619 Project attended to various "absences" of memory that turned out to be not missing but hidden. Thus, the form and tradition of Black Radical Tradition provided journalists with a structure toward getting close to, and close readings of, a rich, Black history that usurped traditions of loyalty to authority and elite sourcing.

Journalists' training as investigators and strategic communicators bolstered the textual and object analysis seen at the heart of many Black studies endeavors. The Smithsonian Institution's role in this is also notable, as the objects of studies were reproduced in high quality throughout the magazine. The objects themselves are a continued site of strategic activist positioning and reading. The publication of various archival reproductions in each story (rather than the *NYT* standard award-winning photojournalism) offered a site of inclusion for Black voices, which had been absent from the very history the authors attend to.

Additionally, we note the inclusion of artifacts of those who caused harm, such as in Jamelle Bouie's (2019) essay on power, where otherwise their violence would be a deafening silence rendering other voices unintelligible. The journalists' key integration of objects with their texts allows proximity to memories that may not have been viable via writing. Hannah-Jones interwove historical artifacts with her own narrative, including old photos of white atrocities, Black protests, the 1963 March on Washington, and others. This weaving of voice and objects, both of which have been traditionally countering prevailing national memory or thoughts, is seen throughout the project. In the text edition, many of the essays were interspersed with photos of African American artifacts now on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. This Radical Black Thought emerges in the tendency to read objects and voices together in sync, and not necessarily from the simple inclusion of these assets. What we have here is the nexus of history reading the personal and the personal reading of history, with liberation at the forefront.

The most academic manifestation of the Black Radical Tradition we find in the project arises in the critique of capitalism that is centered on race and class. By following Hannah-Jones' writing with Desmond's (2019) essay on capitalism, the reader is presented with the project's two-sphere influences of the expressive manifestation of Black life and the critique of the system that demanded Black deaths in the United States, starting in 1619. The journalists throughout the project used these two spheres to form a Venn diagram for their essays, and following Stevenson's (2019) essay, missives like Bouie's carry extra weight as they overlap realms.

In addition to the inclusion of artifacts and critiques that speak back to systems of oppression in the United States is the 1619 Project's intentionality in centering collectivity. Importantly, there are no "Black Messiahs" in the projects. Journalists abandon the trope of the profile to focus on systems, with emblem leads serving as segues to concepts of health care and minstrelsy. The pieces do not focus on how a singular Black life changed or was changed by the past 400 years but rather attempt to create a kaleidoscope of experiences caused by the ramifications of slavery in Black life over the centuries. This is impactful in that the 1619 Project demonstrates a balancing act of deconstructing the racially simplistic notion of a "monolithic" Black experience while always casting light on the near-omnipresence of slavery in all parts of American life.

The essay that perhaps best exemplifies a journalist's use of activist thought is Wesley Morris' (2019) piece on American music. In it, his emphasis on the relationships between oppression and expression in music is emblematic of the 1619 Project as a whole. What becomes an object of tension in using the form of Black Radical Thought in journalistic writing is journalists' role as custodians of history. If journalists point to an intentionally obstructive archive, the finger is in part, pointed at the mirror. What the 1619 Project

points to is not just various industries' (sugar, health, transportation, prison, etc.) role in maiming Black life, but journalism's complicit role in what Jasbir Paur refers to as the "slow death" of the Black body (Paur, 2017). Thus, we can extrapolate from Paur, the distance that journalists prided themselves on is merely the distance of a sniper shooting the maim and not that of a neutral observer. It is this tension of the structure of Black studies' resistive reading, as the focus on journalists' writing and investigations, that pushes toward a backlash of the role of journalism. If journalists use other structures to reach their goal of writing substantive, justice-oriented pieces, the question becomes: Is that journalism? As a text, the 1619 Project pushes back with a resounding yes.

