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# A Critical Discourse Analysis of the 1619 Project Controversy and Its Implications for Social Studies Educators

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## ABSTRACT

The protests of 2020 cast a national spotlight once again on police brutality and ongoing racial injustice in America. Within this context, many activists and even mainstream commentators have given more attention to a critical analysis of how American history has been taught, especially regarding race relations. The publication of the *1619 Project* has touched off a wave of controversy regarding some of its historical claims and its larger interpretation of American history. In this paper, we analyze some of the discourses that have emerged from the post-publication controversy over the *1619 Project* and then discuss applications of our inquiry for the preservice teacher classroom. The paper will provide an overview of the background of the topic, important theoretical frameworks, methods, and sources.

## KEYWORDS

1619 Project; social studies methods; preservice teachers

## Introduction

The protests of 2020 cast a national spotlight once again on police brutality and ongoing racial injustice in America. Within this context, many activists and even mainstream commentators have given more attention to a critical analysis of how American history has been taught, especially regarding race relations. For example, on an August episode of *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver ended his show by saying, “History, when taught well, shows us how to improve the world, but History, when taught poorly, falsely claims that there is nothing to improve” (Iwenski et al., 2020). One of the sources he referenced was the *1619 Project*, a collection of historical essays, poems, and other literature published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2019 (Silverstein, 2019). This collection aims to indicate how slavery and white supremacy were rooted in America’s founding, reframing the birth of the nation, not in 1776, but in 1619, the year that saw the first enslaved Africans in Virginia. Since its publication, the *1619 Project* has touched off a wave of controversy regarding some of its historical claims and its larger interpretation of American

history. In this paper, we analyze some of the discourses that have emerged from the post-publication controversy over the *1619 Project*. Before we engage in our analysis and discussion, we will provide a brief overview of the background of the topic, important theoretical frameworks, methods, and sources.

## Background of the 1619 Project and Controversy

While the *1619 Project* is an ongoing project affiliated with the *New York Times*, most of the controversy surrounding it has stemmed from the publication of a special issue of *New York Times Magazine* in August 2019 which featured a collection of essays and literary works from Black writers. Each of these works attempts to connect the historical legacy of slavery and racism with present-day phenomena, issues, and institutions, ranging from traffic in Atlanta to inequalities in health care to mass incarceration. These works are introduced by an essay from the project’s founder, Nikole Hannah-Jones (2019), in which she provocatively re-envisioned America’s founding ideals through the prism of slavery, rather

than its founding in 1776. Among the most notable claims in Hannah-Jones's essay are that American independence from Britain was declared to protect slavery and that Abraham Lincoln opposed Black equality.

Though Hannah-Jones's essay won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, criticisms and controversy over the project, and the central claims of Hannah-Jones's essay in particular, arose quickly after its August 2019 publication. These criticisms have emerged from a variety of groups, including amongst professional historians, journalists, and politicians. Interestingly, negative responses to the project have spanned the political spectrum. Much of the criticism of the *1619 Project* in mainstream discourse has come from conservative politicians, including from the Trump administration itself. However, many academic historians on the liberal or even left-side of the political spectrum have also written scathing rebukes of the project. Sean Wilentz, for example, whose writings we analyzed extensively, is a noted liberal and historical critic of modern American conservatism. He has written prominently regarding the *1619 Project* and its supposed historical flaws. Additionally, Marxist historians Tom Mackaman and David North have critiqued the *1619 Project* for presenting a false, racialized narrative of American history that displaces the centrality of class conflict (Mackaman & North, 2020).

Particularly important to the growing controversy, and our own analysis of it, was a set of criticisms which came from a group of prestigious American historians. In the fall of 2019, the World Socialist Web Site presented a series of interviews with a set of prestigious American historians (World Socialist Web Site, n.d.)<sup>1</sup>. Though the invited historians did not necessarily share the same political stance or historical framework as those associated with the World Socialist Web Site, each were in agreement over the relative problems and shortcomings of the *1619 Project*. Of the group that gave these initial critical interviews, Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James

Oakes, and Gordon Wood, with the addition of Sean Wilentz, some of the most prominent scholars of the American Revolution and Civil War, signed a letter in December 2019 to the *New York Times Magazine* editor asking for corrections to be issued regarding the project (Silverstein, 2020). Much of their letter centered on Hannah-Jones's characterization of Lincoln as an opponent of Black equality and her claim that American independence was fought primarily to protect slavery. Importantly, they wrote that these claims were simply factual errors rather than differences of historical perspective or interpretation.

This initial salvo in the developing fight over the *1619 Project's* reputation ushered in an onslaught of criticisms and corresponding defenses in major print publications. Sean Wilentz in particular continued to publish editorials and public lectures critical of the central claims of the project in the months since the initial letter to the editor. Importantly, however, the popularity of the project, its subsequent controversy, and the development of elements of the project into school curricula touched off a wave of reactions, especially from political conservatives. For example, Senator Tom Cotton introduced the *Saving American History Act of 2021* in June aiming to prohibit federal dollars from school districts teaching the *1619 Project* (Saving American History Act of 2021, 2021). Additionally, in September 2020, President Trump formed the *1776 Commission* as a response to the project in order to support "patriotic education" (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021, p. 16).

