



Americans Pretend Racism Is a Relic. UNC Alum Nikole Hannah-Jones, Who Envisioned the NYT's 1619 Project, Says It's Time to Stop Hiding From Our Sins.

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In August 1619, colonists in Jamestown, Virginia, purchased between twenty and thirty enslaved Africans—who had been stolen from a Portuguese slave ship after being kidnapped from what is now Angola—from English pirates. They were the first of 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped, forced into chattel slavery, and shipped to the New World to make white men rich. At least two million would die along the Middle Passage.

For the next twenty-three decades, enslaved Africans worked the fields of white plantation owners—deprived of rights, abused, raped, and murdered, regarded as property—providing the labor that fueled the rise of the American economy. At its peak, in 1860, approximately 3.9 million human beings were enslaved in the U.S.

The Civil War that ostensibly gave them their freedom in reality led to a century's worth of another form of oppression, especially in the South, where white-run authoritarian governments used violence and intimidation to keep black Americans subjugated and often impoverished. The civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century led to the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act, but by this point the institutions of white supremacy were well entrenched.

And as we've learned over the last decade—to borrow from Faulkner—the past isn't dead, it isn't even past. The election of the first black president in 2008 produced a backlash that gave rise to both a revanchist tea party movement and a rise in white nationalism that culminated in the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

On August 14, 2019, four hundred years after the first American colonists purchased human beings as slaves, *The New York Times Magazine* unveiled [The 1619 Project](#), an ambitious exploration of the lingering legacy of slavery, utilizing historical analyses, news features, photos, essays, and even fiction and poetry.

There's a piece on how slavery shaped modern capitalism, an essay connecting the efforts to preserve slavery in the nineteenth century to right-wing nullification movements that still persist today, a story on our schools' failure to properly teach kids about slavery, and even a history lesson on how racism made Atlanta traffic a nightmare.

“The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie,” *The New York Times Magazine* staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones writes in an essay introducing the issue. “Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that ‘all men are created equal’ and ‘endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.’ But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness’ did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, and immigrant and disability rights.

“Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different—it might not be a democracy at all.”

For any student of history, the project’s thesis was undeniable: The stain of slavery has not only not been erased, but America has never truly grappled with it. But it nonetheless provoked an intense backlash among some conservatives, those who saw it as an affront to American exceptionalism.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called it “propaganda” and “brainwashing.” Conservative commentator Erick Erickson said the *Times* was “keeping racial tension aflame as much as Trump does.” Ilya Shapiro of the libertarian Cato Institute called it “grievance-mongering” intended to “delegitimize mankind’s grandest experiment in human liberty.”

For Hannah-Jones, who first conceived The 1619 Project, these complaints miss the point: “It is time to stop hiding from our sins and confront them,” she said at a launch event for the project. “And then in confronting them, it is time to make them right.”

Over the last decade, Hannah-Jones has emerged as one of the nation’s most celebrated journalists, winning just about every major journalism award, as well as a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant, and perhaps soon a Pulitzer.

While she grew up in Iowa, she has strong ties to the Triangle, as a 2003 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill’s School Media and Journalism School and a former reporter for *The News & Observer*, where she covered education, especially issues related to school segregation in Durham and the No Child Left Behind Act.

She went on to explore educational inequality all over the country—at *The Oregonian* in Portland, then at ProPublica, now at *The New York Times Magazine*—and is today a foremost authority on the academic achievement gap.

This past week, Hannah-Jones has been a near-constant presence on national news programs talking about The 1619 Project. On Monday, she spoke with the *INDY* both about it and the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting, an organization she co-founded in 2016 to promote investigative reporting by journalists of color, which announced last week that it will be housed at her UNC.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

INDY: How has your earlier work as a journalist here in Durham informed your journalism over the years?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: My very first job was covering segregation in high-poverty schools. Durham Public Schools had adopted No Child Left Behind, and poor black schools were expected to perform as well as poor white schools. Students could leave, principals could be removed, and teachers could be removed if the school was deemed a failure by the federal government. So the stakes were very high. No Child Left Behind didn't give those schools additional money, just additional requirements. I was a new reporter trying to figure out how this makes sense, and it didn't.

