

Nikole Hannah-Jones on the Power of Collective Memory  
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\*NHJ: *Nikole Hannah-Jones*

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** I'm Karen Griggsby-Bates and this is *Codeswitch* from NPR. If you've been paying attention to race news at all this year or last year or the year before, there's almost certainly one name you've heard over and over again: Nikole Hannah-Jones. She's a professor, a journalist, and MacArthur genius, and she's become one of the most well-known, though not necessarily well understood, figures at the center of our national conversation on race.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Our plate cousins at NPR's *Throughline* podcast sat down with Nikole Hannah-Jones to talk about her work, how it's been interpreted, misinterpreted, and the lessons about history that she thinks people still aren't learning. Which is really important because as the through line team argues: "The past is never passed". This phrase, which is a remix of a passage by the famous American writer William Faulkner, is basically the tagline for this show, but it isn't just a tagline. It's kind of like a guiding principle. Here on *Throughline*, we're constantly trying to understand the mechanics of history, its limits.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** The way it oscillates between the light and shadows, darkness and hope. And ultimately how the past and our interpretation of it has shaped the world we live in today. This task can be especially challenging when it comes to the history of the country we live in, the United States, the complex, murky, painful, and beautiful history of this country has always been ammunition for the political battles of the present. This is because the story we're told about the past shapes the way we view the world and our role in it.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** So history becomes something we're always updating and fighting over. Whose stories are being told? Whose are being left out? Who gets to decide what stories we teach our children? Who gets the final word on truth? There's a battle waging across this country over these questions. And there's one person who for the last few years has been at the center of it.

**NHJ:** My name is Nikole Hannah-Jones. I'm a reporter at the *New York Times* and the creator of the *1619* project.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** In 2019, Nikole Hannah-Jones conceived and curated the 1619 project, a collection of essays by scholars from different disciplines that reframes the origin story of the United States. It contends that the date, 1619, should be at the center of our national history. It's the date the first people of African descent were forcibly brought to what would become the United States. And it says that the only way to fully appreciate the vast complexity of American history and identity is to understand the legacy of slavery and racism experienced by Black Americans and the powerful role Black Americans have played in our democracy.

**NHJ:** We have a country that was founded on these ideas of individual liberty, of inalienable, God-given rights, which is unique to the world to have a country actually founded on those ideas and we were not unique in the world in not giving most people rights. We were unique in the world, though I'm saying that we were a country based on individual rights while depriving so many people of any rights.

**NHJ:** That to believe then, that founding narrative requires a great deal of historical amnesia. We just can't think about those contradictions. We just can't think about those hypocrisies because if you do, then you have to up-end of the entire identity of America as an exceptional nation, and an exceptionally free nation. So that forgetting becomes necessary because that's the only way you can maintain the belief in American exceptionalism. But of course, if you're Black, if you're Indigenous, You can't forget that.

**NHJ:** How can you forget everything about your experience is a reminder of that. And so that forgetting it's just not possible.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Nikole began her career as an investigative journalist at the News and Observer in Raleigh, North Carolina. For years she covered everything from education to housing. Eventually becoming a prominent reporter in the New York Times. She also became one of the most influential voices on Twitter. And her clever and actually really funny Twitter handle: Ida Bae Wells is a play on a name. The name of a journalist from the early twentieth century. A name that gives us insight into how Nikole Hannah-Jones views her own work as a journalist.

**NHJ:** There's no bigger influence on me than Ida Bae Wells. I remember discovering her autobiography and just being shocked that a Black woman who had been born right around the time of

the Emancipation Proclamation could be so audacious, so confident, and so assured in kind of the moral nature of her work.

**NHJ:** She was a feminist, a suffragist, a civil rights activist, and an investigative reporter who challenged not just mainstream White America but also Black men who didn't believe that Black women should be leaders when it came to fighting for civil rights, so it's just really hard for me to overstate what a kind of North Star she's been for me.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Nikole Hannah-Jones' platform is astronomical compared to anything Ida B. Wells could have imagined. The 1619 project started out as a special issue of the New York Times magazine. It took over the entire issue in August of 2019 and sold tens of thousands of copies. It's now a development to become a TV show and was just released as a book with lots of new material that didn't fit into the original magazine publication.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** In the beginning of the book, there's a photo of a man. He is young and wearing a military uniform while standing in front of a Jeep. The look on his face is a combination of pride and the shyness that often accompanies young adulthood. He is Nikole's father. A man whose complicated relationship to his identity as an American was the inspiration for her opening essay.

