
Viewing Guide for *The 1619 Project* Docuseries Episode 4: “Capitalism”

The 1619 Project is a Hulu documentary series expanding on The 1619 Project initiative created by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones for The New York Times Magazine. The six-part series seeks to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative. You can view the documentary series at [hulu.com/series/the-1619-project](https://www.hulu.com/series/the-1619-project).

About this Guide

Each episode of the series calls on historians, journalists, and community leaders to share their insight and expertise on the enduring legacy of slavery and its impact on our current society. Each episode contains information that could be useful for a variety of classroom contexts and weaves together multiple related themes and plotlines. It is possible for students to engage with these key themes without viewing the hour-length episodes in full, particularly if they are utilizing other *1619 Project* materials as supplemental texts.

As such, we’ve created a guide that allows for both thematic and linear viewing of each episode:

- In the [About the Episode](#) section of this guide, you will find a summary of the key themes, the relevant time stamps for those themes, and some supplemental texts from *The 1619 Project* to help deepen student understanding.
- In the [Linear Viewing Guide](#) section, you will find a table that splits the episode into sections from start to finish with time stamps and discussion questions.
- At the end of the guide, you will find a [Topic Index](#) for the episode listing the key people, events, concepts, terms, and more to assist with lesson planning and standards alignment.

Some parts of this episode include descriptions of violence and brutality on slave labor camps during the institution of American chattel slavery. Other parts recount the exploitation of American workers in the modern day. We suggest having a classroom social-emotional learning protocol for engaging with hard histories and inviting students to think through how they can care for themselves when things are both important to know and difficult to listen to.

About Episode 4: Capitalism

“Capitalism” explores the ways in which the institution of enslavement impacted the development of American capitalism. It delves into the particular brutality engendered by America’s low-grade capitalism, including the quality of life of American workers and barriers to unionization. Lastly, the episode documents the experiences of low-wage workers and current efforts to create a formidable labor movement.

- Defining Characteristics of American Capitalism
- Unionization and Labor Organizing
- Impact of Capitalism in Black Communities

Theme: Defining Characteristics of American Capitalism

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Summary of Theme | This theme explores how the institution of enslavement impacted the development of a particular brand of low-grade capitalism that is unique to the United States. It details the brutality, violence, exploitation, and immorality that American capitalism engenders. |
| Relevant Time Stamps | 01:24-04:15 (Defining American Capitalism; Disparities in American Society) 08:10-12:26 (Interlude: Low Road Capitalism; Forms of Labor Exploitation) 15:33-21:05 (Record Keeping on Plantations; The Amazon Assembly Line; Determining Value from Labor) 23:21-26:12 (Interlude: Capitalism and Race) 40:30-46:21 (Brutality of American Capitalism; The Cost of Tax Breaks) 55:48-58:24 (Closing: Combating Barriers and Moving Forward) |
| Supplemental Reading | <u>From <i>The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story</i></u> “Sold South” by Jesmyn Ward Chapter 5: “Dispossession” by Tiya Miles Chapter 6: “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond Chapter 16: “Justice” by Nikole Hannah-Jones |

Theme: Unionization and Labor Organizing

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Summary of Theme | This theme explores the history of unionization and labor organization in the United States, and barriers that have hindered the development of a sustained American labor movement. It also highlights the current unionization efforts. |
| Relevant Time Stamps | 03:07-04:15 (Interlude: Disparities in American Society) 12:27-15:32 (Personal Account: Derrick Palmer) 18:00-19:00 (Interlude: The Amazon Assembly Line) 26:13-29:59 (Personal Account: Jennifer Bates) 30:00-36:28 (Nationwide Worker Strikes; Labor Organizing at Amazon; History of Union Destabilization) 46:22-54:19 (Labor Organizing at Amazon; Obstacles to Unionizing) |

These materials were created by Pulitzer Center Education staff to support utilizing *The 1619 Project* as an instructional tool. You can find our full *1619 Project* Education Materials Collection at <https://1619education.org/>.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| | 55:48-58:24 (Closing: Combating Barriers and Moving Forward) |
| Supplemental Reading | <u>From <i>The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story</i></u> “An Absolute Massacre” by ZZ Packer “1955” by Danez Smith Chapter 4: “Fear” by Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander Chapter 6: “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond |

