

CONVERSATION

# POWER, MEMORY, AND THE REWRITING OF AMERICAN HISTORY

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DOUG FABRIZIO



*A Conversation with*  
**NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES**



Nikole Hannah-Jones speaking with Doug Fabrizio at Weber State University as part of the *Browning Presents!* series on Friday, March 31, 2023.

*Nikole Hannah-Jones is an award-winning investigative reporter who covers civil rights and racial injustice for The New York Times Magazine. She also serves as the Knight Chair in Race and Journalism at Howard University, where she is the founding director of the Center for Journalism & Democracy. She is the co-founder of the Ida B. Wells Society for investigative reporting, which seeks to increase the number of reporters and editors of color in the profession. Hannah-Jones's reporting has earned her the Pulitzer Prize, a MacArthur "Genius" Grant, the Knight Award for Public Service, the Peabody Award, two George Polk awards, and the National Magazine Award three times. She is a Society of American Historians Fellow and a member of the Academy of Arts & Sciences. We would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Browning Trust for making possible this conversation between Ms. Hannah-Jones and radio host Doug Fabrizio, which took place on the campus of Weber State University on 31 March 2023. It has been edited for length and clarity.*

*Welcome. One of the things you've written about is that for as long as you can remember, you've been fascinated with the past. Why is that? This was before you learned anything about the Black experience in this country.*

Good question. For one, I was just extremely, painfully nerdy as a child. I read a lot. My dad was really a fan of Louis L'Amour westerns. And so, as a child, I just read every book in the house, except the Bible. (Laughter) I started reading books about the Old West. A great aunt of mine bought me the Laura Ingalls Wilder book set, also about the West. I was fascinated by how people lived a long time ago. I was always interested in how studying the past helped you to understand why things were the way they were. My dad and I used to watch documentaries together—my dad also loves history. Even before I started studying Black history specifically, I always held this fascination for the past.

*So, you had this fascination with the past, you were a nerdy kid. Before you discovered the date 1619, you were eleven years old, and you wrote a letter to the editor of your local newspaper about Jesse Jackson's campaign bid, and it got published.*

Yeah, I was nerdy. (Laughter) I mean, what eleven-year-old is paying attention to a presidential primary? I read the newspaper every day with my dad. My mom was very active in her unit. Throughout my childhood, she was president of her local chapter. In Iowa, we were first in the national primary. During presidential campaigns, everyone was paying attention, even eleven-year-old Nikole. My hometown of Waterloo, Iowa—which I think is about the same size as Ogden—was the most racially-diverse city in Iowa. It had the largest Black population, it was heavily unionized, working class, and very Democratic. Presidential candidates would come to my hometown. I was precocious. I was paying attention to things that my classmates weren't paying attention to. I loved reading the Letters to the Editor because they were regular people who were writing in to the paper. Jesse Jackson did poorly in the Iowa primary—which tells me that I actually was, at that age, attuned to race, even though I don't remember being that attuned to race. I believe that part of the reason he didn't do well was because he was a Black man. I thought he was a very good candidate, so I wrote that. Every day, I would come home and open the newspaper to see if they published my letter. And one day, they

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did. I felt so empowered—an eleven-year-old kid who could see something in the world, and write about it, and people could read it. It wasn't really a byline, a Letter to the Editor, but it felt like seeing your first byline. I think that's when I started to think that journalism might be something I wanted to do.

*For our audience to understand your story, they have to understand Mr. Ray Dial. Tell people about Ray Dial, because he's amazing.*

I love to talk about Mr. Dial. Are there any educators here? (Audience applauds) I applaud you all because it is not an easy time to be a college professor or a public school teacher. Sometimes, you wonder if the work you are doing is having the impact that you hope it will. I can absolutely say that I would not have the career I have without Mr. Dial. My parents enrolled my sister and me into a school desegregation program starting in the second grade. I was bused out of my neighborhood to white schools across town. Our high school was made up of about 20% Black students. Those kids were bused out of their neighborhood to someone else's neighborhood school. So, you can imagine that there was a lot of racial tension in my school; many of us felt that we faced discrimination and stereotyping because we were from the Black side of town. Mr. Dial was a college professor who was brought in to keep the Black students in line. A lot of schools like this would hire a Black male educator who was really brought in to be a disciplinarian. But they had no idea who they were bringing in when they brought in Mr. Dial, because they brought in the man who would radicalize us. (Laughter) Mr. Dial had other plans. (Laughter) Mr. Dial was the only Black male teacher I ever had. He was rail-thin. He had a hearty laugh. He taught a Black studies class, and that class changed my life. It was the first time that I realized that the reason we weren't learning about Black people was not because Black people had not done anything of note;

