

# Nikole Hannah-Jones promotes racial politics and the “1619 Project” at the University of Michigan

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On Thursday, October 17, Nikole Hannah-Jones, lead author of the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project,” appeared at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in an event titled, “Realizing Justice and Equity in the Long Arc of History.”

Hannah-Jones answered questions from two moderators for more than an hour, giving a barely coherent presentation of her racialist conception of American history and contemporary society. She took no questions from the audience of several hundred people, online and in-person.

Despite its fractured and intellectually impoverished character, her presentation had a clear purpose—to employ the racialist falsifications of history promulgated by the 1619 Project to promote the presidential campaign of Democratic candidate Kamala Harris.

Even more fundamentally, Hannah-Jones sought, in response to the growing resistance of the working class in America to war, genocide and capitalist exploitation, to insist that race, not class, is the driving force of social and political development, and that white workers are part of the ongoing legacy of white supremacy rooted in the history of slavery in the American South.

Hannah-Jones began with a defense of the 1619 Project as the basic framework for understanding US politics and the crisis election of 2024. She said:

Since the Project came out, I feel that arguably the Project has clearly been borne out. That if you want to understand January 6, if you want to understand how you have a political party now ... that has somebody openly saying, “We don’t believe in democracy, that if democracy is multiracial, that is not what we want,” ... that they could overtake the country and overturn the elections. All of that ... is not explained by 1776, is not explained by these ideas of liberty. It is explained, however, by 1619.

Hannah-Jones argued in the 1619 Project, which was first published in August 2019 in the *New York Times Magazine*, that the “true” foundation of the United States was not the Declaration of Independence of 1776, but the arrival and sale of the first African slaves in Virginia in 1619. As a result of this “original sin,” she wrote, “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.”

The 1619 Project has been heavily promoted by the corporate-financial oligarchy, and particularly by the Democratic Party, which relentlessly promotes the politics of racial and gender identity. Hundreds of thousands of copies of the magazine were distributed to schools and used to form the basis of new curriculums, while a book edition and a children’s book were both #1 *New York Times* bestsellers. Last year, Hulu released a six-

episode docuseries, with billionaire TV host Oprah Winfrey as executive producer.

Identifying the 1619 Project as a major attack on the democratic content of the American Revolution and the Civil War, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a series of devastating refutations of the Project’s falsifications of history, which included interviews with leading historians.

Hannah-Jones has deployed new turns of phrase in lieu of serious historical analysis—for example, calling slavery a “poison pill”—but has offered no response to the WSWS.

At the University of Michigan, she argued that what “allowed 1776 to happen is that the very idea of republicanism comes up from Virginia by white men who have power and wealth because they engaged in slavery and who can believe in the idea of letting people decide because, in fact, 40 percent of the population has no say in democracy at all because they are enslaved. We have to understand that if we want to understand our society.”

In other words, the political crisis in the US, the evolution of the Republican Party under Trump into a fascist party and the political violence surrounding the upcoming election are confirmation that the American Revolution was not progressive, but was really a Southern slaveowners’ revolt driven by fear of a growing anti-slavery movement in Britain. Hannah-Jones repeated this falsification of the American Revolution from the 1619 Project in her remarks in Ann Arbor.

The revolutionary war, she contended, was not fought to end subjugation by the main colonial power in the world at the time, or over issues such as, “No taxation without representation,” but to defend the institution of chattel slavery. She ignored the revolutionary role of actors in northern colonies such as Boston’s Sons of Liberty and Sam Adams, among others.

Hannah-Jones drew a direct line between the supposedly reactionary origins of the United States and the growing social and political crisis in contemporary America. She argued that working class anger over worsening social conditions and soaring economic inequality is really an expression of racism. “What we have been taught is about ‘economic anxiety,’” she declared, “as a matter of fact, this is about demographic anxiety. This is about a [white] majority here that is losing its demographic supremacy, but also the political power that comes from that.”

**A defense of affirmative action and funding for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)**

The major focus of Hannah-Jones' presentation was concern that the "white majority" (via Trump and the Republicans) is trying to roll back the affirmative action and "diversity, equity and inclusion" (DEI) programs that have elevated a thin layer of African Americans into lucrative positions in the media, politics, academia, the corporate establishment and the state. This is, above all, what she means by "saving our democracy."