**NHJ:** My dad, as I talk about in the essay, was one of the smartest men that I knew, a voracious reader, very astute observer of the world, a history lover like myself, but he was also a Black man born into apartheid America and never had the type of opportunities to live up to the potential that he had. And when he passed away, he really had believed that his life hadn't amounted to much. Just the thought that this man didn't think his life hadn't amounted to much that all these people will see his name and know his story. And know the influence that he had on giving me the opportunities to be in a position to create something like the 1619 project. It has been deeply emotional for me.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** When we come back, how Nikole Hannah-Jones discovered the significance of the year 1619. And how that set her on a path towards a new American origin story.

Part One, an alternative origin.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** The fundamental argument being made in the 1619 project that the Black experience has to be at the core of the telling of American history. And according to Nikole Hannah-Jones, this is precisely because many of us were taught that the United States started with the colonial struggle for freedom against the British Empire, leaving out the fundamental role of Black and indigenous people. Growing up in the 1980s, Nikole herself was largely given this narrative. Until she was 15 when she came across a different origin story for the US that went back further than 1776. Over 100 years further.

**NHJ:** So I first came across the year 1619 as a high school student. My high school offered a one semester, Black Studies elected course, and I learned more in the 3 months of that course than about Black people, not just in America, but across the diaspora than I'd ever learned in my entire academic career and as a Black girl, who I think like most kids believed that if it was important we would we would be taught it in school. Um, the absence of learning about Black people led me to believe that Black people had not accomplished much of note for us to learn about and that that's why we were invisible.

**NHJ:** So taking this class, led to a really an obsession to learn more. And I would ask my teacher to give me books to read outside of the class. And he gave me Lerone Bennett's *Before the Mayflower*, which is where I first came across to date 1619. I'd never been taught in school. I'd never been taught from a movie, from documentaries I watched on television, and I just was shocked that Black people have been here that long and that slavery had been here that long, right? Literally one of the oldest institutions in the English colonies. So I've, I've thought about that date and both the power of the day and the power of the erasure of that date since I was 16 years old. So that's 30 years.

**NHJ:** When I began to think of it as an origin story, I think started to come over time when I continued to study racial inequality to do historical research to try to understand why we still see so much racial inequality in our society today, why Black people's conditions remain as they are. And it just became clear that slavery was the root of so much in our society and So I couldn't give you, you know, an exact moment when I started to understand the 1619 was in origin - that it was not just the start of the African presence in the 13 colonies, but that it was an origin of so much that would define America in ways good and bad.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** I'm curious, what was it about your early education as someone growing up in the United States that preceded the shock you felt to discover how much older slavery was in the United States. You mentioned that a second ago. What was it about that? Because I think it's an experience many people have encountered in the education system here in the US and way we're taught history.

**NHJ:** I mean, Africa largely didn't exist in my education. Clearly there was a continent, but we weren't taught that there were kingdoms, that there were centers of learning, that Africans were contributing anything to the world. We learned about Europe. We learned some about China, almost nothing about the Middle East and really nothing about Africa.

**NHJ:** I was telling a friend the other day. I remember the moment when I realized that Egypt was in Africa and I was in the classroom and I was playing with the globe. I saw Egypt at the top of Africa and I was like, oh, there's 2 Egypt's. That's literally what I thought as a child - was that there must be 2 Egypt's. And it's not that a teacher said Egypt's not in Africa, but like the images of Egyptians looked White and the way we talked about Egypt was as if it was somehow part of Greece or Rome or European.

**NHJ:** And I just was like, wait, Egypt's in Africa? And think about that. No one ever taught you that, but there was an understanding of that. And where does that come from? It is both the absence of information and how we are taught certain things. And it was that understanding. That history is managed and manipulated in our understanding of history. Our national memory is manipulated by those who are in power - I think that liberated me to come up with a different narrative and to try to study. That which we had not been taught.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** When you took the idea to the folks at the Times and were like, this is the project, what was your pitch to them and what was the goal of the project?

**NHJ:** My pitch was very informal, honestly. I had been obsessing about this 400 year anniversary that I just knew from past experience was probably going to pass with little acknowledgement without the proper attention that something so important needed. So I think what I said when I went into the, we have a weekly ideas meeting where editors and writers toss around ideas. And I think what I said was, do you all know that this year is the 400th anniversary of American slavery?

