

Reading Guide for *The 1619 Project* Essays

The index below offers a preview and guiding questions for the 18 essays included in *The 1619 Project* from *The New York Times Magazine*.

1. “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones (pages 14–26)

Excerpt	<p>“Our Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4, 1776, proclaims that ‘all men are created equal’ and ‘endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.’ But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’ did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country to live up to its founding ideals...Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	<p>abolitionist, American Revolution, Civil Rights Act, Crispus Attucks, Declaration of Independence, Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Jim Crow, Mason-Dixon Line, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), Reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois</p>
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have laws, policies, and systems developed to enforce the enslavement of black Americans before the Civil War influenced laws, policies, and systems in years since? 2. How has activism by black Americans throughout U.S. history led to policies that benefit all people living in the U.S.?

2. “Chained Migration” by Tiya Miles (page 22)

Excerpt	<p>“Slavery leapt out of the East and into the interior lands of the Old Southwest in the 1820s and 1830s.”</p> <p>“As new lands in the Old Southwest were pried open, white enslavers back east realized their most profitable export was no longer tobacco or rice. A complex interstate slave trade became an industry of its own. This extractive system, together with enslavers moving west with human property, resulted in the relocation of approximately one million enslaved black people to a new region. The entrenched practice of buying, selling, owning, renting and mortgaging humans stretched into the American West along with the white settler-colonial population that now occupied former indigenous lands.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	Indian Removal Act of 1830, Mexican-American War, Westward Expansion
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How was the expansion of the U.S. shaped and made possible by slave labor? 2. When did free black Americans begin to travel west, and why?

3. “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond (pages 30–40)

Excerpt	<p>“In the United States, the richest 1 percent of Americans own 40 percent of the country’s wealth, while a larger share of working-age people (18-65) lives in poverty than in any other nation belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.).”</p> <p>“Those searching for reasons the American economy is uniquely severe and unbridled have found answers in many places (religion, politics, culture). But recently, historians have pointed persuasively to the gnatty fields of Georgia and Alabama, to the cotton houses and slave auction blocks, as the birthplace of America’s low-road approach to capitalism.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	2008 economic crisis, assets, capitalism, Collateralized Debt Obligations (C.D.O.s), cotton gin, credit, creditor, debts, depreciation, Industrial Revolution, investor, labor union, Louisiana Purchase, mortgage, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.), Panic of 1837, stock

	market crash of 1929, Wall Street, W.E.B. Du Bois
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the author describe capitalism in the U.S.? 2. How did slavery in the U.S. contribute to the development of the global financial industry? 3. What current financial systems reflect practices developed to support industries built on the work of enslaved people?

4. “Mortgaging the Future” by Mehrsa Baradaran (page 32)

Excerpt	<p>“The Union passed the bills so it could establish a national currency in order to finance the war. The legislation also created the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (O.C.C.), the first federal bank regulator. After the war, states were allowed to keep issuing bank charters of their own. This byzantine infrastructure remains to this day, and is known as the dual banking system. Among all nations in the world, only the United States has such a fragmentary, overlapping and inefficient system — a direct relic of the conflict between federal and state power over maintenance of the slave-based economy of the South.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	bank charters, dual banking system, federal oversight, National Bank Act, Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (O.C.C.)
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How are current banking practices in the U.S. influenced by bank administration and regulation practices developed to fund the Civil War? 2. How are bank regulation practices established after the Civil War connected to the 2008 economic crisis in the U.S.?

5. “Good as Gold” by Mehrsa Baradaran (page 35)

Excerpt	<p>“At the height of the war, Lincoln understood that he could not feed the troops without more money, so he issued a national currency, backed by the full faith and credit of the United States — but not by gold.”</p> <p>“Lincoln assured critics that the move would be temporary, but leaders who followed him eventually made it permanent — first Franklin Roosevelt during</p>
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	the Great Depression and then, formally, Richard Nixon in 1971.”
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	fiat currency
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why did the U.S. develop its first national currency, and what role did the Civil War play in its creation? 2. How was the value of a national currency in the U.S. determined?

6. ”Fabric of Modernity” by Mehrsa Baradaran (page 36)

Excerpt	“From the first decades of the 1800s, during the height of the trans-Atlantic cotton trade, the sheer size of the market and the escalating number of disputes between counterparties was such that courts and lawyers began to articulate and codify the common-law standards regarding contracts...Today law students still study some of these pivotal cases as they learn doctrines like foreseeability, mutual mistake and damages.”
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	damages, futures contracts, foreseeability, mutual mistake contracts
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did increased production of cotton in the South through slave labor influence trade and business in the U.S., and around the world? 2. How have the laws and contracts developed before the Civil War to support the cotton industry influenced the financial documents we use today?

