

Drew Lovett  
Black Women's Rhetorics  
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**Tracing the Rhetorical Tactics Used by *1619 Project's* Nikole Hannah-Jones'  
at *The Raleigh News & Observer***

In 2019, 20 Black scholars, poets, photographers and journalists contributed to the launch of *The New York Times' Magazines' The 1619 Project*. *The Project* itself is aimed at focusing on the reframing of America's narrative where the experiences and contributions of African-Americans are centered in the discourse. This work was revolutionary in that it commemorated the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans to forcibly step foot on US soil. This centering of the Black experience received praise and condemnation because the emphasis on the exploitation of African-American's considered to be at the core of the nations founding and success.. Unsurprisingly three years later Hannah-Jones and *The 1619 Project* are discussed frequently by politicians, academics and opinion writers, broadcasted on the mainstream news and on social media. Controversy has continued to proliferate as the National Education Association declared they would integrate works like *The Project* into educational curricula across the country as discussed in newspaper coverage from the *New York Post* ("Fighting for the Right to Indoctrinate, 2021).

Pulitzer Prize winning Black female journalist, Nikole-Hanna Jones' essay "The Idea of America" received an unwarranted amount of criticism when it was first published in 2019 and again when she re-published *The Project* in 2021. Her essay received backlash from historians and civil rights leaders like Robert Woodson Sr. rejected Jones' claims that American capitalism could not thrive without this affective labor (Hartman, 2016).

When examining Hannah-Jones' journalistic career it's clear that she made a gradual progression to this award-winning long-form journalism and has made use of rhetorical tactics along the way to survive in a predominantly white male industry. Before Jones' got to her high-profile job as a staff writer at the *NYT magazine* she was a staff writer at various local newspapers and nonprofits across the country. While writing for these publications she was able to craft her rhetorical voice and enable social change by highlighting stories that expose the effects of institutional racism on marginalized communities. In this paper I aim to trace the ways in which Jones' used rhetorical strategies prior to the publishing of *The 1619 Project* in an effort to expose the way institutional racism affects education policy and opportunities in African-American communities. Nielsen, 2021) (Royster, 2000).

Hannah-Jones' sits in a unique and historical place as she follows in the rhetorical tradition of radical Black female rhetoricians like Ida B Wells, Lillian Parker Thomas Fox, Kathertine Davis Chapman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Alice Dunbar Nelson and Gertrude Bustill Mossell. While working at local newspapers Hannah-Jones exercises a self-definition (Collins, 1990) what Jones-Royster describes as "using literacy and rhetoric to continue the work of our ancestors who used the essay to enact social change" (Traces of A Stream, 2000).

In this study I plan to examine articles written at a local North Carolina newspaper by Hannah-Jones prior to her job at the prestigious *NYT* tracing the rhetorical practices she used in order to navigate a white, patriarchal industry while advocating for the transformation of American society.

RQ: What rhetorical strategies did Jones' use in her journalistic work before the publication of *The 1619 Project*? How did these tactics allow her to navigate "tightrope of perfection" while aiming to enact social change?

## Lit Review

I'll use literature highlighting the use of Black women's rhetorical competence which along with Black feminist and journalistic theory that will inform my reading of her articles.

The first two works that are relevant to this study are Jone-Royster's *Traces of A Stream* (2000) and Hartman's "Belly of The World" (2018). In Royster's book she chronicles the ways African-American women of the nineteenth century used rhetorical strategies to gain agency, power and ultimately advocate for their communities. She begins by emphasizing how these women used the essay as a narrative form that enabled a "multiplicity of voices" that helped circulate their activism. She reiterates that the essay is used by African-American women in order to make sense of their world and conditions while advocating for social, political and economic change. Royster goes on to highlight the careers of Maria Stewart, June Jordan and Ida B. Wells while emphasizing Henderson's notion that we "think and write in conversation with ourselves. Like Hannah-Jones' Wells' exemplified this through her efforts to expose and offer solutions to be implemented (2000). Hartman's piece is integral to this analysis because of her historical analysis of the impact of Black women's affective labor and the success of American society. She uses affective theory, narrative and historical archives to trace the way the exploitation and devaluation of Black women's labor was at the foundation of the United States economic system (2016). She incorporates Collin's concept of "controlling images" as tropes like "mammy, jezebel and matriach (strong Black woman)" evolved as Black women challenged the white supremacist patriarchal system (1990).