**NHJ:** And no one in the room knew that, which I was not surprised by because most people had never heard of the date, 1619. And I said, well, this is the 400th anniversary of slavery this year, and I think we should do an entire issue of the magazine dedicated to excavating what that means. For instance, did you know American capitalism had its roots in slavery? Do you know? And I went through a list of a couple of things. And that was the pitch. I didn't write anything out. It was just very conversational and immediately Jake Silverstein, Editor-in-Chief of the magazine said, "We should do it, absolutely." And that was it.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Wow, that's amazing. I mean, I'm still trying to understand. I'd be interested in what you think. It's happening right now, not just in the media, but in the country that people are more, at least in some places, are more open to these ideas or these, or these frames of looking at history.

**NHJ:** Well. I mean, as someone who studies history, it's always hard to figure out why things happen as they happen in the moment, but I'll say that there may have been a different response had I pursued project under the Obama administration, where many people in mainstream media kind of bought into this idea that we had reached the post racial mountain right there. We hadn't solved racial inequality, but certainly we had banished the type of racism of old America. And then Donald Trump wins and Donald Trump wins on a campaign of White grievance and saying things that hadn't been appropriate and polite company for some time.

**NHJ:** And so I think a lot of gatekeepers of mainstream media understood like something is happening that we didn't think was happening and there's some smart folks who want to excavate that and I think that they were open because of that. So I think that played a big part in it. When I first started in journalism, in 2003, most newsrooms had a race beat and then they all went away.

**NHJ:** And, the news rooms because of what was happening politically began to create these beats again. So I think it was really the kind of cultural schizophrenia that was that was happening in our country that was not surprising to people of color but seemed to be very surprising to newsroom gatekeepers that that created these types of opportunities.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Since it has come out, 1619 has almost become like a, a buzzword for people who either to attach all their hopes or fears to and I think it's easy to lose sight of what is actually in the project, what it actually says. So we want to actually dig into some of the arguments you're making in the book and sort of the expanded version of 1619 that's in the book. And I think one of them that's interesting to us, instead of the word plantation, you use the term labor camp. Can you describe why that was important and why language in general in terms of the way we describe things, particularly from the past are important?

**NHJ:** Yes, so I'll start with the second part of that question. Language is important, particularly in the past, but of course in all contexts, because it can either clarify or obscure. It can either justify or explicate, right? And one of the things I did early on was I created a guide on language. So the language of uniform. And that said, we won't call human beings slaves. We're not going to use the euphemism of a plantation. We don't use Blacks as a noun. And that language was important because when you call someone a slave, you're saying that's who that person was, but slavery was a condition. And of course, the entire reason people were defined as slaves was to strip them of their humanity, to treat them as something that could be owned - not as someone as a human being so it was really important to me to not continue to dehumanize people who have been dehumanized, but also to force an understanding that these were people who had a condition forced upon them, but this was not their identity.

**NHJ:** Plantation. I think the usage of the work plantation is why we have weddings n the sites of torture, on the sites of forced labor, on the sites of places where human beings through extreme violence or the threat of violence or coercion or forced to labor for life for no pay, whether children were bought and sold away from them. That we can see these vacation sites, that we can have these Hanna Bucolic images, of Gone with the Wind in a way that you would never see on a concentration camp in Germany. So that language then facilitates the erasure of what happened in these spaces. But if you name them what they were, which was these were slave labor camps. These were forced labor camps. Then that gives us the proper image and context for what we're talking about. To me, you could not do a project like this and allow the language to obscure the atrocity that slavery was.

**NHJ:** In fact, I wanted the language to jar you and to force you to do this little switch in your head. That, My God, the

plantation was not Gone with the Wind. The plantation was everything that was happening off camera that you could never see. We have largely used language to obscure those things. And this clearly is an effort to, to challenge that understanding.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** In addition to the success of 1619, it's also been the subject of scrutiny and criticism. When we come back, we talked to Nikole Hannah-Jones about the debates triggered by her project. And what they tell us about the ongoing battle over American history.

Part 2, the pushback.

**[Newsclip audio #1]** Calais school districts are now using the 1619 project from the New York Times for example as a curriculum. That project is the work of an out of the closet racial extremist called Nikole Hannah-Jones.

**[Newsclip audio #3]** All right, the 1619 project creator defending her racial curriculum against the push to stop it for being taught in our kids' schools.

