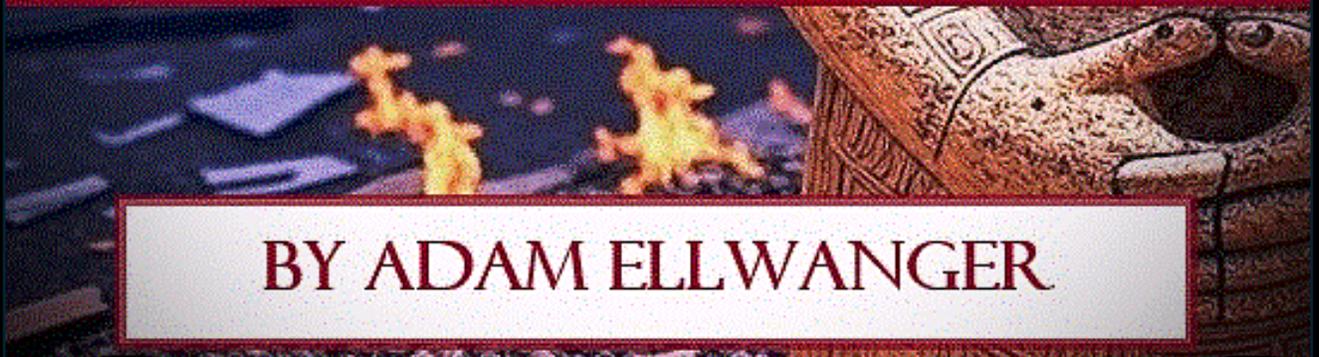




THE 1619 PROJECT'S ATTACK ON MEMORY

History, Propaganda, and National Identity



BY ADAM ELLWANGER

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Speaking in 1838, Abraham Lincoln warned that the ideas that undergirded the American Revolution and the founding of the nation were facing a new threat: after the death of the generation that fought for independence, the public memory of the nation's birth would inevitably grow dim and distorted. Lincoln foretold that such an event, when it happened, would jeopardize constitutional governance, American freedom, and the identity of the nation itself. His remarks are excerpted at length:

Why suppose danger to our political institutions? Have we not preserved them for more than 50 years? And why may we not for 50 times as long?

We hope there is no sufficient reason, [...] but to conclude that no danger may ever arise, would itself be extremely dangerous. [...] That our government should have been maintained in its original form until now, is not much to be wondered at. It had many props to support it through that period, which now are decayed, and crumbled away. [...]

[...T]he scenes of the revolution are [not] now [n]or ever will be entirely forgotten; but [...] like everything else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time. [...] They cannot be so universally known, nor so vividly felt, as they were by the generation just gone to rest. At the close of that struggle, nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of its scenes. The consequence was that [...] a living history was to be found in every family – a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related [...] But those histories are gone.

[...] They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in the future be our enemy. (Lincoln)

Nearly two centuries after Lincoln’s warning, Americans have a very limited understanding of their nation’s history and its principles of design. A prime example that validates Lincoln’s concern is the enthusiastic reception of the 1619 Project, a propaganda campaign by the *New York Times* that claimed to offer a historical description of the nation’s founding. Although its contributors openly admit that it advances a “reimagining” of America’s birth, they simultaneously insist it offers a *truer, more accurate* account of the founding than (what the project calls) the traditional “mythology” taught in schools. Specifically, the 1619 Project argues that 1776 was not the true birth of the nation. Instead, the project’s participants claim that the true founding was in 1619 – when the first ship of captured Africans arrived in British North America to work as indentured servants. By shifting the beginning of the United States from 1776 to 1619, the project hopes citizens will acquiesce to a hard truth: that America was fundamentally a racist slavocracy at its start and that the entire history of the nation (up to and including the present) was defined and determined by attempts to institutionalize and protect anti-black racism.

The foremost historians of the American founding quickly and thoroughly debunked the central premises of the 1619 Project.¹ In short, those who are most qualified to judge the facticity of the overarching claims made by the project found them to be *untrue*. The present analysis does not attempt to further catalogue the project’s historical contradictions, inaccuracies and distortions – work that has been admirably completed by

¹ The definitive statements of those historians are collected in *The New York Times’ 1619 Project and the Racialist Falsification of History: Essays and Interviews*, Eds. David North and Thomas Mackaman, Mehring Books, Oak Park, MI: 2021.

dozens of others.² Nevertheless, their debunking of the project did very little. It was not retracted. In fact, it still endures.³ This suggests that practically speaking, the truth of the founding matters very little – which, in turn, shows that truth-telling and the writing of history were never the real aims of the 1619 Project. Instead, it is a rhetorical salvo in a *contemporary* battle over the present *ethos* of the nation, a conflict that will be won or lost based on which account of the past dominates public memory in the future. By modifying how Americans remember the beginning of the nation, the contributors hope to reconstruct how average Americans (and especially students) see the nation itself. There is a war unfolding over American identity, and the historical truth has limited rhetorical utility in combatting new myths aimed at exploiting citizens' ignorance of past events. Put differently, the reality of the founding doesn't matter if most people have forgotten (or never learned) that history. What matters is what people *believe* the truth to be. At its core, then, the 1619 Project is a strategic effort to hasten a forgetting that is already underway and reengineer cultural memory. As such, the project offers a unique opportunity for a critical evaluation of the links between invention and memory – two of the five canons of rhetoric, and the most enigmatic of them all.

The concept of mnemohistory, pioneered by Egyptologist Jan Assmann, is a rhetorical retelling of history with the aim of preserving or manipulating public memory. Thus, mnemohistory illuminates the interplay between invention and memory in the

² See in particular Peter Woods' *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project*. New York City, New York, Encounter Books, 2020.

³ See Donnalie Jamnah and Kendra Grissom's "Five Years of Teaching 'The 1619 Project'", Sept. 11, 2024. <https://1619education.org/blog/five-years-teaching-1619-project> Accessed March 19, 2025.

construction of a collective *ethos* or national identity and its rootedness in the past.

Throughout his work, Assmann explicates the idea of mnemohistory through a critical reading of two parallel historical narratives: the biblical account of the Jewish exodus from Egypt and the histories that chronicle the Amarna period of Egypt and its mysterious pharaoh Akhenaten. The differences between these competing accounts of overlapping events are largely a product of a contest between the needs of two different cultures in which the historians of each fashioned cultural memory in ways that supported self-serving notions of national identity.

In what follows, I argue that the recent debate over the 1619 Project is similarly an instance of mnemohistory – one where two different cultures with a shared history retroactively create competing narratives of memory that affirm their own present self-conceptions as a collective. Further, I show how mnemohistorical invention is a rhetorical technique akin to propaganda – a tactic that helps advance the revolutionary aims of modern mass movements in politics. The 1619 Project is ripe for critical analysis as an example of mnemohistory because while the contest between Jewish and Egyptian memories of the Amarna and exodus sagas played out millennia ago, the 1619 Project offers a rare instance where scholars can observe a mnemohistorical conflict unfolding in real time. Thus, it offers a key reminder that historiography, while often concerned with producing an accurate record of the past, also serves as a rhetorical strategy for processing traumatic historical experiences in such a way that public memory enables an affirmative notion of collective identity. In short, there is an important critical distinction between

history and mnemohistory: the former tries to record the truth of the past, while the latter is both a product and creator of the public *memory* of historical experience.

This study investigates how a battle over collective *ethos* is fought through the invention of narratives that work to modify individuals' memories of the past. I begin with an elaboration of the concept of mnemohistory through the analysis of primary and secondary sources that offer competing accounts of the exodus and the Amarna period of Egyptian history. Then, I explicate the uses of collective memory for the propaganda of mass movements in revolutionary politics. This, in turn, allows a rhetorical interpretation of the 1619 Project that demonstrates its status as mnemohistorical propaganda and its utility in understanding the link between *ethos*, invention, and memory.

Moses, the Hyksos, and Akhenaten

Most readers will be familiar with the biblical story of Exodus. Jacob, son of Isaac, had twelve sons, the youngest and most favored of whom was Joseph. Out of jealousy for their father's love, the eleven brothers sold Joseph into slavery. He ended up in Egypt and rose to a prominent position in the government and administration. Years later, he was reunited with his father and brothers. Out of gratitude for Joseph's wise management of a drought and famine, the pharaoh provides Joseph's family with choice land. This is the biblical account of how the Hebrews arrived in Egypt. After Joseph's death, the book of Exodus tells us that the Jews somehow fell out of favor with the Egyptians, who enslaved them and put them to manual labor.