it was because people had decided it wasn't important for us to learn. Because Mr. Dial was a college professor, he was also teaching at a college level at that time, and one of the books he gave me introduced me to 1619. But the most important thing that Mr. Dial did was he showed students that we had a voice, that we didn't have to sit silently and accept what we thought was unfair treatment. He was the teacher who, when my girlfriend and I decided to start an underground Black newspaper, snuck into the teacher's lounge to print the paper in there. (Laughter) The principal was like, "Where is the newspaper coming from?" (Laughter) We planned a walkout because we didn't feel that the administration was dealing with our concerns, and we wanted to turn the Black studies elective into a mandatory course. Mr. Dial was the teacher who said, "Okay, you can go this far. . . up to this line. . . . But when you cross this line is when you can get into real trouble." He would guide

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us in our activism. I just saw him two weeks ago in Waterloo. I've kept in touch with Mr. Dial since I was a high school student.

I just found out that the day that Mr. Dial found out that our superintendent was going to be out of town for the day was the day he suggested we do the walkout. (Laughter) He saw the need of his students, and he was going to bend the rules a little bit, but he was going to bend the rules to benefit us, to encourage us. He always called us "Doctor," I remember that. He called me "Dr. Hannah." It was as though he was trying to pour these aspirations into us that the school itself often wasn't reflecting back to us. He's also the educator who told me to join my high school newspaper. I came in to Mr. Dial one day, and I was complaining about how our high school newspaper didn't write about any of the experiences of the Black kids at the school. You can imagine, with the kind of educator Mr. Dial was, very straightforward and to the point, he said, "Well, I guess you better join the paper and write those articles, or don't come in my classroom and complain about it anymore." (Laughter) So, that's what I did. He got me to join my high school newspaper, which is where I really started to become a journalist. He introduced me to the year 1619. And he put me on to what has been a lifelong quest, to speak to the silences of history.

*There is this beautiful moment that you write about when Mr. Dial put the book *Before the Mayflower* into your hands. You write in such a beautiful way about when you came across the date 1619. You say that you "imagined the date glowing, like three-dimensional numbers rising from the page." The other thing that you write about is that you had this impulse at the time, which you describe as a "visceral reaction." Because you hadn't heard about 1619, because they weren't teaching about 1619, that it wasn't an innocuous omission, that it was intentional. What was that impulse? What was that sense?*

When he gave me *Before the Mayflower*, I didn't know exactly what the title was evoking. I assumed the title was referring to a pre-American, African story. I came across that date of The White Lion, and I realized that African people had been here before the Mayflower. There was another ship that came here the year before. Lerone Bennett Jr. was a historian and journalist and wrote this beautiful passage that said, "There was probably no more momentous cargo that ever arrived in the United States," and yet, we didn't learn about that. I realized in that moment that history is not what happened; history is what we are *taught* about what happened, what we are taught to *remember* about what happened. I think, sometimes, if you are not a member of a marginalized group, it can be pretty difficult to understand what it feels like to be erased from the narrative of your country. What it feels like to never see people like yourself—particularly Black Americans—because we don't even have a connection. We don't know what country we came from. All of that was erased in the Middle Passage—to realize that our lineage predates this other ship. Every American child knows about the Mayflower. But we were *here*, we were already here. That was tremendously powerful to me. It gave me a sense of pride, that our lineage went back that far. But also, as I say in *The 1619 Project*, it erased me. All these years when I felt demeaned, degraded, and insignificant because we didn't learn about Black folks, I had no idea that there was a whole history that could have been taught. People chose not to teach it to us.

