

MSNBC's *The ReidOut*

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JOY REID: In a major recruiting coup, Howard University announced that journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates, both McArthur geniuses, are joining the faculty in the fall. Hannah-Jones will become the inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Reporting at Howard. She will also create a new initiative aimed at training inspiring journalists and has already secured nearly \$15 million to launch the effort. Coates will be a writer in residence in the university's College of Arts and Sciences, and hold the Sterling Brown chair in the English department. Howard's win counts as a loss to University of North Carolina. Hannah-Jones, the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist for her work on *The New York Times*'s 1619 Project and a UNC alum, was originally set to fill the school's own prestigious Knight chair in race and investigative journalism. After a rigorous review and recommendation followed by howls of complaints from right-wingers offended by the 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones was, at first, denied tenure by the board of trustees. That sparked a fierce backlash, which led to the university — led the university to reverse course and offer her tenure last week. For the record, the professorship has always been a tenured position. Breaking her silence, Hannah-Jones issued a statement today that laid out in great detail how painful this entire process has been. She writes: "Why would I want to teach at a university whose top leadership chose to remain silent, to refuse transparency, to fail to publicly advocate that I be treated like every other Knight Chair before me? These times demand courage, and those who have held the most power in this situation have exhibited the least of it. The burden of working for racial justice is laid on the very people bearing the brunt of the injustice, and not the powerful people who maintain it. I say to you: I refuse." And joining me now is the brand-new inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Reporting at Howard University, Nikole Hannah-Jones, incoming Sterling Brown Chair in the Department of English at Howard University, Ta-Nehisi Coates. I am so jealous that I'm no longer teaching this semester. I finished my semester last year, just in the nick of time, at Howard. But welcome, welcome, welcome to the Howard family. I'm so proud of both of you and excited. I want to start with you, Nikole. You wrote this phenomenal piece, and I hope everyone will read it, in which you really work through the pain of being denied this opportunity at the place where you went to graduate school — you're an alum — and how much you said the university gave you and fed into you and — and sowed into you, to only have this happen. I just want to just for a moment talk to us about how that felt, to have that — go through that whole process, only to be told no tenure?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Thank you for having us on tonight and thanks for the conversation. It was humiliating. It was deeply hurtful and it was — it was enraging, as you know, you don't grow up a black child in this country without being told that you have to work twice as hard to get half as far, that you have to be twice as good, but I have been that and to do everything that you are told to do to be successful, and then have them change the rules at the end at a school that I am an alum of and for a job that I didn't seek out, but that I was recruited for, it just — it just confirms my life's work, everything that Ta-Nehisi and I write about, about how black people are treated in this country and how, even if you follow all of their rules, in the end, it's not going to guarantee that you will be treated fairly and that's why I fought this. That's why

I demanded the vote and that's why I ultimately made the decision to walk away.

REID: And, you know, the thing is that we're kind of taught — and you talked about this a little bit as well. Those of us who went to, you know, PWIs, and not to HBCUs, undergrad, you have in your head growing up that, you know, the pinnacle is to go to fill in the blanks, the school of your dreams, Harvard, Yale, whatever school it is and, you know, I was talking with Jason Johnson — he was hosting Ari's show today — about the fact that, set us back a generation, the schools that were producing the greatest minds in American history, the minds that broke the back of segregation and the rules that had been in this country, in place since the 1619, which is why you wrote that project, you know, the rules that excluded us, were — came from HBCUs. Do you feel like your going to Howard and saying no to UNC, after they belatedly offered you tenure, do you think that that's going to spark more young people to change the vision in their minds to Howard?

HANNAH-JONES: I certainly hope so and I know that Ta-Nehisi hopes so as well. I mean, look, I chose Notre Dame because I felt, as a black woman, I had to have this certain credential, that they — if I wanted white society to believe I was actually intelligent and capable, then I needed to have an elite white institution on my resume and I hated my time at Notre Dame. It was traumatizing. I haven't been back there since 1999. It's the first place I was ever called the n-word was — was on that campus and so we have to — we have to get to the point where we ask ourselves, we deserve to be at those places, absolutely, but is that the best thing for us? And so I certainly hope that us making this decision a choice, right — this is not a consolation prize for me. This is what I wanted. I decided I was going to go to a historically black college. I had other options, and I didn't want to go anywhere else, that other students will realize, as you said, Howard University has played, of any kind of academic institution in this country, played the largest role in black people achieving rights of any institution in this country, right? The tradition of doctors, lawyers, professionals coming out of HBCUs still, it's an amazing tradition to be a part of and we don't need to feel that we have to get validation from these other institutions. We can come home and build our own.

REID: Yeah, and, Ta-Nehisi, I have to bring you in here and, again — and I want to thank you, because I know you don't do a ton of TV. So, I'm very honored to get to talk to you tonight. I feel like —

TA-NEHISI COATES: Can you tell by my lighting?

REID: — we're going to work on that. We're going to send you a ring light. You got a great new job, so we're going to get you a ring light.

COATES: Seriously. We got to do something here.