A few centuries later, Moses was a Jew who was raised in the house of pharaoh after one of the royal daughters found him as an infant, floating in a basket on the river.

Somehow (the book of Exodus is unclear on the matter), Moses grew up conscious of his Jewish identity. He sympathized with the plight of his people and murdered an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew laborer. In self-exile from Egypt to avoid punishment, God spoke to Moses and revealed that he would be God's instrument in freeing the Jews from slavery. After a series of tense meetings with the (unnamed) pharaoh, and after the Egyptians were subjected to ten deadly plagues by God, Moses finally led his people out of Egypt, through the divided Red Sea and into the desert, where the Jews would aimlessly wander for forty years before entering the promised land that would become Israel.

Modern archeologists often cast doubt upon this narrative by pointing to the lack of artifactual evidence of such a large group of people wandering in the desert at that time. But there are historical phenomena that suggest there is some veracity in the account. The Hyksos, for example, were a Semitic people who ruled Egypt for a time, probably between about 1650 BC and 1550 BC. Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the third century BC, wrote a historical account of the succession of Egyptian kings and pharaohs. His text only exists in fragments preserved by later writers.⁴ But Josephus conveys that Manetho translated "hyksos" as "king-shepherds" and characterized them as a group of outsiders who harshly ruled Egypt (Manetho 85). Eventually, the native Egyptians rebelled. Manetho claims that a king named "Mispthagmuthosis" led the revolt, and his son "Thummosis"⁵ (notice the latter

⁴ In fact, Josephus gives his own colorful account of similar events in his text *Against Apion* (1.26-1.35) that directly engages with Manetho's account (and differs considerably). Another highly embellished account of the exodus can be found in Book I, Chapter VI of *The Talmud's "Biblical History."* Other retellings can be found in the works of Strabo and Tacitus.

⁵ This Thummosis may be a reference to the pharaoh Thutmose III, who reigned from 1481-1425 BC, and who curiously lost his oldest son prematurely – like the pharaoh of the Exodus narrative. While the Exodus pharaoh's son died as a result of the final plague that killed all the firstborn sons of Egypt, the circumstances of Thutmose's son's death were not recorded.

part of the name's similarity to "Moses") led the military attempt to drive them out (Manetho 87). Although that effort failed, according to Manetho they ultimately settled on a treaty that resulted in the Hyksos' departure: "the Shepherds, with their possessions and households complete, no fewer than 240,000 persons,⁶ left Egypt and journeyed over the desert into Syria" (89). According to Josephus, Manetho elsewhere referred to the Hyksos as "captives," which Josephus suggests could be because Joseph (father of the Jews in Egypt) arrived there as a captive (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.14).

The Hyksos' presence in and departure from Egypt has been validated by historians and archaeologists, and the parallels between their story and the Exodus narrative should be obvious. The Hyksos, though, predated the era in which the exodus would have occurred by a century or three. Obviously, in the second millennium BC, most history was transmitted orally rather than by writing. This means that for historiographers of late antiquity (like Manetho), it would not be unusual to erroneously approximate the date of events from a thousand years prior by a hundred years or more. Still, the important point here is that when history *was* written down in the ancient world, it was done for distinctly rhetorical reasons: to unify a people, to legitimize their claims to territory, and to acquaint people with a narrative that traces their ancestry to legacies of greatness. This explains why the Jews were the heroes in the Hebrew account of the exodus, and the native Egyptians were the heroes of the Hyksos story as told by Manetho the Egyptian priest.

⁶ The Exodus narrative holds that the number of Hebrews who departed was much greater – 600,000 men, plus women and children.

There is another event in Egyptian history that bears tantalizing connections to the Jewish account of the exodus. This one involves the pharaoh Amenhotep IV who ruled in the mid-fourteenth century BC – a reign that comes much closer to coinciding with modern estimates of when the Jewish exodus would have occurred. Amenhotep IV's father followed the polytheistic cults of Egyptian royal tradition. When Amenhotep III died, though, and Amenhotep IV took the throne (possibly with a co-regent at first), he initiated a radical campaign to rid Egypt of cultic polytheism. He honored only one god – the Aten, embodied by the sun. He changed his name from Amenhotep (translated as “[the god] Amun is satisfied”) to Akhenaten (translated as “effective for the Aten”), cast out the old priests and scribes from his courts, and moved the seat of the monarchy from Thebes up the Nile, northward to Amarna.

Akhenaten had a relatively short reign. After his death, there appear to have been very brief reigns by two pharaohs. In those years, Atenism was rejected by the regime. Akhenaten's images were destroyed, traditional cultic worship was restored, Akhenaten's name was struck from the records, and the city of Amarna was abandoned. His young son named Tutankhaten took the throne around age 9, and his name was changed to erase the Atenist faith of his father (evident in the last two syllables of the boy's name). The young king was renamed “Tutankhamun” – a moniker that bears testimony to the traditional faith of his grandfather. King Tut's youth at the time of ascension probably limited his ability to resist the many adult advisors who likely pressed for a total return to traditional polytheism and erasure of his father's legacy.

Akhenaten has often been compared to Moses for three reasons. First, his dates can be loosely aligned with the biblical chronology of the exodus. Second, like Moses of scripture, Akhenaten seems to have been the progenitor of the first documented attempt at monotheism (or perhaps monolatry or henotheism) in history. Third, the fact that Akhenaten's name and legacy were erased in the years after his rule could offer a possible explanation for why the pharaoh with whom Moses contested was unnamed (an odd occurrence given that the Bible accurately names other historical pharaohs who arise in the course of action). For these reasons, some scholars (notably Sigmund Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*) have speculated that the tale of Moses somehow grew out of cultural memories of Akhenaten and the Amarna episode.⁷ Could these theories be true? As I will show in the case of the 1619 Project, questioning the mnemohistory's fidelity to historical fact distracts from the function and purpose of competing memories of the past. Regardless, I proceed on the assumption that the thematic overlap in the stories suggests there was historical transmission of *some* traumatic event that was relevant to both Egypt and the Jews – even if the details of that event are remembered differently by the parties involved. Most importantly, *how* the event is remembered by a particular group (whether Jews or Egyptians) tends to reflect the internal needs of the community doing the remembering. This dynamic between what Assmann calls “cultural memory,” and “mnemohistory” refers to a style of collective remembrance. I now turn to a more thorough discussion of these concepts in reference to the Akhenaten/Exodus affair.

⁷ Freud identifies Moses with Ramose, who served as Akhenaten's chief vizier. Freud suggests that after Akhenaten's death, the backlash against proto-monotheistic Atenism forced Ramose to flee Egypt. He asserts that the story of Exodus is a Jewish remembering of Ramose's flight.

Mnemohistory: Ethos, Trauma, and Narrative Inversion

In *From Akhenaten to Moses*, Assmann defines cultural memory as “that form of collective memory that enables a society to transmit its central values and patterns of orientation to future generations and, by doing so, to continue its identity over the passing of time” (84). A few elements of this definition need emphasis. First, the remembering in question is a *collective* one and this indicates that shared memories are refined and advanced through communicative interaction, and negotiated through speech or writing. Secondly, the central purpose of the remembering relates to *ethos*: it is a means to generate a consensus among people of a particular group as to *who they are*. Finally, the goal of this process is to create a temporal continuity; establishing a shared history (and thus a collective identity in the present) helps to bind a people and ensure that their culture will be transmitted forward in time. Remembering the past, then, primarily serves the interest of social stability in the present and the future.

It is also critical to recall that mnemohistory is not the same thing as historiography. Ideally, the recording of history aims to accurately convey past events to people in the present and future (many of whom do not have direct experience or memory of those events). In short, historiography’s primary concern is truth. But mnemohistory does not aim to create a truthful or accurate account of what happened. Rather, it is a psychological technique of invention by which a people remember past events in a way that affirms the needs of the collective. In *Moses the Egyptian*, Assmann explains that “Mnemohistory is a reception theory applied to history. But ‘reception’ is not to be understood here in the narrow sense of transmitting and receiving. The present is ‘haunted’ by the past and the

past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present” (9). The intersection of the memories related to the Hyksos, Thummosis, Moses, the Exodus, Akhenaten, and the Amarna episode – assuming that they represent different recollections of a single historical era as remembered by different groups people – serve as sites to observe how cultural memory and mnemohistory played out in antiquity. The 1619 Project presents a live example of how these dynamics unfold in the contemporary era. But before turning to the 1619 Project, three theoretical components of mnemohistory must be underscored: its role in the manufacture of collective identities or *ethos*, its status as a discursive response to trauma, and its reliance on counter-memory and narrative inversion.

