

Defending Discussions: The 1619 Project

John Piche

Adult Services Librarian

Heights Libraries, Cleveland Heights, OH



Origin

The New York Times Magazine

August 14, 2019

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed. On the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully.


The 1619 Project

- Community interest
- Library provided printouts – 600 printed, 200 donated
- Library absorbed printing costs
- Word of mouth – local bookstores, churches, civic groups
- Idea of discussion group proposed

“One of the reasons why the 1619 Project has been so controversial is that it proposes that we should talk a lot more about the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black people when we talk about the foundations of our country which, of course, means that racism permeates our history. because the face is right now kids aren’t learning the realities of our history.”

Amber Ruffin Show, June 11, 2021.

Flexibility



1619 Project

DISCUSSION GROUP

MONDAY • SEPT 30 • 7 PM
Lee Road Branch

- 3 weeks from idea to program – typically schedule 3-6 months out
- Word of mouth, flyers
- Expect 30 attendees?
1 moderator
- 98 attendees; help from circulation staff to run discussion

Challenges



1619 Project Discussion at Heights Library

Private group · 205 members

Facebook Group

About Discussion Rooms Topics Members Media Files



What's on your mind?



Photo/Video



Tag People



Feeling/Activity

New Activity ▾



Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library
shared an event.

May 12 at 9:53 AM · 🌐

About

The 1619 Project Discussion Group focuses on how the legacy of slavery remains the dominant factor in American political, cultural, and social s... [See More](#)



Private

Only members can see who's in the group and what they post.



Visible

Anyone can find this group.

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

Seems my comments are getting deleted . So let's try again .. the only thing "my people" have benefitted from is coming to this great country after most of my relatives were murdered by the Nazis . Slavery , abhorrent as it is , was and is an establis... See More

Like · Reply · Message · 13w · Edited

The 1619 project is utter garbage, debunked by real historians.

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

"Someone like you" - racist much?

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library

I see you do not live in our service area. Our programs are on topics of local interest and are very well attended. As the library of Cleveland Heights-University Heights, we are called to respond to our community's interests.

Like · Reply · Commented on by Sheryl Banks · 12w

You know it bothers me that you don't realize that we have been treated more in humane on this Earth than any other race. For you to debunk something there more research that you should dive into before speaking. Your comments don't bother ... See More

Like · Reply · Message · 12w



1619 Project Discussion at Hei...

Private group

Filters

Questions

Join Facebook Data

Search by name

1 Request

Newest First

Sort



2 hours ago

425 friends

125 groups

Joined Facebook Mar 15, 2008



do you live in cleveland ohio or one of it's suburbs?

f no you all are f d bags!! wake up and see the truth!!

Approve

Decline

...

Facebook Group & Event Moderation



Oct 20

612 friends

10 groups

Joined Facebook May 7



do you live in cleveland ohio or one of it's suburbs?

What racist s

Approve

Decline

...

HEIGHTS OBSERVER

News and Views from Cleveland Heights and University Heights

Participant complains of 'falsehoods' in library's 1619 Project programs

by [REDACTED]

The CH-UH library has sponsored and promoted a [series of programs about] The 1619 Project, a collection of essays compiled by a *New York Times* staffer about the role and impact of slavery in the U.S.

Shortly after the program [about the project] was distributed to schools and libraries in 2019, [some] prominent American history scholars condemned The 1619 Project for its bias and falsehoods about America's founding and the role of slavery. Mary Grabar of the Alexander Hamilton Institute called it a "jumble of lies, half-lies, bad history and bad faith." Historian Robert Paquette of Hamilton College called it "dangerous rubbish."

The materials on the library's 1619 Web page do not include any of the criticisms, and exclude the views of dissenting Black intellectuals. Kay Coles James, president of the conservative Heritage Foundation, said that the dubious history of The 1619 Project hurts the cause of racial reconciliation by creating a "false narrative."

I zoomed in to two sessions conducted by Heights Libraries' employee and moderator John Piche. A recording of the sessions shows that when I made my first and only comment—to refute a recurring false claim about the Constitution, the first contrarian comment of any kind in the entire program—Piche soon interrupted and muted my comment, as he had never done to other, more contentious and long-winded participants.

The general theme of the material and discussion is the never-ending misery, hopelessness, and lack of opportunity for African Americans. A group of Black intellectuals and writers who reject the "grievance peddling" and "victimhood culture" of the 1619 Project have launched www.1776unites.com, which offers "a special focus on stories that celebrate black excellence" and "showcases African-Americans who have prospered by embracing America's founding ideals."

I asked Piche about the scholars' criticisms of the program and if the library had any standards for evaluating programs. Piche replied that "supervisors" approved the program. I submitted a formal review request to the library, recommended the 1776 Unites curriculum, and suggested Mr. Piche was too biased to present a balanced view on the subject.