The DEI office at the university co-sponsored her talk, and its chief diversity officer, Dr. Tabbye Chavous, introduced the event by warning about an "anti-DEI" movement. The same day as the event, Hannah-Jones's colleagues at the *New York Times Magazine* published a piece titled, "What to know about the University of Michigan's D.E.I. Experiment," which defended the allocation of \$250 million for these programs since 2016.

Hannah-Jones argued that "attacks on what they are calling critical race theory, what they are calling DEI, what they are calling wokeness are really attacks on our ability to grasp the country that we have so that we can deal with the issue of race, that should save our democracy."

She referred to the Supreme Court ruling in June 2023 to end affirmative action and the commitment by the Trump campaign to cut back funding and positions for affirmative action and DEI programs. She asserted this was the result of "historical amnesia" about the roots of the country in slavery and white racism.

In fact, these programs have nothing to do with defending democracy or the interests of the large majority of African Americans, whose social position has continued to deteriorate along with that of the rest of the working class. Over recent decades, economic inequality within the African-American population has grown more rapidly and starkly than within the US population as a whole. A 2016 study of census data concluded: "A black family in the top 1 percent is worth a staggering 200 times that of an average black family. If black America were a country, we would be among the most wealth stratified in the world."

Beginning with Republican President Richard Nixon's promotion of "black capitalism" following the urban rebellions of the 1960s, the ruling class has used the race-based allocation of privileges in college admissions, military officer training programs and corporate positions to promote the illusion of social mobility and prop up the legitimacy of the military, the state and the capitalist system as a whole, even as it abandoned any semblance of social reform.

The continuation of this system of allocation of privileges requires the lie that racism is an ineradicable feature of American society, a lie that has become ingrained in Democratic Party politics.

The racialist falsification of history and contemporary society has allowed Trump to exploit the weakness of popular support for identity politics in the working class, including among black workers. The explanation of Trumpism strictly as a matter of race actually helps the fascists cover up their agenda of establishing a brutal dictatorship to crush opposition among all workers to the wars and austerity demanded by the capitalist ruling class.

## Voting "is the least sh\*t we can do"

In her UM appearance, Hannah-Jones said that voting "is the least sh\*t we can do" to save democracy. For all her talk of democracy, however, she failed to mention that the Biden-Harris administration announced the deployment of "boots on the ground" in Israel the previous Sunday, becoming even more directly implicated in the genocide in Gaza and the expanding war in the Middle East. Hannah-Jones also remained silent about the escalation of US-NATO support for a Ukrainian regime

dominated by neo-Nazis in a war against Russia that threatens to trigger a nuclear holocaust.

She also chose to remain silent about the repression of anti-Gaza genocide protesters at the University of Michigan and on campuses all across the US. The university dispatched the police to arrest four peaceful protesters in August, has lodged felony charges against 11 students, and carried out a brutal assault by police on a peaceful protest on October 7. Two days before the lecture, Ann Arbor police rescinded a prohibition against Socialist Equality Party members going onto the campus. It had been issued in retaliation for their "crime" of distributing leaflets for a public meeting at the university featuring the SEP's presidential candidate Joseph Kishore, who advances a socialist perspective against war, genocide, the social crisis and the growing threat of dictatorship and fascism.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporter approached Hannah-Jones after the event and asked about her stance on the Gaza genocide and the Harris campaign, noting that the Democratic vice president and current presidential candidate had met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and declared her support for the genocidal war against the Palestinians. She replied that, as a *New York Times* journalist, "I can't talk about politics."

The cynicism and dishonesty of this response is obvious. Hannah-Jones was present at the Democratic National Convention in August, where Kamala Harris and Tim Walz were confirmed as the party's presidential ticket. There she wore a pin on her chest showing Harriet Tubman, a leading abolitionist who escaped slavery.

At the DNC, she explained to AURN News, "I have Harriet Tubman because this is a moment that black women have been fighting for since we were brought to this country and to see that that glass ceiling might finally be broken, but broken by those of us who were at the very bottom of society, is just very powerful."

The association of Tubman with an imperialist war criminal like Harris explodes the democratic pretenses of Hannah-Jones, the 1619 Project and their racialist politics.