Theme: Impact of Capitalism in Black Communities

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Summary of Theme | This theme explores the physical, social, economic, and emotional impacts that American capitalism has on low-wage Black workers. |
| Relevant Time Stamps | 00:00-01:23 (Introduction) 03:07-09:04 (Disparities in American Society; Hannah-Jones and Chimiere Tillman; Low-Road Capitalism) 12:27-15:32 (Personal Account: Derrick Palmer) 18:00-19:00 (Interlude: The Amazon Assembly Line) 21:06-29:59 (Chimiere and Jennifer Bates; Capitalism and Race) 45:50-46:21 (Interlude: The Cost of Tax Breaks) 54:20-55:46 (Interlude: What COVID-19 Revealed) |
| Supplemental Reading | <u>From <i>The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story</i></u> “Greenwood” by Jasmine Mans Chapter 6: “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond Chapter 11: “Inheritance” by Trymaine Lee Chapter 16: “Traffic” by Kevin Kruse |

Linear Viewing Guide: Capitalism

Some questions to consider before viewing:

1. What is capitalism? How have you heard it defined? What connotation does the word have for you?
2. Some of the history and personal stories told in this episode are hard to listen to because they describe painful events. What can we do to take care of ourselves when something is both important to hear and difficult to listen to?

| Time Stamp | Main Topic | Questions to Consider |
|-------------|---|---|
| 00:00-01:23 | Introduction | The spoken word poem we hear in this intro is “Whitey on the Moon,” by Gil Scott-Heron. Written in 1970, it is situated between imagery from the Apollo 11 spacecraft launch in 1969 and imagery from a personal spaceflight by Jeff Bezos in 2021. What is the poem expressing and critiquing? Why might people find it as relevant today as they did in 1970? |
| 01:24-03:06 | Defining American Capitalism | What are Seth Rockman’s critiques of general definitions of capitalism? Why is it important to have clear and accessible definitions of terms like capitalism? According to Robin D.G. Kelley, what is the myth of American capitalism? What is the reality of American capitalism? |
| 03:07-04:15 | Interlude: Disparities in American Society | What has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed about disparities in America? Do those disparities redefine the way you think about the country? |
| 04:16-08:09 | Personal Account: Nikole and Chimiere *single use of profanity in conversation | In this section, Nikole Hannah-Jones and her cousin Chimiere Tillman reflect on the jobs their fathers worked throughout their lives. What are some of the jobs they mention and what impacts did that labor have on both men? Both Hannah-Jones and Tillman become emotional recounting these stories. Why do you think that is? What is your emotional response listening to them? |
| 08:10-09:04 | Interlude: Low Road Capitalism | What does it mean to “take the low-road?” What might be some defining components of “low-road capitalism?” |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| <p>09:05-12:26</p> | <p>Forms of Labor Exploitation</p> <p>*pictures and images from slave labor camps</p> | <p>According to Professor Rockman, what are the origins of the claim that slavery was not profitable?</p> <p>American chattel-slavery fueled business and economics from the first colonial settlements through the Industrial Revolution. Why is it important to understand chattel slavery as a national institution and not just a southern one? How were other nations in exchange with America during this period of time complicit in the exploitation of labor from enslaved people?</p> <p>Rockman names continuous efforts to find and implement coercive mechanisms that hold people in place and exploit their labor in the American workplace as a legacy of slavery. How did slavery impact/shape the culture of the American workplace? Can you think of examples of what this looks like in practice today?</p> |
| <p>12:27-15:32</p> | <p>Personal Account: Derrick Palmer</p> | <p>Did you know that Amazon is the second-largest employer in the United States? How does this knowledge expand our understanding of the number of people and communities affected by the exploitative and dangerous labor practices the company is under investigation for?</p> <p>How do you think prioritizing productivity over employee safety impacts a work environment? How might it impact an employee even after they leave that work environment?</p> |
| <p>15:33-17:59</p> | <p>Record Keeping on Plantations</p> <p>*pictures and images from slave labor camps</p> | <p>Nikole Hannah-Jones describes American capitalism as historically demanding “productivity for profit at the expense of human beings.” How does this framing help us to better understand the throughline between the exploitative institution of chattel slavery and labor exploitation today?</p> <p>Have you seen a slave ledger like the one Caitlin Rosenthal shares before? Why is it important to understand the meticulous recordkeeping systems enslavers had in place? How does it contradict the imaginary version of plantations Rosenthal describes?</p> <p>In workplace culture today, performance statistics are often legitimized and celebrated. Why do you think that is the case? Are there any ways in which this practice may be harmful?</p> |
| <p>18:00-19:00</p> | <p>Interlude: The Amazon Assembly Line</p> | <p>What system of performance tracking is used for workers on an Amazon workplace assembly line? How does this system impact the workers on the line? How does it resemble the performance tracking in plantation account books?</p> |