In Morgan's "Why Women Speak" she discusses the ways African-American women and girls language and rhetorical traditions are devalued and passed down through generations as a survival tactic. She lists rhetorical acts like signifying using laughter, silence, indirectness are

used to make fun of, navigate and resist the white patriarchal society. I plan to examine how Hannah-Jones uses these in her everyday life as well as in her writing stylistic choices (2002).

Richardson's "She Was Working Like Foreal" explores the ways African-American writers encounter an ideal that middle-class White femininity is the ideal. She emphasizes that prominent institutions like school, healthcare and the media create "scripts" that reinforce inequality rooted in white patriarchal market values. Everyday these scripts are normalized and re-circulated reiterating the naturalization of unjust social contracts. Richardson emphasizes that young people of color get mixed messages relating to acceptable representation of race, gender and sexual identities. Hannah-Jones' enlists this ethos as she exposes the nuances of being a Black student in North Carolina (2007). In another piece "Protect and Serve" as she rhetorical tactics used by Black women' writers. She explores the notion of multiple consciousness, storytelling and code switching as powerful literary devices used to navigate a society that devalues and exploits them. Richardson reiterates how codeswitching is used as a tactic in predominantly white spaces invoking more standardized English enables Black women to be more direct about shared knowledge within the Black community. (2002)

All of these pieces speak to what rhetorical scholar Carey describes as "Tightrope of Perfection" (2018). She theorizes this "tightrope" to be the historic surveillance and policing of Black female rhetoricians through examining a case study of an incident on former MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry's show *Nerdland*. Resulting in a segment where she, a fellow Black female journalist Pia Glenn and Palestinian-Italian American lawyer and pundit Dean Obeidallah made fun of the ironic nature of a photo of Republican Sen. Romney (UT) posing with his grandchildren with a lone Black grandchild on his lap. The segment went viral and the Black women involved in the segment received an unwarranted amount of violent backlash including

racist, misogynistic comments that caused the eventual cancellation of Harris-Perry's show after expressing sorrow and explaining her intent several times. Obeidallah was virtually unscathed from the viral moment, writing about the account and still contributes to the network. This exemplifies how in contemporary culture Black women are still held to an unrealistic standard of respectability where there is a fine line and if crossed they risk danger and true cancellation (2018).

Regardless of this historical devaluation, surveillance and policing of Black female rhetoricians Hannah-Jones' journalistic career proves that she has made use of traditional rhetorical tactics as well as improving upon them to set a possibility model (Bailey, 2021) to navigate the tightrope of perfection.

### **Black Feminism**

Bailey's book *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, discusses the nuanced nature of being a Black woman in America. Throughout her book they provides case studies examining her term misogynoir which is defined as the anti-Black hatred and misogyny directed at Black women in visual and digital culture. This violence is imparted on Black women and girls as Bailey explores the ways this marginalized group is policed and harrassed by the public. They emphasize that Black women who learn to navigate everyday violence and danger of their existence through creative means create a possibility model which is the idea of someone who reveals a possible way of being human in the world that resonates to a specific individual. She reiterates that these are used by marginalized communities who have historically been limited in their imagining the possible ways of being in this world (2021).

Collins, as discussed earlier, focuses on "controlling images" and also her notion of "self-definition." This is the idea that Black women have the power to name their existence

which is seen by the author as a resistive, revolutionary act. Through this naming they are able to navigate the white supremacist patriarchal society with shared cultural knowledges that are inherited and unique to African-American women. This tactic is employed by Black women as they come to realize their place in a society that often renders them silent and invisible (1990).

“Talkin’ back” is used as a means of challenging the dominant ideals of Black femininity. Hooks explains this is used as a rhetorical strategy to resist the ways that society silences Black women and girls. I feel like journalists before her, Hannah-Jones’ talks back through her journalistic pieces to the American government. Her methods have not gone unnoticed as she published articles and was able to ascend journalistic hierarchy through recognition and condemnation of her work (1989).

## **Methods**

I’ll use a qualitative textual analysis of the newspaper’s articles from Jones’ time at North Carolina’s *The Raleigh News & Observer* and I’ll gather these articles through UVA’s Virgo Lexis database. Hannah-Jones has stated “all journalism is activism” (2021) and by using these methods I’ll examine the distinct discourse and rhetoric used by her at this newspaper as she continues to advocate for the US government to invest in its marginalized communities.

