*Slavery's Legacy Within American History: A Comparative Analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois and "The 1619 Project"*

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*"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.[1]

**Historical Memory**

Slavery in the United States is often "treated as an excrescence on the main growth of American History."[2] It is the "inhuman and immoral [...] treatment of Black Americans" that created a "shameful history" that many Americans try to avoid. In August of 2019, the New York Times published "The 1619 Project", which aimed to "challenge historical narratives, [and] redefine national memory" to create a "more just future."[3] It emerged as a significant force in historical discourse by placing slavery at the center of American History. Numerous articles have since been dedicated to discussing the project and its approach in understanding American History, but less appreciated is W.E.B. Du Bois' attempt at the same feat. Sixty-five years prior to the publication of "The 1619 Project," W.E.B. Du Bois along with his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, composed a proposal for a book to be titled *The Slave.* The book was to "study [...] the slave in the United States from the Virginia Slave ship 1619, to the enfranchisement of the freedman, 1869."[4] While the proposed book was never crafted, Du Bois' sentiments can be found in similar writings; such as an unpublished manuscript *Negro and Social Reconstruction* where Du Bois chronicled Black history from 1442 to 1936.[5]

W.E.B. Du Bois sought to understand enslaved Americans not as "clowns or clods" but "as an integral part of the nation," especially emphasizing their "economic and social"

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[1] Martin Luther King, *I Have a Dream* Scholastic Paperbacks, 2007.
[2] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Slave*, 1954, unpublished book prospectus. https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b222-i005/#page/2/mode/1up
[3] Jake Silverstein, "The 1619 Project," Ebury Publishing, 2021, 5, 99.
[4] Du Bois, The Slave, 1954.
[5] W.E.B. Du Bois, Negro and Social Reconstruction, 1936, unpublished manuscript, https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b227-i017

contributions.[6] The same economic contribution that the Times detailed as turning a "fledgling nation into a financial colossus."[7] From Du Bois' perspective, enslaved Americans were the "fore-runner of the modern working class" and a Black "push for democracy" catalyzed subsequent civil rights movements. Their social contributions "led to the present struggle for a free world, not simply of whites but yellow, brown and Black people."[8] Nikole Hannah-Jones echoed this sentiment when she stated "Black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle."[9] This essay seeks to compare these two interpretations of U.S. history and discover where they align and diverge.

**Methods**

This comparative analysis between W.E.B. Du Bois' and "The 1619 Project" sheds light on diverse approaches to examining slavery in U.S. history. They both emphasize aspects of slavery that are not prevalent within historical discourse. Yet, they both differ in their approaches to communicating information. Du Bois was writing amidst the great depression when Black Americans were still grappling with different approaches to achieving equal rights. He employed a wealth of facts, statistics, and a keen historical lens to meticulously construct his writing. His extensive chronicles, filled with economic and social analyses, demonstrate a rigorous pursuit to prove his argument on a factual level. His approach stands in contrast to that of "The 1619 Project."

Initiated in 2019, the project utilizes emotive language and compelling storytelling to

[6] Du Bois, The Slave, 1954.
[7] Matthew Desmond, "The 1619 Project," 33.
[8] Du Bois, The Slave, 1954.
[9] Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project", 16.

evoke a visceral response from its audience. It weaves together vivid descriptions, personal stories, and powerful imagery to craft a narrative that resonates on an emotional level. This juxtaposition highlights the broader societal context in which these works were produced. "The 1619 Project" was written at a time when Black Americans had full legal equality, whereas Du Bois was writing during a time when Black Americans could be lynched with no legal repercussions.[10]

As such, Du Bois utilized a meticulous and fact-based approach in order to establish his argument, whereas "The 1619 Project" employed emotional appeal to stimulate conversation about historical injustices that continue to reverberate today. These divergent approaches underscore the importance of considering the historical context, the evolving nature of historical narratives, and the role emotions and facts play in shaping our understanding of the complexities of interpreting history.