| | | |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 19:01-21:05 | Determining Value From Labor | <p>How does it feel to learn about the ways enslavers assigned and tracked the monetary value of enslaved people? Why is determining a person's value from their potential labor production an act of dehumanization?</p> <p>Catilin Rosenthal explains that enslaved people were aware of the ways their enslavers assigned value to them and used that knowledge strategically. Have you been taught about any other ways enslaved people used strategy in their lives?</p> |
| 21:06-23:21 | Personal Account: Chimiere | <p>How long has Chimiere Tillman been working? Why has it been difficult to sustain herself and her family despite that amount of labor?</p> |
| 23:21-26:12 | Interlude: Capitalism and Race | <p>Are you surprised to see the statistics on wealth disparity between white and Black families? Why do you think such a great disparity exists?</p> <p>Why does Nikole argue that race and capitalism will never be inseparable in America? How does Robin D. G. Kelley support this argument in his explanation of racial capitalism?</p> <p>Why could Derrick Palmer's experience at Amazon be considered an example of racial capitalism? How do the statistics shared about the racial makeup of workers at his facility and in senior leadership at the company support this argument?</p> |
| 26:13-29:59 | Personal Account: Jennifer Bates | <p>How did locals initially respond to Amazon coming to Bessemer? How did the reality of Amazon coming differ from the hope that it initially offered?</p> <p>How does Jennifer Bates describe her experiences working at Amazon? Why did Bates decide to stay at Amazon despite these experiences?</p> |
| 30:00-31:12 | Interlude: Nationwide Worker Strikes | <p>What are some of the differences Nikole Hannah-Jones lists between the United States and other modern capitalist societies? Why do you think those differences exist?</p> <p>Were you aware of any of the strikes mentioned in this section? Do you know of any workers in your community who are striking now? Where can you learn more about them?</p> |

| | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| 31:12-33:34 | Labor Organizing at Amazon | Why did Derrick Palmer and his colleagues decide to strike? How were these motivations similar to those of the Amazon workers fighting to unionize in Bessemer? |
| 33:35-36:28 | Interlude: History of Union Destabilization | <p>What are some potential explanations for the low union participation rate in the United States?</p> <p>What was the response to unionization efforts of the 1930s and 1940s? What are some of the long-term impacts of this response?</p> <p>What does Robin D. G. Kelley describe as the popular corporate response to unionization efforts today?</p> |
| 36:28-40:29 | Labor Organizing at Amazon | <p>What strategies did Amazon utilize to destabilize their employees' efforts to unionize? How did this response impact the workplace?</p> <p>What are a few of the steps Derrick Palmer and his colleagues had to take in forming their unions? Why might it be challenging for workers to see a unionization effort through to the end?</p> |
| 40:30-45:49 | Brutality of American Capitalism | <p>The institution of American chattel slavery required the theft of land from Native American Peoples. How does the example provided about the stripping of 23 million acres from the Creek nation demonstrate "low-road" capitalism in a different way?</p> <p>How do Douglas A. Blackmon and Nikole Hannah-Jones term convict leasing as 'slavery by another name.' In what ways does convict leasing parallel enslavement?</p> <p>How does this section illustrate the relationship between capitalism and land? What questions do you have about the history of the land in your own community after viewing?</p> |
| 45:50-46:21 | Interlude: The Cost of Tax Breaks | Where does the money used on government tax breaks to companies like Amazon come from? How is this burdensome to everyday citizens? |
| 46:22-48:46 | Labor Organizing at Amazon | What was the outcome of the initial attempt to unionize the Amazon facility in Bessemer? Why was Jennifer Bates suspicious about these results? |
| 48:47-50:46 | Obstacles to Unionizing | <p>What are some of the barriers to unionizing that have existed historically in the United States?</p> <p>Robin D. G. Kelley shares a W.E.B. Du Bois quote about commitment to whiteness being a paltry wage. What do Kelley and Du Bois</p> |

