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## The War over the Future of Academic Freedom

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### Abstract

*A war over the future of education is raging at school board meetings, in news media, and in classrooms, despite the implementation of short-term solutions to disparities caused by white supremacist ideological practices and policies. Attacks on academic freedom today are shaped by the politics of respectability, the desire to evacuate issues of race from racialized subjects, the fear of “the Great Replacement,” or gains made by racialized people and shifting cultural norms that benefit historically marginalized populations. To secure the future of academic freedom in this sociopolitical climate, I advocate for methods of redress including more audacious organizing, legislation, political agitation, and knowing when to say no to unnecessary interventions and innovations that ultimately undermine the agency of academics.*

As Eva Cherniavsky (2021, 1) defines it, academic freedom is a “collective right of faculty to set the norms of academic debate, free from interference by administration, governing boards, or the state.” In practice, however, academic freedom continues to be stifled. While one of the solutions is collective action against censorship of faculty not aligned with white supremacist power brokers, there needs to be a better understanding of how evaluation processes are used to undermine marginalized faculty. A case in point is Nikole Hannah-Jones’s 1619 Project, which met “certain collectively established norms of relevance, coherence, and evidence” (Cherniavsky 2021, 7) that served as a counternarrative to the ideas expressed in the 1776 Project. Although there was no valid argument

against granting Hannah-Jones tenure, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill board of trustees based its denial of tenure on claims about the quality of her work. In doing so, it weaponized the evaluation process against Hannah-Jones.

The “collective right of faculty to set the norms of academic debate, free from interference by administration, governing boards, or the state” (Cherniavsky 2021, 2) has become in many spaces the freedom of *a select few* with the power to dictate what constitutes quality scholarship and which scholars are deemed productive. Each step of the evaluation process may be weaponized against raced Black academics for the purposes of removing them from the ranks of faculty and administration or undermining their influence within these domains. The attempt to “*preserve (a measure of) faculty control*” (Cherniavsky 2021, 11; italics in the original) enables white supremacist stakeholders or members of the university community to use academic freedom protections to preserve the interests of groups and institutions that oppose diversity and inclusion efforts. Due to these trends, US universities have a white supremacy malignancy that is metastasizing at an alarming rate.

In this article, I address the war over the future of academic freedom and the weaponizing of the tenure evaluation process, using the case of Nikole Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project. In response to Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s discussion of academic freedom, Ani Mukherji argues that it’s only “as practices, or better, *organized collective practices*, that academic freedom takes on meaning, that it becomes something that has force, something that moves” (Buff and Mukherji 2021). This is a theme echoed in Hannah-Jones’s tenure case at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which exemplifies the level of intensity one engages during a tenure battle as a raced Black academic. I conclude by highlighting some of the ways faculty members may resist such incursions.

### **The Black White Supremacist**

The Woodson Center’s 1776 Unites project is organized by predominantly raced Black people who choose to ignore a system of white supremacy that negatively impacts the sociopolitical and economic potential of melanin-rich Americans. Founded by Bob Woodson, 1776 Unites is

reminiscent of the Dave Chappelle sketch about a raced Black man named Clayton Bigsby who is a (literally and figuratively) blind white supremacist. Similarly, the 1776 Unites project's reframing of history and other forms of historical disinformation circulating in mass media are laughable examples (Kulinski 2020) of the not-so-funny reality of raced Black people working against their own interests with the funding and other support of corporations, conservative interest groups, institutions, and politicians (1776 Unites project 2021–22). This becomes particularly poignant when we witness this in real people like Ali Alexander, an African American of Arab descent and the organizer of the January 6 "Stop the Steal" rally in Washington, DC, and Enrique Tarrio, a Miami native of Afro-Cuban origin and leader of the Proud Boys.

Conversely, the 1619 Project, founded by Nikole Hannah-Jones, is a series of essays published in August 2019 by the *New York Times Magazine* that includes marginalized perspectives. The 1619 Project is a disappointment to Woodson, who argues that it wrongfully frames the nation as one built on "corrupt and hypocritical" principles (Stepman 2020), makes false claims about the "original sin" of enslavement (Hains 2020), and perpetuates the notion that white people are "beneficiaries of privilege" (Stepman 2020). However, a more complex analysis of the conditions of race in US history is possible without having to evacuate both the gains made (Cherry 2020) by raced Black people and the struggle it took to achieve those gains. There are deep divisions in Americans' views of racial histories (Pew Research Center 2021), but those divisions should not prevent us from sharing knowledge about the racist past and present of the United States, understanding that can lay the groundwork for future progress.