**Revolt and Revolution**

In the context of the Revolutionary War, Nikole Hannah Jones wrote, "In every war this nation has waged since that first one, Black Americans have fought."[11] Du Bois believed that "the participation of Negroes in the various wars of this country [...] proves not only the Negro's loyalty but his courage and his interest in freedom." They both recognized Crispus Attucks as leading "the first violent encounter of the Revolutionary War" and being "the very first person to die for this country."[12] Yet Hannah-Jones wrote that "every Fourth of July is wrong, and that

[10] Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Lint Shaw, killed by a mob near Royston, Georgia" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed May 30, 2024. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bc519566-0cfa-27c9-e040-e00a18061543
[11] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 16.
[12] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 59.; Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 16.

the country's true birth date, [...] was in late August of 1619." She argued that the country's founding ideals are rooted in "the moment that [the United States'] defining contradictions first came into the world," and that the "colonists decided to declare their independence [...] because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery."[13]

In contrast, Du Bois believed the country "pledged its allegiance [to democracy] in 1776," and that there was "favorable anti-slavery sentiment right after the Revolution." Accordingly, this "was due to the Negros demonstration of valor and patriotism," with Du Bois detailing how "several thousand Negroes fought on the colonial side during this war." He further elaborated that "even in the South, Negroes were [...] cited for bravery and assistance."[14] This conflicts with Hannah-Jones' characterization of the Revolution as a "nation [that] was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy."[15] A purported slavocracy founded with anti-slavery sentiment that "grew [...] for a period of some forty years." However, Du Bois contends that these sentiments would eventually be diminished "due to the increasing spread and profit of the slave system," emphasizing the role capitalism played in deconstructing Revolutionary anti-slavery sentiments.[16] Both authors underscore the essential role of Black activism in shaping American democracy, but they differ in their understanding of how this influence manifested. When writing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln regarded his act as "warranted by the Constitution."[17] "The 1619 Project" declared the Constitution as "a document that preserved and protected slavery."[18] Yet Du Bois believed that "All [negro] leaders and movements have proceeded along the lines of the traditional belief of American [...] legal and

[13] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 4, 18.
[14] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 115, 60.
[15] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project", 18.
[16] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 60.
[17] Abraham Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," January 1, 1863.
[18] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project", 18.

constitutional guarantees."[19] He argued that Black activism was more successful when leveraging these established legal and constitutional frameworks. In contrast, Nikole Hannah-Jones argued that it was "centuries of Black resistance and protest" that "helped the country live up to its founding ideals." She feared that without Black resistance, "our democracy today would most likely look very different" and that "it might not be a democracy at all," suggesting that Black resistance to legal and constitutional frameworks is what truly created American democracy.[20]

However, Du Bois chronicled instances of Black resistance, detailing how every "slave seized in Africa between 1442 and the middle of the nineteenth century fought for freedom." He estimated that "for every slave actually captured by raiders four human beings were left lying dead in the villages." Du Bois detailed multiple instances of revolts aboard slave ships and their outcomes. Although "the first effort to counteract violence [was] naturally violence" Du Bois found that "once captured [...] there was little chance for revolt." He elaborated that "actual revolts among American Negroes, from 1619 to 1863, were few in number" but that "there were a great many [...] rumors of conspiracies." He claimed that plans of violence were met with "energetic measures for curbing slave revolts" and "therefore, [the plan] to gain freedom through violence was pretty well curbed."[21]

Both authors concur that Black activism was crucial in the pursuit of equality and enfranchisement, but they differ on the mechanisms. Du Bois argued that Black activism, aligned with American constitutional principles and a belief in democracy, were instrumental. In contrast, Nikole Hannah-Jones contended that true democracy emerged through resistance to the American Constitution and the founding principles of a society built on slavery.

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[19] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 80.
[20] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 16.
[21] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 2, 4, 3.

**Black Emigration**

"The 1619 Project" highlights an August 1862 meeting between Lincoln, James Mitchell, and "a group of five esteemed free Black men." The men are purported to have discussed how "[Lincoln] had gotten Congress to appropriate funds to ship Black people [...] to another country."[22] Here the project introduces the concept of Black emigration, but its discussion exclusively pertains to Lincoln. Critics like Sean Wilentz claim that this "impart[s] a fundamentally misleading impression" and that these are "partial truths and misstatements."[23]

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about the concept of Black emigration at great length. Du Bois claimed that "from the earliest times the thought that the Negro population of the United States would eventually be repatriated in Africa was widespread among whites and also among Negroes." In New England, "Massachusetts Negroes as early as 1774 had asked to be assigned to some province of their own." Within Rhode Island alone as many as "Two thousand Negroes [...] were willing to go to Africa." Further stating that "after the Revolutionary War, [...] societies of Negroes in Newport and Boston were formed for migration to West Africa."[24]

These societies are never mentioned in "The 1619 Project," even though between "1820-1852, 7,836" Black Americans "were sent to Africa by the [American] Colonization Society." In 1830 "the first American-Negro convention in Philadelphia" took place, meeting annually from "1830 to 1836 [...] attended by a number of educated and influential Negroes." There they "laid plans for a large migration of Negroes into Canada" and even had "communicated with the British Government." More extensive plans were created in 1853

[22] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 19, 20.
[23] Sean Wilentz, "A Matter Of Facts," 12
[24] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 8, 9.