Hannah-Jones has become a multi-millionaire as a result of the 1619 Project, gathering lucrative speaking fees for events such as the one held last week in Ann Arbor, as well as grants, including a 2019 subvention from oil giant Shell, which has a major presence in Africa and the Middle East. At her alma mater, Howard University, she heads the Center for Democracy and Journalism, which is backed by \$20 million in funding.

## The myth of "racial capitalism"

The lead moderator at last week's event was UM Professor Terri Friedline, who introduced the concept of "racial capitalism" into the discussion, listing it as one of the subjects she teaches on campus. Her question referred to an episode of the docuseries on Hulu that presents the failed unionization effort at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama as a supposed case study of "racial capitalism."

The term was popularized by Professor Cedric Robinson, the former director of the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, published in 1983 and reissued in 2020 following the protests against the police murder of George Floyd.

Robinson wrote that racism has its genesis in the "internal" relations of European peoples and is part of the "inventory of Western civilization." He argued:

As a material force, then, it could be expected that racism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term “racial capitalism” to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency.

Endorsing this notion, Hannah-Jones responded to Friedline by saying, “All capitalism in America is racial capitalism... our system of capitalism was shaped through racialized slavery.”

She reiterated:

All capitalism in America is racial capitalism... There are better forms of capitalism. It is not saying you have to give up on capitalism. It is saying we have in the United States, because of our history, a very exploitative form of capitalism.

The political conclusions that flow from this pseudo-analysis are fairly obvious. The problem in America is not capitalism and class exploitation, the domination of society by a parasitic class of billionaire oligarchs. Rather, all social and political evils flow from white racism, which is lodged in America’s origins and has to be dealt with by elevating a narrow layer of blacks to positions of wealth and power to share in the fruits of class exploitation.

Like Robinson, Hannah-Jones rejects the roots of racism as residing in specific forms of production like slavery, feudalism and capitalism, and the resulting ideologies employed by the ruling class to defend its domination. Instead, as opponents of historical materialism, they see racism as intrinsically ingrained in the psyches of “white people.”

The failed effort of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to establish itself at the Bessemer Amazon plant in two separate unionization votes supposedly exemplifies “racial capitalism,” because it demonstrates the continuation of “white supremacy,” according to Hannah-Jones. She claimed at UM that the unionization effort failed because “white workers voted for their racial interests” in opposing the union.

This argument is false. First, it ignores “the decades of betrayals of *all* workers at the hands of the very union bureaucracy that they are now expected to vote for,” as explained in a review of the Hulu series by the WSWS.

In 2021, the RWDSU only got 738 votes from a total of 5,800 workers (13 percent), and 1,798 voted against. An unfair labor practices legal challenge led to a second vote in 2022, which resulted in 875 votes for the RWDSU and 993 votes against, again with only a small percentage of the workforce voting. Given that 85 percent of workers at the plant are black, the vast majority of black workers at the plant did not support bringing in the union.

The union president, Stuart Appelbaum, sought to use racial politics to sell the unionization effort, calling it a “racial reckoning” and continuation of the Black Lives Matter movement. He deployed BLM activists and supporters to campaign at the warehouse. Workers at the plant cannot be blamed for opposing the efforts to divide them along racial lines, or for finding suspicious the fact that the year before, their multi-billionaire boss, Jeff Bezos, had donated \$18.5 million to “organizations focused on combating systemic racism,” including Black Lives Matter.

Hannah-Jones’ endorsement of the union bureaucracy as an expression of “democracy” reflects the growing fear in ruling circles and the upper-middle class of the emergence of a class movement against war and capitalism that breaks free of the stranglehold and isolation imposed by the union apparatus. In response, Hannah-Jones is deliberately injecting

race to prop up the bureaucracy, divide workers and suppress such a movement.

The *World Socialist Web Site* long ago identified the class interests of those who promote racialist politics as entirely antagonistic to those of the working class. Five years before the 1619 Project appeared, the WSWS wrote in “Race, class and police violence in America”:

These people have an agenda. It is to encourage divisions along racial lines within the working class. According to them, the basic problem is not capitalism, a system based on class exploitation and oppression, of which racial discrimination is one expression, but rather a hatred of blacks that is somehow built into the genetic code of white people. On this basis it is a natural and inevitable progression to support black Democrats and their bourgeois allies and oppose an independent and united movement of the working class against the entire political establishment.



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