

POV Community
Engagement &
Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE



THE NEUTRAL GROUND

a film by CJ Hunt

www.pbs.org/pov



THE NEUTRAL GROUND

The Neutral Ground documents New Orleans' fight over monuments and America's troubled romance with the Lost Cause. In 2015, director CJ Hunt was filming the New Orleans City Council's vote to remove four confederate monuments. But when that removal is halted by death threats, CJ sets out to understand why a losing army from 1865 still holds so much power in America.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue and requires preparation before you and your community dive in. This guide is designed for people who want to use *The Neutral Ground* to engage family friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities in honest, though challenging, conversations that will require all participants remain committed to being fully present. Conversations that center race within histories of violence and exclusion; feelings of belonging; safety and identity can be difficult to begin and facilitate, but this guide is meant to support you in sustaining conversations around identity, history, colonialism, white supremacy, racism and community. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people listen actively and share divergent viewpoints with care and respect.

This discussion guide is meant to inspire people with varying degrees of knowledge, as well as dynamic and different experiences, in relation to these topics to enter the conversation, and stay present in the conversation, in order to impact change and awareness.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the topics in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose the questions that best meet your needs and interests. *And be sure to leave time to consider taking action.* Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult and/or uncomfortable, so please also consider a closing activity that gives participants an opportunity to offer gratitude to one another before closing.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *The Neutral Ground*. *The Neutral Ground* invites us to reckon with long histories of racist violence and ongoing struggles for racial justice in our society. We are really glad you've accepted this urgent invitation. Before you facilitate, please *prepare yourself for the conversation* as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and these conversations require both learning and unlearning about the truths of our history that have not typically been taught in schools and universities. If they have, they are commonly taught in a way that marginalizes or completely ignores BIPOC perspectives and first-hand experiences. Knowing this, it is common for some who engage in this work of un/learning for the first time to feel unsure about how to approach and discuss the violence committed against BIPOC people and communities, or about how these violences endure in systems and structures that continue to cause harm to these people and communities today. It is our intention that this guide will support you in facilitating dialogue that generates new awareness, generative questions about how to form coalitions in the ongoing and intersectional struggles for racial justice.

This guide, and our additional resources, offer educational materials that will support you in your process of challenging assumptions by presenting historical facts and contemporary realities. However, we invite you to prepare yourself ahead of the discussion so you can support this process and minimize harm and support your community in recognizing the need for more critical and intentional learning. We encourage you to educate yourself as much as possible. [Racial Equity Tools glossary](#) offers common language and understanding and POV's [Delve Deeper Reading List](#) is also a great resource for learning more.

As a facilitator we urge you to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the safety of BIPOC while maximizing care and critical curiosity, transformation, and connection. We invite you to share with us about how your conversations fostered engagement and transformation in your own community!

TIPS & TOOLS FOR FACILITATORS

Here are some supports for you as you prepare to facilitate a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility for coalition-building. Importantly you (and your facilitation partner, which we suggest you have one) should prepare yourselves to engage in tensions that arise while also *refusing* hate or violence in any form.

STEP ONE: ESTABLISH AND SHARE COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

To begin, review these suggested community agreements. Before beginning the conversation, ask individual participants to take turns reading one aloud to establish agreements for how participants will engage with one another. You may modify these agreements to meet the needs of your unique community, and to set intentions and establish parameters of care. Begin by asking that people be conscious of the way power will be working through this conversation, how this film teaches us about how power has been differently and unequally distributed, and ask that they hold space and offer care to the tensions that may arise.

After reading all agreements as a group, ask participants to reflect on whether they feel capable of honoring them and one another. We suggest that you give participants permission to quietly excuse themselves if they do not feel comfortable honoring these agreements.

SAMPLE COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS*

1. We acknowledge that racism is real, historic, structural, and institutional. We understand that white supremacy and anti-Blackness are active forces in our society and agree not to debate this fact. *Racism and racist violence is not a matter of opinion, but a reality of history and, recognizing this, we begin our discussion from this agreement.*
2. Prejudice, discrimination, hate speech, harrassment, and any other form of violence are not tolerated in this space. *If an individual in the group is intentionally causing harm, the larger community has the right to ask this person to leave.*
3. Impact is more important than intent. *We will assume best intentions as a community and attend, primarily to the impact we have on one another while centering an intention of care and support. If harm is unintentionally caused and we are made aware, individuals will practice: (1.) recognition of harm caused, (2.) taking responsibility for harm caused, (3.) apologizing for harm caused, and (4.) learning from the experience and changing behavior.*
4. Listen to understand, not to respond. *When someone is speaking, give them your whole attention. Remember, listening is a form of engagement and care.*
5. Make space, take space. *As you engage, be mindful of the people that are speaking and how much/ how often you are sharing. Work as a community to support one another in equitable sharing (so long as it is generating new ways of understanding).*