First, the matter of *ethos*. To frame mnemohistory in rhetorical terms, it is a mobilization of strategies for invention and techniques of memory in order to create a narrative that strengthens or modifies a collective identity. Indeed, *ethos* or identity plays a critical role in mnemohistorical discourse. Assmann links “the dynamics of cultural memory” with “the ongoing process of shaping an identity by reconstructing its past” (*Moses the Egyptian* 14). He continues:

If ‘we are what we remember,’ we are the stories that we are able to tell about ourselves. [...] The same concept of a narrative organization of memory and self-construction applies to the collective level. Here, the stories are called ‘myths.’ They are the stories which a group, a society, or a culture lives by. Myths in the sense of traditional narratives play a very important role in the formation of ethnic identity.” (15)

The experience of trauma also plays a considerable role in the process of cultural memory and mnemohistory. Living through traumatic events often changes our view of ourselves. In other words, traumatic experience upsets what had been a settled sense of who we are. This calls for a kind of rhetorical triage where inventing mnemohistory serves a

form of crisis communication that reintegrates a disrupted sense of collective identity. The Exodus and the Amarna sagas – whatever the facts actually were – were undoubtedly traumatic. As Assmann notes, Akhenaten’s sweeping program of reform, which forbid the worship of the traditional deities except the Aten, would have been especially difficult for the Egyptians living at the time (*Moses the Egyptian* 25). Similarly, the period of Hyksos rule – occupying outsiders who dealt with the native Egyptians harshly – would have been traumatic for the national consciousness. In reference to the Exodus specifically, four centuries of slavery followed by forty years wandering the desert also would have been a source of trauma for the Hebrews. Ancient Egyptian literature makes no discernable reference to the events as described in Exodus, but this is not surprising, given that a crippling defeat at the hands of their slaves would have caused significant psychological trauma for New Kingdom Egyptians of the Thutmoseid dynasty (who rightly considered themselves to be a world power). Further, if the Jews didn’t leave Egypt voluntarily – but were thrown out in a manner similar to Manetho’s account of the Hyksos’ departure – this, too, would be a source of trauma for the Jews. Assmann suggests that at the collective level, especially traumatic experiences can be preserved through mnemonic “encryption” rather than conscious memory. Through encryption, a collective experience is preserved in the subconscious, sometimes transmuted into symbols, archetypes or myths (*Moses the Egyptian* 39). Assmann also illustrates that “The Amarna case shows that suppression or encryption renders an original experience vulnerable to many kinds of distortion and transformation rather than preserving it in a pure state” (39). This dynamic will prove illuminating when it comes to the analysis of the 1619 Project.

The third key characteristic of mnemohistory for these purposes is its tendency toward narrative inversion and counter-memory. Narrative inversion is a strategy for combatting or manipulating competing accounts of past events; specifically, the memory of people outside the collective whose narratives may undermine that group's sense of self. Rhetorically speaking, narrative inversion is a powerful strategy. Rather than refuting the accepted details of past events altogether, it presents a similar account that merely offers a different interpretation of them. Thus, it neutralizes the traditional narrative by turning history into a game of he-said-she-said. Counter-memory is the product of narrative inversions and it aims to neutralize the rhetorical power of (usually dominant) historical accounts that threaten the integrity of a culture, people, or society. If we compare the stories of the Exodus, Amarna, and the Hyksos, their shared reference to some past event is most prominent in the way that they diametrically oppose one another. The Hyksos, it seems, were a foreign occupying force from which the Egyptians ultimately had to free themselves. In contrast, in the Jewish account, the Hebrews were not invaders, but captives. While the Egyptians eventually threw the Hyksos out to wander the desert; the Jews had to fight to *leave* Egypt against the pharaoh's will. In historical accounts of Akhenaten, we find an antihero who *left* the capital and betrayed his own people and eliminated their traditions; after his death, the Egyptians made every attempt to ensure his legacy would be *forgotten*. In the biblical account of Moses, we find a hero who broke his allegiance to a people who were not his own, *returned* to the capital to liberate his own people, and then gave them the fundamentals of a new tradition in the desert. His people – the Jews – have taken great pains to ensure that his legacy is *remembered and preserved*.

Assmann notes that “the most effective way of erasing a [collective] memory is by superimposing on it a counter-memory,” later explaining that “the principle of normative inversion or the construction of cultural otherness [...] imagines a culture based upon the inverted mirror image of that order and, by this very procedure of retrospective inversion, turns the past into a ‘foreign country’” (*Moses the Egyptian* 58, 67). These strategies underscore what is essentially a rhetorical approach to “history” – one where facticity is far less important than inventing new memories and imbedding them in the collective consciousness. In brief, mnemohistory is not simply a discursive phenomenon; it is a distinctly political one. Inversion is a mnemotechnique for *forgetting* elements of historical events that run counter to the maintenance of shared sense of identity and replacing them with new interpretations and invented narratives that contribute to “the ongoing process of shaping an identity by reconstructing its past” (*Moses the Egyptian* 14). Understanding these characteristics of mnemohistory allows an explication of their utility in political propaganda that helps build a revolutionary mass movement.

Mass Politics, Propaganda, and History

The fomentation of mass political movements of one variety or another is a hallmark of modernity, as demonstrated through the revolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century. The “success” of those mass movements in rising to the level of political viability was a result of technical transformations in media and communication. These advances also changed the transmission of the past. In *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch asserts that “our collective understanding of the past faltered at the very moment when our technical ability to re-create the past reached an unprecedented level of

development” (112). These developments hastened cultural changes that fueled the rise of propaganda. There is much scholarship from the fields of rhetoric and communication that addresses the definition of propaganda, but the work of two theorists of modern society are especially conducive to an analysis of the 1619 Project as mnemohistory. One is Jacques Ellul, a philosopher of propaganda (and many other things), and the other is Eric Hoffer, whose book *The True Believer* offers a description of the psychological and rhetorical character of mass political movements;

For the purposes of rhetoric, propaganda can be defined as mediated communication that aims to mobilize people for mass political activity. Obviously, the word *propaganda* has decidedly negative connotations, and these are due in large part to the distinctive appeals that propaganda uses to persuade its audience. Both *ethos* and *pathos* play key roles in that process (the former in the presence of the charismatic speaker, the latter in the special emphasis placed on emotional manipulation). But a certain use of *logos* is perhaps the defining feature of propaganda. By *logos*, I simply mean the way that a given instance of communication makes use of facts, reason, and truth. This may be surprising, as the popular conception of propaganda holds that it is fact-free, irrational, and untrue. If only it were so simple: messages that contain *no* truth, or that ignore obvious realities, or mock the intelligence of the audience would be immediately recognizable as propaganda, thereby ensuring that it cannot fulfill its rhetorical objectives. Instead, truthful, factual information is central to propaganda’s success.

In his book *Propaganda*, Ellul elucidates this distinction, explaining that while falsehood is also a critical ingredient of propagandistic messaging, the falsehoods almost

always reside in the *intention and interpretation of facts*, not in the facts themselves (53). The problem, for Ellul, is that “it is exactly here that [the lie] cannot be detected. If one falsifies a fact, one may be confronted with unquestionable proof to the contrary. [...] But no proof can be furnished where motivations and intentions are concerned or interpretation of a fact is involved” (57). To illustrate this with an example, it’s one thing to say that in America, the criminal justice system incarcerates a larger percentage of African-Americans than their share of the general population (a fact). It’s quite another thing to explain *why* that is the case – and any such explanation cannot be as readily proven as the factual claim that it interprets. This example demonstrates that *logos* is an integral component of propaganda: it reflects a fidelity to truth in its deployment of facts, but it simultaneously rejects *logos* through its tendency toward subjective explanations of factual information. Good propaganda is invisible to the people because it “is interwoven with facts. The mechanism used here is to slip from the facts which would demand factual judgment, to moral terrain and to ethical judgment” (58).