7. “Municipal Bonds” by Tiya Miles (page 40)

Excerpt	“As the historian David Quigley has demonstrated, New York City’s phenomenal economic consolidation came as a result of its dominance in the Southern cotton trade, facilitated by the construction of the Erie Canal. It was in this moment — the early decades of the 1800s — that New York City gained its status as a financial behemoth through shipping raw cotton to Europe and bankrolling the boom industry that slavery made.”
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Key Names, Dates, and Terms	capitalism, Dutch West India Company, insurance, profits, Wall Street
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did enslaved people contribute to the construction of northeastern cities like New York City? 2. How did banks and other financial institutions profit from slavery, even after it was abolished in the North?

8. “A Broken Health Care System” by Jeneen Interlandi (pages 44–45)

Excerpt	<p>“Federal health care policy was designed, both implicitly and explicitly, to exclude black Americans. As a result, they faced an array of inequities—including statistically shorter, sicker lives than their white counterparts.”</p> <p>“One hundred and fifty years after the freed people of the South first petitioned the government for basic medical care, the United States remains the only high-income country in the world where such care is not guaranteed to every citizen. In the United States, racial health disparities have proved as foundational as democracy itself.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	Affordable Care Act (A.C.A.), Aid to Dependent Children Act, Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, Freedmen’s Bureau, GI Bill, Jim Crow, New Deal, Pullman porters, Reconstruction, Social Security, Wagner Acts of 1935
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have healthcare policies, city planning, and other government systems in the U.S. limited who has access to healthcare services? 2. According to the author, what factors help diseases to spread in a community?

9. “Traffic” by Kevin M. Kruse (pages 48–49)

Excerpt	<p>“The postwar programs for urban renewal, for instance, destroyed black neighborhoods and displaced their residents with such regularity that African-Americans came to believe, in James Baldwin’s memorable phrase, that ‘urban renewal means Negro removal.’”</p>
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	<p>“In the end, Atlanta’s traffic is at a standstill because its attitude about transit is at a standstill, too. Fifty years after its Interstates were set down with an eye to segregation and its rapid-transit system was stunted by white flight, the city is still stalled in the past.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	James Baldwin, New Deal, public transit, redlining practices, segregation laws of the 1890s, urban renewal, white flight
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What policies contributed to neighborhood segregation in the U.S.? 2. How have transportation systems reinforced segregation?

10. “Undemocratic Democracy” by Jamelle Bouie (pages 50–55)

Excerpt	<p>“There is a homegrown ideology of reaction in the United States, inextricably tied to our system of slavery. And while the racial content of that ideology has attenuated over time, the basic framework remains: fear of rival political majorities; of demographic ‘replacement’; of a government that threatens privilege and hierarchy.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	Affordable Care Act (A.C.A.), the black belt, concurrent majority, debt limit, fiscal responsibility, nullification, Populist Party
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. According to the author, how do 19th century U.S. political movements aimed at maintaining the right to enslave people manifest in contemporary political parties?

11. “Medical Inequality” by Linda Villarosa (pages 56–57)

Excerpt	<p>“The centuries-old belief in racial differences in physiology has continued to mask the brutal effects of discrimination and structural inequities, instead placing blame on individuals and their communities for statistically poor health outcomes. Rather than conceptualizing race as a risk factor that predicts disease or disability because of a fixed susceptibility conceived on shaky grounds centuries ago, we would do better to understand race as a proxy for bias, disadvantage and ill treatment. The poor health outcomes of black people, the targets of discrimination over hundreds of years and numerous generations, may be a harbinger for the future health of an increasingly diverse and unequal</p>
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	America.”
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	anesthesia, gynecology, lung capacity, pulmonary function
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What inaccurate and unfounded assumptions have doctors made throughout history about the bodies of enslaved black people, and how did they attempt to prove those assumptions? 2. How have racist medical practices and attitudes influenced the medical treatment that black Americans have received throughout history, and continue to receive today?

12. “American Popular Music” by Wesley Morris (pages 60–67)

Excerpt	“When we’re talking about black music, we’re talking about horns, drums, keyboards and guitars doing the unthinkable together. We’re also talking about what the borrowers and collaborators don’t want to or can’t lift — centuries of weight, of atrocity we’ve never sufficiently worked through, the blackness you know is beyond theft because it’s too real, too rich, too heavy to steal.”
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	appropriation, minstrelsy
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have popular musical and performance trends throughout history used traditions and styles developed by black Americans? 2. How does the author describe black music and blackness in music?