While the above provides important, if limited, background of the *1619 Project* controversy, it is also crucial to contextualize the discourses surrounding it in the social landscape of 2020. The summer of 2020 saw the coronavirus pandemic disproportionately impact Black communities and illuminate economic and health disparities between White and Black Americans. Additionally, nationwide protests against police brutality in reaction to the killing of George Floyd highlighted America's continued struggle with racial equality and inability to reckon with its racist history. We believe this backdrop is critical for interpreting the discourses emergent

<sup>1</sup>All of the published interviews can be found under "Interviews with historians" heading of the World Socialist Web Site citation in the References.

within the controversy over the *1619 Project* and is essential for identifying the controversy as more than a simple debate over historical veracity.

## Purpose

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an analysis of the, by now, hundreds of editorials, articles, public comments, and even books that have emerged from this controversy, we will use this paper to examine many of the key discourses evident within some of the prominent critiques and defenses of the *1619 Project*, especially among historians and journalists, though we also pay some attention to the more mainstream discourses made about the project from politicians, especially those who are conservative. Importantly, our aim is to analyze the *discourses* surrounding the *1619 Project* controversy, as opposed to a direct investigation into the historical claims made by it, though these provide important context. Our analysis attempts to illustrate the ways in which many of these discourses can be interpreted as reinforcing dominant narratives of American history while marginalizing important dialogues about race in America, both past and present. We also conclude with a discussion of how an analysis of the *1619 Project* controversy can serve as a useful case study for teacher educators and prospective teachers in analyzing historical discourses and their impact on the present.

## Theoretical perspectives and methods

### Theory

It is important to identify a number of theoretical perspectives and concepts that informed our analysis of the discourses emergent within the critical responses to the *1619 Project*. Firstly, we took many components of Norman Fairclough's versions of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a starting point for our examination of the *1619 Project* controversy. According to Fairclough (2012), CDA "brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse

and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth)" (p. 11). Though Fairclough explains that CDA may include an analysis of a range of sources, written texts, conversations, and interviews are materials that may reflect an *order of discourse* of interest to critical discourse analysts. However, CDA does not simply describe surface-level themes of written texts, but critiques how discourse operates between and among texts, genres, social practices, and processes. They are also to be critically analyzed from the discourses produced and how those constitute and are constituted by contextual social elements, such as the institutions represented by authors (e.g. prestigious universities vs. journalistic outlets) and the present social backdrop (e.g. the heightened focus on race relations during and after publication of the texts). Fairclough (2005, 2012) has also written about the transdisciplinary potential of CDA, which is understood as a dialogue between different disciplines and theories for mutual enhancement.

Several scholars have merged elements of CDA with concepts from other frameworks in recent years in order to sharpen analyses of discourses on race through a focus on institutionalized racism within education. Briscoe and Khalifa (2015), for example, have drawn upon the focus on power relations productive in dominant discourses via Foucault, the emancipatory knowledge paradigms articulated via Habermas, and the critique of institutionalized racism within Critical Race Theory (CRT) to form a methodology they refer to as Critical Race Discourse Analysis (CRDA). The authors used CRDA to examine discourses from community members and school leaders concerning the controversial closure of a primarily Black high school. Commenting on the importance of their transdisciplinary methodology, Briscoe and Kalifa write,

Foucault's analytics of power and the concept of institutionalized racism provide a useful lens for discerning power acting through these complexes as well as resistance to these complexes. Examining the conflicts and contradictions within and between community and administrative discourses helps us to see the operation of power shaping the different discourses and thereby supporting or delegitimizing different knowledge paradigms. (p. 741–742)

As we will discuss below, drawing upon multiple theoretical concepts to analyze discourses concerning the *1619 Project* allows us to illustrate areas where power has operated to support and delegitimize different knowledge paradigms.

In addition to analyzing the discourses of people's lived experiences, critical discourse analysts also examine the discourses constituted within published texts. Recently, Busey and Gainer (2021) utilized CRDA to examine *This We Believe*, the central text used by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) to articulate their goals for the education of middle grade students. By drawing upon concepts from CRT, the authors illustrate how this influential text perpetuates dominant discourses of colorblindness, deficit narratives of race, and norms of whiteness for early adolescent students. The authors' analysis powerfully illustrates the dangers that can occur when the discourses shaped via influential educational texts are not critically evaluated, but also indicates ways that these discourses can be re-shaped to instill more direct and appropriate discourses on race in the educational context.