A final characteristic of propaganda is that the remedy it recommends for the problems it attacks must be one that can never be achieved, whether it is “a declaration of peace, of truth, of social justice” (59). This is because the architects of a mass movement do not intend to solve the problem that their propaganda uses to foment political action. Rather, the mass movement is a means to destabilize an existing order, and because the goals of the mass movement are unattainable or utopian, the unstable political conditions that the mass movement ushers in must be sustained – lest its organizers accept their share of guilt for failing to achieve the unachievable goals their propaganda promised.

Some propaganda efforts accomplish their true rhetorical objective – catalyzing a mass movement to destabilize society, thereby fueling the organizers’ rise to political power. Thus, some discussion of the general dynamics of mass movements is in order. When mnemohistory is involved, mass movements reflect specific assumptions about the relations between past, present, and future. At least in terms of their forward-facing elements, mass political movements present themselves as being primarily concerned with the future. Indeed, in its early stages, a mass movement will paint the present as a unique, hopeful opportunity to bring about change and usher in a better future. However, Hoffer notes that this optimism about the present is, in fact, the first stage in a propaganda effort that will ultimately shackle the present to the past: “At its inception a mass movement [...] sees in the established institutions and privileges an encroachment of a senile, vile past on a virginal present” (86). But later, “[t]he present – the original objective – is shoved off the stage and its place taken by posterity – the future. More still: the present is driven back as if it were an unclean thing and lumped in with the detested past. The battle line is now drawn between things that are and have been, and the things that are not yet” (87). This demonization of the past performs a critical role for the audience of propaganda, and it is here that *pathos* enters the equation. People will not take the radical action necessary to destabilize a society – especially an affluent and strong one – without having a negative emotional relation to present circumstances.

Every society in the world has various economic strata: in the western world, this usually means a small number of wealthy individuals, a moderate number of comparatively poor people, and a large group of people in the middle. For obvious reasons, mass

movements which aim to disrupt the social order begin by targeting the people at the bottom whose grievances can be exploited in the name of utopian abstractions like “social justice.” However, the early advocates for forming a mass movement come from the disaffected minority of a privileged social class. Historically, those disaffected revolutionaries are members of a leisured intellectual caste – a group that Hoffer calls “men of words with a grievance” (161). This group, frustrated by their distance from the seat of political power but convinced of their right to it, are those who manufacture the propaganda that mobilizes the lower ranks of the social order. Those people – whom Hoffer unfortunately calls “the inferior elements of a nation” – are pushed into action most easily through emotional manipulation (30). The most effective means to do so is through propaganda that inflames their misery.

To that end, Hoffer says that “not only does a mass movement depict the present as mean and miserable – it deliberately makes it so” (87). And a population that is already disaffected is not hard to convince. This is the moment when those people are almost ready for radical political action. Propaganda finally takes them to the point that they “are wholly without reverence toward the present. They see their lives and the present as spoiled beyond remedy and they are ready to waste and wreck both [...] They also crave to dissolve their spoiled, meaningless selves in some soul-stirring spectacular communal undertaking” (30). At that point, mnemohistorical propaganda becomes especially effective: the architects of the mass movement take pains to demonstrate that their suffering in the present is not mere bad luck or temporary circumstances. Instead, the propagandists forge an indelible, causal relationship between the intolerable present and

the miserable past. They do this by shaping a counter-memory that challenges the mythologized origins of the current order. A narrative inversion of those origins, retold and repeated, stimulates a collective forgetting of the consensus view of history, replacing those memories with a mnemohistory which, while familiar in terms of historical details, also characterizes the past as a series of events *designed* for the purpose of inflicting the present miseries of the public. When the counter-memories are disseminated and have taken hold in a critical share of the collective, history is conquered by a counter-mnemonic inversion. With the insufferable present now viewed as the poisoned continuation of the corrupt past, the existing order is stripped of its legitimacy, and thus, its stability. The scene is now set to force the transfer of political power: the main aim of the mass movement.

The Counter-Memorial Claims and Aims of The 1619 Project

The 1619 Project was a series of essays commissioned by the *New York Times* to mark what they considered a historic occasion: the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first ship containing captured Africans to British North America. Given that the core claim of the project was that the arrival of those Africans on American shores constituted the “true” founding of the United States of America, the collection served as a vehicle for a collective public remembrance on what would be the four-hundredth birthday of the nation in 2019. Initially distributed as an insert in the newspaper and online, the project generated enough interest that its organizers later published an expanded book including the original essays and previously unpublished work on the same theme. It is from that volume that the following quotations are drawn.

Prior to analyzing the rhetorical functions of the text, we must begin with a broader explication of its central claims. The central organizer of the project was Nikole Hannah-Jones, who explains its genesis as the result of her own spiritual longing. She recalls her befuddlement as a youth when she noticed the conspicuous absence of black people in the popular historical accounts of the American founding. She says that she “searched desperately to find [her]self in the American story [she] was taught, to see [her] humanity – [black Americans’] humanity – reflected back to [her]” (Hannah-Jones xviii). Embarking on a search for the African-Americans who she felt had been left out of the story of the nation’s birth, Hannah-Jones discovered that “African people had lived here, on the land that in 1776 would form the United States, since the *White Lion* dropped anchor in the year 1619. They’d arrived one year before the iconic ship [The Mayflower] carrying the English people who got the credit for building it all” (xix). As she learned about the role of blacks in early America, she came to believe that their absence in the conventional history of the nation “was not an innocuous omission” (xix). In fact, Hannah-Jones and her colleagues repeatedly characterize black Americans as the “true” founders of the nation. The 1619 Project, then, was Hannah-Jones’ attempt to assert “the central role that slavery and anti-Blackness [sic] played in the development of our society and its institutions” (xxi). The upshot of her project is that America was deliberately *founded* as a racist society, organized in such a way to empower white Americans at the expense and suffering of black Americans. A secondary but key premise is that whatever good there may be in contemporary America is due to the efforts of black people: “The truth is that as much

democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of black resistance and visions for equality” (33).

If those are the central claims of the project, its stated aims are decidedly mnemohistorical. Hannah-Jones complains that “the American public has an outdated and vague sense of the past,” lamenting that the “mainstream understanding of American history [...] is still wedded to a mythology of our founders as unimpeachable heroes and our founding as a divine event” (xxi). The 1619 Project, then, is meant to diminish the dignity of the founding of 1776 in the eyes of Americans – to “impeach” its heroes and to negate the idea of America as a divinely-ordained nation. Hannah-Jones’ stated goals are to “bring slavery and the contributions of Black [sic] Americans from the margins of the American story to the center *where they belong*” and to “reframe our understanding of U.S. history by considering 1619 as our country’s origin point, the birth of our defining contradictions, the seed of so much of what has made us unique” (emphasis added, xxii). In her own words, Hannah-Jones hopes to “*force a confrontation* with our past and the foundations on which this country was built” (emphasis added, xxii). These passages are key because they show that the 1619 Project seeks to provoke a dialogue with pre-existing, normative tellings of history for the purpose of competing with them, and ultimately, displacing them.

While the 1619 contributors often justify their retellings of the founding with the now-familiar appeal to the subjectivist and relativist essence of all history, they don’t simply assert their narrative as one legitimate account among others. Importantly, and in contradiction with their claims that all history is subjective, the contributors insist that their account of the founding is a *truer* account than the common “mythology.” For example,

Hannah-Jones seems to dare her readers to reject her narrative: “Our myths have not served us well. [...] 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*” (emphasis added, xxxii). Here, Hannah-Jones finally discloses her true objective. Her aims aren’t merely academic, ensuring that schoolchildren get her more accurate account of the birth of the nation. Rather, her historical retelling is precisely *a tool for fomenting societal change*. This invites us to recall Hoffer’s description of the role of propaganda in cultivating mass political movements. As he warned, we see Hannah-Jones shove the present off the stage and replace it with the future. The passage from Hoffer is worth quoting again: “the present is driven back as if it were an unclean thing and lumped in with the detested past. The battle line is now drawn between things that are and have been, and the things that are not yet” (87).