Durham has been a school district that has always had a wide range of types of schools, with curriculum choice, and I just watched the futility of the principal of a school where 95 percent of the students are poor, and schools where 20 percent of the students are poor, and they were expected to get the same test scores.

Tell us about your first cover story for *The New York Times Magazine*.

It was called "Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City." There was a black girl on the front cover with two Afro puffs, and wearing Air Jordans.

What was the takeaway?

How racism is not only the purview of racist white Southerners but that whites, no matter where they live, work to maintain school segregation and inequality. It was a piece at once about individual and systematic racism, but also, how does an individual parent navigate that system and make a choice for the benefit of the common good?

It's been said that you "envisioned" The 1619 Project. What's particularly impressive are the number of stories that delineate how the legacy of slavery has real-time implications today. I read that you first pitched the project idea in January, during a news meeting with your fellow staffers at the magazine. Can you take us before that moment: When did you first start thinking about the importance of 1619, and its possibilities as a news project?

I have been thinking about 1619 since high school, when I came across the book *Before The Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett Jr. I was struck by the fact that no one had ever taught me that we got here before the pilgrims, that we were that foundational—and I understood that was intentional. Moving forward, the last year and a half, I had been thinking about the four hundredth anniversary [of the first enslaved people arriving] approaching, and I'm thinking it's one of the most pivotal dates in American history, because of the introduction of slavery, and how it affected almost everything that came after.

But most Americans don't even know that date, and most Americans were going to let that date pass without acknowledging it. But I wanted to show that the legacy of slavery still impacts almost everything you see across American life, and we're still dealing with those effects.

How has the project been received by the public?

[The issue] sold out all across the country. There are people literally selling it on eBay for \$100. We've done two additional printings and sold out of those. The first printing was seven thousand, I think. The second was twenty thousand. We have a waiting list.

The Pulitzer Center has designed an entire curriculum [based on it]. You can download it from their website. Educators are already teaching The 1619 Project, and we have raised money to print an additional two hundred thousand copies that we are going to distribute in cities across the United States for free to people who typically don't subscribe to the *Times*. We were particularly concerned that those most impacted by the legacy of slavery would be able to get access to the project. That's low-income black Americans.

Some of the most poignant and arresting writing for The 1619 Project occurs in the poetry and fiction section. Why was it important to include creative voices in the project?

For so much of the history, we don't have good documentation because many of us were not allowed to be literate, and the only people telling the stories were white people. So, we wanted to allow the descendants of those who had been enslaved to remember various points in our history.

What prompted your co-founding of the Ida B. Wells Society, and naming the organization after the most celebrated black journalist of her time?

The answer is in your question. It was just important to pay homage to the legacy of black investigative reporting. There are so few of us, but there's a long tradition of doing this type of reporting, and sending a message that black people have been doing this type of reporting for a long time. Even though there seems to be so few of us who are able to do investigative reporting, we have a very long tradition.

Why do you think there are so few black investigative journalists in mainstream newsrooms?

That's easy. Because newsrooms operate in the same racial hierarchy as the rest of American society does.

With the Ida B. Wells Society relocating to Chapel Hill, will you be spending more time in the area?

Yeah, for sure. We hope to engage the program there and at N.C. Central. The co-founders [Hannah-Jones, Topher Sanders of ProPublica, and Ron Nixon of the Associated Press] will speak to classes and work with the students when we can.

Are you seeing a dearth of black journalism students preparing to work in the print industry?

There are black journalism students, but they are leaning toward broadcasting because that's where they see black journalists. I hope when they see the type of work done by our founders, they will see the type of work that's possible for themselves.

So, I have to ask, what was your immediate response when you found out you were selected for a MacArthur "Genius" Grant in 2017?

I believe my exact words were "holy shit!" That was followed by an apology because the person who calls you has you on speakerphone. There's a group of people in the room. They like the feeling that comes from giving that good news. I hadn't heard of the MacArthur Grant until [Atlantic writer Ta-Nehisi Coates] won it two years before. I was completely surprised when I won it. It was a pretty amazing call to get.