In a written reply, Library Director Nancy Levin advised me that a library board committee reviewed my complaint, and said, in part: "We have heard your complaint and will be dedicating the May 13 program to address the controversy and criticism of The 1619 Project in a program called '1619 Project vs. 1776 Project'. Additionally, when applicable, conservative scholars will be included in future discussion packets."

The library declined to include the 1776 Unites material, and John Piche continues as the moderator. The 1776 Project is a different program than 1776 Unites.

Request for Reconsideration & Response

Ms. Levin said a customer would like the library to end offering programs on the 1619 project. She reviewed the customers comments and the staff responses to the customer. The customer requested we end the program, remove the presenter and present programs with a more conservative point of view. She said the program is very popular and averages 100 participants per session. Ms. Levin said the alternate curriculum the requestor presented does not meet the library's standards as delineated in the Materials Evaluation and Selection Policy. She said the May program will be discussing controversial parts of the articles and the customer requesting we end the programs can choose to participate if they wish.

Ms. Levin said the librarian running the program, John Piche, has interviewed scholars for the programs. Ms. DeNero-Ackroyd said that Mr. Piche has been interviewed by a national publication, Public Library magazine, for an article about the 1619 programs. Ms. Carlyle asked about the process of determining programs. Ms. Levin said she would send board members the policy on program selections and said programs don't lean left or right but have to present factual information. Ms. DeNero-Ackroyd said ALA also has statements regarding program presentations that the library follows.

Mr. Gerboc said the library has done a good job discussing the 1619 articles adding the 1776 program the customer is requesting is reactionary, presents falsehoods and revisionist history. He said it would be irresponsible for the library to share any information in programs other than well researched truth. Ms. Fluellen said some people are looking for platforms to spread lies. Ms. Crenshaw wished everyone a Happy Black History Month and said the requestor seems sympathetic to white supremacy as he also had opposed to the Black Excellence mural at the Coventry branch parking lot. Mr. Turakhia said he considers the 1619 programs as his favorite series of events. Ms. Levin said some scholars have criticized the interpretation of the articles in the project but support the project overall. She said she will send the customer a letter informing them the program is continuing.

Library appreciates 1619 Project interest and concern

by Sheryl Banks

To the Editor:

In a "request for reconsideration" in January, Robert Shwab asked that Heights Libraries' 1619 Project program be balanced by information from "critical scholars and other Black voices." He asked that the program's moderator be removed, and that the program include 1776unites.com curricula. Heights Libraries' Board of Trustees discussed the request during its Feb. 1 board meeting. The board and library responded by e-mailing Mr. Shwab:

1. A report by the originator of the program that included a program overview, rationale for the discussion group, and historical sources consulted.
2. A three-page bibliography of the works the program moderator has studied to prepare for the 1619 Project programs. These are works by scholars who are recognized in their fields. The program moderator has worked hard to put together a scholarly and thought-provoking program that has been very popular with our community.
3. Our Materials Evaluation and Selection Policy. The 1619 Project meets the criteria described in our policy. The 1776unites.com curricula does not meet our inclusion standards as delineated in the Materials Evaluation and Selection policy. (The policy is available at www.heightslibrary.org.)

We have heard Mr. Shwab's call for balance, and will be dedicating the May 13 program to address the controversy and criticism of the 1619 Project in a program called "1619 Project vs. 1776 Project." Additionally, when applicable and relevant, scholars critical of the project will be included in future discussion packets.

Regarding his charge of being muted: The rule of the library's online Zoom programs is "one mike, one speaker," to avoid cross talk. Participants are muted after they speak. Mr. Shwab made his point, then he was muted after he finished speaking to allow the moderator to respond. He left the program before it was his turn to speak again.

We invite all community members to attend our upcoming 1619 Project discussions. Details may be found at www.heightslibrary.org.

Taxpayers should not fund the library's 1619 Project programs

I am concerned about the Cleveland Heights – University Heights Public Library System's sponsorship of seminars on the history of race relations based on "The 1619 Project".

Many qualified scholars believe The 1619 Project presents a highly questionable reading of history. They argue that it creates a false narrative out of racial grievance; and as a student of history, I agree with them. For this reason, I object to [Heights Libraries'] public seminar about The 1619 Project [presented] at taxpayer expense. Such a seminar risks being a one-sided, biased, and ideological approach to an important social issue in a type of setting that makes that approach appear to many as more authoritative than it really is.