Interpreting the 1619 Project as propaganda in pursuit of revolutionary futurity, we see a familiar pattern. The United States, founded in the interests of slavery and anti-black racism, was evil from the start. That corrupt past determined our present. The nation that was *designed* on racist principles necessarily *remains* a fundamentally racist society. The contemporary United States is no less racist than the nation was in 1619, and it is no less morally-compromised – and so, it must be dismantled. The only ethical way to inhabit the present nation, then, is to destroy its institutions, traditions, and norms – in short, to destroy the identity of the nation as a sacrifice on behalf of a future, better order, founded anew on principles of “social justice” and “anti-racism.” The wrecking ball that facilitates the demolition of national identity is the alternate history that the 1619 Project asserts – a

history that aims to cast America as essentially evil in the minds of everyday Americans. Only when a majority accepts that idea will they tolerate a mass movement that aims to dismantle the nation, and only when that work is complete can the new revolutionary order fully emerge.

With the claims and aims of the 1619 Project now elucidated, we can begin a rhetorical analysis of its status as mnemohistory. Hannah-Jones directs the reader's attention not just to history, but to how we *remember* it: "while history *is* what happened, it is also, just as important, how we *think* about what happened and what we unearth and *choose to remember* about what happened" (latter emphasis added, xxvi). But who is this "we" that she refers to? As illustrated by the competing accounts of ancient interactions between the Egyptians and Semitic peoples through the accounts of the Hyksos, Akhenaten, and the Hebrew exodus, mnemohistory is designed to meet the needs of a particular group of people. In particular, mnemohistory works to develop or preserve a collective sense of identity. That's why Hebrew writers record a triumphant exodus after winning their freedom and Egyptian sources recall native Egyptians running a ruthless, occupying Semitic power into exile in the desert. So, when it comes to the narrative of the American founding, we must characterize the different groups who, despite a shared history, nevertheless have divergent notions of in-group identity (and thus, require different histories to shore up their respective *ethoi*).

Just as the Hyksos/Exodus narratives pit two cohabitating nations against one another (i.e., the Egyptians and the Hebrews or semitic peoples), so does the 1619 Project. Of course, Americans are one people. But in a multiculturalist society which encourages

individuals to maintain and express minoritarian ethnic or racial identities as their primary loyalty (rather than to the nation at large), it comes as no surprise that subgroups within the American populace come into political conflict with one another. It is undoubtedly true that the traditional account of the American founding forefronts white males of English heritage, but this should come as no surprise, given that black Americans were either enslaved or otherwise politically disenfranchised in the late eighteenth century. However, rather than simply accept the historical truth that the intellectual and political founding of America did not involve any meaningful contingent of African-Americans, the 1619 Project asserts a counternarrative that posits that the unheralded contributions made by blacks in the form of slave labor exceeded the contributions of the English-Americans who Hannah-Jones complains “got all the credit” for the foundation of the United States. Thus, the 1619 Project doubles the victim status of American blacks – not only were they victimized in the racist past by unpaid labor and brutality, they are victimized in the present as mainstream culture denies their pivotal role in the genesis of the nation. In effect, Hannah-Jones and her colleagues assert a black nationalism – the idea that African-Americans embody a suppressed nation within a nation. If blacks constitute one people in the mnemohistorical conflict, the other nation is obviously non-blacks (particularly whites) who allegedly participate in and benefit from the ongoing suppression of blacks and who *do* “see themselves reflected back to them” in the traditional “mythology” of the founding.

Despite the fact that there are two nations or peoples engaged in rhetorical warfare over the historical reality of the birth of the United States, they have also shared a place in space and time. It is true that African-Americans have been a part of the American story

since the beginning. But due to their smaller numbers and their enslavement, they played a decidedly less prominent role than European-Americans in the early history of the nation. Thus, the 1619 Project is a vehicle for establishing a counter-memory in the collective mind of Americans.

In defining *counter-memory*, Assmann describes a memory “that puts elements to the fore that are, or tend to be, forgotten in the official memory. [...] But counter-memory goes a step further in that it explicitly contradicts another memory. ‘You remember it this way, but I remember it differently because I remember what you have forgotten’” (*Moses the Egyptian* 12). The inversions that characterize mnemohistorical conflict should now be clear in the 1619 Project. The official memory of the American founding places the event in the eighteenth century, remembers the particular contributions of white men to a liberatory revolution that culminated in the birth of a nation founded on the principles of equality which ground the moral decency that defines the nation today. The 1619 Project, obviously, tells precisely the opposite story: it places the founding in the (forgotten) seventeenth century, a nation born in enslavement and indebted to the thankless contributions of black men and women, who were victimized by racist white men who created the United States to protect the interests of institutionalized inequality and bigotry – principles which define the moral travesty of the nation as it exists today. As Assmann further explains, the purpose of such normative inversions is to alienate people from their past, and thus, their collective identity: “The principle of normative inversion [...] imagines a culture based upon the inverted mirror image of th[e existing] order and, by this very procedure of retrospective inversion, turns the past into a ‘foreign country’” (*Moses the Egyptian* 67). If one is to

understand the revolutionary inclination of the 1619 Project, one cannot underestimate the psychic impact that these inversions are designed to have on the public mind: rather than being born in the *dissolution* of the colonists' bonds to the English monarchy, America's birth is moved back in time to the moment of the *institution* of black bondage at the hands of American colonists.

Bondage, then, becomes the characteristic feature of American life – in both the past and the present. As Hannah-Jones explains, “We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became *the most American of all*” (emphasis added, 36). Undeniably, there is the historical reality that slavery played a significant role in the early life of the nation. But the idea that bondage remains the central trope of America today is a harder sell. Nevertheless, this is an essential premise for the revolutionary aims of the 1619 Project: the dismantling of traditional American identity requires the public perception that the nation remains morally irredeemable – and that is why the counter-memory that the project fashions repeatedly insists that the nation has made *no* meaningful progress in terms of racial equality since its origin.

How can this be? After all, the United States has made more progress in remediating racial injustice (and at a greater speed) than arguably any nation in the history of the world. Importation of new slaves was banned by 1808. Slavery was abolished in 1863. By 1870, the 14th and 15th Amendments gave black men the right to vote (in law, if not yet in practice). The *Brown* decision of 1954 struck a deadly blow to remaining forms of racial segregation in the south. Ten years later, the Civil Rights Act drove the final nail into the coffin of Jim Crow.

Not only that, it established new policies that resulted in the transfer of wealth to black Americans – policies that were explicitly justified by stressing a need to redress their economic exploitation. The institutionalization of civil rights policies expanded throughout the rest of the twentieth century, with the implementation of “affirmative action” in college admissions and employment.

In our era, with the 2020 death of George Floyd, a black man who died in police custody, racial politics took on an urgency that rivaled that of the civil rights era. People across the country demonstrated and rioted for months against a “systemic racism” that defines the United States – riots that some commentators dubbed the “1619 Riots,” a title that Nikole Hannah-Jones readily and tellingly embraced. In response, institutions created even more programs to remedy America’s legacy on race (Morton). “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” policies (affirmative action on steroids) were implemented across American institutions. “Critical Race Theory” (which positions all non-whites as subjugated victims and all whites as oppressors) began to inform the curricular design at all levels of American education (Karras). In the same way that later generations of ancient Egyptians erased the era of Akhenaten’s rule by chipping his visage off his monuments and striking his name from official records, the federal government joined in erasing critical monuments and markers of American history: “Black Lives Matter Plaza” opened in Washington, DC. The Smithsonian created an exhibit criticizing the alleged cultural characteristics of whiteness (Koop). Memorials to the confederate cause – which served to reunite the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War – were torn down. Statues of George Floyd were erected. “Columbus Day” (which celebrates the discovery of the Americas by the famous Italian

explorer) became “Indigenous People’s Day” (which draws citizens’ attention to the suffering that western colonialism inflicted on natives). “Juneteenth,” (which marks the day that former slaves in Texas received news of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation) was inaugurated as a new federal holiday. All these are examples of what Assmann calls “institutionalized mnemonics” – attempts by the existing order to fix a particular memory in the mind of the collective (*From Akhenaten to Moses* 37).⁸ But after all of this “progress” – which if nothing else, reflects a great societal concern for reconciling the trauma imposed by segregation and slavery – how can the 1619 Project insist that *no* progress has been made?

