

Black Author's Warning on Democracy

Nikole Hannah Jones of 1619 Project; a force of reckoning on race

(AP) — Following a year of professional milestones born of her work on America's history of slavery, Pulitzer Prize-winning Black journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, a former reporter in Portland, is clear-eyed about her mission to force a reckoning around the nation's self-image.

The New York Times Magazine writer who worked for the Oregonian for six years starting in 2006, began this year in a protracted tenure fight with her alma mater in North Carolina — the dispute ended when she announced in July that she'd take her talents to a historically Black university — and is closing it as a national best-selling author.

"I've gone from being just a journalist to becoming some sort of symbol for people who either love me and my work or revile me and my work," she said.

Hannah-Jones recently spoke to The Associated Press in an exclusive interview about the ongoing controversy over The 1619 Project, a groundbreaking collection of essays on race that first appeared in a special issue of The New York Times Magazine in 2019. Now in book form, the project has become a touchstone



Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, a former reporter in Portland and author of the "1619 Project," poses for a recent portrait at the headquarters of The Associated Press in New York. (AP photo)

for America's reckoning over slavery and the reverberations for Black Americans.

"The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story," and "Born on the Water," a picture storybook collaboration with co-writer Renée Watson and illustrator Nikkolas Smith, each have spent consecutive weeks atop the Times bestseller list since their Nov. 16 release. A TV documentary on the work is due out later in 2022.

Still, Hannah-Jones said the backlash to her work is evidence that the U.S. is approaching a make-or-break crossroads on its global standing as a democracy.

"I think that we are in a very frightening time," she said in the interview at AP's New York City headquarters.

"People who are much, much smarter than me, who have studied this much, much longer than I have are ringing the alarm," Hannah-Jones said. "I think we have to ask ourselves ... the narrators, the storytellers, the journalists: Are we ringing the alarm in the right way? Are we doing our jobs to try to uphold our democracy?"

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

AP: If anything, what did this year teach you about where we are in our country currently, when it comes to racial justice and our reckoning with history?

HANNAH-JONES: This year, to me, is just reflective of what I've always understood about this country. And that is that steps forward, steps towards racial progress, are always met with an intensive backlash. That we are a society that fully does not want to deal with the anti-Blackness that is at the core of so many of our institutions and really our society itself.

AP: Can you point to any progress in how the discourse has developed or evolved?

HANNAH-JONES: Certainly the fact that very powerful people are so concerned about a work of journalism called The 1619 Project that they would seek to discredit it, that they would seek to ban it from being taught, does speak to the fact that there are millions of Americans who want a more honest accounting of our history, who want to better understand the country that we're in, who are open to new narratives.

AP: Do you think this country is poised to make any progress on issues of racial justice, and especially around education?

HANNAH-JONES: Many in mainstream media got caught up in the Republican propaganda campaign, which tried to conflate the teaching of a more accurate

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