As the above examples indicate, CDA is an important methodological approach that allows for the interrogation of the, at times, implicit norms and power structures embedded within particular discourses. Merging the overarching methodology of CDA with theoretical concepts with a more specific focus across different disciplines also enhances the ways in which CDA can be employed. Taking up this transdisciplinary character, we worked from important concepts within Critical Race Theory (CRT) in particular, along with concepts from anti-racist scholarship and the politics of curriculum, to inform our analysis of the discourses surrounding the *1619 Project*. We will briefly lay out important characteristics of these ideas here as they are central to the discussion of our findings below.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the field of law in the 1970s as an outgrowth of critical legal studies, which sought to focus on how legal structures and discourses perpetuated oppressive systems in American society. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT came out of the discontent of many legal scholars of color that race was undertheorized within critical

legal scholarship. CRT scholars, then, placed race at the forefront of their analysis, arguing that race and racism are normal and engrained within American society, its institutions, and its discourses. Some of the key assertions of CRT important for our analysis are its critiques of liberalism, colorblindness, and the "master narrative," which we will briefly summarize here.

Regarding the critique of liberalism, Crenshaw (1988) explained that a key critique of critical legal studies was to indicate the limits of civil rights legislation in that it rested on the presumption of a "long, steady march toward social transformation" (p. 1334), which obscured the reinforcement and perpetuation of racism even after major civil rights victories, such as the *Mendez v. Westminster* and *Brown vs Board of Education* decisions. Liberalism asserts a picture of constant progress regarding racial issues and incremental, rather than systemic, change which foregrounds "objective" viewpoints of the American legal system as holding the basic framework for equality even when full equality has not been its historical application. CRT scholars critique this idea of slow, constant progress as inconsistent with the ways in which race is embedded into legal structures, calling for the unmasking of how racism is perpetuated even within narratives of racial progress, such as the evasions of integration and subsequent White flight that came after the *Brown* decision.

Relatedly, CRT scholars critique the notion of colorblindness that was emphasized within the post-civil rights discourse of the 1970s and 1980s. Central to the notion of colorblindness was the idea that the civil rights gains of the 1960s had essentially accomplished full citizenship and equality which, therefore, made race an increasingly irrelevant concept. CRT scholars, however, begin from the standpoint that race continues to be normal and endemic to American society and that explanations of colorblindness, though stemming from rhetoric of equality, actually serve to reinforce oppression by turning a blind eye to oppressive structures.

Assumptions of colorblindness also inform narratives of "objectivity" as critical analyses foregrounding race and racism are often dismissed as



purely ideological while accounts of liberal progress are positioned as the “objective” accounts.

A concept taken up within curriculum studies but informed by CRT perspectives is that of the “master narrative” or “master script”. Ladson-Billings (1998) describes master scripting as a process where, for example, African American stories are muted and erased when they challenge dominant authority and power, such as how Martin Luther King, Jr. and the overall civil rights struggle is often sanitized within schools. CRT, then, sees the curriculum not as a set of objective facts, but as a “culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (p. 18).

This last concept of the master script connects CRT to perspectives in the politics of curriculum that are also central in our analysis of the *1619 Project* controversy. Critical theories of curriculum have long analyzed how school curricula may serve to perpetuate oppressive systems and dominant narratives while appearing as objective accounts through their endorsement in institutions like schools. Michael Apple has long been a key scholar in this area. He, for example, argued that a central aspect of the “hidden curriculum” of many content areas was its emphasis of consensus, rather than conflict. Within social studies curriculum, for example, he argued that, in addition to the exclusion of certain events and figures, the curriculum implicitly assumes that conflict is to be resolved through consensus within existing social institutions and arrangements, writing, “What is interesting is the complete lack of treatment of or even reference to conflict as a social concern or as a category of thought in most available social studies curricula” (Apple, 2004, p. 89).

Finally, in addition to the important concepts we have traced thus far, we also turn our attention in our analysis to discourses around scholars of color which dovetail with some of the critical concepts from CRT and the politics of curriculum. In his history of racist ideas, Kendi (2016) explains that there is a history of Black scholars being critiqued for not being sufficiently restrained and objective when offering differing accounts of history that center on race. He argues that this has represented a double-bind for

scholars of color trying to gain legitimacy within academic institutions, while expanding or critiquing narratives that they feel do not sufficiently theorize racism within American history and society.

## Methods

Each of the above concepts were important for our analysis of the *1619 Project* controversy and inform our discussion of the findings below. The key texts of our analysis were split into three separate groups. The first included the letter to the editor signed by historians Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon Wood and the response from *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein. These two key texts may be understood as the origination of the *1619 Project* controversy as they laid the groundwork for subsequent critique, analysis, and debate of the project and framed the discourse concerning the project around themes such as historical accuracy, objectivity, and the role of identity in historical scholarship. The second group of texts included interviews and publications in non-mainstream, academic outlets. In particular, we analyzed interviews from the original set of historians critical of the project published on the World Socialist Web Site, as well as rejoinders concerning the *1619 Project* published in the *American Historical Review*. The last set of texts were comprised of several editorials written by historians and journalists published in mainstream press outlets such as *The Atlantic*, *Politico*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. These publications have reinforced many of the dominant narratives concerning the *1619 Project* that have taken hold in public discourse and, as we attempt to illustrate below, have created unfortunate narratives about the study of race in American history.