### **The Audacious Exercise of Academic Freedom**

Hannah-Jones, a veteran journalist, who won a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 2017 and received the Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for the 1619 Project, was under attack for having the audacity to center marginalized histories. It was a courageous move to take up a project like this during a time of resentment over the gains achieved by melanin-rich people, increased lynchings, and other racial attacks. Despite her stellar

qualifications, backlash from conservatives who condemned the 1619 Project and her hiring as director of UNC–Chapel Hill’s journalism school led university trustees to decline to offer her the tenure that had always been associated with the position. When her tenure package was submitted to the university’s Promotion and Tenure Committee, her application for tenure received overwhelming approval. However, in an interview with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Hannah-Jones (2021) added,

We learned that my tenure application had been pulled twice but received no explanation as to why. The same thing happened again in January. . . . My editors at The New York Times had already supplied quotes for the press release of the big announcement. I did not want to face the humiliation of letting everyone know that I would be the first Knight Chair at the university to be denied tenure. I did not want to wage a fight with my alma mater or bring to the school and to my future colleagues the political firestorm that has dogged me since The 1619 Project published. So, crushed, I signed the five-year contract in February, and I did not say a word about it publicly.

Hannah-Jones fought back against attacks on the quality and integrity of her scholarship leveled by the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, a conservative Raleigh think tank formally known as the Pope Center, after founder Art Pope, a right-wing activist and UNC–Chapel Hill trustee. The board of trustees’ decision was out of alignment with the AAUP (2015) position that “institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.”

On the contrary, Hannah-Jones was clearly punished by the university board of trustees for her work on the 1619 Project. National Association of Black Journalists president Dorothy Tucker reached out to the UNC–Chapel Hill board of trustees to determine their reason for failing to grant tenure to Hannah-Jones. As Tucker explained,

We denounce any decision to deny a distinguished journalist tenure because she simply did her job by reporting facts about

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slavery in America. The university would be sending a message to its students that it does not support press freedom and that seeking the truth and reporting . . . is not a pillar it believes should be a part of our profession, and that the work of Black journalists, or any journalist, to expose the ills of slavery and its impact on America is unmerited. (Kstewart 2021)

After public outrage, widespread protests by students, faculty, social justice organizations, and other backlash, the board of trustees voted 9-4 to grant Hannah-Jones tenure. Hannah-Jones declined the offer and accepted tenure from Howard University on July 6, 2021. Some of the trustees who still declined to vote in favor of granting tenure remain in their positions. The lesson learned is that when melanin-rich people and allies work collectively for academic freedom, change is no longer simply possible, it is inevitable. Hannah-Jones eventually won her tenure case, but the battle over academic freedom and the need for greater efforts to educate the next generation continues.

### **Reconceptualizing the Spirit of “1776”**

The authors of the Declaration of Independence compared living under British rule to living as an enslaved people. However, they wrote the Declaration of Independence with the idea that Africans had no rights worthy of recognition and therefore should remain in bondage. One of the “Founding Fathers,” Patrick Henry, condemned British taxation without representation, among other abuses, with the cry, “Give me liberty or give me death!” By 1775, colonists were ready to transform those words into action and free themselves from British rule. Many Africans and Black Indigenous people at the time saw their American enslavers’ responses to their own desire for freedom as hypocritical. The contradiction motivated over 30,000 enslaved Africans to fight for the British when word spread about a proclamation stating that any enslaved African who served in the British army against the colonists would be freed after the war. The decision to continue enslaving Africans before, during, and after the Revolutionary War laid the foundation for what we are witnessing today. Bob Woodson chose to name his project after a project of continued enslavement at this country’s founding.

## The Impact of White Supremacist Ideology

Tanisha Anderson, Rayshard Brooks, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Michelle Cusseaux, Manuel Ellis, George Floyd, Janisha Fonville, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Akai Gurley, Andre Hill, Botham Jean, Tatiana Jefferson, Trayvon Martin, Gabriella Nevarez, Daniel Prude, Tamir Rice, Aura Rosser, Alton Sterling, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright (Chughtai n.d.), and too many others to name are symptoms of the original sin and disease of the United States. Like the Founding Fathers who shaped this nation's destiny, subsequent generations of Americans have witnessed our country's consumption by a raging cancer in the form of anti-Black racism, kidnap, theft, rape, terrorism, bioterrorism, and genocide as our current "mode of being human" (Wynter 2006).

