



The 1619 Project: Governing Narratives

ZZ Packer Study Group Outline

The study group will meet seven times in the Spring 2020 semester. Meeting dates are February 11, 25, March 3, 10, 17, 31 and April 7. All meetings will take place from 4 p.m.-5:30 p.m. in the Kim Koo Library.

Course Description

Whether one perceives the traditional American origin story as a founding myth, an exercise in tautology, or the gospel truth, those who govern the narrative often govern the nation. To challenge this dynamic, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones proposed to widen the frame beyond the 1776 date of American Independence to that of 1619—the date that Americans first brought captive Africans onto American soil, thereby inaugurating a slavocracy alongside the colony’s putative democracy. The result of this frame-shifting resulted in a 100-page ground-breaking spread in the August 18, 2019 edition of the New York Times Magazine that quickly became famous for its deft cross-pollination of several forms—political journalism, the historical essay, cultural criticism, and artistic artifact.

The essays and methodology of the 1619 Project will serve as starting point for this Watson Institute study group to explore how certain political, historical and sociological narratives inform an American ethos and construct an American identity—sometimes at the expense of competing narratives. While the readings will include studies in politics, policy, governance, history, sociology, culture and literature, the underlying theme will be narrative itself.

Structure:

- Readings will include studies in politics, policy, governance, history, sociology, culture and literature, the underlying theme will be narrative itself.
- Students should come to class having read each essay, alongside the accompanying excerpts (each no more than 2 pages). Please attend all guest lectures and events.

February 11

Session One: The Ontology of Liberty: The Dilemma of Origin Stories

- Essays: “The Idea of America” (Nikole Hannah-Jones); “Undemocratic Democracy” (Janelle Bouie)
- Excerpts: *Culture and Imperialism*; *Rotten English*; *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*

February 25

Session Two: The Narrative of Empire: The Language and Rhetoric of Expansion

- Essays: “Chained Migration” (Tiya Miles); “Traffic” (Kevin Kruse); “Sugar” (Khalil Gibran Muhammad)
- Excerpts: *Moral Politics* (George Lakoff); *Culture and Imperialism* (Edward Said); *Americans in Waiting* (Hiroshi Motomura)

March 3

Session Three: The Kingdom of Culture: Cultural Mythmaking Narratives

- Essays: “American Popular Music” (Wesley Morris); “Blacksound, Race, and the (re) Making of Musicological Discourse” (Matthew Morrison)
- Excerpts: *Scenes of Subjection* (Saidiya Hartman); *Black Noise* (Tricia Rose)

March 10

Session Four: Captivity and Capital: The Story of Wealth in America

- Essays: “The Wealth Gap” (Trymaine Lee); “Municipal Bonds” (Tiya Miles)
- Excerpts: *Forensics of Capital* (Michael Ralph); “Capital” (Matthew Desmond)

March 17

Session Five: Inequalities: Present-Day Dystopian Narratives

- Essays: “Mass Incarceration” (Bryan Stephenson); “Medical Inequality” (Linda Villarosa)
- Excerpts: *Stamped from the Beginning* (Ibram X. Kendi)

March 31

Session Six: Print Narrative and Media: Contextualizing the Story: a Panel

- Panelists:

Jake Silverstein – The New York Times Magazine

Wesley Morris – The New York Times Magazine

ZZ Packer – The Watson Institute at Brown University

April 7

Session Seven: Politics and Prose: The Legacy of Literature

- Proposed Panelists:

Tyehimba Jess – Pulitzer Prize Winner, College of Staten Island

Nicole Terez-Dutton – Transition Magazine, Harvard University

Jacqueline Woodson – National Book Award Winner

ZZ Packer – The Watson Institute at Brown University, Moderator