I plan to use the lens of framing and agenda-setting theory in the analysis of the newspaper articles as one way look at the rhetorical practices Jones’ employed before publishing essays in *The 1619 Project* (2007). Along with rhetorical analysis of her articles as a means to closely read the practices she used then at *The News & Observer*.

Black feminist theory will be used in the reading her articles as I feel it’s important to keep in mind that she is a self-defined (Collins, 1990) Black woman traversing a white male industry. I aim to trace how Hannah-Jones’ “talks back” to “Uncle Sam” that normalizes

embedded acts of racism and misogyny through traditional rhetorical strategies. This form of pushback is considered unacceptable for women, especially Black women to invoke as it can lead to surveillance, violence or the increase in proliferation of negative images. I hope to show how she resists the notion to conform to respectable standards of Black womanhood through her circulation of articles that highlight the institutional racism that plagues African-American communities (hooks, 1989).

### **Analysis**

From a young age Hannah-Jones felt that her destiny as a writer was connected to power and activism. When she was young Jesse Jackson was running for President and failed to receive the nomination much to her chagrin (Nielsen, 2021). She expressed herself for the first time in print form when she decided to write a letter to the editor angry at the prospect that the American public couldn't make political choices as she did. As a young Black girl Hannah-Jones' felt the power of speaking in a multiplicity of voices to her community and to outside groups as a means to educate and advocate for the betterment of her community (Royster, 2000).

Growing up in all-white Waterloo, Iowa she was not unfamiliar with racism or being a token Black as she wrote for the high school newspaper and felt a pull to name her reality in an empowering way that Black feminist theorist, Collins (1990) would call self-definition. Her ability to name her experience as a Black girl, woman directly links her to the historic ways Black women rhetoricians come to understand their existence (Richardson). Her fixation on learning about the Black community increased as she packed her bags and left for college in Indiana's Notre Dame, graduating with a degree in African American studies in 1998. Her journalistic pursuits were affirmed when she was awarded a scholarship to attend the University

of North Carolina Hussman School of Journalism for her master's degree, graduating in 2003 from the same program that would later deny her tenure in 2021(Nielsen, 2021).

After leaving UNC she began reporting for the local North Carolina newspaper, *The Raleigh News & Observer* for 3 years covering the education beat where she was able to carve out a unique spot for herself as she focused on the institutional racism that impacted underfunded Durham county schools located in marginalized neighborhoods. This paper circulated in the tri-county area and she worked there at a time when print newspapers weren't threatened by the advent of Web 2.0 and social media news. Hannah-Jones' direct rhetorical style and moves reflect historic ways Black women rhetoricians have used it as a tactic to navigate the white supremacist patriarchy that often silences their voices out of fear (Morgan, 2002).

In articles Hannah-Jones wrote like "Black Youths Suspended at Higher Rate" (2004), "Best Teachers Not Where Needed: Some Say Durham Students' Needs Are Not Being Fulfilled Because Quality Instructors Gravitate Towards Premier Schools" (2006) "Schools Make Bus Plea: Durham Asked To Give Parents More Public Transportation" (2004) and "Durham's Image: White Flight Linked" (2004) all deal with the ways in which the community encounters institutional racism in education.

The investigative journalism used these articles to advocate adequate funding to Durham public schools which are primarily located in marginalized communities. In "Black Youth's Suspended At Higher Rate" she uses the narrative of storytelling in order to prime the reader to sympathize with a Black student who, like many other Black children, had been unjustly suspended (Scheufele, Tewksbury 2007). She includes quotes from the superintendent, Harvard civil rights lawyers, PTA members and principal's. The inclusion of statistics that reiterate the way Black boys are treated in this school district and doesn't shy away from including comments

that imply the schools are safer without Black boys: “our primary concern is always safe schools and orderly classrooms.” This speaks to the ways that Black boys and girls are surveilled and policed in schools far more frequently than their white classmates. Hannah-Jones incorporation of quotes from mother’s and teachers discussing if racism is involved highlights the ways in which she navigates her own “tightrope of perfection” as she uses their words to invoke the feelings of the community and shields herself from criticism (2018).