I was obsessed with 1619. It's been ten years or so since I was in high school. (Laughter) Maybe a little longer, but I'm still obsessed with that date and what that date meant for our country. I'm determined to force other people to be obsessed with it as well.

*I'd like to go back to something you spoke about earlier. History is important, but what's just as important is how we think*

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*about what happened. One of the things that you have said about The 1619 Project is that it is a “work of memory.” What do you mean by that?*

Well, what I mean is that I am trying to get us to remember the country that we were, not the country that we have been taught that we were. One of my favorite books is a book written by David Blight called *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. At that age, I didn't realize there is an entire field that looks at historical memory. I think that most of us think that history is settled—this happened on this day, and this person did it. We don't learn about most of it. What we commonly think of as *history* is really *memory*. Memory is often shaped by power. People in power are the people who name buildings,

the people who erect statues, people who determine what our social studies texts are going to include and what they are going to exclude. That's about memory. That's about how we are taught to think about our past. Really, that's how we are taught to think about our past, so that we can think about who we are *today*.

I sometimes like to ask audiences how many of you were taught that George Washington's teeth were made of wood? (Audience laughs, applauds) George Washington's teeth were not made of wood. George Washington's teeth were made of human teeth. They were made of teeth that were pulled from the mouths of people whom he enslaved. I ask that question because I think it is useful for us to think about how we all come to know the same collective lie. Most of us have heard that story; it is not factual. So much of what we *think* we know, what we think we *understand* about history, has been manipulated, has been managed. The best example of it is in *The 1619 Project*. The most contested paragraph in the entire book, out of tens-of-thousands of words, is a paragraph about slavery and the American Revolution. That's because most of what we know about the American Revolution is through mythmaking. It's not based on what actually happened. Memory is powerful. I've written about racial inequality for my entire career, since I was a high school student and had a column called “From an African Perspective.” I'll tell you all later what my first investigation was. (Laughter) It wasn't until I did this project that really tried to reshape how we think of ourselves collectively as a country and our *memory* of who we *are* as a country, that all the powers tried to come against my work. I think that speaks to how powerful memory is, how our self-concept, all of these anti-CRT [Critical Race Theory] laws, are really about memory. When you remove a book about Roberto Clemente or Rosa Parks—books about what happened—what you're saying is you don't want students to know that those



things happened. You don't want students to have this part of our collective memory of the past. That, to me, is the most powerful thing that a storyteller can do, shape our collective understanding of who we are. (Applause)

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*You took The 1619 Project to your editors at The Times and you described it as a "simple pitch." I want you to take us back to the moment. We know what it is now; we know the impact it has had; we know how big this thing is and the movement that it started now. Take us back to before all of this*

*happened. There is a great story that you tell about you and Wesley Morris, right before the book was published.*

In some ways, I feel like I had been working toward *The 1619 Project* for my entire career. I started off as a beat reporter at the newspaper. If you could get thirty column inches, that would be a long story. My articles kept getting longer, and longer, and longer. I wrote about race. I was a history and African American studies major before I got a journalism degree. How could you write about racial equality in America today without building on the history of how we got here? America has learned this so poorly that you have to build that in. My editors would joke with me, saying, "You were going back to 1950, now you're going back to 1930." I'm like, "eventually I'm getting back to 1619." (Laughter) Eventually, you have to go to the root of it. All of my work is really arguing that the racial equality we see today is a legacy of slavery. Racial segregation, poverty, incarceration, these are placed upon the descendants of slavery. Black is a fiction; it's a construct, made up. People who have descended from slavery are the ones who have suffered the brunt of it. When *The Project's* fourth anniversary was approaching, I was still obsessing over 1619. And all these years later, most Americans still don't know that date, it's still rendered in obscurity. I knew that there would be commemorations, that other journalists would write stories about the anniversary, but I really wanted to use it as an opportunity to do something big. I didn't just want to talk about what happened all those years ago, but to talk about the way that what happened all those years ago would lay the foundation for the very country that would come to be. Across all of American life, our society is being shaped by the legacy of slavery in ways that you don't know or recognize. And so, that really was my pitch: capitalism founded slavery in America. Democracy—there would be no democracy in America without Black resistance. I was

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writing about these ideas. I knew it couldn't just be me writing a single essay. If I was going to tell this story, it had to be big. It had to be written by many voices, in many different perspectives. But, then I actually had to pull it off. I didn't get pushback from my editors, and the project just kept expanding and expanding. I felt a tremendous weight once I got them to say yes. You have to deliver it, and how do you do justice to a story?