We began our analysis with a general reading of each text to familiarize ourselves with the broad scope of each publication and emerging ideas across both critiques and defenses of the *1619 Project*. After this initial read, we performed a close read of each text again and engaged in descriptive and in vivo coding, followed by

subsequent focused coding to begin to identify inductively emerging patterns and themes across the various texts (Saldaña, 2009). This led to the emergence of four themes which form the basis of our findings below: *historical objectivity*, *academic double-bind*, *master scripting*, and *consensus over conflict*. Our final stage of analysis involved in-depth analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2009) on the themes to interrogate how various concepts from the theoretical frameworks described above provide important critiques of the dominant narratives that have emerged within the *1619 Project* controversy.

It should be noted that much has occurred concerning the *1619 Project* since the initial thrust of academic and journalistic controversy that are covered in our analysis. There are currently measures in a number of states to limit the ways in which teachers can discuss race in schools, and moves to ban the teaching of specific texts like the *1619 Project* itself. Recently, Nikole Hannah-Jones was even initially denied tenure at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill seemingly due to political reservations over Hannah-Jones's writings in the *1619 Project* from Republican state legislators and influential donors to the journalism school (Stripling, 2021). Hannah-Jones was ultimately offered a tenured position but turned it down to take a tenured position at Howard University (Jaschik, 2021). While we do touch on this public discourse in places, we center our analysis in this paper on the discourses within the academic and journalistic community that emerged soon after the publication of the *1619 Project*. It is this initial thrust of controversy, coupled with the social backdrop of discourses on race heightened within the same time period, that has provided a discursive context for the conservative backlash against educational initiatives that foreground an analysis of racism. Interrogating the norms embedded in the discourses over the *1619 Project* among historians and journalists, we believe, is of critical importance for educators when navigating the unfortunate public discourse that now envelops state legislatures, local school districts, and classrooms. By examining these discourses through the lens of the theoretical concepts we offer, we hope to provide an explanatory and interpretive

framework which might illustrate some of the problematic features of the *1619 Project* controversy. As we discuss in the conclusion, we also illustrate how understanding the controversy in this way can challenge social studies educators and prospective teachers to think more deeply about, not simply content and pedagogy, but the norms that are implicit within this content area.

## Findings

To begin the discussion of our findings, we first turn to the letter to the *New York Times Magazine* editor signed by historians Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon Wood in December, 2019. Though this group had previously given interviews on the *1619 Project* to the World Socialist Website, this letter more concisely laid out the group's key disagreements while also bringing an academic criticism of the project into the mainstream press. The historians noted their "dismay" at the factual errors in the project, primarily focusing on Hannah-Jones's claims about the American Revolution and Lincoln.

Importantly, this group couched their reservations about the project in terms of historical objectivity. They wrote, "These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or 'framing.' They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism" (Bynum et al., as cited in Silverstein, 2019, para. 3). As such, they called on these errors to be corrected and for the process of fact-checking to be made transparent.

### Historical objectivity

The discourse of historical objectivity is one of the first key themes that we focus on in our analysis. Within the emergent controversy over the *1619 Project*, several historians have used language to dismiss many of its key ideas as matters of verifiable historical fact, while emphasizing that potential disagreements have nothing to do with interpretational framings.

Going beyond the original historians' letter, responses to the project in the *American*

*Historical Review* also revealed this framing of the discourse. Alex Lichtenstein, editor of the *American Historical Review*, wrote that many of the supposed “errors” in the project were, perhaps, more matters of emphasis, rather than absolute fact. Referring to the series of interviews conducted with the World Socialist Web Site in the fall of 2019, Lichtenstein (2020) wrote, “Taken as a whole, the interviews are of enormous interest, but more for what they have to say about these scholars’ own interpretations of key aspects of American history than as a full-on attack on the 1619 Project” (p. Xviii). Mackaman and North, both of the World Socialist Web Site, responded to Lichtenstein in a later issue of the *American Historical Review* and once again took on the discourse of historical objectivity. They argued, “The WSWS’s critique of the 1619 Project is not over conflicting interpretations of well-established facts. The 1619 Project is a travesty of history,” while arguing that the project advanced “a racist narrative based on distortions, half-truths, and the falsification of historical events” (2020, para. 9).