REID: We got — no, we got you to hook you up. I feel like I'm talking to the T'Challa and Okoye of academia right now, so Wakanda forever. You have written, you know, so searingly about the theft that has undergirded American society, right, the plunder, as you have put it and I think part of that has been psychic, right? It has been for so long accepting the bland narrative

that lionized these founders as sort of a bedtime story, rather than confront the real pain that's in the history that built us, to be strong, as we are. Do you think that this chapter teaches the people at UNC anything about the ramifications, the consequences of that plunder? Or do you think they say, good, two less problematic black people that we — that have — that are going to tell our poor white students who are so fragile that they can't handle the truth? They won't tell them that now. What do you think they learn?

COATES: Right. Well, I think one of the things that was clear in Nikole's statement, that when we used the — the — the term UNC, we're talking about a fairly big community. UNC is not merely its board of trustees. UNC is the students who protested on behalf of Nikole.

REID: Yes.

COATES: UNC is the dean at the School of Journalism, Dean King, who fought on behalf of Nikole. UNC is the Department of Journalism there that [sic] is regrettably named after somebody who is the antithesis of journalism, but, nevertheless, advanced Nikole's package. I think that has to be said, because, Nikole, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe UNC is also the oldest public university in this country and what that means is that this too is theft, because this is an institution that black people in North Carolina and our public institutions in general that we pay into and what has happened is that the black students and the white students and students of all races and creeds at UNC has been denied the counsel of arguably the most decorated journalist in America right now.

REID: Yes.

COATES: Nikole Hannah-Jones, if I can just sing her praises, is not just the author of 1619. She is a Peabody winner. She is a National Magazine winner. She was hot before 1619 and as much as I'm happy that she's coming to Howard, I'm also sad for those students.

REID: Yes. No, I am too, absolutely. Listen, she spoke at my class, and my students were mesmerized. They were afraid to ask questions. They were so absolutely mesmerized by her and I sent every — all of them copies of The 1619 Project as part of their little package at the end. But, you know, I have to ask you, to just stay with you for a moment, Ta-Nehisi, why do you think — if you can step outside of it just for a moment, and look at what Nikole wrote, in terms of what she created, in terms of The 1619 Project, look at the things that you've written, the things Adam Serwer has written, they have been searing, but they're just facts, right? They're not dangerous, in and of themselves. It's just ideas. Why do you think that people on the right are so terrified of these facts?

COATES: But they are — but they are dangerous. They are. They are extremely dangerous. The political order in this country is predicated on a bedtime story. The history is not merely something that lives outside of the politics. There's a reason why the Confederate flag hung over the state of South Carolina. There's a reason why those statues were — were erected. They are a part of the political order. They justify the anti-democratic power that — that exists in this country and so one thing I — I will say about that — and, Joy, you mentioned this — is that, you

know, HBCUs, frankly, not just Howard, whether it be Morehouse, whether it be, you know, A&T —

REID: Yes.

COATES: — whether it be FAMU, whether it be Coppin, whether it be, you know, Morgan, whether it be, we have always been redoubts.

REID: Throw Bethune in there. Don't forget Bethune-Cookman.

COATES: Bethune-Cookman. They can all — Spelman. Let's go. I mean, the whole community of it, because it's not just Howard. These have always redoubts and places where one would say a more truthful, more accurate and more, as it turns out, searing version of America was rendered to its students and I think that's important.

REID: And to come back to you, Nikole, do you fear that parts of white America are just going to further retreat into the bedtime story, that this rejection of — of true history — we're seeing it in Texas, where they're banning book events because they just don't want to hear the real story of the Alamo. Just give us the bedtime story. Do you fear that that retreat is just going to get more intense over time? And, if it does, what are the consequences of that?

HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely. I mean, you know, I have said that the same places that are trying to ban the teaching of critical race theory, that are trying to ban The 1619 Project, which is actually, you know, they're just trying to ban the teaching of the true racist history of this country, those are the same places that are introducing and passing laws to restrict the vote, right? Those are places that are trying to ensure minority rule, and that the people who the majority are supporting cannot actually have control of the politics of state. So, these things are going hand in hand. And that's when Ta-Nehisi says that ideas are dangerous, we know. There's a reason black people during slavery were not allowed to read, right? There's a reason why there were prohibitions during slavery on abolitionist literature, because ideas change action and the way that you sustain an unequal society is by making us think that this is an equal society.

REID: Yes.

HANNAH-JONES: And so, if you don't succeed, it's because you haven't tried enough. So, it's not incidental that, after we see the largest protests for civil rights and black rights in the history of this country, and when you started to see the language changing, and even white people who had before rejected the idea of systemic inequality starting to say, well, maybe this isn't the country I thought it was, that is then why you see this backlash, because they actually know —

REID: Yeah.

HANNAH-JONES: — if you learn that history, they're saying, you're bad, white people. They're saying that — that you are evil, and we can't teach this to you. So, none of this is incidental. And it is. It's very dangerous. We have seen this before.

REID: Yeah. Well, guess what's going to happen? Howard University is about to turn out students, thousands and thousands of minds, into the world of journalism over the next many, many years, when the two of you are associated with that university, who are going to tear down the house and there's nothing anybody can do about it. I am so proud of both of you. I adore both of you and I — listen, I might go and take a class.

COATES: Thank you, Joy.

REID: Can I sign up? I just need to get a little — I just want to audit the class. Just let me audit. Thank you both for being here. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Ta-Nehisi Coates, I'm not worthy. Thank God for both of you. Thank you both for being here.

COATES: Yes, you are. Yes, you are.

REID: Appreciate you both. Thank you. Okay. Whew!