For months, I researched and wrote my own essay. I also read every single essay in the book, every single piece of prose, looked at every image, and had no idea how people would respond or react to it. As a journalist, the length of time you spend on something, the care you put into it, does not necessarily correlate to the response. There's an app called "Chartbeat." Journalists use it because they can track how long someone stays on your article, how long readers read your article. It is depressing; I don't even look at it anymore. It's like, I just spent a year on this investigation, and the average reader spent a minute and thirty seconds reading it. (Laughter) I knew that I could produce this thing that I felt was profound, and important, and necessary, and that people might pay attention for a day and then move on. But I felt this was the project that I was put on this earth to do. I *had* to do it.

That day, Wesley Morris, who is a very dear friend of mine and an amazing writer—he has won *two* Pulitzers, not *one*—we were in the newsroom together. Before we print the magazine, we print out all the pages and put them together so you can see the entire project. To see an entire issue of the *New York Times Magazine* dedicated to nothing but the story of the legacy of slavery and to see all of these Black writers who got to contribute to this—I feel like all the months of being immersed in the horror, the tragedy, and the hopes of Black people, and to know, we had brought this forth. We looked at each other, it was just he and I in that room; we embraced, and we started sobbing. If you know anything

about journalism, you're not supposed to do that. (Laughter) You're supposed to pretend that you don't have emotions, even though you do. And I didn't know, at that moment, how it would go out into the world. But what I did know, in that moment, was that we had done what we came there to do. And no matter what the public response to it was, we had honored our ancestors. (Applause)

*You wondered if anyone cared about all this work you put into it, and then it blew up. Why did it take hold in the way it did?*

I've asked myself this many, many times. To me, the project is not that novel. To me, the project makes sense. The reason why I pitched the project is because most people have never had that realization; they haven't made those connections. Most people don't have the luxury of spending years of their life reading history, and thinking about these issues, and making these connections. I think that when the *New York Times* puts its resources behind something, it means something; it gives it a gravitas; it means something to the world. But also, I think it was because the arguments that we were making were not about the past. Instead, we were saying, "Look at our world. Look at our system of capitalism. Look at our system of health care." For instance, look at traffic in Atlanta, right? When you're sitting in Atlanta traffic and you can see your exit, it's going to take you 40 minutes to get there. It makes no sense. But that's because it wasn't designed to move you into the city; it was designed to create a physical barrier between Black people and White people. Then it all starts to make sense. I think that it was like that for most Americans; they've been taught this history so poorly. The polling is clear; Americans want to know more. They want to better understand how slavery and racism has shaped our society, because this project was about America today, not just what happened then. I often compare what we tried to do with

this project to the red pill in *The Matrix*. You're living in a society and you think this is just the way that it is. And then, as you read, you start to see that all of this was created; all of this was constructed; it's not natural; we don't have to be this society. That really stuck with people. People wanted to devour it, but they also wanted to keep it. It was really amazing to see, folks were getting their magazines stolen out of their papers. Because the *New York Times Magazine* comes in the Sunday paper, people were saying, "They left my paper, but they took my magazine." (Laughter) This was tens of thousands of words on the legacy of slavery, and people were posting videos where they were driving twenty miles and going to five different stores to find this thing.

