

A NEW ORIGIN STORY

The  
1619  
Project

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*Winner of the Pulitzer Prize*

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But those errors and omissions should not be used as an excuse to deny the reality that racism and slavery have influenced every aspect of US history.

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## An African-Atlantic Perspective on 1619's "Origins" Project

*The 1619 Project* calls itself a “new origin story.” At the most basic level, this “new origin” is chronological, starting in 1619 rather than 1776. For Nikole Hannah-Jones, Jamestown’s first “20. and odd” Africans were incipient Americans, the pioneering generation of a people whose contributions to building the nation have been fundamental.<sup>30</sup> Various scholars have noted that there is nothing particularly “new” in this formulation. As early as 1882, George Washington Williams made a similar claim in his pioneering work, *History of the Negro Race in America* (1882). The first line of his chapter introducing the 1619 story asserts, “Virginia was the mother of slavery as well as ‘the mother of Presidents.’”<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of staking a claim to the nation’s origins, the historical equivalency was clear, even one hundred twenty years ago.

As a scholar of the African diaspora, I am less interested in the histories of empires, colonies, and nation-states than I am in the histories of peoples. As such, my questions about the “origins” of the Africans in 1619 Jamestown do not consider them as British imperial subjects, let alone potential members of an American nation-state not yet imagined. Rather, I am interested in their immediate historical contexts—their “origins” as shipmates, as members of family and friend groups, and as “Angolans.” Understanding these histories requires seeing Jamestown not only as a beginning, but also as an end point in a much longer and broader saga that bound African-descended peoples across the Atlantic world.

When viewed from a broad Atlantic perspective, there was nothing unique about the Africans that arrived in Virginia. Scholars estimate that more African slaves had already been dispersed across the Atlantic world prior to 1619 than would arrive in British North America and the United States for the entire history of the slave trade.<sup>32</sup> The first enslaved Africans in the territory that would become the United States actually arrived from Spain in the sixteenth century. In 1526, explorer Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón attempted to settle San Miguel de Gualdape,

30 John Rolfe to Sir Edward Sandys, January 1619/20 in Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed. *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1933), 3:243.

31 George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880* (New York, 1882), 115.

32 Ivana Elbl estimates that 156,000 Africans arrived in Iberia and the Atlantic islands before 1521. Elbl, “The Volume of the Early Atlantic Slave Trade, 1450–1521,” *Journal of African History* 38, no. 1 (1997): 31–76. *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* (TSTD) estimates that 368,669 Africans disembarked in the Americas between 1502 and 1619: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>. [Accessed November 19, 2022]

along with roughly five hundred Spaniards and one hundred African slaves, near the mouth of the Savannah River. The Spanish colonists quickly succumbed to hunger, cold weather, and disease. Taking advantage of the bleak conditions, a group of Africans torched the house of one of the Spaniards—arguably the first slave revolt in what would become the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Just a year later, in 1527, the more famous Esteban de Dorantes (aka Estevanico and Esteban the Moor), arrived with his Spanish master on Pánfilo de Narváez's ill-fated exploration of Florida.<sup>34</sup> Though the original Spanish expeditions to Florida were a disaster, by 1565 the Spanish established a permanent settlement at St. Augustine. In 1606, on the eve of the British arrival at Jamestown, there were at least one hundred enslaved Africans in Florida, forty belonging to the Spanish Crown. Yet these small numbers of Africans on North American soil paled in comparison to the rest of the Americas, where enslaved Africans often outnumbered their European masters by wide margins. In 1570, the population of Mexico consisted of 20,569 Africans and just 6,644 Europeans, a ratio of more than 3:1.<sup>35</sup> By the time the first Africans arrived at Jamestown, in 1619, Africans outnumbered Europeans in Lima, Cartagena, and Panama City as well.<sup>36</sup> In Havana, the numbers of whites and Blacks was almost even.<sup>37</sup> In Brazil, estimates suggest that there were fifty thousand Portuguese residents in the colony in 1620. Meanwhile, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database estimates that 158,676 Africans arrived into Brazil between 1600 and 1625.<sup>38</sup> Altogether then, the Americas of 1619 were measurably more African than they were European. This fact alone should challenge us to reframe the histories of imperial and colonial America as *African* histories. It should also inform our understandings of the experiences of Virginia's first "20. and odd."<sup>39</sup> But who were these hundreds of thousands of Africans in the Americas? Where did they come from and what were they doing?

