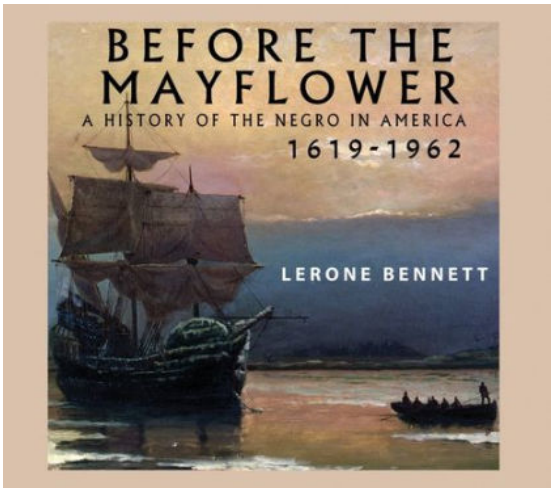
Investigative Journalism & Nikole Hannah-Jones

My public high school in Waterloo, Iowa, offered a one-semester elective called "The African-American Experience," which I took my sophomore year. The only Black male teacher I'd ever have taught the course.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with the past. Learning history made the world make sense. It provided the key to decode all that I saw around me. Black people, however, were largely absent from the histories I read. The history rendered Black people on all the earth [as] inconsequential at best, invisible at worst . . . We were not contributors, just recipients.

Sitting in class each day, I felt as if I had spent my entire life struggling to breathe and someone had finally provided me with oxygen. I recall my surprise that so many books existed about Black people and by Black people, that Black people had so much history that *could* be learned. I began asking Mr. Dial for books to read beyond the assigned texts. He put a book in my hands: *Before the Mayflower*.



African people *had* lived here. They arrived one year before the *Mayflower*. Why hadn't any teacher or textbook taught us the story of 1619? The year White Virginians first purchased enslaved Africans, the start of American slavery, an institution so influential and corrosive that it both helped create the nation and nearly led to its demise, is indisputably a foundational historical date. And yet I'd never heard of it before.

At the start of 2019, most Americans still did not know that date. As the 400 year anniversary approached that August I understood that, like so much of the uncomfortable history of our country, this momentous date would likely come and go with little acknowledgement of its significance.

I made a pitch to my editors: *The New York Times Magazine* should create a special issue that would mark the 400th anniversary by exploring the unparalleled impact of African slavery on the development of our country and its continuing impact on our society. The story of Black America cannot be disentangled from the story of America, and our attempts to do so have forced us to tell ourselves a tale full of absences, evasions, and lies.

The 1619 Project is **not the only** origin story of this country – there must be many – but it is one that *helps* us fundamentally understand the nation's persistent inequalities in ways the more familiar origin story cannot.

If we are a truly great nation, the truth cannot destroy us. On the contrary, facing the truth liberates us to build the society we wish to be. The enslaved and their descendants played a central role in shaping our institutions, our intellectual traditions, our music, art, and literature, our very democracy. They form a legacy of which *every* American should be proud.