I do think part of the success was due to the fact that I published this project under the Obama administration. And to be clear, unlike my detractors, I didn't set the four-hundredth anniversary to fall under Trump; I don't have that much power. (Laughter) Under Obama, the American public, collectively, wanted to believe we reached this post-racial mountain. A Black man is in office, we have banished the past. And I think there would have been folks who were like, "Why are we doing this? Why are we still talking about slavery? You have a Black man in the White House." But we followed the first Black President with an openly white-nationalist President. People had a sense of whiplash, like, what America are we when America produces these two things back-to-back? *The 1619 Project* really helped people to understand the country that they were living in, in a way that the history we've been taught before had not. I guess that's been the sticking power of it. And Trump tweeting about it helped. (Laughter) I owe Republicans royalties, but I'm not going to pay. That's not reparations. (Laughter)

*You turned me on to the work of historian Evan Morgan. He wrote about how historians have tried to deal with slavery as an exception in the American story. He talked*

*about the challenge to explain how the people in this country could have developed a dedication to human liberty and dignity, and at the same time developed a system of labor that denied human liberty and dignity every hour of the day. This is the thing that describes that central paradox in American history. This gets to something else that you talk about, that there's a myth that we have where we have to try to hold these true stories all at once. I don't know if you have an answer to this, but how do you do away with a myth? How do you explode it?*

Myth very rarely withstands the light of truth. To some degree, *The 1619 Project* is replacing one origin story with another. There's always going to be some mythmaking to how we recount any history when a nation wants to understand itself. And I don't think it's all bad. But I think the myths that we have told ourselves about America have allowed us to accept great inequality and injustice, and we don't have to. I love history. Some people think it is dry, but to me, when you read certain historical texts, you're able to make connections that you weren't really able to understand before. Evan Morgan says, "In America, slavery and freedom were born at the same time." And if we were simply taught that fact, it would go a long way toward us having a better understanding of the society that was built up from that. We only want to learn one of those things. I write about this pretty extensively in my essay. We're taught to think of slavery as an aberration in a free society, an asterisk to the American story, that we were founded on ideals and practices of liberty, that slavery was mostly a phenomenon of backwards Southerners, that the true heart of America was the Abolitionist North. Only about 1% of the population of the North were abolitionists. All thirteen colonies practiced slavery during the Revolutionary period. At the end of our first Civil War, which was the Revolutionary War, we could have abolished slavery and started a nation without it, but we



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And also, the true heart of America was Virginia. We think about these words being written in Philadelphia, but who wrote them? A Virginian whose job it was to enslave

people for a living, that was his occupation. The father of the Constitution was a Virginian. The man who drafted the Bill of Rights was a Virginian. Our first President was a Virginian. The ideas of republicanism all come out of Virginia. Virginia was a slave society; 40% of the population of Virginia was enslaved. Evan Morgan argues that the reason that Madison and Jefferson and Washington could contemplate a democratic republic was because they knew most of the masses were enslaved and so could never challenge their power. So, we need to understand that our founders were human beings; they weren't demi-gods. They were deeply flawed human beings who were compromised, like many people are compromised, because they wanted to make money. These men wanted to make money and they made money off of slavery. But if we changed the kind of central idea of who we are as a country to Virginia, which is the truth, then we would better understand our most vexing tensions today. We are exceptional; we have exceptional inequality in this nation. We are the most powerful nation in the world, yet we incarcerate more people than any nation in the world. We are the only Western democracy where whether or not you can go to the doctor if you are sick depends on if you have a job that offers health insurance. We have the highest rates of child poverty. What makes us different from the countries that we like to compare ourselves to is our legacy of slavery and our inability to get over it. And the fact that we were founded by a white elite who didn't care much for poor white people, and certainly didn't care for Black folks. And we are still largely ruled by an elite that doesn't care much for poor white folks and it certainly doesn't care for Black folks. If we could understand what the white elite understood at the time of the Bacon Rebellion, that it is those of us who share a material interest of all races, without fighting for crumbs on the bottom, that we could challenge the power of the elite, but instead, we don't. And so, we allow ourselves to be a very rich nation

that is extremely stingy when it comes to our own citizens. This, to me, is why you see the powers aligned against this project.