Between 1600 and 1625, more than 261,000 West Central Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas as slaves. These Africans, most often referred to as "Kongos" and "Angolas" in colonial documents, represented more than 90% of all Africans who made their way to the Americas during this 25-year period.<sup>40</sup> When combined with the data on the preponderance of Africans in the overall population of the Americas, we can safely conclude that West Central Africans dominated the immigrant populations of the Americas by the time of the arrival of the first Africans at Jamestown. As a result, communities such as Cartagena (New Granada) and Salvador (Brazil) were more deeply influenced by the Kimbundu and Kikongo languages than by Spanish or Portuguese, more definitively shaped by spirit possession rituals known as calundu than by Catholic ritual, and often more responsive to the political and economic demands of Luanda than of Lisbon or Madrid. In short, the idioms and cultures of West Central Africa profoundly shaped seventeenth-century American history in ways that have scarcely been

- 33 Paul E. Hoffman, *A New Andalusia and a Way to the Orient: The American Southeast During the Sixteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1990). Some have argued for a "1526 Project" as an "allied effort" to the "1619 Project." See Samuel T. Livingston, "The Site of Memory: The 1526 Project and Why It Matters," November 22, 2021, <https://facultyblog.morehouse.edu/blog-posts/link-to-article-25740-en.html>, published..
- 34 See Andrés Reséndez, *A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca* (New York, 2009).
- 35 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México* (Mexico City, 1972), 210.
- 36 Peru: from viceroy's census of 1614—10,386 Africans; 9,616 Spaniards in Fernando Montesinos, *Anales del Perú*, vol. 2 (Madrid, 1906), 197. Panama City: from 1610 census—3,500 Africans; 1,007 whites in Luis Torres de Mendoza, *Colección de Documentos Inéditos* vol. 9 (Madrid, 1868), 90–91; Cartagena at beginning of seventeenth century: 3,500 Africans; 2,000 Spaniards from Maria Cristina Navarrete, "Cotidianidad y cultura material de los negros de Cartagena en el siglo XVII," *América Negra* 7 (1994): 67–68.
- 37 Isabelo Macias Dominguez, *Cuba en la primera mitad del siglo XVII* (Sevilla, 1978), 20–25.
- 38 Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion 1400–1668* (London, 2004), 168. The TSTD estimates that an average of more than 6,100 Africans arrived in Brazil every year between 1600 and 1625, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>. [Accessed on November 19, 2022]
- 39 John Rolfe to Sir Edward Sandys, January 1619/20 in Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed. *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1933), 3:243.
- 40 <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>. [Accessed on November 19, 2022]

- 41 For more on West Central Africans in the Americas, see Linda M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2002); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Space, Transforming Culture* (Mona, Jamaica, 2003); Jason Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2007); Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil During the Era of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 2012); Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge, 2012).
- 42 Engel Sluiter, “New Light on the ‘20 and Odd Negroes’ Arriving in Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1997): 395–98; Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007).
- 43 See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (Oxford, 2007); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2014); Herman Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic* (Philadelphia, PA, 2019); Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Boston, MA, 2020); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, PA, 2020).

considered in a historiography that emphasizes European colonies and nation-states.<sup>41</sup>

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Those interested in 1619 might consider the conjunctural histories of enslaved Africans in the Americas. If, for example, nearly all of Virginia’s earliest Africans hailed from Angola, did they share histories with the more than a quarter million Central Africans that arrived in the Americas between 1600 and 1625? What might the Angolans in Virginia have had in common with those in Cartagena or northeastern Brazil? Claudine Rankine’s poem “The White Lion” reminds us that “two English ships” pirated the Portuguese ship *São João Bautista* and “split up its human cargo” (3–4). *The White Lion* delivered the small contingent of Africans to Virginia, but *The 1619 Project* tells us nothing about the fates of the three hundred fifty shipmates, friends, and family who originally boarded with them in Luanda. In fact, twenty four ended up in Jamaica, twenty nine in Bermuda, and one hundred twenty two in Mexico.<sup>42</sup> By thinking of Jamestown’s West Central Africans not as incipient Americans, but rather as people with a common Angolan homeland and scattered kin across Latin America and the Caribbean, we endow them with a different set of “national” histories and future imaginaries, etched in African-Atlantic cultures and politics.<sup>43</sup>