13. “Sugar” by Khalil Gibran Muhammad (pages 70–77)

Excerpt	“None of this — the extraordinary mass commodification of sugar, its economic might and outsize impact on the American diet and health — was in any way foreordained, or even predictable, when Christopher Columbus made his second voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in 1493, bringing sugar-cane stalks with him from the Spanish Canary Islands. In Europe at that time, refined sugar was a luxury product, the back-breaking toil and dangerous labor required in its manufacture an insuperable barrier to production in anything approaching bulk. It seems reasonable to imagine that it might have remained
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	so if it weren't for the establishment of an enormous market in enslaved laborers who had no way to opt out of the treacherous work.”
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	1730 slave code in New York, Haitian Revolution, Hurricane Katrina, racketeering, taxpayer subsidies, triangle of trade, wire fraud
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is sugar produced, and why was it cultivated in what became the U.S.? 2. How has sugar production changed, and how have policies continued to limit who has access to the wealth earned from producing sugar?

14. “Pecan Pioneer” by Tiya Miles (page 76)

Excerpt	“The presence of pecan pralines in every Southern gift shop from South Carolina to Texas, and our view of the nut as regional fare, masks a crucial chapter in the story of the pecan: It was an enslaved man who made the wide cultivation of this nut possible.”
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	commercial production, commercial market, grafting
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How were pecans initially cultivated in the U.S., and how did Antoine’s innovation make their commercial production viable? 2. Who are the figures that we learn about when studying innovation in the U.S., and whose stories are missing?

15. “The Wealth Gap” by Trymaine Lee (pages 82–83)

Excerpt	<p>“Today’s racial wealth gap is perhaps the most glaring legacy of American slavery and the violent economic dispossession that followed.”</p> <p>“The post-Reconstruction plundering of black wealth was not just a product of spontaneous violence, but etched in law and public policy.”</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	Freedmen’s Bureau, GI Bill, Home Owners Loan Corporation, New Deal programs (social security, unemployment, minimum wage, etc.), Reconstruction, redlining, zero and negative wealth

Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does a person accumulate and keep wealth in the U.S.? 2. How have policy and exclusion from government wealth-building programs limited black Americans' opportunities to accumulate wealth?
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16. "Mass Incarceration" by Bryan Stevenson (pages 80–81)

Excerpt	<p>"The United States has the highest rate of incarceration of any nation on Earth: We represent 4 percent of the planet's population but 22 percent of its imprisoned. In the early 1970s, our prisons held fewer than 300,000 people; since then, that number has grown to more than 2.2 million, with 4.5 million more on probation or parole. Because of mandatory sentencing and 'three strikes' laws, I've found myself representing clients sentenced to life without parole for stealing a bicycle or for simple possession of marijuana. And central to understanding this practice of mass incarceration and excessive punishment is the legacy of slavery."</p> <p>"It's not just that this history fostered a view of black people as presumptively criminal. It also cultivated a tolerance for employing any level of brutality in response."</p>
Key Names, Dates, and Terms	13th Amendment, Black Codes, capital punishment, Reconstruction, sharecropping
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have laws been written and enforced in the U.S. over the past 400 years to disproportionality punish black Americans? 2. How does Stevenson argue that the modern day prison system acts as a continuation of slavery?

17. "Hope" by Djeneba Aduayom (photography), Nikole Hannah-Jones (introduction), and Wadzanai Mhute (captions) (pages 86–93)

<p>Excerpt</p>	<p>“Leading up to the civil rights movement, Howard was virtually the only law school in the South that served black students. It became an incubator for those who would use the law to challenge racial apartheid in the North and the South and help make the country more fair and democratic.”</p> <p>“The school continues that legacy today, producing more black lawyers than perhaps any other institution. In May, it graduated its 148th class, and the four newly minted lawyers featured here were among the graduates. All of them descended from people enslaved in this country.” —Nikole Hannah-Jones</p> <p>As a sixth-generation descendant of slavery, I am essentially a part of the first generation of descendants to carry the torch that was lit by my ancestors into true freedom.” —Septembra Lesane, a recent graduate of Howard University School of Law</p>
<p>Key Names, Dates, and Terms</p>	<p>census, estate, Freedmen’s Bureau, genealogy, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), property ledgers, will</p>
<p>Guiding Questions</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What challenges do black Americans face in tracing lineage, and what strategies have been used to address those challenges? 2. What similarities and differences do you notice between the stories of the ancestors of the four Howard University School of Law students? 3. How do the portraits help tell the stories of the people who are profiled?

18. “Shadow of the Past” by Anne C. Bailey (text) and Dannielle Bowman (photograph) (page 98)

<p>Excerpt</p>	<p>“This spot [pictured] is the site of the largest auction of enslaved people in American history... A photo can’t capture the contribution those 436 people made to the economy of their country, or the gifts and talents they lent it. (As part of the Gullah Geechee community, they were among those who gave the world a song of peace, ‘Kumbaya.’) What you do see are two tracks, intersecting but going in different directions, toward different outcomes — a fitting metaphor, perhaps, for black and white life in America.”</p>
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Key Names, Dates, and Terms	auction, economy, Gullah Geechee community
Guiding Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How does the author describe the largest auction of enslaved people in American history?2. How do the text and image connect? Why do you think <i>The 1619 Project</i> concludes with this image and text?