This same rhetoric continued in the mainstream press shortly after the publication of the historians’ letter to the editor. For example, Wilentz (2020a) published a lengthier argument in *The Atlantic* defending his concerns over Hannah-Jones’s essay in particular. Importantly, he explained that the specific criticisms raised in the letter did not concern historical interpretations or “anything other than the facts” (para. 38). Contrasting this viewpoint in the same publication, Serwer (2019) asserted that the overall controversy surrounding the *1619 Project* went far beyond purely matters of historical fact. Serwer wrote,

Underlying each of the disagreements in the letter is not just a matter of historical fact but a conflict about whether Americans, from the Founders to the present day, are committed to the ideals they claim to revere. And while some of the critiques can be answered with historical fact, others are questions of interpretation grounded in perspective and experience. (para. 9)

The centering of discourses of objectivity among academic critics of the *1619 Project* is

reinforced and extended by an analysis of the discourses surrounding the identities of the different authors. For example, each of the sources cited above briefly alluded to criticisms that the charges made against the *1619 Project* were being made by mostly White historians, allegedly in response to a social media feud between Hannah-Jones and her critics. In response, each source dismissed such charges as “partisan,” or displacing historical objectivity with “ideology”. The tacit assumption in this discourse was that these authors’ own critiques of the *1619 Project* (interestingly, even from World Socialist Web Site writers whose main objections of the project were its lack of class analysis) were free of ideological positioning and firmly rooted solely in the objective historical facts. To bolster this point, Wilentz’s *Atlantic* piece pointed to the example of W.E.B. Du Bois and his work in challenging the Dunning School of historical scholarship, which portrayed Reconstruction as a vicious attack on the postwar South led, in part, by corrupt and ignorant Black people. Wilentz (2020a) explained, “No historian better expressed this point, as part of the broader imperative for factual historical accuracy, than W. E. B. DuBois... Only by carefully marshaling the facts was Du Bois able to establish the truth about Reconstruction” (para. 40–41).

This is an interesting example within Wilentz’s discourses on historical objectivity and truth. First, Du Bois did not “establish the truth about Reconstruction,” at least going by its reception within historical scholarship in the 1930s. According to Foner (1982), the traditional interpretation of Reconstruction, influenced by the Dunning School, was not completely reversed until the late 1960s, largely as a result of historical scholarship emerging in the context of the civil rights movement. As an added layer to the problems of Wilentz’s appropriation of Black revisionist scholarship, one of the “major works of revisionism” Foner cites that contributed to the death of the traditional interpretation of Reconstruction is *The Struggle for Equality* (1964) by James McPherson, one of the signatories of the letter to the *New York Times Magazine* editor. Why Du Bois and other Black historians’ critiques were not taken up in the 1920s and 1930s



was, in part, due to discrimination and institutional racism in the academy, but also because Black revisionist history was subjected to claims of a lack of objectivity. For example, Kendi (2016) writes that one of the books that Du Bois reviewed as editor of Fisk University's student newspaper was the first full-length history of African-Americans, written by George Washington Williams in 1883. While Kendi notes that reviews of the book were favorable, critical reviews claimed that its perspectives were not "sufficiently restrained," which signaled a conundrum for Black revisionist scholars. Kendi writes, "When Black revisionists chose not to revise, then they seemingly allowed racist studies excluding or denigrating Blacks to stand for truth. When they did revise racist scholarship, they apparently lacked objectivity" (p. 267). We see, then, that both historically and contemporarily, discourses of "historical objectivity," while believed to simply be defending valid historical accounts among its articulators, can actually serve to displace the accounts of Black scholars in favor of what is viewed as the "objective" account amongst primarily White scholars.

### **Academic double-bind**

The preceding example provides some historical context for what we analyze as an academic double-bind that is perhaps produced through discourses on historical objectivity that seem to be evident within the *1619 Project* controversy. By structuring the discourse solely in terms of "historical objectivity," critics of the project, especially amongst political conservatives, have taken some of the criticisms of academic historians to completely dismiss the project as debunked or purely ideological. Via this framing, the perspectives of White historians have been centered as the "objective" ones, while marginalizing scholars of color, some of whom have their own thoughtful criticisms of both the *1619 Project* and the historians who have denounced it. As an example of the former point, Wilentz was cited by Republican Senator Tom Cotton as a historian who had "debunked" the *1619 Project* during a Fox News interview with Tucker Carlson (Schwartz, 2020). Regarding the latter, Leslie

Harris (2020), historian and *1619 Project* fact-checker who vigorously disputed the contentious claim about the American Revolution, explained that, while the historians were correct on this particular detail, they "were just as misleading" (para. 16) in their portrayals of the principles of the Constitution. Harris further suggested that some of the historians who wrote the letter have operated from an older view that does not acknowledge the centrality of slavery and racism to American history, a view that has been revised by "a growing, multiracial group of historians who try to offer a complete picture of our past" (para. 23).