**[Newsclip audio #4]** This is a lie they're trying to equate critical race theory unfounded by any fact with what facts we have known for hundreds of years.

**[Newsclip audio #5]** Take our history, turn it upside down and empty it and we lose. Any sense of what we have as an American identity.

**[Newsclip audio #6]** All men are created equal. And the history of America is the long and sometimes difficult struggle to live up to that principle. That's a history we ought to be proud of. Not the historical revisionism of the 1619 project, which wants to indoctrinate America's kids and teach them to hate America.

**[Newsclip audio #7]** Many parents understandably deeply resent this. It's strange. It's racist. The culture revolution has come to the West.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** 1619 was mostly met with praise when it was first released. But it was also the subject of criticism, for its framing of early American history and the role slavery played in it. Some of those critiques came from pundits, others



from historians who took issue with particular portions of a project and from politicians, including the former president.

**[DONALD TRUMP AUDIO CLIP]** Critical Race Theory. 1619 project. And the crusade against American history is toxic. Propaganda. Ideological poison. That if not removed will dissolve specific bonds that tie us together. Will destroy our country.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Were you surprised by the level of pushback that came towards the 1619 when it was released? The aggressive response particularly from the right, were you - less about surprised by it at all but the level at which it came and how did you deal with that initially? Just on a personal emotional level.

**NHJ:** Of course I was surprised. No one could have expected the level. The longevity. The extent to the pushback. I certainly expected push back. I mean, this is a project in the New York Times arguing that slavery is the foundational American institution that our founders were - many of them, if not most, hypocrites who said they were founding a nation on the ideal freedom while engaging in slavery. You don't make that argument in the New York Times and not expect pushback. The duration of it, though, the level of the visual, the fact that the president of the United States was castigating the work, that sitting senators are trying to prohibit work from being taught, the fact that the project is banned in state law in several states in this country and likely will soon be prohibited from being taught in schools and several others.

**NHJ:** No one could have predicted that. I've been writing about racial inequality for 20 years. It was only when I created a project to unsettle the established narrative, our collective understanding of our country that I've become the center of this type of campaign. And I think that speaks to how powerful collective memory is and how collective memory is used, how it is managed, how it's manipulated to maintain powerful people in power. And that's actually what they find dangerous. So how have I dealt with it is dependent on the day. There have been some really difficult times in the last 2 years, efforts to discredit not just the work but me as a journalist. Threats of violence. We had a president who openly stoked violence, who was tweeting about my work, and that just sends a different type of person into your inbox and into your DMs and onto your voicemail. But at the same time, I understand that you would not see this type of organized pushback against the project if the project had not been immensely successful at achieving its goals, which is

leading people to have to think differently about their country and therefore, think differently about what is demanded of our society today if we want to live up to our highest ideals.

**NHJ:** So I in some ways take it as a badge of honor that 2 years out you can still see daily people trying to discredit the project because that's a measure of the power of what we were trying to do.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** How do you characterize their pushback? What is the pushback and what is it reflecting in terms of the ideology on the right that 1619 has been used by senators, by the former president as sort of a rallying point.

**NHJ:** Well you can't disentangle what's happening around the 1619 project right now with last year's so-called racial reckoning. You know, last year we saw the largest protest for civil rights and Black lives in the history of the world. You saw all White communities participating in Black Lives Matter marches. And people were evoking this 400 years, right? This narrative of this is a 400-year struggle. They are invoking the year 1619 and they are making these connections to what happens not just to George Floyd and Brianna Taylor, but the material conditions of Black Americans back to this legacy of slavery. And the narrative is what changes the policy, of course. So we know that if people start to think differently and understand their country differently and understand the inequality in their country differently, then they will support policies that are reflective of that understanding.

**NHJ:** If you think Black people are the, you know, more likely to be stopped by the police because they're more criminal or the Black people are more likely to be poor because they just don't want to work hard, then you support a different policy than if you think that what happened to George Floyd is because Black people - since the institutional slavery have been a target of a particular type of policing or that the reason that George Floyd and so many others were struggling against poverty is because of this long legacy of history and anti-Blackness, then you support policies that will address that. So it's not incidental that you see after this summer of racial reckoning, this massive backlash against the 1619 project against so-called critical race theory against the teaching of a history that tries to help us understand the inequality that we see today, because of course there's a fear that that will lead to policy that is more progressive and that will unsettle some of that economic supremacy, that will unsettle kind of our traditional holders of

power. So this becomes part of that campaign and Republicans decide they are going to run for reelection on this belief that, hey, these folks want to make you feel bad for your history. They want to blame you for the society that we live in and they want you - look they're taking down Christopher Columbus - they're attacking all of these White people that we have valorized. They're taking something from you and they're not gonna stop just by taking your heroes - they're going to take things out of your pocket. They're going to tell you that you're bad. That's very successful if you look at history. The way that you break up these multi-racial coalitions is you drive into the oldest wedge issue in America, which is race.