TIPS & TOOLS FOR FACILITATORS

6. Respond do not react. *Before you speak, ask yourself “Why am I talking?” Check in with yourself and ask if your contribution will help the conversation deepen and become more collaborative.*
7. Be open to learning and changing your mind. *Changing your mind after learning new information and bearing witness to the experience of another can be a challenging process because we have been conditioned to want to be “right.” However, the experience of learning and growing is transformative. We commit to the common goal of dialogue that asks us to change and be changed by others. We understand that it is okay to have been wrong and to learn new information and to change our minds. In fact, we think this can be exciting!*
8. Focus on growth and speak from your own experience. *We will practice using “I” statements and speaking only for ourselves. We will avoid assumptions and generalizations. We will aim for specificity and intention.*
9. Self care and community care. *Pay attention to your body, pay attention to your neighbors. If you need to take a break, take a break.*
10. Practice gratitude often. *We will say thank you to one another for sharing and taking risks. We will receive one another with care and sincere gratitude.*

*Some agreements were inspired by and modified from: Emergent Strategy, by: adrienne maree brown.

STEP TWO: INTENTION-SETTING & RECOGNITION

Histories of colonization and American Slavery are deeply intertwined as are their enduring structures. While the experiences of settler colonialism and chattel slavery are unique to place, peoples, and communities, we all inherit and hold different relationships to this inheritance. We must recognize this past and its ongoing human, societal, and structural implications in order to commit to change. We encourage your community to openly acknowledge the legacy and inheritance of both and open this discussion with: (1.) a [Land Acknowledgment](#), and (2.) an Acknowledgment of Slavery.

*What is a Land Acknowledgment?**

Land acknowledgments do not exist in the past tense, but rather recognize that colonialism is a current and ongoing process with enduring structures. Land acknowledgments are a way to combat systemic erasure and honor the traditional indigenous inhabitants of the land you are currently living on, to offer respect, and to support larger truth-telling and reconciliation efforts. Acknowledgement is a small gesture that must be accompanied by continued education, action and commitments to justice and repair. Here are some resources to learn more about Land Acknowledgments: [Native Land Resources](#)

To discover and learn about the Indigenous Territories you currently inhabit you can:

Visit <https://native-land.ca/> to see a visual representation and learn more
Text your zip code to (855)-917-5263

Land Acknowledgment Model:

*I/We acknowledge that today we gather as **[name of your community/group]** on the unceded Indigenous lands of Turtle Island, the ancestral name for what is now called North America. Specifically, I/We acknowledge the unceded territory of the **[indigenous community/communities local to your zip code]** past and present; as well as all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in **[your state]**. We honor, with gratitude, the land itself and the people who have stewarded and lived in relation to this land across generations.*

Acknowledgment of Slavery & its Enduring Legacy Model:*

*I/We also recognize that we cannot separate the history of **[name your community/institution]** from the history of colonialism and slavery in what is today named the United States. We acknowledge that what we know of this country today, including its culture, economic growth, and infrastructure throughout history and across time, has been built by the labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants who were made to suffer the horror of the transatlantic trafficking of their people, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow. We also recognize that it is our duty to acknowledge the afterlives of that state-sanctioned violence throughout the generations and the lasting impacts that are alive today.*

*Acknowledgments have been inspired and modified by: [Native Land](#), The University of Texas at Austin Native American and Indigenous Studies Program, and Dr. Terah 'TJ' Stewart, Iowa State University, "Labor Acknowledgment;" and the scholarship of Christina Sharpe, York University