While the preceding discussion focuses on the narratives of historical objectivity evident in the discourse surrounding the *1619 Project*, our analysis, informed by concepts specifically from CRT, focuses next on the strands of liberalism implicit within this discourse. Recall that critical race theorists critique liberalism for its picture of an incremental, yet upward trajectory toward equality implicit within American society. Ladson-Billings (1998), drawing upon the work of Crenshaw (1988), writes that the perspective of liberalism

is flawed because it fails to understand the limits of current legal paradigms to serve as catalysts for social change and its emphasis on incrementalism. CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change. (p. 12)

Many of the criticisms of the historians who denounced the *1619 Project* have foregrounded narratives of liberalism as a sort of synthesis between racist views of American history and what they perceive as an extreme form of identity politics supposedly represented by the *1619 Project*. For example, regarding the project's discussion of Lincoln's views on racial equality, the letter explains that American founding documents provided the framework for eventual, progressive equality. The letter states that the *1619 Project*

ignores his conviction that the Declaration of Independence proclaimed universal equality, for blacks as well as whites, a view he upheld repeatedly against powerful white supremacists who opposed him. The project also ignores Lincoln's agreement with Frederick Douglass that the Constitution was, in

Douglass's words, 'a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT'. (Bynum et al., as cited in Silverstein, 2019, para. 5)

Because this critique focuses on the ultimate validity of the Constitution in providing a framework for equality, and that a pragmatist like Lincoln and abolitionist like Douglass should be read together on this point, it may be argued that some of the critiques in this letter tacitly endorsed a more moderate, incremental view of American history in accord with favorable views of its foundational legal structure. This is, perhaps, informed by the fact that the letter does not mention Douglass's own criticisms of Lincoln on issues of racial equality or the regressive context of post-Reconstruction America, even after the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. On this point, Harris (2020) argued in her op-ed that the letters' picture of Lincoln was "just as misleading" for what it chose to omit. She wrote that general Constitutional interpretation and a range of state and local laws at the time "demonstrates that legally, the struggle for black equality almost always took a back seat to the oppressive imperatives of white supremacy" (para. 16).

Subsequent writings by Sean Wilentz that have furthered his critique of the *1619 Project* more clearly indicate the narrative of liberalism. For example, in a 2019 lecture, Wilentz noted that common accounts of slavery most familiar to Americans imply that the end of slavery was inevitable, a view he argues is misguided because it courts complacency. By contrast, Wilentz asserted that an opposite viewpoint, represented by the *1619 Project*, which views slavery as a defining feature of America, is also misguided because it is "vulnerable to an easy cynicism" (para. 12). He continued by writing that such cynicism "can leave our understanding of American history susceptible to moralizing distortions that seem compelling simply because they defy reassuring versions of the past" (para. 12). Throughout the lecture, even while noting many of the limitations and reversals of these campaigns, Wilentz upholds the anti-slavery movement in America as a beacon to the rest of the world and "perhaps the greatest unforeseen transformation in modern history" (para. 45) as

it produced a series of upward, progressive victories that led to slavery's extinction. Additionally, founding ideals and documents, such as the U.S. Constitution, are represented as providing the basic framework for this progressive movement, rather than an obstacle to be overcome or re-envisioned.

### **Master scripting**

By pairing this more liberal view of American history as a flawed, yet progressive movement toward eventual equality with the discourses on historical objectivity laid out previously, we read this foregrounding of liberalism as the protection of a master narrative, or an example of master scripting. Recall that the historian critics of the *1619 Project* were quick to identify their qualms as matters of historical facts, rather than competing interpretations, while also implying that, because it was simply about factual accuracy, only opposing views could be understood as committed to ideology. As Swartz (1992) explains,

Master scripting silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily by legitimizing dominant, White, upper-class, male voicings as the "standard" knowledge students need to know. All other accounts and perspectives are omitted from the master script unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation. Thus, content that does not reflect the dominant voice must be brought under control, mastered, and then reshaped before it can become part of the master script. (p. 341)

While it seems that Swartz's development of this concept was in relation to more explicit forms of exclusion in K-12 U.S. History materials, it is hard to avoid the resonance of this concept with the discourses surrounding the *1619 Project* controversy. The demand for corrections to the project in the initial letter to the editor on the part of some of the most prestigious American historians, many of whom have vocally favored a more moderate understanding of American race relations, is perhaps most emblematic of this point.

### **Consensus over conflict**

Dovetailing with this concept is the discourse concerning consensus over conflict regarding the

topics explored in the *1619 Project*. Recall that this borrows from Apple's (2004) critical analysis of the politics of curriculum, wherein a central feature of the "hidden curriculum" is the favoring of historical consensus over conflict. It is, perhaps, no surprise that political conservatives have written scathing rebukes of the *1619 Project*. While their reactionary histories that foreground "patriotic education," which was called for in the Trump Administration's *1776 Commission*, have also been met with historical criticism (Crowley & Schuessler, 2021), the foregrounding of a more moderate understanding of American history as the correct and objective approach among prominent historians might be understood discursively as a move toward consensus. In a *Washington Post* editorial, Wilentz (2020b) laid the Trump administration's reactionary views of American "patriotic education" over against the *1619 Project* and its "ideological distortion" (para. 12), where both equally onerous extremes would be displaced in favor of "legitimate historical writing" (para. 12). On its face, this is an important point about historical scholarship, but when understood within the larger context of the *1619 Project* controversy, it can also be understood as positioning an ideological middle ground concerning America's history with slavery and race relations as the consensus, and approved, version.