“Best Teachers Not Where Needed: Some Say Durham Students’ Needs Are Not Being Fulfilled Because Quality Instructors Gravitate Towards Premier Schools” and “Durham’s Image: White Flight Linked” (2004) directly places Hannah-Jones work as advocacy, through her rhetorical style she reveals the racism and segregation still prevalent in these school districts (Royster, 2000). Hannah-Jones uses discursive tactics to highlight the ways that segregation is still happening in schools like Durham and she exposes the fear projected on to the community in her interview with a school board member who discussed the increased violence relegated to their district. This idea that Black children and people are more aggressive and violent is rooted in stereotypes proliferated during chattel slavery and Jim Crow aimed at instilling hopelessness and a limited range of possibilities of African-Americans who are constantly inundated with negative tropes about themselves from the media (Collins, 1990). Hannah-Jones’ captured the racialized nature of this presumption by including comments with Black school board members using African-American vernacular: “Our image is so tore up. The reputation of Durham was screwed up a long time ago. She likely included this quote to invoke the feelings of the community as the member uses “tore up” while talking as a descriptor of the district. The inclusion of this quote in a journalistic article is revolutionary in that it wasn’t cut by an editor and gives voices to the marginalized community that’s affected by the lack of teachers and their

bad reputation. She includes commentary from the same school board member who reiterates that as white population dwindles schools will become increasingly segregated by race and class (2004). In this instance Hannah-Jones warns her community about the potential consequences of this white flight that point to larger issues of race, education and institutional racism. The articles examined thus far exemplify the media scripts that are naturalized in communities of color that tend to render them violent, silent and unable to thrive without white help (Richardson, 2002).

By publishing these articles Hannah-Jones uses her rhetorical voice to enact social change and uses discursive tactics like incorporating quotes, use of AAVE and not holding back from exposing the white supremacist forces that still influence Durham school districts (Royster, 2000). Her explanations after the quotes point to the use of codeswitching in her work as she uses “standard” English to inform outside groups about the shared knowledge in the Black community (Richardson, 2002).

Two articles from the *News & Observer* illustrate the ways in which Hannah-Jones affords agency to the parents, students and through her rhetoric advocates for the school district to intervene. “School's Make Bus Plea: Durham Asked To Give Parents More Public Transportation” (2004) directly quotes school principals, representatives and council members. The council denies the \$300,000 plan to provide public transportation for parents because of its price and in the next instance Hannah-Jones highlights the fact that 80 percent of students in Bethesda qualify for free and reduced lunch, directing the council to the families financial woes. She even included a brief story about a woman who walked with her 8-year-old daughter miles in the heat to get to school, almost collapsing when they arrived. She recorded the disdain from council members who argued that “... school staff can't help everyone who needs it, and many parents don't like asking for this assistance.” Quotes like these uncover how marginalized school

districts are not invested in on a state and national level, Hannah-Jones exposes the hypocrisy of the council through her discursive moves of including their quotes along with the public relations phrases they utter to come off as sympathetic. The Pulitzer Prize winning journalist honing her skills in "School An Elusive Dream: For Latino Students, Desire For Diploma Often Clashes With Needs of Families" (2005). Hannah-Jones begins to make a shift toward long-form journalism and the essay in this piece as she highlights the scholarly work and historical aspects that contribute to the issues Latino students face when trying to attend public school in North Carolina. In this 2005 article, she includes statistics and various case studies outlining the intersection of culture and education in latino families. Although she may not belong to the Latino community, she advocates for all marginalized people when she uses narrative to evoke emotion for these students: "We have no money, that's why I dropped out of school." Said Fuentes, soft-spoken and resigned. "[My father] asked me, but I decided. Now, if I could go back in time, I would stay in school." Including the life experiences of latino students along with giving a brief history of about the origins of the latino community in North Carolina where English is a Second Language and unexpected costs of uniforms, textbooks and lack of transportation keep them from engaging in their education— a fundamental right of every child under 18 in America. In a sense, when Hannah-Jones published this piece she essentially "talks back" (hooks, 1989) authority, that authority being Uncle Sam and the greater Durham school district that she feels are leaving these children behind. She employs the practice of signifyin' like indirectness in order to shield herself from criticism and communicate her point across in a scholarly, authentic manner (Richardson).