### **Activists Perform as Journalists**

#### ***When Journalists Provide Form and Activists Provide Substance: Activists Reporting on Racial Injustice***

The 1619 Project's inclusion in the flagship news outlet of the United States is not just set apart with its display of Black radical methods but also with Black activists as creators of features and authorial journalists. Here, then, is a distinction between profiling Black activists and their work, "amplifying" as is a common contemporary retort, as a way to cover social justice (as one might cover up a mistake). We have the opposite here: Black authors uncovering the various histories of the United States, their own expertise not mediated through another professional. On pages 10 to 11 of the 1619 project in the *NYT Magazine*, the headshots of various contributors are featured, their bodies wrapped in the shadows of blinds or the outlines of a window. Here, these black-and-white photos display the contributors as if opening the blinds and letting in the light on a dark and unseen past; they have opened the blinds and stare back, in a variety of directions—toward us, unseen audiences, and also toward each other—as active agents. While the 1619 Project refers to the various long-form writings as essays, it is not a literary magazine. By using the form of feature writing and that of the political magazine, its authors use the rhetorical devices and expectations of journalistic writing to convey their stories. It is not enough to simply say the authors provided stories and the *NYT* provided reach and platform. It is the use of journalistic conventions, the very style of writing, that allows for these authors to further their stories and take control of their histories in the most legacy-oriented news outlet that existed in the United States in 2019.

One work not written by a journalist is Tiya Miles' (2019) "Chained Migration: How Slavery Made Its Way West." Trained as a historian, Miles used years of research on Native Americans and Black Americans to fill this short form with her knowledge. Inlaid in Hannah-Jones's essay, Miles' (2019) 600-word piece features a concise 20-word lead and a compelling quote in place of a conclusion. Here, where a journalist would traditionally interview or cite Miles' own work, Miles instead is able to use her own experience to concisely contextualize the American West in an approachable manner. The constraints of 600 words and a form that eschews introductions and conclusions for leads and short grafs allow authors like Miles to shift their methods to take up a mantle of accessibility and authority, which was always the realm of journalism. Without mediation by a third party like a journalist, the piece can focus wholly on Miles' topic at hand rather than profiling Miles, justifying her expertise or misrepresenting the work. Conversely, as opposed to academic articles, conferences, and other circles where a certain amount of pomp and knowledge is assumed and ascribed, the piece focuses entirely on the thesis of Miles' argument and not on its place in the extant

scholarly literature. Journalism's form places an emphasis on urgency and concision, which Miles uses deftly. Activists who use journalistic writing in this way emphasize readability and key contextual new values that frame each point as timely. For Miles, this style allows for her to move the project beyond the Southern plantation or East Coast, where much of the project centers, but throughout the United States.

The work transfers as well to the artistic endeavors within the magazine, such as the seven photo illustrations by Jon Key (2019). The artist created digital collages transferred via acetone onto paper. Created from assets from various archives, such as the National Archive, Getty Images, and other institutions, these manipulations rearrange and mirror the images before us and seep the pages with black ink—both in Key's original creations and literally in the magazine. A stark contrast to the photojournalism or portraiture typical to the *NYT*, Key's illustrations are allusions to the mediated transference of memories of Blackness in the United States. Consider, for example, the flower in front of a distorted background that accompanies Tyehimba Jess's (2019) poem on the attack of Negro Fort as it is juxtaposed richly with his other pieces, such as his illustration of Cripus Attucks for Yusef Komunyakaa's (2019) piece. Some of these more difficult-to-decipher pieces point to the tension of memory and decipherability that stalks the Black American experience. The images' unique attention to the archive is an iteration of investigative journalism that points to that which is readily available, that which seeks to remain hidden, and the storytellers' role in bringing both to the forefront.

If the Black Radical Tradition is useful in noting that the archive is lacking, then journalistic writing (not the institutions) is useful for talking back and uncovering U.S. history. While this project carries cachet because of the cultural capital of the elite journalism institute that curated this project, it is the very use of journalism itself to attend to gaps in the archive that makes the project compelling.

### Conclusions

We are encouraged by the 1619 Project and the opening of doors it signaled as a move of the most traditional, legacy-oriented news outlet in the whole of the United States toward a "moral voice," a movement beyond objectivity as a dominating standard. Here we can start to see the kind of "moral clarity" that Wesley Lowery (2020) had called for and which both journalists and scholars are morphing into "a moral voice" (Carlson et al., 2021, p. 16). In essence, the phrase comprises an essential ethic centered on humanity and incorporating the identities of those writing the first drafts of histories. It asks journalists to stop practicing the traditional passive objectivity that has demanded a false equivalency around phenomena such as explicitly racist remarks. It asks for revelations, backed by evidence, that peel off the layers obfuscated by entrenched structures that were founded during a time of slavery and whose discriminatory policies remain fixed. And most of all, it asks for inclusion (of stories framed in non-white relevancies, reporters of color, sources of color, marginalized perspectives)—a closing of the objective distance between journalism and journalists and the "others" that they have written about for generations.