The election of this country's so-called first Black president, Barack Obama, was seen as both a sign of progress and a threat (Lewis 2017). As if his victory in 2008 wasn't triggering enough for white supremacists, Obama's second-term win in 2012 motivated white violence and the desire to change what voting-age students were being taught in primary and secondary schools and on college campuses. This devastating blow to the rabid thematization of Blackness (Fanon 1967, 112) shed new light on our society's cognitive dissonance (Gawronski and Brannon 2019) and inspired hate-fueled violence that played out in our everyday lives through corporate news, social media, and other modes of communication. Individuals who had lived their lives in a fantasy of their own superiority couldn't face reality. They wanted facts to be buried—murdering melanin-rich people wasn't enough to satiate their deep desire for the supremacy they had been conditioned to believe was their birthright. Increasing numbers turned to "Great Replacement" ideology (Camus 2018, 18–22). As ideological foundations crumbled, calls intensified to protect white women, and, more important, children, from the realities of our shared histories.

Parents attended school board meetings to exercise their freedom of speech (Scott 2019). Some of the meetings turned violent. The "Great White Hope" (Sammons 1990) as an ideal of white virility was imploding, while news organizations attempted to prop it up by framing the violence

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as anything else (Miller 2021; Kingkade, Zadrozny, and Collins 2021; Talbot 2021; Kamenetz 2021; Owen 2021). Cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall says culture is about shared meaning, and language is the privileged medium in which we “make sense” of things. Language is central to culture and operates as a “representational system” through signs, symbols, sounds, written words, images, and so on to represent to other people our concepts, ideas, and feelings (Hall 1997). Any discussion of language implicates power.

Debates about inclusive education and ethnic studies didn’t fit the understanding of power for enraged parents at school board meetings who committed themselves to continue defending an education that centers whiteness. Their conceptual maps (Hall 1997) directing them to what they assumed to be their rightful place of white superiority got rerouted. While some simply dismissed the facts behind a perspective other than their own, others got defensive, which led to unprovoked violence. Such aggressions, like violations of academic freedom including denying tenure and promotion and banning the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) and ethnic studies, are acts of collective catharsis. Even only for a moment, people working in the service of white supremacy can feel as though they are recovering their loss, and if they can be made to feel whole again by stopping progress, those moments enable them to regain an imagined omnipotence.

The magnitude of US violence reflects a country that has had too many leaders exhibiting the behavior of psychopaths. Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1967, 145–46) spoke to society’s various approaches to collective aggression: “In every society, in every collectivity, exists . . . an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released. This is the purpose of games in children’s institutions, of psychodramas in group therapy . . . and all those ‘comic books’ serve actually as a release for collective aggression. The magazines are put together by white men for little white men. This is the heart of the problem.”

When Fanon called this “the heart of the problem,” he was suggesting that we are all implicated in the damage done by subliminal messaging

about ourselves, which is destructive in a variety of ways.<sup>1</sup> Engaging in critical pedagogy and academic freedom is one of many ways to resist these incursions.

### The War over the Future of Education

A tug-of-war has emerged over the future of school curricula. This war has been ideologically impelled by white supremacists who aim to reconstruct how US history is taught and incite tensions concerning the value of teaching CRT. Their goal is to quiet and delegitimize calls to address the historical consequences of racism and discrimination. These developments result from years of resentment over gains made by marginalized people despite the consistent presence of various forms of violence committed by whites targeting the sociopolitical and economic stability of melanin-rich individuals and groups.

For example, consider the opposition to adoption of A.B. 1460 (California Legislature 2020), which requires students in the California State University system to take an ethnic studies course before graduating, and A.B. 101, which creates a similar requirement for high school graduation. Many parents, predominately white, feared how teaching race-related issues might impact K–12 children. However, collective efforts, including those of politicians like the raced Black California secretary of state, Shirley Weber, who had authored A.B. 1460 as an assemblywoman and supported A.B. 101; community activists; K–12 teachers; and university professors who stayed active and committed, ultimately got the bills signed into law. But the fight isn't over, considering that A.B. 101 currently applies to grades 9–12 only (California Legislature 2021). By 2025, high schools across California will be required to offer ethnic studies classes and make such a course a graduation requirement. By 2029, they will also be required to ensure that students

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<sup>1</sup> Fanon (1967, 146) said that in the Antilles and in the other colonies, popular “magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary ‘who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.’”



complete a one-semester ethnic studies course (California Legislature 2021).