In this section, we have traced some of the important themes evident within the discourses of the *1619 Project* controversy, especially focusing on critically analyzing the discourses evident within prominent critiques of the project through the lens of different theoretical concepts we discussed previously. On the whole, we believe there are some important themes within this discourse that raise key questions surrounding historical legitimacy as well as how discourses of objectivity and ideology may be used to further some perspectives at the expense of others. In the discussion section, we provide an example of a set of activities where we utilized the *1619 Project* for a social studies methods class to engage future educators in these important questions.

## Discussion

Our analysis of the *1619 Project* controversy interrogates the emergent discourses that have been used to critique the project and attempts to illustrate how these discourses reinforce dominant norms that work to legitimize some knowledge claims while marginalizing others. Many of the criticisms of the project imply that critical analyses of American racial history, as exhibited by the *1619 Project*, represent an ideological position that has a tenuous relationship with legitimate historical scholarship and journalistic practice. In contrast, the narrative that America has a fraught, yet constantly improving history of race relations built upon an ultimate structure of equality (as opposed to one built on unequal relations of power regarding race) has been emphasized as a simple matter of empirically validated historical fact. It is important to note that our analysis is not meant to imply that one cannot make a historical argument for the latter rather than the former. More crucially, our analysis intends to illustrate that the discourse surrounding the *1619 Project* attempts to legitimize the latter as the valid discourse, the consensus view of history, rather than a competing knowledge claim.

It is interesting to consider these discourses within the current defaming of the *1619 Project* within school districts, state legislatures, and even Congress. One of the consistent arguments made by detractors of the project's use in schools is that it is "divisive" and that the role of history should be to instill some sort of national pride and unity. For example, the *Saving American History Act*, signed by seven Republican senators in order to bar federal funding from K-12 school districts that teach the *1619 Project*, states, "The *1619 Project* is a racially divisive and revisionist account of history that threatens the integrity of the Union by denying the true principles on which it was founded" (*Saving American History Act of 2021*, 2021, para. 11). Senator Thom Tillis discussed his support of the legislation by stating, "Americans do not want their tax dollars going toward promoting radical ideologies meant to divide us instead of being used to promote the principles that unite our nation" (Murphy, 2021,

para. 9). When taken together, one can argue that the emergent discourses surrounding the *1619 Project* reinforce a set of dominant, yet paradoxical claims, which state that the role of history should be to present “objective” accounts free of ideology, while also serving a pre-determined ideological purpose of national unity.

We believe that what these discourses indicate about the role of history is of critical importance to teacher educators and prospective teachers within the content area of social studies. Teacher education programs, even those of high quality, tend to emphasize both content knowledge and pedagogy, but may not necessarily have prospective teachers consider deeper philosophical questions about their content area, its relation to the broader school curriculum, or its potential application to present-day realities. While curricular controversies in the social studies are nothing new, we believe it is also critically important for prospective social studies teachers to develop academically-informed responses and identities to the present issues being raised about materials like the *1619 Project*. In this discussion section, we recount a set of activities we implemented in a social studies methods class intended to provoke such questioning and dialogue, using the *1619 Project* controversy as a case study.

In the Fall of 2020, we incorporated discussion around the *1619 Project* into our senior secondary social studies methods course. It should be noted that even though the class was run in a virtual manner, students knew each other well due to previous courses and the size of the social studies education program. Students appeared very comfortable with one another and often referred to themselves as a family. As white faculty members at a Hispanic Serving Institution, we were cognizant of the summer of 2020 where the United States saw the coronavirus pandemic disproportionately impact Black and Latino/a communities and highlight economic and health disparities. Furthermore, we had previously discussed the nationwide protests against police brutality. We believe this is pertinent to discussing the controversy over the *1619 Project* and is essential for identifying the strife as more than a simple debate over historical veracity.

The discussion over the *1619 Project* took place over four class periods during two weeks of instruction. First, students were assigned to read one of the *1619 Project* essays and provide a response that included their overall reaction to the essay and how they could use the essay (either parts or in its entirety) in their future classrooms. Second, students were asked to review either a podcast from *Teaching Hard History* or view the John Oliver *Last Week Tonight* episode from August 2, 2020 which focused on United States History. Dr. LaGarrett King provided the background information for the August 2, 2020 *Last Week Tonight* episode. Next, students read the following articles:

- *We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project* (Silverstein, 2019)
- *American Historical Review Publishes Letter on 1619 Project* (Mackaman & North, 2020)
- *A Matter of Facts: The New York Times’ 1619 Project Launched with the Best of Intentions, But Has Been Undermined by Some of its Claims* (Wilentz, 2019)
- *The Fight Over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts: A Dispute Between a Small Group of Scholars and the Authors of The New York Times Magazine’s Issue on Slavery Represents a Fundamental Disagreement over the Trajectory of American Society* (Serwer, 2019)
- *I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me: The Paper’s Series on Slavery Made Avoidable Mistakes. But the Attacks from Its Critics Are Much More Dangerous* (Harris, 2020)

