

1619 Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones granted tenure after weeks of media furor

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The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) Board of Trustees voted 9-4 in a closed session Wednesday to grant tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, *New York Times* journalist and architect of the 1619 Project. Hannah-Jones, who has a master's degree in journalism from UNC, will have a position as the Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media.

Hannah-Jones has been given a lifetime sinecure—a position with immense financial benefit requiring little actual work—amid a relentless campaign to promote her and the racist falsifications of the 1619 Project. With the institutional backing of the *New York Times*, she has been elevated into superstar status, despite the vast disconnect between the accolades which have been piled on her and what she has accomplished.

This latest episode makes clear the heavy political investment of the Democratic Party and powerful sections of the ruling class in the effort to make race the central aspect of political discourse in the United States.

“Today’s outcome and the actions of the past month are about more than just me,” Hannah-Jones declared in a statement released through the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. “This fight is about ensuring the journalistic and academic freedom of Black writers, researchers, teachers, and students. We must ensure that our work is protected and able to proceed free from the risk of repercussions, and we are not there yet.”

The vote comes after weeks of fulmination and accusations of racism in the media and among Hannah-Jones’ supporters after it came to light in May that the board had postponed a decision on her tenure application. In the face of the delay, Hannah-Jones had instead accepted a 5-year tenure track position which

did not require board approval.

However, once the details of the delay in her tenure application came to light, Hannah-Jones, who has an African American father and a white mother, threatened to sue the university for discrimination and declared that she would accept nothing less than immediate tenure. Her attorneys claimed that the delay was the result of viewpoint discrimination in violation of her First Amendment free speech rights, race and sex discrimination and illegal political interference.

“The reasons for UNC’s denial of tenure to Ms. Hannah-Jones can only be understood as the product of political and racially discriminatory backlash against her life’s work investigating, documenting, reporting, and uplifting Black Americans’ fight against generational subjugation through racial oppression and structural injustice,” a letter sent by her attorneys to UNC claimed.

A public campaign was waged to secure tenure for Hannah-Jones. Over 200 professors, writers and other cultural figures signed a letter published by *The Root* which decried the failure to grant her tenure as part of a “growing wave of repression” which seeks to block the teaching of the history of slavery. The letter also declared that the UNC board had “failed to uphold the first order values of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas.”

The provost and other leaders at UNC intervened on her behalf, appealing to the board to approve her tenure application. A back-channel intervention by the Biden administration cannot be ruled out.

The demands that Hannah-Jones be granted tenure come in the face of withering criticisms of the 1619 Project, the central work for which she has become known, and the exposure of the falsifications upon which its central thesis is based. The response of

preeminent American historians Gordon Wood, James McPherson, James Oakes, Clayborne Carson, Victoria Bynum and others exposed the *New York Times*' effort to reinterpret American history as one of eternal struggle between blacks and whites.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, in addition to interviewing these historians, has thoroughly refuted the falsifications of the 1619 Project's lead essay written by Hannah-Jones, including her claims that the American Revolution was fought to defend slavery and that African Americans have been alone in fighting for civil rights.

Hannah-Jones' historical falsifications would be enough to disqualify her for tenure. However, there is also the matter of her journalistic qualifications for the position of professor, which do not exist.

A review of the *New York Times*' archive shows that Hannah-Jones has bylined just 23 articles for the newspaper since December 2014 and nothing since June of last year. It is not uncommon for professional journalists to produce one hundred or more articles in any given year. This is not limited to lower-level beat reporters, but includes well-known columnists and journalists who generally produce several columns per week.

Hannah-Jones' oeuvre consists of reports, essays and commentaries for the *New York Times Magazine* which would barely pass as personal journal entries, much less serious journalism.

Through stories framed by her own personal experience, Hannah-Jones presents race and racial division as the fundamental problem of American society, informed by a racist outlook directed against whites. She replaces individuals and historical forces with her own personal feelings.

In one column from 2016, "The Grief That White Americans Can't Share," she declared that whites are incapable of understanding the pain of seeing a black person killed by the police. "For white people, who have been trained since birth to see themselves as individuals, the collective fear and collective grief that black Americans feel can be hard to grasp," she wrote.

Hannah-Jones' defenders point to the fact that she is highly lauded—a 2016 George Polk Award, a 2017 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship "genius grant" and a 2020 Pulitzer for Commentary—and therefore qualified to teach about journalism. In reality, this says

more about the way such awards are used to bolster those who serve the interests of the ruling elite than it does about the quality of her work.

The racial identity politics which define Hannah-Jones' work has nothing to do with challenging economic inequality or oppression, but serves to advance the economic interests of members of the upper-middle class. She has discovered that there is a lot of money to be made in promoting a divisive racial narrative, securing a lucrative book and television deal out of the 1619 Project.

A final note on the issue of tenure. The increasingly difficult conditions in academia are well known, with tens of thousands of graduate students and adjuncts toiling under immense pressure with little economic and job security. While tenure was once relatively common, reaching a peak of 57 percent of faculty in 1975, according to *Tufts Magazine*, the American Association of University Professors reports that only 21 percent of the academic workforce in the United States is currently tenured.

The overwhelming majority of academic staff today are non-tenure track, often working paycheck to paycheck and from one contract to the next. It is rare for someone to enter academia with a tenured professorship position, since most universities require a years-long probationary period.

This is all of little concern to Hannah-Jones, who has been offered a permanent position, not because of the quality of her journalistic output, but because of her celebrity and the political role of the racist narrative that she promotes.



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