Faculty, students, and staff across the California State University system had fought CSU leadership for years in support of an ethnic studies course requirement (Charles 2021; Patel 2014; Abdullah 2020; Flaherty 2014). On the campus of California State University, Los Angeles, they pushed for full support for Pan African studies, Asian and Asian American studies, Chicana(o) and Latina(o) studies, and American Indian and Indigenous studies programs. Their efforts won a rule change requiring students to enroll in an ethnic studies course as a general education requirement for graduation.

These gains may appear minor, but they come out of a history of struggle. “Pan-African Studies [PAS] at Cal State LA is the second oldest Black Studies department in the nation, founded out of the [student] struggles of the late 1960s. PAS was initially established as a program in 1967 and won departmental status in 1969, concurrently to the founding of the oldest Department of Chicano Studies in the nation, also at Cal State LA. As such, the history of the Department in many ways overlaps with the history of the discipline” (CSULA n.d.). Faculty in the PAS department continue building on that history as we witness the fruits of our collective labor with the passage of A.B. 1460.

Another significant gain came with the development of the College of Ethnic Studies, made up of Pan African Studies, Asian and Asian American Studies, Chicana(o) and Latina(o) Studies, and American Indian and Indigenous Studies. It is only the second ethnic studies college in the nation.

Despite these successes, the struggle continues as melanin-rich faculty on college campuses across the United States continue to be targets of bomb and death threats. The CSULA campus received two mass-shooter threats in the span of a week (Black 2019). Pan African Studies has also received a steady stream of explicit death and bomb threats, as well as more veiled ones, against its faculty and the department chair (Kyle and Price 2016). Professor and former PAS chair Melina Abdullah, who helped make ethnic studies a requirement in the Los Angeles Unified School District and contributed to the development of the College of Ethnic

Studies, told the *LA Progressive* that she receives hate mail daily and a death threat “at least once a week” (Kyle and Price 2016). The death threats increased when Ben Shapiro was invited to give a speech at Cal State LA titled “When Diversity Becomes a Problem” (Volokh 2021). Abdullah has also been the victim of “swatting” (Macias 2020), which involves an anonymous person making a prank call to emergency services to bring about the dispatch of heavily armed police to a particular address. In this case, it was the home address of Abdullah. Given the number of unarmed Black people murdered by police officers, this use of swatting amounts to a form of domestic terrorism, and a deliberate attempt to stop Black progress.

Other forms of domestic terrorism include the recent increase in bomb threats against historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). “Nearly 20 HBCUs in five states and the District of Columbia received bomb threats since Feb. 1. In Louisiana, Xavier University of Louisiana, Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge were among campuses that received threats since the beginning of Black History Month. And again on Tuesday, students at Spelman College sheltered in their rooms after another bomb threat—its third this year” (Chavez 2022).

There is increasing outrage at the scant national attention to domestic terrorism against raced Black people and its implications for academic freedom. Sadly, federal investigations and safety measures aren’t keeping pace with hate-fueled violence, while university administrators are ill equipped to handle the problem or have displayed indifference. Faculty have been attacked and report that university policies are inadequate to make them feel safe (Grundy 2018).

While white violence continues to increase in response to incremental gains made by melanin-rich people, some states are continuing to pass legislation requiring curricula that engage race relations in US history. In addition to California, states that have passed laws requiring that Black history be taught in public schools include Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington.

## Onward

The panic on all sides of these issues is real, which is why critical race theory, research like the 1619 Project, and academic freedom are key to building curricula across the country. Academic freedom changes lives and opens opportunities to everyone for self-discovery, particularly students who have been deprived of taking an ethnic studies or CRT class. The potential to replace ignorance with knowledge of individual and collective histories is powerful. I appreciate the 1619 Project and the fact that Nikole Hannah-Jones let the UNC–Chapel Hill board of trustees know that she can take her talent and intellectual property to a university that recognizes the wealth of knowledge she has to offer. The fact that the institution she chose instead is an HBCU makes this particular win all the more satisfying. If Bob Woodson and his 1776 Project had it their way, they would erase Hannah-Jones’s struggle and reframe it as a victory won by “strong moral and economic ethics” (Cherry 2020) and “a belief in self-determination” (Woodson 2020). We would also be denied the lessons learned from her journey and the opportunity to use those lessons to create the change we want to see in the world.

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