when "a National Council of Negroes [...] organized to take up the question of migration." Individuals from "twelve state conventions" deliberated on proposals for "the Niger Valley in Africa" as well as "Central America" and "Haiti," whereby 1861 "2,000 emigrants went to Haiti."[25]

"The 1619 Project" solely referenced "a convention of Black leaders in New York some decades before" who put forward "a resolution against Black colonization," seemingly ignoring those who proposed emigration.[26] In contrast, Du Bois did not ignore the perspective of those who opposed colonization. He wrote that the "plan of wholesale emigration split the American Negroes into bitterly antagonistic groups."[27] In Richmond Virginia, "The free Negroes [...] asked Congress for territory on the Missouri River" while "The Negroes of Boston asked how they could be called Africans when they were born in America."

Du Bois also highlighted the very same August 1862 meeting between Lincoln and "a delegation of Negroes." He does this in a significantly different manner. While "The 1619 Project" exclusively examines Lincoln's perspective of migration; Du Bois succinctly referenced Lincoln's preference as "his long cherished plan of colonization." Rather than linger on Lincoln's sentiments, he wrote about their discussion, and its "disastrous" outcome. The men were to decide on "settlement in Central America or elsewhere" and eventually "a settlement on the Isle à Vache near Haiti was arranged." Under the leadership of Bernard Kock, "an expedition set out in 1862 with 500 Negroes." Of that 500, "only 293 survived." They had "landed without shelter or supplies" and soon "smallpox broke out, drinking water was scarce, and food [went] bad." Their leader "Kock proved to be dishonest and incompetent" and two years later "in 1864,

[25] Ibid, 8, 9.
[26] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 20.
[27] W.E.B. Du Bois, Negro and Social Reconstruction, 1936, unpublished manuscript, p10. https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b227-i017

the remains of the colony were brought back to the United States."[28]

Sean Wilentz claims "The 1619 Project" misconstrues facts to align "Lincoln and the white supremacists who opposed him." Arguing Lincoln was only "like the majority of white Americans of his time." Wilentz quotes Du Bois favorably as "the upholder of plain provable fact," while having written that "Lincoln "sloughed off" the idea of colonization."[29] Du Bois would likely disagree with the assertion that he 'sloughed off' on what he refers to as Lincoln's "most cherished plan."[30] However, Du Bois would not contextualize Black emigration exclusively through the ideas and actions of Lincoln. In this facet, "The 1619 Project" seemingly ignored the broader historical context of Black emigration, in order to re-contextualize public perception of Lincoln. While illuminating the genuine thoughts of 'the great emancipator' is valuable, disregarding the broader context of the Black emigration movement comes across as targeted criticism rather than historiography. As evident from Du Bois' writing, the concept has a long and deep history that extends further than a presidential meeting in August in 1862.

**Reconstruction**

Between the years "1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process," with emancipation sending "a thrill through the Negro population."[31] Both "The 1619 Project" and Du Bois commend the initial accomplishments of Reconstruction. However, their perspectives diverge in attributing blame for its subsequent failures. Nikole Hannah-Jones succinctly believed it was the pervasive "anti-Black racism [...] in the very DNA

[28] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 10, 9.
[29] Sean Wilentz, "A Matter Of Facts," 14, 20, 11.
[30] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 10.
[31] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 20.:Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 12.

of this country" that encouraged "fierce white resistance" to the "many gains of reconstruction." This resistance led to a myriad of conflicts and violence, which resulted in "the federal government [deciding] that Black people were the cause of the problem," and ultimately in the decision to "to pull federal troops from the South."[32]

In contrast, Du Bois believed "the failure has been more greater with regard to Negroes than it has to whites." Instead of highlighting white resistance and violence as a primary factor, he focused on the economic challenges faced by Black Americans. He asserted that the "political power [of] Negroes is continually handicapped by their dependent economic position." According to Du Bois, "From 1867-1876, the Negroes placed their whole hope of full emancipation and economic security upon their political power." This was "putting the cart before the horse" as "their employment [was] often threatened by any political activity."[33] Political activity that was hindered by "wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud and even, [...] the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments," as was the case in Wilmington, North Carolina; where in 1898, white supremacists violently ousted the elected biracial government, killing sixty.[34] This was not to say that Black Americans failed to acquire political positions and status. Du Bois extensively detailed the governmental occupations held by Black Americans throughout this period. He stated, "office holding by American Negroes has been creditable, but disappointing so far as it has sought to further their political, social and economic position." While they held roles in a multitude of federal, state, and local offices, "they have seldom reached positions of real importance where they could [...] help the status of their people." He detailed how "Negroes have succeeded in having laws defending their civil rights,"

