The Branded Empire

Designer Denim, Air Jordan, and the Logo as Identity · 1980–2000

GUIDING QUESTION

When a brand's clothes are sewn by contractors overseas, who is responsible for the workers who make them?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1980 to 1994, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 2 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Contractor, Maquiladora, Code of conduct, Anti-sweatshop movement, Factory audit.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 9 (1980–present)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

Day 2 (50 minutes)
5 min · Key terms matching

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (2 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms
Contractor: B · Maquiladora: A · Code of conduct: E · Anti-sweatshop movement: C · Factory audit: D

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

As American mills closed, American brands ascended. The closing decades of the twentieth century reorganized the industry around the logo—the value of a garment lay less in its construction than in the symbol stitched to it.

Even as American textile manufacturing contracted, American apparel marketing reached new heights. Calvin Klein turned jeans into a luxury object with a fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields; Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren built brand universes that sold American identity as merchandise; Nike, signing a Chicago Bulls rookie named Michael Jordan, made athletic shoes among the most coveted consumer objects on earth. Hip-hop culture, rising from New York to Los Angeles and Atlanta, completed the equation: the garment was no longer simply worn—it was performed, photographed, and resold. The 'branded empire'

was a fashion economy in which design, marketing, and licensing happened in the United States while the sewing increasingly happened in Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and Asia.



An American indoor shopping mall in the 1980s-the retail stage on which apparel brands built national empires. Carol M. Highsmith, "Indoor shopping mall," between 1980 and 1990. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LCCN 2011635987). Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1980 — **Calvin Klein's Brooke Shields Ads**
Richard Avedon's television spots, in which fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields asks what comes between her and her Calvins, debut in November; several New York stations refuse to air them.

1984 — **Nike Signs Michael Jordan**
A five-year endorsement deal with the Chicago Bulls rookie leads to the Air Jordan, released in 1985.

1990s — **Hip-Hop Adopts the Logo**
Tommy Hilfiger, Polo Ralph Lauren, Timberland, and others see their goods reinterpreted by hip-hop artists and fans, extending their reach far beyond the brands' plans.

1994 — **NAFTA Speeds the Split**
The North American Free Trade Agreement accelerates a structure already underway: design in New York, sewing in Mexico and the Caribbean Basin.

PART 4

Key terms

Contractor (answer B)
An independent factory hired by a brand to make its products, letting the brand avoid owning factories or directly employing workers.

Maquiladora (answer A)
A factory in Mexico or Central America that assembles imported materials into goods for export, often with tax and tariff breaks.

Code of conduct (answer E)
A company's written list of labor and safety standards that it says its suppliers must follow.

Anti-sweatshop movement (answer C)
A 1990s campaign by students, unions, and activists to pressure brands to improve conditions in the factories that made their goods.

Factory audit (answer D)
An inspection, often paid for by the brand, to check whether a supplier follows labor and safety rules.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Testimony at a Capitol Hill Press Conference on Child Labor

Wendy Díaz (translated by Barbara Briggs), May 1996

> My name is Wendy Diaz. I'm from Honduras. I'm 15 years old, and I entered into Global Fashion to work when I was 13. And last year, until December, I was working on pants for Kathie Lee. ... Working those hours, I earned 240 lempiras a week, which they've told me is $21.86 a week.

Context: Díaz traveled to Washington with the National Labor Committee after activists revealed that clothing sold under television host Kathie Lee Gifford's Walmart label was sewn by teenagers in Honduran factories. The scandal helped launch the 1990s anti-sweatshop movement.

Source: Child Labor (Democracy Now!, May 31, 1996). Democracy Now!. 1996-. https://www.democracynow.org/1996/5/31/child_labor

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Remarks Announcing the Apparel Industry Partnership

William J. Clinton, April 14, 1997

> As has now been painfully well documented, some of the clothes and shoes we buy here in America are manufactured under working conditions which are deplorable and unacceptable--mostly overseas, but unbelievably, sometimes here at home as well. ... The code will establish a maximum workweek, a cap of 12 hours on the amount of overtime a company can require; require that employers pay at least the minimum or prevailing wage, respect basic labor rights. ... Most important, it will crack down on child labor, prohibiting the employment of those under 15 years of age in most countries.

Context: Clinton announced a voluntary workplace code agreed to by apparel companies, unions, and human rights groups. The partnership later became the Fair Labor Association, though several unions left, arguing its standards were too weak.

Source: William J. Clinton. Remarks Announcing the Apparel Industry Partnership Report (Public Papers of the Presidents, 1997, Book I). U.S. Government Publishing Office (govinfo). 1997-. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1997-book1/html/PPP-1997-book1-doc-pg435.htm

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Corroborate
Compare "Testimony at a Capitol Hill Press Conference on Child Labor" (Wendy Díaz (translated by Barbara Briggs), May 1996) with "Remarks Announcing the Apparel Industry Partnership" (William J. Clinton, April 14, 1997). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. How old was Wendy Díaz when she started work, what was she sewing, and how much did she earn?
2. Díaz spoke through a translator at a press event organized by labor activists; Clinton spoke at a White House ceremony with company executives. How does each setting shape the message?
3. Clinton's code depended on voluntary company participation and monitoring. Using the chapter narrative, explain why brands preferred voluntary codes to new laws.
4. Many brands now publish supplier lists and sustainability reports. Are voluntary codes enough, or should laws require brands to guarantee conditions throughout their supply chains? Argue.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

MATERIAL CULTURE

Calvin Klein and the Birth of Designer Denim

How a Bronx-born designer made workwear a status symbol.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/calvin-klein-denim

BIOGRAPHY

Air Jordan and the Sneaker Economy

How a basketball shoe became a foundation of modern brand culture.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/air-jordan-economy

IMPACT

Hip-Hop and the Logo

How a culture that brands did not market to redefined their reach.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/hip-hop-and-the-logo

Places: New York

SOURCES AND CREDITS

How the Air Jordan 1 Banned Colorway Sparked a Sneaker Revolution. Nike-
. https://www.nike.com/a/air-jordan-banned-history

Brooke Shields looks back at her controversial Calvin Klein adverts. The Telegraph-
. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/fashion/people/brooke-shields-looks-back-controversial-calvin-klein-adverts/

Elena Romero. Free Stylin': How Hip Hop Changed the Fashion Industry. Praeger. 2012

Image: Carol M. Highsmith, "Indoor shopping mall," between 1980 and 1990. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LCCN 2011635987). Public domain.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/branded-empire. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.