

# Ibram X. Kendi, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor awarded MacArthur Foundation “genius grants”

Dominic Gustavo, Tom Mackaman  
10 October 2021

Author Ibram X. Kendi, whose work promotes a race-obsessed view of American history and society, was awarded a \$625,000 “genius grant” by the MacArthur Foundation at the end of last month. The massive private endowment named him one of twenty-five “exceptionally creative visionaries inspiring change” for 2021.

Among the other MacArthur recipients this year is Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a professor in the Department of African American Studies at Princeton, whose work also promotes racial division. Previous recipients include Nikole Hannah-Jones, the leading individual behind the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of the demoralized rumination on race in America, *Between the World and Me*. Hannah-Jones won the MacArthur “genius grant” award in 2017, and Coates won in 2015.

Kendi’s writings, which include *How to Be an Antiracist* and *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, promote a narrative in which racial division is the permanent and only real conflict in American society. Kendi posits that racism is an inherent product of “whiteness.”

In 2020, Kendi’s “Center for Antiracist Research” at Boston University was endowed with millions of dollars from wealthy oligarchs, including \$10 million from Twitter and Square CEO and billionaire, Jack Dorsey, and \$1.5 million each from the Vertex Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The selection of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor alongside Kendi underscores the importance that the MacArthur Foundation lays on opposing a class-based understanding of the present and past.

Taylor was a leading member of the pseudo-left

International Socialist Organization (ISO), which dissolved itself in 2019 on the basis of a sex scandal. The actual purpose of this dissolution was to allow the ISO leadership to fully integrate itself into the Democratic Party and the nexus of corporate money that surrounds it.

Earlier this year, Taylor received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, estimated at as much as \$45,000. This brings her one-year cash payout from the corporate fellowship world to nearly \$700,000.

It should also be noted that Taylor was a leading voice behind the cancellation last year of a scheduled talk by political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr. to Philadelphia and New York chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Taylor wrote at the time that Reed’s plan to focus on the class issues that underlie racial inequality was “a provocation.”

Coates and Hannah-Jones also continue to rake in grant money. They joined hands earlier this year in founding the so-called Center for Journalism and Democracy at Howard University, financed with \$20 million from the Knight Foundation, Ford Foundation, and other major capitalist donors. Each was also granted a tenured professorship at the historically black university.

Hannah-Jones simultaneously turned down a tenured position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) after a media firestorm was raised against her having been offered “only” a five-year position with a potential for tenure. She presented the hold-up in getting full tenure at UNC as a racist attack on academic freedom.

The new multi-million dollar center at Howard is one

of the many franchising opportunities opened up for Hannah-Jones by the 1619 Project, which has been propped up with the institutional backing of the *Times* and yet another corporate endowment from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. Like Kendi, Hannah-Jones will not have to rely on a six-figure academic salary alone. She is handed thousands upon thousands of dollars for each speaking appearance, including being paid \$25,000 recently by one public university to speak at an online Zoom lecture.

Coates perhaps best summed up the role of a middle class layer that is being promoted for advancing a racist interpretation of history and American politics when he titled a collection of essays on the Obama years, *We Were Eight Years in Power*. The oppressed black workers of Detroit, New Orleans, Baltimore, Oakland, and elsewhere may be surprised to learn that they were “eight years in power” under Obama, the period that witnessed the largest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in American history.

Recently, Kendi’s book directed at school children, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You*, was featured in the American Library Association’s (ALA) annual Banned Book Week—for titles which are banned or suppressed in public schools and libraries—held between September 16 and October 2. The same week, Hannah-Jones appeared on CNN to speak about the alleged censorship of her work, saying, “This is actually trying to control the collective memory of this country... And trying to say we just want to purge uncomfortable truths from our collective memory. And that’s very dangerous.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes efforts by Republican lawmakers in various states to ban the teaching of critical race theory or the 1619 Project. But this does not lessen our opposition to racist politics.

To claim that Hannah-Jones, Kendi, Coates and the rest are facing genuine censorship is to make a mockery of the term. Kendi’s supposedly “banned” children’s book has spent 79 weeks on the *New York Times*’ bestsellers list. Coates’ *Between the World and Me* is among the most assigned books on college campuses. The 1619 Project and an associated curriculum, with backing from the Pulitzer Center, is being given out, free of charge, to cash-starved public schools.

The massive payouts from corporate foundations give the lie to the claim that these authors represent a view

of American history and society that is dangerous to the establishment. If they are so threatening, why are they being sponsored by the capitalist press, academia, billionaires, and above all the Democratic Party?

Kendi, Coates, and Hannah-Jones, now joined by the pseudo-left Taylor, have made lucrative careers lamenting “institutional racism,” the “white power structure,” and even “white capitalism.” But, in oblivious self-parody, they have not seemed to ponder why it is that powerful “white institutions” such as the *New York Times*, the ALA and the Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur, and Guggenheim foundations lavish so much attention and money on them.

The apparent contradiction is resolved when one understands that the racial politics they promote is part of the semi-official platform of the Democratic Party and is an integral ideological defense of capitalism. Race is utilized now, as it always has been, to disorient and divide the working class by obscuring the reality that society is divided under capitalism between classes whose interests are fundamentally opposed and irreconcilable.

For such valuable services rendered in the defense of capitalism, Kendi, Coates, Hannah-Jones and Taylor have been generously rewarded.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**