The answer lies in the revolutionary dimensions of the 1619’s mnemohistorical aggression. Hannah-Jones admitted that the aim of her project was to create a new and better future society. This depends on the willingness of a majority of Americans to sacrifice both the past and the present to a radical and undefined itinerary for “change.” Thus, the present, too, must be made wholly irredeemable. Admitting *any* progress would concede to audiences that despite some enduring flaws, the existing order might still be perfected – if we give it time. But revolutionary futurity can’t wait. It must begin from a clean slate, which means a complete demolition of the existing order.

Thus, in the chapter of *The 1619 Project* by critical-race guru Ibram X. Kendi, the reader encounters new inversions of history which explicitly deny progress: The election of America’s first black president in 2008 “did not *make* American history [...] [Obama]

⁸ That the federal government enacted all of these mnemonic interventions in the year following Floyd’s death shows that there is a significant contingent of revolutionaries against the current order *within* the current architecture of the state.

became American history – an American history popularly written as the story of incremental and steady racial progress. [...] But [...] when the long sweep of American history is recast as a constant widening of equity and justice, it overlooks this parallel *constant widening of inequity and injustice*” (latter emphasis added, Hannah-Jones 423-424). Kendi continues: “Saying that the nation can progress racially is a necessary statement of hope. Saying that the nation *has* progressed racially is usually a statement of ideology, one that has been used all too often to obscure *the opposite reality of racist progress*” (emphasis added, Hannah-Jones 425). Here, again, we see the distinctive tendency of mnemohistorical propaganda to claim that the *truth* of history is precisely the opposite of what the official narratives hold it to be. And this misrepresentation of the truth – as is so often the case in mnemohistories – is judged by Kendi to be an insidious “failure” of memory: “We sometimes forget – and I would argue it is an intentional forgetting – that the racism we are fighting today was originally conjured to justify working unfree black people” (458). By positioning the “origin” of American racism as a justification for slavery, and by identifying contemporary manifestations of racism as identical with antebellum ones, Kendi indissolubly binds the present to the past – ensuring that both must be jettisoned at once.

In his theorization of mass revolutionary movements, Hoffer nicely distills the aims of Kendi’s mnemohistorical propaganda: “All active mass-movements strive, therefore, to interpose a fact-proof screen between the faithful and the realities of the world” (99). Kendi’s denial of America’s undeniable racial progress is nothing but an attempt to insulate and isolate potential converts to the cause from the truth of history. But as we learned from

Ellul, propaganda can't afford a *complete* denial of reality, which would undermine its effectiveness. Rather, the propagandist offers a new *interpretation* of the facts, thereby moving the matter in question from the arena of historical truth to the realm of moral judgment. Accordingly, the 1619 contributors repeatedly acknowledge the reality of events like the Civil Rights Act, the *Brown* decision, and emancipation. They don't contest their facticity – they simply challenge the *effectiveness* of those interventions. In the best cases, they assert that those historical attempts at reconciliation were completely ineffective, and in the worse cases, the contributors interpret those efforts as cynical attempts to repackage and revitalize racism in the face of changing social conditions. Ultimately, these rhetorical manipulations affirm Hoffer's insight about the effectiveness of a mass movement: that its narrative "should not be judged by its profundity, sublimity, or the validity of the truth it embodies, but by how thoroughly it insulates the individual from his self and the world as it is" (100). Only when converts to the mass movement are completely alienated from themselves and their reality are they fully prepared to "dissolve their spoiled, meaningless selves in some soul-stirring spectacular communal undertaking" (30) – an undertaking such as the "dismantling" of a "systemically racist" cultural order in the collective pursuit of "social justice," perhaps.

It is true that some propagandizers of the 1619 narrative are consciously inculcating false grievances in their audience – grievances that they strategically and cynically conjured simply to mobilize troops for a revolution that they want to foment for their own selfish purposes. But it is also likely true that many purveyors of the narrative (to say nothing of their target audience) actually *believe* that America was founded to protect

institutional racism, that blacks were the “true founders” of the egalitarian impulse that was grafted into American ideology, and that contemporary American society remains as systemically racist as it ever was. The fact that these premises are incorrect doesn’t make them unbelievable for those with a need. As explained above, the 1619 Project was developed as a mnemohistory for a nation *within* a nation: African-Americans. Their previous subjugation and more recent marginalization from the centers of political agency has resulting in an ongoing sentiment that they are, in some sense, strangers in their own house. America, some of them feel, doesn’t wholly belong to them. Or, they don’t want their share of ownership in an America that doesn’t identify a primary role for blacks in the genesis of the nation. Whether these feelings of alienation are still justified after the many attempts at racial redress over the last century is beyond the scope of this study. Either way, the historical suffering of black Americans (like the historical sufferings of the Egyptians under the Hyksos, or the Hebrews under pharaonic bondage) has undeniably caused some real trauma in the African-American psyche. This is important because as Assmann explains, mnemohistorical modifications of the past are a strategy for traumatized peoples to come to terms with legacies of suffering and to develop an integrated, affirmative sense of collective identity (*Moses the Egyptian* 25). On a generous reading, this, too, is a core aim of the 1619 Project: it is an attempt at telling the past differently to imagine that African-Americans played a more critical role than they did in the founding of the nation. One is left to assume that the contributors to the project believed that by “seeing themselves” featured more prominently in the early American mythology, contemporary blacks might experience more enfranchisement and ownership over the

nation than they otherwise would. Nevertheless, although it is tempting to assume that the purpose of such enfranchisement would be to facilitate a more complete integration into American society as it currently exists, we must remember that Hannah-Jones and other writers clarify that their true purpose is to authorize radicals who accept the project's premises to dismantle that society (which remains fundamentally flawed) and build a new one. Paradoxically, the contributors seek to empower readers in this way by cultivating their resentments and enflaming their grievances. This paradox gives rise to a final question addressed in the conclusion to this study: given the role that propagandizing and antagonisms play in achieving the rhetorical aims of the 1619 Project, can the project really be understood as a liberatory one?

The Past as Present: Perpetual Bondage and Prospects for an Exodus

The choice to illustrate the concept of mnemohistory through recourse to the narratives of the Hyksos, Akhenaten, and the Hebrew exodus was not arbitrary. Just as all mnemohistory inverts the master tropes of a given society (especially in service of a revolutionary mass movement), the 1619 Project and the oppositional narratives of American black nationalism don't merely invert the typical American "mythology," they also invert the biblical tropes that offered the prototype for the nation's liberation from British tyranny and oppression. For example, 1619 contributor Matthew Desmond offers the anthology a chapter entitled "Capitalism" that frames America's history of racial conflict in the religious terminology of the Old Testament. After agreeing with other scholars that the "DNA" of American capitalism is "imprinted" by slavery, Desmond extends the metaphor: the task currently before us, he suggests, is "tracing the unsettling and often unrecognized

lines of descent by which America's *national sin* is even now *being visited upon the third and fourth generations*" (emphasis added, Hannah-Jones 167).⁹ Of course, one cannot change one's DNA, and similarly, as the Bible teaches, the original sin can never be erased or atoned for – it can only be forgiven by a divine messiah. The parallel, then, is that just as human nature cannot be redeemed in this world, neither can the contemporary United States be redeemed from its founding racism.

Hannah-Jones herself, in her concluding chapter to the anthology, also hints that the master metaphor of 1619 is adapted from the biblical Exodus narrative: "This is our national truth: America would not be America without the wealth from black labor, without black striving, black ingenuity, black resistance. So much [...] that draws the world to us, comes forth from black Americans, from the people *born on the water*" (emphasis added, 475). Of course, the primary reference in the italicized passage of the preceding quotation is the Middle Passage – the brutal journey that African slaves made across the Atlantic Ocean to reach America. But taken in concert with other recurring 1619 themes of bondage and liberation, sin and salvation, and the sacred and the profane, a people "born on the water" necessarily brings to mind the story of Moses, the Hebrew baby who was plucked from the Nile, raised in the house of Pharaoh, and later led his people out of the house of bondage, giving them a new land, a new nation, and a new law. Understood through this lens, when Hannah-Jones mentions "*our* national truth," we must take her to mean the nation of black Americans exclusively, given the Jewish separatism that began with their flight from Egypt and continues to the present day.

⁹ See Exodus 20:5, Exodus 34:6-7, Numbers 14:18, and Deuteronomy 5:9.