As journalists, we understand that narrative drives policy. As Americans, we don't tend to make our policy choices based on data. (Laughter) We don't think the research shows us that the best thing to do for someone who is poor is to give them money, and they won't be poor anymore. We know this, right? (Laughter) We make decisions on policies based off of narrative, who we think is deserving, who we think is undeserving, who we think is worthy of help, who is not worthy of help. This project is attempting to change the narrative about who we are as a country. We are not a country of rugged individualism. We are not a country that has believed in equality. We are a country that has had to fight for everything that we have. We are a country that was founded on these amazing majestic ideals that we just have never believed to be true. And I think if we don't stop struggling with that path, we're going to keep accepting this deeply unequal and divided society that we have been. We will keep grappling with this society that many of us want to believe we already have.

*I've heard you tell a great story about your daughter. She used to ask you, "Is this person good? Is this person bad?" And your answer was. . .*

My answer to her was, "Most people are not good or bad or both, except Donald Trump." (Laughter) We have to have nuance; we have to have complexity. We want everything to be, excuse the pun, black or white, but it's not. Most of us are capable of doing really good things. Most of us are capable of doing some bad things, hopefully not *really* bad things, but we accept a lot. I talk to my students at Howard about this. We study *The 1619 Project*, and I talk to them about how most Americans, no matter where they lived, were accepting of slavery. Most Americans

were not opposed. They weren't abolitionists. They may not have liked the brutality of slavery, but they were largely okay with it if the South contained it to the South. They didn't fight a war to end slavery, but fought a war because the South wanted to break off from the Union. I talk about how all evil systems require complicity. So, it's easy for us to look back and say, "How could you? How could you allow this brutality against humans just so you could have cotton shirts, sugar to put in your tea, and rum to drink?" But then, we think about what we allow now. The capitalism episode of the *1619* docuseries is built largely around efforts to unionize Amazon factories. All of us would like to think of ourselves as good people, but we know that next day delivery is built on exploitation. We know that the materials that make our phones run are mined by child laborers, and yet, all good people look away. So, I think it's just important to always be thinking about how we are all complicit in these systems. And it doesn't mean that we are bad people, but then we certainly can't say that we're entirely good either. And I think that's the most useful way to think about history. Can you look at Thomas Jefferson and say he did some good things? Absolutely. Is it hard as a descendant of people who were enslaved to say that the good outweighs the bad? That's what we have to debate. I think those conversations are worthy of being had. We have a society that hasn't wanted to have those conversations. They want to silence those of us who say, you can't talk about Jefferson without talking about the people he owned. How does a thirty-something-year-old have the power and the wealth to be tasked with writing the new words of a new nation? It's because of all of the human beings that he exploited in his slave labor camp. We've only wanted to tell one of those stories. And I'm just saying, we have to tell it all.

*You said something a few months ago to Ezra Klein in the New York Times about*

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*journalism and the importance of a healthy press. "If our press is not covering the politics of our country in a way that is honest and in a way that gets to the truth, and is more than stenography, then our democracy can't be healthy." Will you break that down for me? Give me a sense of what you're seeing in journalism.*

I think the press, more often than not, doesn't reflect truth, it reflects power. I think that we have really struggled with things like how to cover a political party that is not adhering to political norms anymore. How to cover a president who doesn't seem to care what the rules are in a system of checks and balances, when you realize there really aren't any checks and balances. The checks and balances are largely about people adhering to the way we've always done things. It's become very glaring since Trump first started running for office. We are so afraid of being charged with being biased, of favoring one political party over the other, that we aren't reporting the truth. If I report something negative about Republicans, I have to report something negative about Democrats, even though, clearly, what's happening in the Republican Party is beyond the pale. When we are seeing a breakdown of democracy, we are seeing people who are saying they don't believe in democracy or trying to overturn elections. And yet, so often, you can't tell that from reading the coverage, because we don't want to take a side. But our job is to side with the truth. I mean, I certainly didn't get into journalism just because I thought it would be interesting for people to know things. People do need to know things, but I got into journalism because I believe our field is a check on power, that our field exists to hold power accountable and to expose the way power is used against the vulnerable. When a journalist covers Child Protective Services, we wouldn't write a story that says a child was abused, but the official in Child Services said they did everything they're supposed to do, so that's the end of

