

Revisiting the National History of the 1619 Project in Media Discourse in English

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Abstract

The growing influence of English-language media discourse in the construction of national and ethnic identity makes the issue raised in the article pertinent. The article's goal is to examine the primary methods used in English-language media discourse to formulate and express national identity. The cognitive-discursive method and the content analysis method are the most popular approaches used to analyze this issue. The New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project, which aims to reassess American history from the perspective of the African-American component's predominance in it and its place in the English-language American media discourse, is examined in this article. The project was originally intended to be a collection of essays that revised important ideas like the US Constitution, the founding fathers' significance, the "beginning point" of American history, and their nature. The essays first appeared in an interactive online platform and a special edition of The New York Times Magazine, but they have since transcended journalism to become a phenomenon in media, politics, and society. The project, according to the authors, is a media narrative that aims to critically rethink and debunk the primary mythologies and ideologies ingrained in American culture in order to create a new American mythology.

Keywords: Media Discourse; English Language; African-American History.

1. Introduction

The role of media discourse has garnered more attention in recent years, which has prompted attempts at interdisciplinary scientific understanding of media language and its influence on the formation of national consciousness. Scientists in the fields of psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics, text linguistics, media linguistics, and discursive analysis are now closely examining the language used in mass media. The possibility of a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of media discourse in English was made possible by this kind of interdisciplinary approach. Studies on how language and media shape national identities have become more and more prevalent in recent decades. According to Morley (1992), "it is impossible to comprehend the formation and emergence of national identities without considering the role of communications technology" (Anderson, 2006). Any nation-building process, according to Anderson (2006), involves the introduction of national ideology through the media. The majority of recent research has regarded media discourse as "an important site for propagating a construal of national identity" (Anderson, 2006). This inherent relationship between media discourse and collective identity appears to be explained by the fact that national identity is largely constructed through acquiring "the ways of talking about nationhood," as argues Billig (1995) (Anderson, 2006). English-language media discourse is uniquely suited for disseminating national values and concepts because it combines both verbal and visual elements to convey meaning.

The problem of creating a national identity is becoming more and more important because of the state of society today, where "the processes of globalization have caused the migration of different nations and ethnic groups, whose cultural background consists of distinctive customs and traditions" (Castells, 1997). A multifaceted concept, national identity is founded on shared territory, language, sociocultural values, and unique cultural codes. Nonetheless, some

studies highlight the dominant role that shared history plays in its construction. Therefore, ethnicity, religion, language, and territory "per se do not suffice to build nations, and induce nationalism," according to Castells (1997). Experience that is shared counts (Castells, 1997). It is noteworthy that the concepts of subjectivity and mythologization are strongly related to the modern (postmodern) understanding of history. According to Berger (2009), "myths which came to underpin assumptions of national character and national identity were constructed even by the self-consciously professional writing of history." According to Martin and Wodak (2009), "every society that deals with traumatic events creates myths and taboos around these events, and every country has skeletons in its cupboard." The past is altered completely or is reconfigured, reorganized, and recontextualized. These tactics also have to do with how individual and national identities are constructed. For identities to effortlessly and constructively integrate, they require underlying myths and specific histories (Fakhrudinova et al., 2022).

Scholars have distinguished between four types of national identity verbalization strategies: transformative, destructive, constructive, and perpetuating. Constructive strategies are associated with the development of "a certain national identity through promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation," according to Wodak & Ludwig (1999). The two diametrically opposed ideas of "unification" and "differentiation" are crucial in this regard. The best way to conceptualize the image of the "Other" is to demonstrate unification strategies through differentiation. The goal of perpetuating strategies, which are "employed primarily in relation to problematic actions or events in the past which are important in the narrative creation of national history," is "to maintain and to reproduce a threatened national identity, i.e. to preserve, support, and protect it." "To transform a relatively well-established national identity and its components into another identity the contours of which the speaker has already conceptualized" is the stated goal of transformational strategies. "Aiming to dismantle or disparage parts of an existing national identity construct, destructive strategies typically cannot provide any new model to replace the old one," is how they put it. The process of creating a national identity is "creative," which fits in nicely with the essence of media discourse. The genre system within media discourse is unique, with genres being distinguished based on the channel of information transmission as well as the functional orientation of media texts. Discourse in the media frequently crosses over into other discourse genres, especially artistic discourse.