A library program on this subject cannot help but classify people based on the color of their skin rather than on the content of their character. To Black children, official library sponsorship risks suggesting they will have a permanent reduced status in life no matter how much they try to achieve. To their white classmates, it risks suggesting they will always be viewed as oppressors because of skin color they cannot control, and past actions in which they played no

part. Rather than leading to an honest discussion about race, The 1619 Project makes such honest discussion much less likely. That is because it encourages the worst type of racial division.

I certainly do not advocate censorship. A public library should offer books for readers interested in reading about The 1619 Project. It also should offer books written by critics. But sponsoring a public program taught by advocates can lead to indoctrination in the guise of scholarship. Our library should not become a party to that.

Some may argue that controversial topics such as The 1619 Project deserve to be discussed in a library forum. I hope they would recognize there are reasonable limits to what subjects a library should offer at taxpayer expense and in a public setting. **For instance, should the library offer a forum to proponents of pedophilia just because there may be some people who advocate in favor of it? I would hope not.**

Library trustees should examine carefully what their own limits are. And I hope they will conclude after consideration that a publicly supported forum to teach about The 1619 Project exceeds those limits.

[redacted] served on CH City Council (1980–87) and as mayor (1982–87).

We need 'The 1619 Project'

by [redacted]

In the January *Heights Observer*, [redacted] wrote to tell us he is upset that Heights Libraries uses tax money to sponsor public seminars about The 1619 Project. He is concerned that this fosters "a one-sided, biased and ideological approach" that appears more authoritative than it actually is, and that, in dredging up the racial harms of the past, it "encourages the worst type of racial division."

Mr. [redacted] has things backwards.

I, too, am weary of so often having to hear that so much of American society is pervaded by racial antagonisms and tensions. But my weariness comes from the actual existence and continuation of these problems, not from efforts like The 1619 Project that may call attention to them.

Mr. [redacted] claims to be a student of history, but his learning seems to have some gaps. I wonder if, for example, he has read *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen, in which the author examines high school history textbooks, concluding that they generally tell a lackluster tale of American goodness and grandeur in which events unfold without cause or conflict or relevance to the present, and which tend to avoid altogether, or give short shrift to, what it was like to be a racial or ethnic minority in this country.

If you had been a person of color in the Jim Crow era, you most certainly would have been keenly aware that the pervasive and relentless racism of American society affected just about every aspect of your life—from access to jobs, schools, voting rights, housing, even lunch counters and cemeteries. If you were not a person of color, but paid any attention to what was going on, you could not possibly have been oblivious. If, today, you have no awareness of this history, you need to educate yourself about it. It is an inherent part of American history.

There are those who say we should just put it aside, forget about it and move on.

Really?

Trying to pretend it away won't work. We are where we are and what we are because of what we were. William Faulkner famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

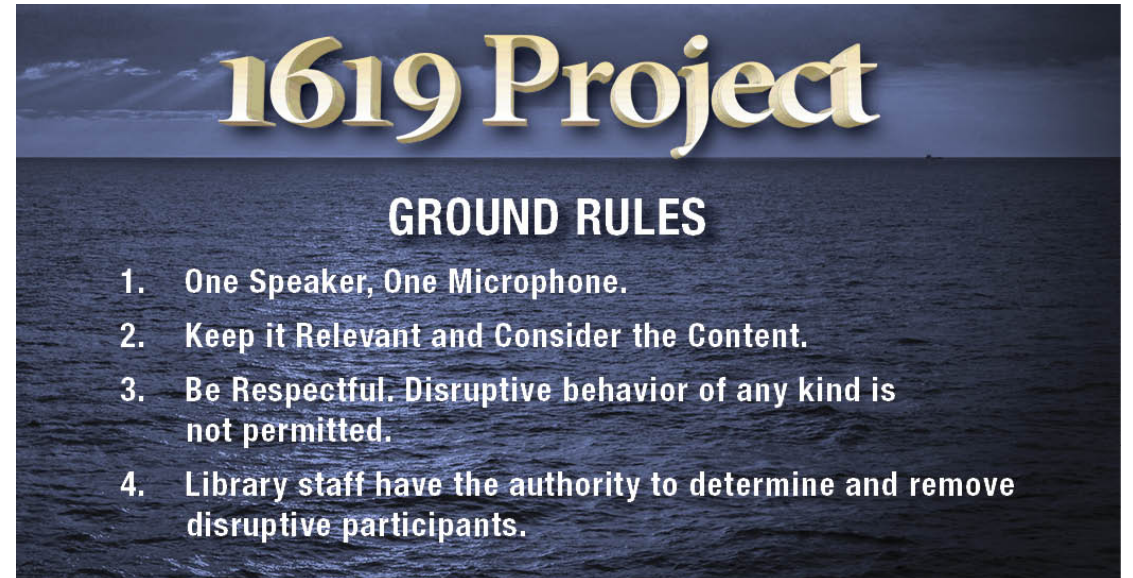
This does not imply that we today need to blame ourselves for the conduct of our ancestors. But directly or indirectly it is our history. Attempting to gloss over uncomfortable aspects not only avoids necessary efforts at genuine understanding, but such an approach also relegates into insignificance the real experience of large segments of American society. They and their ancestors lived it. They know what went on, even if many in the majority culture are oblivious, and wish to remain so.