the story. Right? We would investigate. We'd say, well, they said that they did everything. But, let me show you all the ways that they didn't. And we're not trying to balance, and then dig up, that the child was not in school one day, so maybe they deserve it, right? You don't do that. There's a clear imbalance. We have really struggled with how to cover a political party that has gone rogue. How do you cover that consistently? How do you understand the threats that our democracy is facing? Because so much of our political press doesn't come from groups who have had to fight for democracy. And I think they don't understand the peril because they think everything will work out. And you know what, for them, it probably will. But for many of us, it won't. I am calling for us to really *examine*. And ours is a very defensive profession. We traffic in transparency, but don't actually like being that transparent ourselves. I think part of that is because all we have as journalists is our credibility. There's no reason for you to believe anything I write unless you find me credible. And so, when we are critiqued, instead of us taking a moment and saying, "Is there some truth to that critique? Are there things I should be doing better?," our instinct is often to be defensive, because we feel like if we acknowledge that we have failed in some way, we will become less credible. I actually believe that it is in opening up and saying, "You know what? You're right, I had a blind spot. I didn't get that right. Let me go back and report this," that we become more credible.

*(Deborah Uman) What was your first investigative story?*

I always liked being a little provocative. So, my very first investigative piece was whether or not Jesus was Black. (Laughter, applause) I was not able to prove that he was Black. But I was able to prove that it was very unlikely that he was white.

*(Kaydee Davis) What would you say to people who claim that teaching a more honest version of American history causes more division, or constitutes a threat, to society?*

I think that's a very convenient excuse for not teaching the truth. What you're saying is that our history is so divisive that if we teach it, it'll make us more divided. And it also ignores that we are already divided, right? We are already a polarized society. And so often, the sense that we are not divided is based on the silence of marginalized and oppressed people. As a journalist, I don't believe in that. And I actually think it's just not true. I've been all over the country for four years now talking about *The 1619 Project*, and I can't tell you how many times I've heard from people, "I never knew any of this." And it doesn't make them feel more divided. What it makes them feel is, "So much of my country didn't make sense, and now it's making sense to me, and I want to learn more." And that's really the only way we can ever hope to truly come together as a country, to own up to what our country has done. Not to tear our country down, but to build it and make it stronger.

I'll just give a quick example. We know this in our own interpersonal relationships, right? If someone has done something to you and your family, something that hurts you, and then they're ready to move on; they don't want to talk about it anymore. They want to act like it never happened. You might come to family dinners, but the tension is there. Right? You feel it; you can't get over it, because that person has not acknowledged and owned up to what they did. And then, on that one dinner, maybe you've had too much wine, or bourbon, in my case, and you bring it up. There's a big fight, and then you get blamed. Why did you have to bring that up? Because it's only the veneer that everything is okay. But once you've had that conversation, once you've had that big fight, and that person says, "You know what? You're right. I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry, what

can I do?," then you can start healing. And that, to me, is the same thing in our country. The reason why we had an insurrection on January 6<sup>th</sup> is because we have not owned up and atoned for what we did. The reason why we see George Floyd get lynched by a police officer in the streets is because that police officer lives in a society where he believes even if he has witnesses he can get away with killing a Black man. That is a society that is deeply divided, and has not owned up to what it is. But if we want to build a new society, it is through the truth.

*(Bailey Shae) What would you say to someone who argues that the past was a different time, that we can't place our present judgments on past eras because things were done differently then?*

The past *was* a different time; that's factual. I'm all for placing my current judgment on the past, okay? I don't think there was ever a time when people didn't know that slavery was wrong. I don't hear people saying that about World War Two and the Holocaust, that we shouldn't judge the Holocaust by today's standards because Hitler didn't know that what he was doing was wrong. We don't do that. Look at the words of the people who lived back then. Look at the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said, "We know we have a wolf by the ears. We know that if God is just, he is going to punish us for the sin of slavery." This is Jefferson, a man who enslaved human beings. Look at George Washington; when he was trying to get support for the Revolution, he said, "We have to fight against the British because they're going to treat us like we treat our slaves." He said that; it's in *The 1619 Project*, footnoted. And then we can look at the fact that there were anti-racist white people back then. All the folks who get so distraught when we talk about racist white people; why don't you ever see yourself in the anti-racist white people? You'd have to believe that these men were children, that

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they had no intellect, that they weren't able to know that when you whip a human being, that is wrong; when you sell a child away from their mother, that is wrong. Of course, they understood that was wrong; they wrote about it. The British, when we were trying to break off from that empire, were calling us out for our own hypocrisy. So, my answer to that is, no. If you are a historian, and many historians are having the fight about presentism, or whether we can put today's values on the past, I just want to know when was the time when we had the value that buying and selling human beings was okay?