The final articles I'd like to examine are ones that mirror her work at *The 1619 Project* as she focuses on the intersection of history, institutional racism and education. "A Color Line In

Baseball: A Former Negro Leagues Veteran Says Jackie Robinson 'the best person'" and "Malcolm X's Message Resonates Across Time: He Left Lasting Impression in Durham" highlight the rhetorical strategies Hannah-Jones used in order to educate and empower those inside and outside of Durham. In the Malcolm X piece she celebrates what would be the civil rights leader's 80th birthday by recounting the time when he came to Durham in the 1960s to debate another famed civil rights leader Floyd McKissick Sr. She first highlights X's biography and notes his "chilly reception" in the city noting how the local newspaper coverage deemed the prolific leader a "violent segregationist group" (2005). She goes on to explain that X inspired activists to rename building on Duke University's campus and how the local activist began an independent Black College in an old warehouse. Hannah-Jones uses this story to invoke the racial history of the city while incorporating quotes from African-Americans who attended, worked or heard about Malcolm X's debate emphasizing their hesitancy to attend but shy acceptance of his then "radical" positions. In this instance she follows in the footsteps of rhetoricians who aim to expose the truth of the country's racist past. She educates the out-group as well as young marginalized people who have been kept from this history through rhetorical tactics like storytelling. This is also evident in the "Color Line in Baseball" article where she interviews a former teammate of Jackie Robinson speaking to Durham fourth graders: "Jackie Robinson wasn't the greatest player to come out of the Negro Leagues, but he was the right one to integrate professional baseball." This quote exposes the aspects of respectability that were at play when Robinson was considered to sign with the MLB. His teammate goes on to explain that Robinson integrated the league when Brown vs The Board of Education was signed, connecting him to integration in education while chronicling the violent racism he and his teammate encountered when traveling for games. This was an important article for Hannah-Jones

to publish as she got to delve into the history of Black public figures while disclosing his legacy in relation to integration in schools reiterates how institutional racism affects every aspect of Black life (2004). This article is a distinct change for Hannah-Jones as begins her work aiming to reframe the history of the United States centering Black bodies in this discourse.

The last article I examined was one that was written in the later years of Hannah-Jones time at the News & Observer. In "Hunting For Heritage: Thousands of African-Americans Aching to Trace Their Roots Have Tried DNA Testing, Is it Worth It?" the journalist explores the difficulties of being Black in America, tracing history and linking it to modern technology. This article is notably different from the others she wrote because it truly leans into her long-form journalistic style that is almost like an essay. She notes her experience in purchasing a DNA test as a Black adopted child. She expresses how feeling alone in this world can be thwarted through learning about one's ancestry emphasizing that no matter what she found "... even that tiny connection to one of my ancestors' homelands will mean so much." Hannah-Jones goes on to discuss her disappointment in the lack of clarity on her mother's ancestry questioning the uncertainty baked into these home DNA tests. In this article Hannah-Jones does many things, she first engages in activism as she educates the audience about the limitations of finding out one's ancestry as an Black adopted American in her essay-like article (Royster, 2000). She then goes on to question her reality and thinks critically about why these tests are being offered? Are they accurate? Through her narrative questioning of herself and the system she is able to talk back (hooks, 1989), create a possibility model and engage in an authentic investigation of her ancestry while revealing the sordid history that limits African-Americans from finding out their roots (Bailey, 2021).

As she became more comfortable in her rhetorical style and beat (education, race) Hannah-Jones was able to enlist the rhetorical tactics used by Black women rhetoricians in order to navigate the tightrope of perfection and a society that historically deems their opinions obsolete. One can trace in her published articles in *The News & Observer* that she uses indirectness, quotes from Black parents, administrators and public officials, along with history to educate and empower her readers as she follows in the tradition of Black feminist rhetoricians before her this work is exemplified in her essays located in *The 1619 Project*.

## **Conclusion**

Tracing the rhetorical practices of Nikole Hannah-Jones prior to her publication of the 1619 Project was a task that allowed me to encounter the tactics she used to advocate and expose her lived reality. She follows in the tradition of Black women rhetoricians who used their writing in order to enact social change and to make sense of their realities in a world that makes them choose between their sex and race. Hannah-Jones proves that she is able to navigate the tightrope of perfection as she uses indirectness, extensive quotes and discursive moves that exhibit the ironic nature of American history, specifically regarding education. These practices allow her to talk back to naturalized notions of the Black everyday experience as she reveals the emotional, real life consequences of institutional racism. I hope to have investigated the ways in which she came to become self-defined and confident in her rhetorical voice at *The Raleigh News & Observer*, as she honed her skills and is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist currently on a “banned book tour” marketing the re-publication of *The 1619 Project*.

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