**NHJ:** And we were warned about this. And when we were told they're going to use 1619 in the presidential campaign, it sounded like the most ludicrous thing I ever heard. Like, who's going to use a work of journalism about slavery in a political campaign. But they have. And they have managed to turn it into a very effective wage issue.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** That's interesting you bring it up, because one of the criticisms of the 1619 project from the left particularly from socialist or you know marxists, has been that looking at American history through a racial lens strictly, leaves out kind of really important dimensions about class and about multi-kind of racial and multi-structure kind of movements against economic power structures in this country. That was a criticism laid at 1619 but just more in general about taking kind of a racial lens that looking at history. How do you respond to that critique?

**NHJ:** Well, one, the 1619 project is a project about the legacy of slavery. So I never understand this critique that the project didn't address every other issue that have been used to divide people in society. It's not a project about women and gender. It's not a project about what happened to indigenous people. It's not a project about class. It is a project about the legacy of slavery. And slavery was a racial institution. So I don't think that that is a justified critique and I think really people who accuse the 1619 project race essentialism are themselves trying to be class essentialists because, the truth is if you study history, there has not been very successful long-term class-based movements that have not been destroyed by race. And in the end every example that they can give about class movements, those class movements always end because White people in the movement choose their Whiteness over their class solidarity. This is what? The slave codes that follow Bacon's

rebellion are about - is saying we have to divide Black and White people who are all struggling under a White elite from each other and we do that by creating in Black people a distinct class that even the poorest White person can never fall below. So if you look at history simply on a class basis, you can give examples, very short lived examples of cross-racial solidarity. And then you can show how each and every one of those movements is destroyed by racism. And further - if you remove the class elements, so if you look at poor people who are Black and White, Black people are still worse off in every measure than people who are White and poor who have the same income.

**NHJ:** So how does one describe that? How does one explain the disparity in class within class without looking at race? So, I think the project is open to all types of critique. And I would never pretend that the project is perfect in every way, but I don't think the fact that we didn't focus enough on class when class is racialized in this country is the right argument.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** One thing I was going to ask about is the sort of one of the central arguments of the essay around the American Revolution and it being in part at least in part or not largely about American colonies trying to preserve slavery, there came criticisms from a number of historians, prominent historians about the veracity of that claim. From the most part, you stuck to that argument. My question is, how did you choose to respond to that in the book and why did you choose to kind of stick with that point of view of that argument?

**NHJ:** So I'm gonna push back a little bit on that framing.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** Sure.

**NHJ:** I would say fewer than a dozen historians have come out against that argument publicly. And I can't speak to the whole profession and how many people have not said anything.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** That's fair.

**NHJ:** But it's a small number of historians and Not even all of them are experts in the period of the American Revolution. We have more historians than that who wrote for the project. We have far more historians than that who agree with our framing of the American Revolution, who've also written publicly about that and yet they never get brought up and no one ever talks about all of the historians publicly supported the facts that we argued in the framing about the American Revolution.

**NHJ:** Now, why did I stick with the argument? If you see in the book, then you see the copious amount of endnotes from historians of the Creative American Revolution that that argument relies upon. We tend to think about history as being settled, right? There's these facts. This happened on this date and this is who did it. But history is a field of consensus and consensus does not mean that that's actually what occurred. And for a long time, historians didn't even deal with slavery in a revolution that was largely led by slaveholders. But you have for the last 40 years have had historians who are really trying to excavate the role of slavery, and they have come up with scholarship that says that slavery played a prominent role, particularly for Virginians and South Carolinans, in joining the revolution and it's that scholarship that my project or that section on the American Revolution is based on. So why did I leave it in there? Because I think it's right.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** I think one of the things you just pointed out is that history isn't settled and there's arguments made about history, right?