2. Literature Review

As Zhezhko-Brown (2021) contends, the Pulitzer Center reports that 3,500 American schools had incorporated the project materials into their curriculum by the end of 2019, or just four months after *The 1619 Project* was published (Pocock, 2004). There are still ongoing seminars and webinars available for individuals who are prepared to apply *The 1619 Project* in a classroom setting. The project drew a sizable following of proponents and detractors alike, serving as something of a spark for the development of similar phenomena. A good example of it is the birth of *The 1776 Unites Project*, which was established by a coalition of African-American academics, journalists, business executives, and religious leaders around the Woodson Center as a sort of counterbalance to *The 1619 Project*. The project's title alludes to the events of August 1619, when the British colony of Virginia's port received its first ship carrying African slaves. The historical fact that "a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia, in August of 1619" is already mentioned on the magazine cover. It carried over twenty Africans sold into slavery and given to the colonists. This was the beginning of America, even though it wasn't quite there yet. The 250 years of slavery that followed shaped every part of the nation that would be formed here. It is now time to tell our story honestly on the 400th anniversary of this momentous occasion (Van Dijk, 2015). Particularly telling is how the term "truthfully" is used in reference to the authors' and creators' methodology in this matter. As a result, the issue's cover declares that earlier accounts of the creation and development of the American nation and state were "false." A number of factors contribute to the changing historical narrative, one of which is the symbolic year 1776, which is commonly seen in US "mainstream" consciousness as the nation's founding.

"The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie" is the author's leitmotif (Mefodeva et al., 2022). The primary attribute of the Declaration of Independence is said to be "lie." Simultaneously, the African-American population's belief in the ideals of the United States is highlighted, in contrast to the documents' falsity. "Living, Liberty, and Pursuing Happiness" did not apply to all fifty percent of the nation. Nonetheless, black Americans fervently believed in the American creed despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all. It's interesting to note how the founding essay and later articles dissect the popular conceptions of the major national heroes connected to the American founding narrative. The founding fathers are primarily criticized for their alleged cruelty and early lack of faith

in the principles they espoused. African-Americans are specifically credited with "helping the country live up to its founding ideals" and "paving the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights" (Akhmetzyanov et al., 2022). However, at the same time, there is frequently more than just the destruction of the image associated with America.

Therefore, it seems that African-Americans are the "real founding fathers of the United States." The issues surrounding racism receive a lot of attention in this topic. Hannah-Jones states early in the introduction that "racism is embedded in the very DNA of this country," a statement that will be repeated later in every article. Other journalists have chosen to focus their research on racism, giving examples of how racism influenced the slave trade-based American economy. The article titles themselves are declarative and explicative in nature. The article *A Traffic Jam in Atlanta Would Seem to Have Nothing to Do with Slavery* presents another intriguing strategy. Kevin M. Kruse's book, *But Look Closer*, is devoted to American urban planning. The article's author gives instances of how the intention to alienate the African-American community led to the particular style of city planning that has led to congested roads as of right now.

The 1619 Project issue also presents a literary timeline that consists of sixteen prose and poetic artistic passages, each of which is devoted to a significant event in the history of slavery and the current state of African Americans in the United States. The authors have selected the following events as the most significant ones that have taken on symbolic meaning: the start of the Middle Passage, one of the phases of the Atlantic slave trade (1619); Crispus Attucks's death, which is said to be the first person killed in the Boston Massacre (March 5, 1770); the publication of Phyllis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), the first African-American professional woman poet, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773); George Washington's signature on the Fugitive Slave Act (1793); Gabriel Prosser's slave revolt (August 30, 1800); the implementation of The Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves (January 1, 1808), and the American troops' attack of Negro Fort (July 27, 1816), The Emancipation Proclamation, which freed African-Americans who had been enslaved by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, the New Orleans Massacre on July 30, 1866, the start of the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male, which involved six hundred African-American participants from 1932 to 1972, and the blindness of African-American World War II veteran Isaac Woodard, which was brought on by police officers on February 12, 1946; the Ku Klux Klan's bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963; the Black Panther Party's founding on October 15, 1966; the development of hip-hop as an art form in the South Bronx on September 16, 1979; Jesse Jackson's famous speech during his campaign for the Democratic nomination for President on July 17, 1984; and Hurricane Katrina, which was deemed a symbol of racial inequality in New Orleans due to the government's "slow" response to save the African-American community (2005). Each event's documentary details are paired with a prose or poetry artistic passage that follows a distinct stylistic approach. Clint Smith uses a detailed poetic metaphor to illustrate The Middle Passage by tracing his fingers around the world and retracing his ancestors' footsteps. The John Kay illustration serves to visually replicate this "journey" as well. The phrase "the bodies all around began to cook and swell in the heat: fingers the size of pickles, forearms rising like loaves until as big and gamy as hams festering in the noontime sun" (Anderson, 2006) is used to accompany ZZ Packer's naturalistic drawings of the corpses rotting in the sun. Yaa Gyasi presents the study of syphilis in Tuskegee from the perspective of the heroine, a young mother who constantly worries that she will never be completely safe in a nation where medical professionals and researchers were willing to watch dozens of black men die horribly and slowly just because they could (Zheltukhina, 2016).

3. Methodology

In August 2019, The 1619 Project was made public, sparking a heated debate in the US public. The project was originally intended to be a collection of journalistic essays that revised important ideas related to American national history, including the US Constitution, the founding fathers' role, the nature of the Declaration of Independence, and the "starting point" of American history. The project's output, which included works published in an interactive online platform and a special edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, has since transcended journalism to become a social, political, and media phenomenon. Given this, it would seem appropriate to analyze this project in the context of the English theory of media discourse. In this work, content analysis, functional-stylistic, and cognitive-discursive methods were applied. The 1619 Project is the primary subject of our attention since it is a text that is organized in a compositional, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic manner.