But can this *particular* mnemohistory – one that characterizes contemporary African-Americans as still in bondage, despite the myriad historical efforts at redress – possibly achieve the freedom that the 1619 Project promises, when Hannah-Jones tells the reader that “facing the truth liberates us” (xxxii)? In his book *The Dark Enlightenment*, philosopher Nick Land suggests that the dominant themes in the historical memory of the black American experience are rather limiting in this regard. He charts a departure early in the republic’s history from the deist, rationalist, Masonic outlook observed in the nation’s founding documents toward a “biblical religiosity” (73). He claims that the greater the emphasis on scriptural tradition grew, “the more indistinguishable its faith became from a Black [sic] American experience, mythically articulated through Exodus, in which the basic framework of history was the escape from bondage” (Land 73). Land describes an eventual merger between the Exodus narrative and the American Founding: “The flight of the Hebrews from Egypt, the American War of Independence, the abolition of chattel slavery in the wake of the American Civil War, and the aspirations of the civil rights era were mythically compressed into a single archetypal episode” (73).

Critically, however, Land also suggests that the rhetorical presumptions of civil rights discourse virtually guaranteed that the Exodus template cannot effect the same liberatory affirmation for African-Americans as it did for the Jews. He explains: “A century after the ‘joyous daybreak’ of emancipation from slavery, [Martin Luther] King declares, ‘the Negro is still not free.’ [...] The story of Exodus is *exit*, the War of Independence is *exit*, and the emancipation from slavery is *exit* [... But] To be ‘manacled’ by segregation, ‘chained’ by discrimination, trapped on a ‘lonely island of poverty,’ or ‘exiled’ in one’s ‘own land,’ in

contrast, has no relation to exit whatsoever” (73-74). The insight here is that to choose the theme of perpetual bondage as the defining characteristic of the black American experience – in spite so much evidence of meaningful progress and liberation – is to remain willfully shackled to the past. The Jews’ historical memory of their bondage in Egypt was simultaneously to a remembering of their victory over Egypt, their perseverance through the desert, and their eventual flourishing as a distinct nation in the promised land. The 1619 mnemohistory stands in stark contrast: by rooting black American identity in the experience of slavery, and by rejecting any moral or social progress that enfranchised and further integrated African-Americans into American life, the narrative cannot provide American blacks with any victory or exit (which would enable a full integration of black identity *within* the larger frame of American history). Instead, blacks are left to understand themselves as in the grips of bondage today. Therefore, they can only hope for an eventual liberation and exit. It is the rhetoric of revolutionary, black-nationalist separatism that promises to create a mass movement that might achieve this future exit – but only by “dismantling” the existing order, which is defined by racism, and within which there is no prospect for freedom.

Jan Assmann, too, understood that for the Hebrews, the Exodus memory locates their collective *ethos* in a context of independence and sovereignty. The point of that narrative, he says, “is not conquest – from destitution to possession – but liberation: from serfdom to freedom” (*From Akhenaten to Moses* 30). Through normative inversion of the Exodus tropes (and their deployment as metaphors in discourse surrounding the American founding), the 1619 Project flips their polarity: the African-American experience moves

from (African) freedom and sovereignty to (American) destitution and serfdom. Assmann notes that the very purpose of the Hebrews' ritual remembrance of their bondage after their possession of the promised land was that they knew that to forget that history would be a symbolic "return to Egypt" – a return to a condition of exile from their homeland, their history, and ultimately, themselves (*From Akhenaten to Moses* 30). In sum, Land shows how exploiting the liberatory content of the Exodus narrative to advance the rhetoric of perpetual bondage inhibits moral progress and change not just for blacks, but for all Americans:

liberal-progressive mastery of American providence has become uncontested, dominated by a racial dialectic that absorbs unlimited contradiction, whilst positioning the Afro-American underclass as the incarnate critique of the existing social order, the criterion of emancipation, and the sole path to collective salvation. No alternative structure of historical intelligibility is politically tolerable, or even – strictly speaking – imaginable, since resistance to the narrative is un-American, anti-social, and (of course) racist, serving only to confirm the existence of systematic racial oppression through the symbolic violence manifested in its negation." (70)

And so, it seems that the counter-memory advanced by the 1619 Project chains the American present to the past – thereby reinforcing black Americans' collective identity as one defined by oppression and victimization and ensuring that the possibilities for American identity writ large are constrained by historical circumstances that haven't obtained for nearly two centuries.

Instead of hope for the future, the 1619 narrative of perpetual bondage cultivates hopelessness in the reader, if only because it holds that every past effort toward racial justice has catastrophically failed. Of course, those efforts *must* fail. If they demonstrated some success, that would keep alive hopes that the current order might be further

ameliorated, thereby mitigating the dissatisfaction with the present – which is a necessary ingredient for convincing members of a mass movement to “dismantle” the current order so that the leaders can “build the society [they] wish to be” (Hannah-Jones xxxii). This futility is on display when Hannah-Jones laments the missed opportunity of Reconstruction: “Out of the ashes of sectarian strife, we could have birthed *a new country*, one that recognized the humanity and natural rights of those who helped forge this nation [...] We could have finally, one hundred years after the American Revolution, embraced its founding ideals. And, oh so briefly, during the period known as Reconstruction, we moved toward that goal. And for a fleeting moment, a few white men listened to the pleas of black people” (Hannah-Jones 459).

In these efforts to nourish an *ethos* of bondage and dispossession among contemporary African-Americans, the architects of the 1619 movement ensure that the oppression of the past will indeed carry over into the future. Assmann defines “cultural memory” as “that form of collective memory that enables a society to transmit its central values and patterns of orientation to future generations and, by doing so, to continue its identity over the passing of time” (*From Ahkenaten to Moses* 84). Ironically, then, the collective *ethos* that the 1619 contributors transmit to the future is one that *inhibits* a reorientation of black identity from the theme of enslavement and estrangement to themes of agency, at-homeness, and belonging. Instead, this experience of sovereignty and liberation can only be achieved through a total dismantling of the existing order, creating a future that is completely unreachable from the irredeemable past/present.

Still, there is good cause to hope that the 1619 Project will fail in its revolutionary aims, and that African-American collective identity will not be defined on the basis of victimhood and deprivation. There are a few reasons for this. First, the existing order has, in fact, made considerable progress in reconciling with blacks for past abuses. Secondly, the existing order remains dominant, and it has committed defenders who will resist and refute the distortions of the 1619 counter-memory. Those people will make efforts to transmit the true history of the American founding and its traditional and aspirational values to future generations. Third, just as the reality of the war for independence was made undeniable by the missing limbs and living accounts of those who fought, there remain many living African-Americans who were part of the civil rights struggle. They directly experienced how life improved when the schools were desegregated, when banks finally issued loans to blacks, and when affirmative action policies came into effect. Their testimony bears witness to the 1619 Project's lie that no progress has been (or can be) made. But the final good reason for skepticism that the 1619 ideologues will emerge victorious in the mnemohistorical conflict over American identity is that their account of the national *ethos* and the black experience is of very little benefit to the majority of African-Americans.

The 1619 Project, despite its populist pretenses, is a decidedly elitist enterprise that is remote from the experience of contemporary American blacks. It was spearheaded by well-positioned black intellectual elites, and it was sponsored by the largely white, leftist staff of the *New York Times* – the American “paper of record” that, since the revolutions of the 1960s, has carried out an increasingly ideological form of journalism that is generally hostile to traditional conceptions of American history and the national *ethos*. In his

seminal book *Ethnic America*, celebrated black economist Thomas Sowell characterizes a longstanding cultural gap between typical African-Americans and those of the educated and upper classes: “Color consciousness mixed with class consciousness in the black elite [...who] long remained aloof from the black population, although speaking publicly in their name” (196). Throughout Hannah-Jones’ opening chapter of the 1619 anthology, she showcases an excellent example of this phenomenon. She begins her narrative by describing her bewilderment at her working-class black father’s patriotism and his pride in displaying the American flag. Although she sometimes frames the 1619 Project’s aims in contrast to her father’s nation pride and service, at other times she offers her mnemohistory of the founding as a necessary corrective explanation of the *true* reasons for her father’s patriotism – subconsciously, she implies, the America he was celebrating was the black nationalist conception of the nation that lies at the heart of the 1619 counter-memory. Whether Hannah-Jones’ position is ultimately that her father was misguided or that he was right (but in the wrong way), her instinctive dismissiveness toward his views embodies the “false consciousness” that the radical black elite often attributes to typical African-Americans who view the traditional “mythology” in a favorable light.