As we noted, though, the very idea of moving away from objectivity as an ideal ignites the resounding cries eschewing subjectivities—as if such binaries are the only essential choices (see, e.g., the long Twitter thread we referenced regarding the long-time media watcher and journalist Tom Rosenstiel [2020], "clarifying" what Lowery really meant). Therefore, it was not surprising that Hannah-Jones and the

*NYT* saw the kind of recoiling that occurred after the publication of the 1619 Project, in which they challenged the supposed objective fact of the United States' origins and the various patriotic nostalgia for its greatness. We saw this blatantly in the subsequent 1776 report that former president Donald Trump commissioned just before leaving office in January 2021, which laid out a revisionist history that glossed over the country's history with slavery and its contemporary systems of oppression (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021). It read in part,

Historical revisionism that tramples honest scholarship and historical truth, shames Americans by highlighting only the sins of their ancestors, and teaches claims of systemic racism that can only be eliminated by more discrimination, is an ideology intended to manipulate opinions more than educate minds. (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021, p. 18)

It goes on to reassert the brilliance of the country as a shining example for the rest of the world in its successful egalitarian mission. Startling for its nationalist overtones and its government-sanctioned misinformation campaign (Crowley & Schuessler, 2021), the report nonetheless helps to highlight the veritable importance of the 1619 Project. A movement is afoot as this piece is being written in mid-2022, and the Black Radical Tradition—or at least some of its threads—is moving closer to the mainstream.

Thus, we can say this serves as a call to the pen for scholars of journalism, to stop othering such projects, regulating them to the realms of "alternative" or "activist." What we saw in these pages may have lain within the confines of a legacy, prestigious newspaper, but these expansions of form, perspectives, and paradigms offer a more just understanding of our history. Indeed, *NYT's* readership, though trending young (two-thirds are younger than 50), represents higher-income, well-educated, often liberal-identifying people (Djordjevic, 2021). Other news outlets can adopt the strategies of co-creation, content experimentation, and alternative contextualization. It is in the aggregate of such collections, bolstered by evidence from visual artifacts such as those Smithsonian historical relics that laced the work of Matthew Desmond (2019). In some ways, we argue, this is journalism at its most raw, its most honest. The 1619 Project peeled off the layers of color blindness to reveal the racist underbellies of our present-day institutions such as our transportation systems or criminal justice structures.

What would it look like for community news outlets to partner with community activists in solidarity and seek reparations for their city's or town's historical wrongs? Our thought is that even daily stories might contain background sentences about how contemporary structures have histories steeped in often-intentional discriminatory policies, for example. Although we dislike the very term "objectivity" as a norm for journalism, the kinds of changes we are thinking about are no more subjective than the mainstream journalistic watchdogging of problematic institutions or the unquestioning commitment to something like democracy or the American Dream. Whether we think about such journalism as "obsessive-activist" or as "co-creation" matters not; all that matters would be a commitment to justice, equity, and revelation.

On the one hand, Hannah-Jones was able to organize a collection of highly esteemed contemporary thinkers and creators; in part, she had to. The pages teemed with elite actors for justice, people who had already made a name for themselves in the upper echelons of culture. Perhaps this is cause for criticism. However, we note that for this endeavor specifically, Hannah-Jones needed to cull from legacy Black cultural

and academic circles—people who had letters after their names and books galore. This collection of creators served at once as both a vanguard of the United States' distinguished experts in a subject many Americans struggle to learn about—but in addition, this collective is a celebration of Black excellence, an intentional snapshot of brilliance 400 years after Black lives were stolen and brought to the shores of the United States.

But on the other hand, we acknowledge that a more radical project would have undertaken this same goal by including Black authors, thinkers, and creators from a spectrum of educational and cultural backgrounds. If a critique of class is central to understanding how racism operates in the United States, producing a project compiled of solely elite authors creates a dissonance between written intention and material reality and the representation of both. Furthermore, we were dismayed at the backpedaling the *NYT* felt they had to do in the wake of their assertions that the country's founding is more accurately pinned to 1619 than 1776 (Silverstein, 2019a). It is the assertion of this article that journalists do away with the distinctions of objectivity versus subjectivity and remain committed to justice, equity, and authentic truths that speak to all people's experiences. Radical reinterpretations of our histories peel back layers of truths that have become obscured by whitewashed spaces of journalism and an unwillingness to step outside of a status quo that has oppressed entire populations of people. With this unique collaboration between journalists and activists, we achieve revelation of the real history of the United States via Black Radical Thought.

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