Like people have perspectives. One of the arguments I've read you made is that, look for most of American history it's been one kind of type of person who's been able to make that argument, right? White men for the most part, historians, and that now as a Black woman living in the 21st century making this argument - you're making a historical argument, right? Like that you're making an argument. Like you said, this is history is like a collection of historical arguments that finally people settle on and it's not ever settled. So sounds to me like that's part of what this is about as well, is that there's a historical argument being made, it's just as there's been in the past.

**NHJ:** Yes. I mean this is history as told from the bottom. So, do we think that enslaved people were inanimate objects during the period of the American Revolution? They were no different than the cattle? They were just kind of doing their work and not asserting themselves in the conflict, not understanding that there was, uh the issue of slavery was at play here, right? Not actively engaging in what was happening. This is about focus. It's about if you're not interested in what they're doing, then you don't focus on it. But that's not objective history. In these wars within the profession have been ongoing. If we think back - if you're a history nerd, to when Annette Gordon-Reed in her Pulitzer Prize winning book asserts that Thomas Jefferson had a relationship with Sally Hemings and had children by her.

That work was castigated. Scholars of Jefferson said there is no way, that's false. Thomas Jefferson absolutely did not have children with Sally Hemings and there's no proof that it happened.

**NHJ:** It is now the historical consensus, including even Monticello, that he did. I'm not arguing as a non-professional historian that I could never get anything wrong, because of course I could. Because historians also get things wrong. What I am saying is - I've said many many times, is, I did not sit down at my desk one day and say let me make up something about slavery in the American Revolution. That I wrote that because there was scholarship that backed it up that I thought was compelling and that I believed.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** You have this book coming out and it's much longer than the original project. I'm assuming that part of the motivation is also that you can fit more of the nuance, maybe fit more of the things that ended up not making it into the original project - into a longer book. And that you can spend more time. I don't want to say responding to you because that's assuming that you're responding in parts to some of the things that some of the criticisms that came along but, definitely flushing out things that weren't able to be flushed out in the original project. I mean is that fair to say? Do you think that that is partly what the book is able to do? That maybe the original project just didn't have the capacity to do as a magazine feature.

**NHJ:** Yes, absolutely. I mean, let me be clear, there was valid critique to be had of the project and where the critique was valid, we listened to it and we consulted more experts, and we did more research and with a book yes, you can be much more nuanced, you can add much more detail, you can add end notes so people can actually see the sourcing on the arguments that you're making. And as with anything, which happens with academic publications all the time. You publish something, you get the feedback on it and you revise it and you improve it, which is a very normal thing. It's just that 1619 project has become so politicized that people are like, "Oh, you revised? Oh you must have got it wrong in the first place," No just revision is part of a normal process.

**NHJ:** The beautiful thing about this is having had a chance to publish. And now having more space, you could sit and think, okay, what were the things that I really wish could have been in there that worked. And when the project came out, I had so many

conversations with historians, with regular people, and I listened to their feedback and I read more and studied more myself because I had more time, and that also changed in some ways the argument that I was making. And that's what's so exciting about this is, even if you read every single word of the original project, every essay in there has been significantly changed and all of that made much better.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** What's at stake in the battle for history? When we come back.

Part 3. The Country We Have.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** History and its accurate telling is at the heart of what Nikole Hannah-Jones is aiming for in 1619. It's sparked an intense debate about what story we should be telling ourselves about this country. But the debate doesn't end there. Questions are often put to someone like Nikole Hannah-Jones who does the work of storytelling and observation. Questions like, "what are we supposed to do with this history? How can pointing out the darkness of the past be productive? How are we supposed to feel about it? And what's the point?" According to Nikole, these questions miss the point.

**NHJ:** I don't know why it should matter whether it's pessimistic or optimistic. It is what it is. It is trying to make an argument about our society and some people have, you know, a criticism of the project, is that they do feel it's not hopeful enough, it's too pessimistic.

**NHJ:** I'm completely unconcerned with that. I don't think it's true. I don't think you can read to the end of my essay where I say Black people have made astounding progress despite every obstacle and that we have a right to fly the flag and feel proud of the country that we helped build and think that that is a pessimistic essay. But I don't think that's a relevant question. This is the country that we have, and the last 2 essays in the project, one is by Ibram Kendi on progress, which gets to this notion that Americans - we need to just believe that we're always moving forward even if the evidence is to the contrary and that that belief that we are better than we used to be and we're getting better you know in the future. That alleviates us of the need to do something right now about all the inequality that we see. And then the final essay is on justice. And it says, okay, we've taken you through this whole history. We've shown you all of the ways that the legacy of slavery has hurt Black Americans, has corrupted our society and it says we

have a choice. If you know it's all been created, then you know that it can be undone and we are not captive to the past. We can't do anything about it, but we don't have to be held captive to it, but we do have a choice to make.