*(Artem Koval) With the assertion that 1619 was America's origin point, how do we move forward? How do we begin using this knowledge to effect change and reshape the U.S. into something that more closely achieves its best ideals?*

I became a journalist so I can expose the problem, and then ya'll have to figure out how to fix this. (Laughter) We're not the problem solvers; we're just the ones who point out what the problems are. (Laughter) I really do think, until we have truth telling, until we have an honest accounting of our history, and then we atone for that history, and then we make repair, and then financial and other repairs for that history, we won't be able to move forward. We will always be stuck in this polarized, unequal, divisive society that we have. I'm hoping that we can liberate ourselves to truth. And yes, it will be painful. But we are not living up to the potential of a country that could be great. And let's be clear, Black people suffer the most from our legacy of slavery. But *most* Americans are suffering in some way. They just released new data on life expectancy. Even if you take out COVID deaths, we're really the only industrialized nation that saw a decline in life expectancy. Almost all of that decline is coming from young people who are dying too early from gun violence, from suicide, and from drug

overdoses. So, this is not a sign of a healthy society. And I think we have the resources to be a great society, and a caring society, and to take care of all of our people. Our young people are drowning in college loan debt. I just paid my student loans off five years ago. I'm celebrating that I paid it off, but I'm forty-seven years old. When you look at what makes this country amazing—that we truly are the most diverse country in the world, that we truly are a place that can be incredibly generous—if we could steer toward our best instincts as a country instead of succumbing to the divisiveness of our past, I can only imagine what this society could be. But we won't get there by hiding from the truth of what we are.

*(Rachel Amedee) If there is only one idea that you would have people take away from The 1619 Project, what would that idea be?*

If I can send you away with one thought, it is the last chapter of the book called "Justice." It argues that this nation owes not only a great moral debt to Black Americans, but a great financial debt to Black Americans. If you just read the book and you come away thinking that's a sad story, then I failed. What I want you to do is come away with a charge that we can alleviate the primary cause of suffering of Black people in this country, which is that Black people have close to zero wealth. After living in this country for four hundred years, slavery was not a system of racism; it was an economic system designed to extract wealth from Black bodies and to redistribute that wealth to white institutions and white people. Jim Crow, the period of racial apartheid, was also a system of economic exploitation. And so here we are, sixty years after the Civil Rights Movement and sixty years after Dr. King was assassinated. Black Americans have full legal rights and citizenship, but the wealth gap is identical to the time when King was assassinated in 1968. We've made zero progress on that. So, what that means is, you



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can do all the things this country says that you are supposed to do. You can get married, you can go to college, work a good job, but you can't buy into the neighborhoods that other people with the same amount of income that you have buy into. You can't get your kids out of high poverty schools. You can't send your kids to school without student loan debt. All of those things add up. There's a primary cause of that. What I want people to take away is, even when it comes to reparations, even our white allies don't support it. The majority of white Democrats are opposed to reparations. And I really want folks to do a gut check about why that is. How can you learn if you haven't read the book from beginning to end? I know it's a lot; *The 1619 Project* is a thick book, like Holy Bible length. But we have to make financial repair; we have to pay that debt, and it is a collective debt. So, if you didn't sign the Declaration, but you want to take credit for that as an American, then you also have to own the debt that is owed as well.

*Thanks. This was an amazing conversation. I think we are all called to action after to-night's conversation. So, thank you so much.*



Doug Fabrizio is the news director of KUER radio and the host and executive producer of the program *Radio West*. The talk show is syndicated by PRI with a focus on the western United States and especially Utah. His work has been recognized by the Society of Professional Journalists, the Utah Broadcasters Association, the Public Radio News Directors Association, and the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.