

Exploring "The Idea of America" by Nikole Hannah-Jones

Lesson Overview:

“The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been born on the backs of black resistance...Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.” —Nikole Hannah-Jones

The 1619 Project, inaugurated with a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, challenges us to reframe U.S. history by marking the year when the first enslaved Africans arrived on Virginia soil as its foundational date.

Award-winning investigative journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones provides an expansive essay on why “black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’” Her essay chronicles a history of policies enacted to profit from and disenfranchise black Americans, and the fight not only to claim black liberation, but also to make liberation possible for all Americans.

This lesson plan is designed to introduce Hannah-Jones’ essay, and *The 1619 Project* as a whole, through discussion questions and guided reading.

Warm-up:

The signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 is often presented as the foundational event of U.S. history. Referring to the text of the Declaration of Independence, answer the following questions:

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| What are the values stated in the Declaration of Independence? | |
| In what ways can you see those values working in contemporary U.S. society? | |
| In what ways can you see those values failing in contemporary U.S. society? | |
| How has the interpretation of those values changed over time? Who is responsible for creating those changes? | |

Introductory Reading and Reflection:

1. Read the excerpt from “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones to identify her central thesis.
2. Identify Hannah-Jones’ central thesis. Then, answer the following sets of questions.

| Connecting to Content | |
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| What do you know about slavery, and where does that information come from? | |
| What do you know about the contributions of black Americans to U.S. society, and where does that information come from? | |
| What are the ramifications of slavery in contemporary U.S. life? | |
| How does the origin story of the U.S. change if we mark the beginning of U.S. history in 1619 instead of 1776? | |
| What is national memory? How do we create it? How can we change it? | |

| Connecting to Structure | |
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| Why do you think Nikole Hannah-Jones and other contributors to this issue chose to publish this work in <i>The New York Times Magazine</i> , a national news publication? | |
| What is journalism’s role in shaping national memory? | |
| <i>The 1619 Project</i> includes analytical essays, poems, fiction, art, photography, and more in the same issue. How can each of these forms contribute to the conversation on the legacy of slavery in the U.S.? What is the effect of having all of these forms combined in one magazine? | |

In-depth Reading and Reflection:

Read Nikole Hannah-Jones’ full essay in *The 1619 Project*. **While you read**, consider this claim in her essay: “[T]he year 1619 is as foundational to the American story as 1776...black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’”

Choose ONE of the following graphic organizers, and fill it out while you read:

- Graphic organizer tracking evidence Hannah-Jones’ provides for her central thesis
- Graphic organizer tracking new information learned and personal responses to the essay

After you read, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper:

1. What examples of hypocrisy in the founding of the U.S. does Hannah-Jones supply? What evidence can you see for how “some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy”?
2. Why do you think Hannah-Jones consistently refers to what are commonly known as “plantations,” such as Monticello, by the term “forced-labor camps” instead? Does any other language she uses to describe places, people, or events surprise or stand out to you?
3. What picture does Hannah-Jones paint of major figures in classical U.S. history, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln? Did you learn new information about them from her essay? If so, why do you think this information wasn’t included in other resources from which you have learned about U.S. history?

4. What are some examples of progress pushed forward by black Americans during Reconstruction that Hannah-Jones discusses? How have these efforts benefited all Americans?
5. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were all signed into law during Reconstruction. What examples of persisting racial inequalities in the years following Reconstruction does Hannah-Jones mention? What institutions and ideologies made this possible?
6. How does Hannah-Jones expand on this quote from sociologist Glenn Bracey: “Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves”?
7. Consider the following quote from “The Idea of America”:

“Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation’s most significant original culture. In turn, ‘mainstream’ society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to appropriate the one truly American culture as its own.”

- Why do you think Hannah-Jones places the word “mainstream” in quotation marks?
8. “The Idea of America” is bookended by personal stories; it begins with Hannah-Jones’ memory of her father’s attachment to the American flag, and ends with a story about a middle school class assignment. Why do you think the author includes personal anecdotes in her essay? Why do you think she writes in first-person throughout? What effect do these choices have on how you experience the essay?
 9. Hannah-Jones writes, “How could this black man [Hannah-Jones’ father], having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner?” What answers does her essay provide?
 10. Consider the title of this essay: “The Idea of America.” What other possible titles can you imagine for this essay? Why do you think Hannah-Jones ultimately chose this title?