The reality of American progress in matters of racial justice over the last century ensures that the claims of the 1619 mnemohistory (where *no* progress has been made) present themselves as manifestly false to a large group of diverse Americans. Ultimately, 1619 counter-memory amounts to a kind of play-acting. Centuries after the Exodus, Jews practiced rituals which ensured that their memory of their bondage in Egypt would live on. Nevertheless, those Jews had no *living* memory or experience of that enslavement. As

Assmann suggests, the Seder ritual functioned to achieve “a transformation of semantic memory, something we have learned, into episodic memory, something we have lived, albeit in the form of ritual-play, of an ‘as if’ [we had lived the history that we commemorate]” (*From Akhenaten to Moses* 37). In much the same way, revolutionary black nationalist counter-memories of American history amount to a ritualistic remembering of slavery and segregation – by people who never experienced the former, and who increasingly do not remember the latter. But there is a core difference between the Jews’ remembrance of their bondage and black Americans’ contemporary remembrance of slavery. While the Jews remembered their bondage as a means to solidify a people who had achieved liberation and built a nation, black separatism remembers slavery to create a continuity between the past and the present – a present where African-Americans are still in bondage, and where a future liberation is dependent on a rejection of the existing order.

Indeed, the prominent roles that institutional slavery and racism play in the conception of black American identity is the product of real historical trauma. But as Assmann demonstrates, this kind of play-acting – which denies undeniable historical progress – can actually compound the trauma of the past in the present. He creates a distinction between remembrance and reenactment, where the former enables an affirmation of collective identity through a distinction between an oppressive past and a better present, and the latter risks a perpetuation of past suffering in the present: “Reenactment – instead of remembering,” he says, can lead to “a re-traumatization which, in turn, cause[s] suppression and latency, according to the typical progress of a neurotic

illness” (*From Akhenaten to Moses* 65). The 1619 mnemohistory, then, doesn’t merely present a threat to the existing American order and the remembrance of its tradition; it also poses a threat to contemporary African-Americans by intensifying their sense of alienation and stripping them of the hope that we can progress together, within the current order, toward “a more perfect union.” Finally, it seems these are risks that the 1619 contributors are willing to undertake, given that the only viable path they see toward a future liberation is a mass movement so alienated and aggrieved by the present that its adherents are willing to dismantle the existing order root and branch.

Conclusion: Memory, Rhetorical Invention, and the Future of American History

Having demonstrated the propagandistic means and revolutionary ends of the 1619 counter-history, we now turn to the broader implications of this analysis for the rhetorical canons of invention and memory. Here it is worth remembering the words of Lincoln from the introduction to this study. Lincoln worried that once the American Revolution had completely faded from living memory, the future of the nation would come into jeopardy. In particular, Americans risked *forgetting who they are* – an observation that underscores the unique roles that strategies of invention and memory play in the construction of a collective *ethos*. Still, Lincoln offered some guidance for how to protect historical memory (and thus, to preserve national identity). He explained that the fallen “pillars” of historical memory would need to be replaced “with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason” (Lincoln). “Reason,” here, is a stand-in for *logos*, truth, and critical thinking. Lincoln goes on to contrast the reason and *logos* that will be required to preserve the nation with *pathos*: “Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in the future be our enemy.”

In short, when the generations of American revolutionaries were still alive, their unique zeal for its cause would be enough to sustain the founding's notions of collective identity. But the loss of memory that came with their death ensured a diminished zeal among their descendants. Future generations would discover enthusiasm for new and different causes, and foment other revolutions – ones that threaten to dismantle the nation that was founded in 1776. A strict devotion to reason, Lincoln suggests, will guard against the new passions that could lead us astray.

For a text that presents itself as a national history, The 1619 Project stands as a powerful example of the threat that counter-memory presents to a nation that has largely forgotten the truth of its origins. 1619 is not an attempt to preserve history – it is an effort to remake it. The invention of the 1619 mnemohistory was calibrated to fell the remaining pillars that uphold what Lincoln called “the temple of liberty” (Lincoln). 1619's goal is to level that temple and prepare the site for a new structure – a new nation dedicated to the pursuit of a dogmatic view of racial justice. Assmann observes that “the most efficient way of erasing a [collective] memory is by superimposing on it a counter-memory. This is less an ‘art’ than a strategy which works on both the individual and collective level” (*Moses the Egyptian* 58). Thus, it becomes clear exactly what the 1619 Project succeeded at inventing: it invented a past. But not just any past: a complete *inversion* of the history that grounds most Americans' historical perceptions of collective identity. Because these inversions advance “the ongoing process of shaping an identity by reconstructing its past,” Assmann acknowledges that “the approach of mnemohistory is highly selective” – a feature on prominent display in the 1619 essays (*Moses the Egyptian* 10, 14).

But what of memory, then? The goal of inventing a new narrative is ultimately to rewire the memory of the nation. The revolutionary objectives of the 1619 Project reflect just the sort of new cause to which Lincoln alluded, one which its proponents pursue with great fervor. Further, the satisfaction of this particular cause demands nothing other than the destruction of America as it exists today: its history, its values, and its way of life. The 1619 Project is a propaganda campaign to make Americans forget who they are. The contributors completed the first step of their revolution – they invented a counter-memory calibrated to displace the popular idea of the American *ethos*. Their anthology is the product of that process of invention. Now, they are busied with the second step in fomenting their revolt: propagating the new counter-history, institutionalizing its symbols, and repeating its claims until the insurgent narrative takes on the status and normative power of the traditional account and becomes memory and “myth” (in the positive sense of the term). The matter of “truth” is completely irrelevant in the pursuit of revolutionary futurity. Thus, we see that strategic manipulation of public memory serves as a core rhetorical and psychological weapon in establishing a mass movement: inventing a compelling historical narrative is the necessary precursor to such efforts.

In essence, capturing the space of Americans’ minds is a prerequisite to the capture of the nation itself. Only after this mnemo-colonization is complete can a mass movement large enough to dismantle the existing society take form. What I call “mnemo-colonization” Assmann calls “canonization.” He underscores the connection between canonization and the process of invention, defining it as when counter-memory achieves “a society that decides to hold these texts [e.g., narratives] in the greatest authority, to make them the

basis of its life or to follow their model *in artistic creation*” (emphasis added, *From Akhenaten to Moses* 93). At that moment, the revolutionary mass movement has reached a sufficient power and size to lay claim to institutional infrastructure of society – whether to destroy it or take it as their own. For Hoffer, there is a distinct form of invention involved in modern mass movements: “the art of ‘religiofication’ – the art of turning practical purposes into holy causes” (6). By inverting and intermingling the normative themes of the American founding and the Hebrew Exodus, the 1619 Project explicitly pursues this “religiofication.”

The problem, of course, is that the “holy cause” at the heart of the 1619 effort (“racial justice”) doesn’t merely require the destruction of the existing social order – it also inhibits an affirmative construction of the black American *ethos*. As I have shown, the way that the 1619 narrative denies historical progress and insists upon enduring oppression serves to reconstitute a kind of existential bondage for black identity, hurting the people that it claims to be most eager to help. That the imposition of this perpetual bondage is deliberate – inflicted as a tool to manufacture a hopelessness with the present order and inflame a will to subvert it – adds insult to injury.

Understanding the role of invention and memory in the formation of a national *ethos* or collective identity is a crucial matter – especially at the present moment when nationalist and populist movements are placing a new emphasis on cultural preservation and demonstrating a greater awareness of cultural particularities. If these movements are to succeed in reasserting a nation’s collective right to self-definition and sovereignty, their advocates will need to engage in a process of historical reeducation. They will need to come to grips with the fact that much of the history of their nations and their founding has

been forgotten by the people. Reminding people of those historical truths – helping them to remember them – is a central task to recovering national identity in general. In America, though, this project is even more pressing as revolutionaries like the 1619 contributors continue to distort cultural memory with counter-memory. To preserve the American identity and the nation that Lincoln warned us about losing, traditionalists will also need to be much more aggressive in challenging inversions and erasures of consensus accounts of history. American nationalists devoted to the country's traditional *ethos* will require not only a deeper grasp of the role of historical memory in contemporary battles over national identity and sovereignty – they will need to be prepared to effectively participate in mnemohistorical conflict by refining rhetorical strategies related to invention and memory.

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