After reading the above articles, students discussed the following prompts:

1. Critics of the *1619 Project* (see “Historians’ Letter and Editors’ Reply & Wilentz, *The Atlantic* article) claim that their issues with the project are not matters of interpretation, but “are matters of verifiable fact”. *What might people say who support this claim and what might others say who disagree with this claim?*
2. Critics of the *1619 Project* seem to dismiss the argument that race or background could have anything to do with historical interpretation (see Historians’ Letter and Editor’s Reply &



*American Historical Review* Letter). Could race, class, sex, etc. impact one's historical understanding/interpretation? *What might people say who would say 'yes' and what might people say who would say 'no'?*

3. Another consistent theme within the *1619 Project* controversy is the notion of presenting history as objective and free of ideology. Critics of the project claim that it is a misleading account of history entirely driven by identity politics, while defenders claim that it is acting as a revisionist account meant to challenge conventional historical interpretations of consistent racial progress. Can/should history be free of "ideology"? Is there such a thing as a purely objective, empirically validated historical account? *What might people say who would say 'yes' and what might people say who would say 'no'?*
4. Leslie Harris, one of the consultants on the *1619 Project*, agrees that the *1619 Project* has some factual errors, but argues that the criticisms of it have been even more dangerous (See Harris, *Politico* article). Central to this controversy is how we portray America (and important historical figures) in our telling of history. *What are possible dangers with different historical accounts, both "extreme" ones (American is great or American is evil) and "moderate" ones (e.g. America is flawed, but has made lots of progress since its founding)?*

Lastly, students were given the following small group assignment:

We have looked at the *1619 Project*, as well as writings from critics and defenders of the project in class. Now, consider how you could bring this material into a social studies classroom. This could include material from the *1619 Project* itself or material from the *1619 Project* controversy to teach about: historical content or deeper issues about teaching/writing history itself. In this small group session, develop an activity regarding the *1619 Project* that would meet standards for "Authentic Intellectual Work" (King et al., 2009).

Students were tasked with sharing out in groups an activity they would use in their future classrooms along with the materials they would need. Students also needed to justify why they

believed the activity was "Authentic Intellectual Work" (King et al., 2009). Throughout these activities, students engaged in important considerations of the purpose of history, its role within school curricula, and their future roles as social studies educators tasked with navigating conflict in historical discourse as a productive site for education. In commenting on the activities, one student indicated the importance of understanding American history from the perspective offered by the *1619 Project*, writing,

My overall response to this essay is resonance. I completely connected to what Nikole was writing about when it came to dealing with nationalism for a country you're taught (as a Black American in our public school system) you didn't really have a hand in. However, it is a whole different perspective when it can be considered that African Americans played a huge factor in the building of America... We would be able to see ourselves as not the ones who were moved, but the ones who moved America forward.

We hope that the activities summarized here illustrate some ways in which engaging materials like the *1619 Project* can produce critical educational outcomes within social studies classrooms that avoid many of the problematic discourses on display in the current controversy over the project.

## Conclusion

We believe that an understanding of the *1619 Project* controversy raises key questions that should be explored by social studies teacher educators and prospective teachers. In an interview with NPR, Nikole Hannah-Jones, speaking on the nature of objectivity in journalism, said, "When white Americans say to me, 'I just want factual reporting,... what they're saying to me is they want reporting from a white perspective... with a white normative view, and that simply has never been objective'" (as cited in Stripling, 2021, para. 34). In contrast to the foregrounding of discourses of objectivity by detractors of the *1619 Project*, this critique of how discourses of objectivity function to perpetuate dominant modes of power is important for social studies educators and prospective teachers to confront as part of their teacher training. The incorporation of

discussion around the *1619 Project* added critical thinking, reasoning, and deep discussions about historical narratives within our social studies methods course. What is neutral? Can history be neutral? Who gets to decide what is taught in our public school classrooms? Who gets to critique history? Who gets to act as a gatekeeper for our nation's children? These are all questions we discussed with our social studies methods students in order to help them learn to evaluate materials and take ownership in their future classrooms.

Students appeared enlightened when given the ability to see they too could be considered facilitators of historical inquiry and/or gatekeepers of history, rather than simply transmitters of historical facts. Furthermore, we believe these types of assignments would be valuable for students in the K-12 classroom and their teachers as well, rather than just an activity that might be educationally provocative as part of teacher training. Teachers of all levels might consider starting with the children's book, *The 1619 Project: Born on the Water*, by Hannah-Jones and Watson (2021). The Pulitzer Center Education group describes the book as "a pathway for readers of all ages to reflect on the origins of American identity by chronicling the consequence of slavery and the history of Black resistance in the United States" (Pulitzer Center Education, 2021, para. 1). The text would make for a captivating class read aloud, gallery walk, or jigsaw. As teacher educators, we see the incorporation of the *1619 Project* as an insightful case study for how historians debate history and the consideration of how historical discourses shape the present.

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