It is not clear how we address and rectify things to go forward, but we do know it will be difficult. We should also understand that ignoring facts cannot possibly help. Efforts such as The 1619 Project can provide much-needed perspective.

Adaptation

Community Agreement Statement

- 1. One Speaker, One Microphone** – We have muted everyone's line at the beginning of the meeting. Please use the "Raise Hand" button in the "Participants" tab. When it is your turn to speak you will be prompted to unmute yourself. Enabling your camera is optional (but recommended). When you comment, please let everyone know your name. Once you've made your point, you will be muted to give others a chance to speak.
- 2. Keep it Relevant/Consider the Content** - Speak from your own experience. Use "I" statements. This is a discussion, not a lecture. No one person knows everything. Your opinion is worthwhile. Out of respect for the conversation, do not insult or put down other attendees. Sexist, racist, and other exclusionary comments will not be tolerated.
- 3. Disruptive behavior of any kind is not permitted.** Disruptive customers will be logged out of the meeting. **Library staff have the authority to determine what is disruptive.**
- 4.** We ask that participants not record or photograph speakers or fellow participants without permission of all those in attendance. However, please be aware that we cannot stop nonconsensual recording of this meeting



In the Moment...

Return to the **TEXT**.

We are all skilled at book discussions and have experienced groups that go off the rails.

- Diffuse
- Redirect
- Reestablish authority

Remain calm and professional – remember your reference training.

1619 Project

Online

The 1619 discussion project
is continuing online.

[Click here to learn more!](#)



heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project

The 1619 Project is an initiative by *The New York Times* that re-examines the history, and lasting influence, of American slavery on our society.

Join us the second Thursday of each month as we continue to discuss how the legacy of slavery remains the dominant factor of American political, cultural, and social spheres. The library program centers on the articles included in the New York Times Special Sunday Magazine dated August 20, 2019.

Article packets are available for download on this website or on the lobby display at the Lee Road Branch.

Our very own John Piche was interviewed by the Public Library Association's *Public Libraries Online* magazine about the success of our 1619 Project program series, which he developed and runs. [Read the article.](#)

YouTube Video Playlist



You can view the entire playlist of 1619 project interviews on our YouTube page.

[Click here to open our YouTube 1619 project Playlist](#)

Materials

[1619 Project Article Packet](#)

[1619 Versus 1776 Projects](#)

[African Identity & Loss of Culture](#)

[Race/Racism Reading List](#)

[Slavery & Capitalism Packet 1](#)

[Slavery & Capitalism Packet 2](#)

[Slavery and Health Care](#)

[Slavery and Reparations Part 1](#)

[Slavery and the American Dream](#)

[Stealing Black Culture: Music](#)

The 1619 Project

Heights Libraries Interviews

Laura Bieger
University of Groningen

Laura Bieger is Professor of American Studies, Political Theory and Culture at the University of Groningen. She is the author of *Belonging and Narrative and Ästhetik der Immersion* and numerous essays. Her current research explores the reading public as a transnational institution and 'engaged literature' as a literary change.

PLAY ALL

The 1619 Project

30 videos • 473 views • Last updated on Feb 11, 2022



**Cleveland
Heights-
University
Heights
Public
Library**

SUBSCRIBED



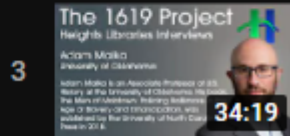
1619 Project Interviews - Laura Bieger - Essay as Politics

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1619 Project Interviews - Philip Reichel on Slave Patrols Origins of the Police

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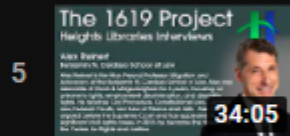
1619 Project Interviews - Adam Malka on the rise of Baltimore police

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1619 Project Interviews - Atiba Ellis on Polley V. Ratcliff

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1619 Project Interviews - Alexander Reinert on the 8th Amendment Debate

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1619 Project Interviews - Michael Conklin on Public Opinion of Reparations

Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library

**What about
my library?**

- Stay up-to-date.
- Listen to community needs and interests.
- Flexibility and nimbleness in programming.
- Buy-in across departments, administration
- Not just applicable to 1619!
- Go beyond the text: reference curation, counterpoints, other mediums
- Too controversial? Use another name or integrate into other programming.

Questions?