4. Results

The 1619 Project is a 100-page anthology of creative works, essays, and articles. The writers, poets, artists, photographers, journalists, publicists, and educators are among the authors. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Trymaine Lee, Jeneen Interlandi, Wesley Morris, Jamelle Bouie, and other journalists are among those employed by the project. The following people contributed their creative works: Eve L. Ewing, Darryl Pinckney, Kiese Laymon, Clint Smith, ZZ Packer, Yusef Komunyakaa, Barry Jenkins, Jacqueline Woodson, Jesmyn Ward, Rita Dove, and Reginald Dwayne Betts. The result of their work is a naturally occurring hybrid of fiction and documentary (See Figure 1).

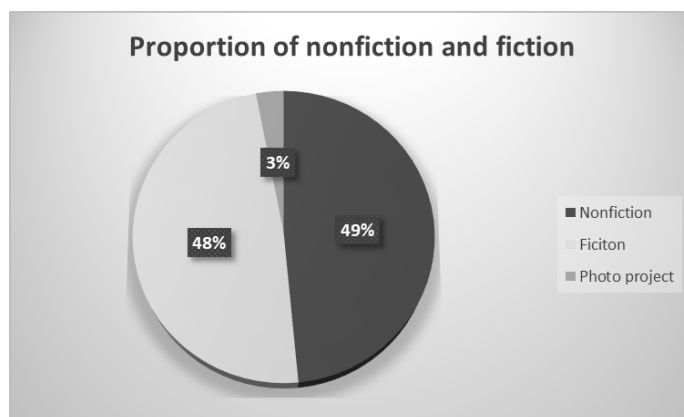


Figure 1. Categories of the Materials Presented in the 1619 PROJECT

The 1619 Project is a multifaceted endeavor that integrates artistic, visual, and publicist discourse. The issue's main message—that racism against African Americans has been a persistent part of American history—is surely communicated in an emotive and persuasive way when there is an equal amount of journalistic writing and artistic creations paired with photos. The project's "journalistic part" consists of one photo project, fifteen journalist pieces covering a range of topics, and an introduction essay. The articles can be categorized into multiple themes (refer to Figure 2).



Figure 2. Thematic Grouping of the Articles

The economy (five pieces), industry (three pieces), and healthcare and medicine (two pieces) receive the most attention. Four articles that cover politics, the legal system, slavery, and urban planning are evenly distributed. The devastating effects of slavery are the sole focus of one article by Tiya Miles, *Chained Migration: How Slavery Made Its Way West*, but it serves as the lens through which all other authors view their subjects. The researchers' assertion that The 1619 Project is now "the first stage of a multi-stage socio-engineering project with ideological and practical components" is one we can all agree with. In addition to the special edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, the project featured five episodes of a podcast, an anthology authored by Nicole Hannah-Jones, and public and academic lectures. N. Hannah-Jones and R. Watson, "The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story and an illustrated children's poetry book *Born on the Water*." Furthermore, the 1619 Project is now deeply ingrained in American educational discourse. For those who wish "to challenge historical narratives, redefine national memory, and build a better world," the Pulitzer Center, which

actively supports the project's ideas, has created a curriculum and a set of educational materials (Liu & Chang, 2021). The project's designers clearly employ perpetuating strategies in an effort to replicate a threatened national identity, offering a fresh perspective on central US historical events that seemed problematic in their previous interpretation.

5. Discussion

Along with the pictures of the founding fathers, other significant documents related to the history of the US are also dissected, and this is done in a graphic, visual manner. One of the creative sections, for instance, exemplifies "erasure poetry," which creates a completely new piece by painting over, darkening, or removing words from an already-written passage. The Fugitive Slave Law is largely ignored by Reginald Dwayne Betts, who reserves only a few crucial phrases for himself. It should be mentioned that The 1619 Project's educational component subsequently made extensive use of this technique. During a class, students are required to select a historical document and remove any words that do not support their own viewpoint. The Declaration of Independence is one of the documents suggested for this type of deconstruction. According to Zheltukhina (2016), artistic discourse in the mass media is defined by a social order that serves to confirm or disprove stereotypes, fabricate or reveal socio-political myths, critically understand and interpret the past with a projection into the present, and create a particular value picture of the world. The 1619 Project is one instance of a social order that attempted to demythologize and reevaluate national history in the English-language discourse of American media.

6. Conclusion

The 1619 Project is a multifaceted sociocultural and media phenomenon that aims to critically rethink the primary mythologies and ideologies ingrained in American culture while also inventing a new American mythology. It is an English narrative discourse. The essence of The 1619 Project is not erasing the majority's understanding of American national history, but rather reshaping it to pave the way for the creation of a new African-American history. The project's primary tactic is to use the well-established ideas at the core of the mainstream American national identity to provide a strong foundation for the development of a second (new) American identity, the foundation of which has already been conceptualized.

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