**NHJ:** And to me that's tremendously empowering because we can decide whether we will be the country of our highest ideals. Black people did not until the end of the Civil War with the reconstruction amendments believe in the Constitution. The Constitution laid out no vision for us as citizens or us as free individuals. But they did believe in those opening words of the declaration. And the declaration, which is a succession document, but the beginning, brass, "as we hold these troops to be self-evident that all men are created equal, endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights of these, our life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Black people took those words. And turn the declaration into a freedom document. And I think that is the work that Black Americans have been doing since those words were written and what we are calling on is the rest of America to join in the struggle to perfect those really majestic words of our founding.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** You know, I wonder what you think is in the present, what is at stake in revising and re-examining the past. And do you think that we as a country can move forward without a shared agreed upon narrative about the past?

**NHJ:** Why it matters to me? Is we have learned the history of a country that does not exist. And because we've learned a false history of a country that does not exist, we are unable to understand a country in which we live and to create the country of our highest ideals. So I don't know that there can ever be one single uncontested shared narrative. But I do think we are a nation that is exceptional in ways that we should not be proud of. We have an exceptional amount of income inequality. We are the only Western industrialized nation that does not guarantee health care for its citizens. We are the only Western industrialized nation that does not guarantee paid leave when you have a child. We have this stingy social safety net of all of the countries that we like to compare ourselves. We incarcerate more people than any country. In the world.

**NHJ:** These are legacies of settler colonialism and these are legacies of African slavery. And until we are honest about that upon which we are built, we will never become the country that we believe ourselves to be. So I don't know if there is one collective unifying narrative about America. I think that the



1619 project can be a unifying narrative, but only if you believe that Black Americans can be heroes of the story and that Black Americans are just as American and that a White American can see themselves in the struggle to make this a democracy in a land of equality just the way we are expected to see ourselves in White founders.

**NHJ:** So, can we get there? I don't know. I don't think that is the concern of a journalist is whether we can have a single unifying narrative. I think the concern of the journalist is to try to help us understand the society we live in and to get as close to the truth as possible.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** You know, one thing I'm thinking about here, circling back to the beginning of our conversation is, and I know this is like asking you to imagine things, you how would you know but What would it have meant to you? To know that as a 16 old version of yourself to know that that thing you discovered about 1619 would now be entering classrooms, right? So another 16 year old will actually be coming across us through a curriculum.

**NHJ:** Oh my god, never, never in my wildest dreams could I imagine any of this. I did not even have this type of ambition for myself. I just wanted to write about Black folks for the Atlanta Journal Constitution. That was my highest ambition. I had no idea anyone would ever know my name or that anyone would be discussing my work or even, you know, that - my work would be considered so dangerous that it would be barred in state law. So, I think when I think back to that very nerdy 16 year old who had very little confidence and very little exposure - to all that would be possible in the world. I would just like to go back and give her a hug. And I don't know. I think it would have made all of those times when I was very unsure of myself, when I felt very small, have been worth it. So, I'm just grateful I talk a lot about how between this book and you know we also have a children's book that I co-wrote with Renee Watson that's called *Born on the Water* that's coming out on the same day. That's origin stories, specifically for Black American children who descend from American slavery, how much I wish I would have had texts like that when I was a child. I wouldn't have had to spend all of those years sitting in the classroom feeling completely inferior, feeling that Black people had never accomplished anything of work. Believing that the reason we weren't in the story was because we didn't do anything important and how differently my concept of myself would have been had

anyone bothered to teach us any of this, so I'm just grateful mostly and honored.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** And this has been really, really fantastic. Thank you so much.

**NHJ:** Thank you. I really enjoyed the conversation.

**NPR PODCAST HOST:** That's it for this week's show. I'm Ron D. Data. I'm Ron Team Adab Lou and you've been listening to Throughline from NPR.

This episode was produced by me and me and Line Swoo. Lane Kalman Levinson, Julie Kane.

Victor Evez. Anya Simon. Yolanda, Sangreni. Fact checking for this episode was done by Kevin Vogel.

Also, we want your voice on our show. Send us a voicemail at 872-58-8805 with your name where you're from and the line you're listening to through line from NPR and we'll get you in there.

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