When viewed from the larger context of the Atlantic world, *The 1619 Project* telescopes the experiences of African Americans in ways that obscure histories outside the nation-state. As a consequence, the project reduces Black people’s claims for freedom, democracy, justice, and reparations to the history of the United States (and vice versa). But African Americans were never bound by the constraints of a nation-state that firmly rejected them. This was as true in the twentieth century as it was under slavery. In her concluding chapter on justice and reparations, Hannah-Jones provides the book’s only meaningful reference to Marcus Garvey.<sup>44</sup> Garvey, a Jamaican, built the largest, most far-reaching mass movement of African-descended people the world has ever known. At the core of his “race first” philosophy was a fierce self-determination that resulted in the creation of Black-owned newspapers, schools, restaurants, laundries, grocery stores, and a steamship company. These businesses stretched from Garvey’s headquarters in New York City to Cuba, Jamaica, Panama, Costa Rica, and elsewhere across the Atlantic world. Garvey’s dream was to liberate the world’s scattered Africans, like the descendants of those that traveled on the *São João Bautista* in 1619, and return them to Africa.

In a contradictory misreading of Garvey, Hannah-Jones writes, “The Black nationalist Marcus Garvey [called] for reparations in the 1910s and for Black Americans to leave this country and resettle in a Black one.”<sup>44</sup> Just as with the Africans at Jamestown, Hannah-Jones reduces Garvey and Garveyites to Americans, effectively erasing the shared struggles against racism and oppression of African-descended peoples across the Atlantic world. Perhaps even more notably, she misrepresents Garvey’s staunch economic nationalism as a call for reparations. Garvey bemoaned Europe’s pillaging of Africa and called on Black people to seize control of the continent’s oil, rubber, and mineral deposits. But he was also crystal clear: Black people needed nothing from white people—not money, not affirmation, and definitely not belonging in their nations or empires. Rather, Black people needed to control their own legal, financial, and political destinies, establishing an independent nation in Africa.

While I applaud *The 1619 Project* for its singular commitment to challenging the triumphalist narrative of American democracy, such an approach ultimately reifies the very nation that systematically excluded African Americans for the majority of its history. African Americans cultivated many other “nations.” They did not simply react to white folks’ exclusionary politics. At the same time, the “nation” itself was not a historical monolith. Indeed, the United States only became a nation 157 years after the British introduced African slavery to Virginia. The “origins” of American slavery reside in Britain. This has important implications for contemporary reparations demands. By focusing narrowly on the US government’s debt to African Americans, *The 1619 Project* misses an opportunity to link up with scholars and activists in the British West Indies, who have been particularly effective in formulating reparations demands, not merely at the national level but as a regional movement. Their demands extend well beyond the British government to include the corporate heirs of knowable, nameable slave holders.<sup>45</sup>

Ironically, for a book so rightfully critical of the narrative of American exceptionalism, *The 1619 Project* seems to fall into the trap of replacing one form of American exceptionalism for another. A broader consideration of the multiple, overlapping meanings of belonging and “nation” might have hewn more closely to African American history. However, it is precisely in the revelation of white America’s persistent exclusions, hypocrisies, and acts of violence that the project gains its political potency. This narrative of American history is no less legitimate or complete than the heroically white, male one it challenges. At bottom, the project is an urgent demand for national inclusion. If people read it this way, our politics might look different.

44 Garvey is mentioned only by his first name in Hannah-Jones’s Introduction (xviii).

45 *The 1619 Project*, 463.

46 See Hilary McD. Beckles, *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* (Kingston, 2013). For the reparations demands of various countries in the Caribbean, see the work of the CARICOM Reparations Commission: <https://caricomreparations.org/>.