| | | |
|-------------|--|--|
| | | suggest could be gained by white workers engaging in solidarity with others over labor rights? |
| 50:48-54:19 | Labor Organizing at Amazon | <p>The Amazon workers at the JFK8 facility in Staten Island were able to successfully unionize. What did the victory mean to Derrick Palmer?</p> <p>We see a clip from a speech by Chris Smalls, president of the new Amazon labor union, in which he addresses Jeff Bezos. How does his statement relate to the one made by Bezos in the introduction of this episode?</p> <p>Nikole Hannah-Jones shares that union activists in 2022 won more elections than they had in 20 years. Why do you believe that we are currently witnessing an increase in efforts to unionize?</p> |
| 54:20-55:46 | Interlude: What Covid Revealed | <p>What was Chimiere Tillman’s experience with stimulus checks during the pandemic? What does it suggest about the potential of government programs that invest directly in people?</p> <p>Why does reflecting on this experience make Tillman emotional?</p> |
| 55:48-58:24 | Closing: Combating Barriers and moving forward | <p>What does Robin D. G. Kelley say must be done in order to make sure that race is not a dividing factor in social movements/labor efforts?</p> <p>What does solidarity mean to you? How can we go about building solidarity?</p> <p>According to Hannah-Jones, American capitalism requires complicity. What does it mean to be complicit? What, in your opinion, would be required to avoid complicity in low-road capitalism?</p> |

Some questions to consider after viewing:

1. How has listening to this episode changed your understanding of the ways in which the United States profited off the labor of enslaved people? How has it changed your understanding of labor exploitation in America today?
2. How are imagery and audio used to help with storytelling in this episode? How is the experience of viewing the docuseries similar or different to reading the text?
3. What additional research do you want to do about U.S. history after learning about the ways in which research can expand your understanding of a topic?

Topic Index

Amendments, Legislation, Supreme Court Cases

- Black Codes
- [Thirteenth Amendment](#)

Concepts and Terms

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-union ● Assembly line ● Big business ● Canvassing ● Capitalism ● Chattel slavery ● Commodity ● Convict leasing ● Coercion ● Economic disparities ● Economic system ● Exploitation ● Financial industry ● Forced bondage ● Free market ● Inequality ● Labor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Labor rights ● Low wage jobs ● Low wage workers ● Market ● Middle class ● The New World ● Poverty ● Profit ● Race neutral ● Racial capitalism ● Prosperity ● Soft power ● Solidarity ● Union ● Wages ● Wealth inequality ● Working conditions |
|---|---|

Subject Matter Experts

- [Caitlin Rosenthal](#), Professor of History at UC Berkeley
- [Dougals A. Blackmon](#), Journalist, Author and Filmmaker
- [Robin D. G. Kelley](#), Professor of History at UCLA
- [Seth E. Rockman](#), Professor of History at Brown University

Labor Unions

- [Amazon Labor Union \(ALU\)](#)
- [United Auto Workers \(UAW\)](#)
- [United Food and Commercial Workers \(UFCW\)](#)

Locations

- Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- Bessemer, Alabama
- Brooklyn, New York
- Elizabeth, New Jersey
- New Orleans, Louisiana
- New York City, New York

Historical & Political Figures Mentioned

- Andrew Carnegie
- James McAdory
- J. P. Morgan

Historical Events

- The Civil War
- The Industrial Revolution