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[32] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 21.
[33] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 19, 12, 20.
[34] Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 21; "1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report - North Carolina Digital Collections," n.d., https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/1898-wilmington-race-riot-report/2257408?item=2277542.

but that “the laws were so drawn that [...] courts could easily render them ineffective.”[35] The 14th amendment guaranteed equal protection under the law, but in 1876 the Supreme Court decided in United States v. Cruikshank that the federal government could not prosecute private individuals for civil rights violations. This limited protection exclusively to actions by the state, thereby undermining the ability of the 14th amendment to protect Black citizens. A single part of “the systemic white suppression of Black life” that “was so severe [...] between the 1880s and the 1920[s] and ’30s” Hannah-Jones declared that “Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century,” and Du Bois believed it was “definitely abandoned in 1876.”[36] Both authors agreed on the severity of white suppression and violence, however, Du Bois once more underscored the economic context as the root cause of these issues.

**Dizzying Economic Profits**

Nikole Hannah-Jones believed the “dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery” led the “founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world.”[37] “The 1619 Project" stated that historians tend to view “slavery as precapitalistic,” and that they “connect the development of modern business practices to the 19th-century railroad industry.” Historians purportedly do this because “it’s a more comforting origin story.” The Project contends that the “accounting displayed in slave plantations predates industrialism” and that “Northern factories would not begin adopting these techniques until decades after the Emancipation Proclamation.”[38]

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[35] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 17, 19.
[36] Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project,” 21.:Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 115.
[37] Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project,” 18.
[38] Desmond, “The 1619 Project,” 34, 35.

Yet, there is significant scholarship that connects the emergence of American capitalism directly to slavery. Edward E. Baptist illustrates the brutal efficiency of the plantation system in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism.* Published five years prior to "The 1619 Project," Baptist argues that techniques used on slave plantations for maximizing labor output were precursors to later industrial practices. Similarly, in *American Lucifers: The Dark History of Artificial Light, 1750-1865* Jeremy Zallen highlights how the economic activities associated with slavery were integral to the growth of American industries.[39] This should come as no surprise to "The 1619 Project," as two pages before historians were viewing "slavery as precapitalistic," they were "point[ing] persuasively to the gnatty fields of Georgia and Alabama, [...] as the birthplace of America's low-road approach to capitalism."[40]

In line with contemporary historians, Du Bois emphasized understanding slavery through an economic context. Writing about fugitive enslaved people and their impact on the Southern economy, he asserted that their "economic loss [...] spurred secession." Du Bois pointed to an increase in the North's Black population between 1820 and 1860. During this time frame, the North saw "an increase of 167% as compared with 151% for the total Negro population." Of that 16% difference, Du Bois believed "between 100,000 and 200,000 of them were doubtless fugitives."[41] This is a considerable number, as they would have "represented a loss of at least $25,000,000 [...] perhaps twice that sum," and that loss would have been duly noted, as slaveholders were "tallying expenses and revenues and noting the causes of their biggest gains and losses."[42] As Black Americans fled Southern slavery and sought refuge in the

[39] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* Basic Books, 2014: Jeremy Zallen, *American Lucifers: The Dark History of Artificial Light, 1750-1865* University of North Carolina Press, 2019.
[40] Desmond, "The 1619 Project," 34, 32.
[41] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 7, 6.
[42] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 7; Desmond, "The 1619 Project," 34.

North, “slave owners demanded more and more peremptorily that the laws for the recapture of slaves be enforced.”[43] Slaveholders had “quantified capital costs on their land, tools and enslaved workforces,” and had even “developed ways to calculate depreciation.” They “reduced [people] to data points,” and the data insisted “that a new Fugitive Slave law be enacted.”[44] Slavers' attempt to recuperate their losses would result in “retaliatory legislation which attempted to nullify the Fugitive Slave law.” The North believed these laws “seriously interfered with local state government” and as such refused to enforce them. This “intensified [...] bitterness between [the] North and South,” and, according to Du Bois, “led [...] to the Civil War.”[45]

While the authors occasionally diverge in their perspectives on framing the historical context for their arguments, they consistently converge on the significance of comprehending the scope of the slave economy. Highlighting the intricate connections between economic exploitation and racial oppression provides valuable insight into the complexities of the past and the ongoing legacy of slavery in contemporary society. Their shared emphasis on this aspect underscores its fundamental role in Black history, and moreover American history.

[43] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 6
[44] Desmond, “The 1619 Project,” 34, 35.; Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 6.
[45] Du Bois, *Negro and Social Reconstruction*, 6, 7.

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