THE FILM: KEY PARTICIPANTS



- **Abdul Aziz: War Photographer**
- **Ashley Rogers & Dr. Ibrahima Seck: Whitney Plantation**
- **C.J. Hunt: Filmmaker & Protagonist**
- **Cecil J. Hunt II: C.J.'s Father**
- **Christy Coleman and Karen Cox: Historians**
- **Dread Scott: Artist ([Slave Rebellion Reenactment Project](#))**
- **Freddi Evans & Luther Gray: New Orleans Slave Marker Project**
- **Freddie Williams Evans: Author, Scholar, Artist**
- **Jason Williams: Former New Orleans City Council President**
- **Michael “Guess” Moore & Malcolm Suber: Activists in Take ‘Em Down NOLA**
- **Mitch Landrieu: Former Mayor of New Orleans (2010-2018)**
- **Thomas Taylor: Louisiana Sons of Confederate Veterans**

“We have a duty to fight for our freedom. We have a duty to win. We must love and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

-Assata Shakur

The Neutral Ground is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- **Racism, White Supremacy, Whiteness**
- **Historical Memory, Mythology, and the cult of the Lost Cause**
- **Identity and Political Consciousness**
- **Education, History, and Power**
- **Relationships between Symbols of Violence and Systems of Oppression**
- **Whiteness and Violence**
- **Resistance and Racial Justice Movements**
- **Continued relevance of the past in contemporary movements for racial justice**



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

We do not have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present. We do not have to suffer the waste of an amnesia that robs us of the lessons of the past rather than permit us to read them with pride as well as deep understanding.

- Audre Lorde, 1983

MONUMENTAL MYTHOLOGY & THE WHITE-WASHING OF AMERICAN HISTORY

The Neutral Ground highlights America's most enduring contradiction - that a country dedicated to freedom only exists because of its history of oppression. This film also exposes the enduring structures founded upon the logic that both, colonizers and slave owners, used to justify the devastation they perpetrated upon millions of Indigenous and Black people. Supremacist thought, specifically, white supremacy was a foundational "American" idea. This contradiction was present when Thomas Jefferson declared the "self-evident" truths that "all men are created equal" while he forcibly (and legally) enslaved at least 150 human beings (Horton & Horton, 2006). Institutionalized white supremacy was present in 1964 Mississippi, when Civil Rights Activists engaged in strategic campaigns to register Black Americans to vote despite laws that explicitly suppressed their ability to exercise equal freedoms as whites. These founding contradictions are being resisted today as we witnessed, in March 2020, when social unrest on a similar scale to the outrage following Martin Luther King, Jr's 1968 assassination erupted across American cities. These uprisings expressed a collective sentiment of solidarity against anti-Black racism and police brutality following the police killing of George Floyd. Importantly, as *The Neutral Ground* makes visible: histories of oppression are exactly as long as histories of resistance.

This film asks contemporary viewers to reckon with the inheritances and legacies of these foundational contradictions and our national inheritance of the violence of white supremacy. Today, debates around memory, history, and identity as seen in *The Neutral Ground* are ones that take place in public spaces, public schools, and public discourse. We are asked to grapple with what false histories these monuments represent and what feelings they continue to inspire in individuals.

Origins of Lost Cause Mythology

The Civil War was a battle over the institution of slavery. After the Confederate lost the Civil War, and the 13th Amendment abolishing the institution of slavery was ratified, and in response to Reconstruction, the Lost Cause myth was created to minimize and manipulate the truth that slavery was the central cause of the Civil War. This myth framed the Confederacy's goals as heroic. The term "Lost Cause" dates back to 1866 when Edward A. Pollard, a proslavery propagandist and graduate of the University of Virginia, coined the term and set out to exonerate Southern whites. Origins of the false "history" that constitute the Lost Cause mythology began a memory tradition that reframed pro-slavery white Confederates as fighting for what they reframed as a "noble" cause. They used the language of "state's rights" to manipulate the truth of history. This momentum and myth has been legitimized not only through language and reframing, but also through white supremacist power structures in place in the 19th Century that spanned politics, law, and - as the film highlights - education.

The Lost Cause myth was created, positioned as truth (then rendered as history) by white people with power and gained strength as it was passed on as a way for family members to cope with the loss of Confederate soldiers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Lost Cause is fiction: it is a story that includes plot twists where defeated Confederates framed slavery as good for Black people, and the cause of the Civil War as a war over states' rights and not slavery. Whites' and Confederates' desires to be "good" or "innocent" in the eyes of history has had devastating and lasting effects on how we collectively remember the cruelty of white supremacy within the institution of slavery. The power of the Lost Cause mythology, and the way white people co-opted the position of victimhood, continues to impact America's capacity to collectively reckon with the reality of American Slavery and to acknowledge the truth of our nation.

PUBLIC EDUCATION, POWER, & POSSIBILITY

Now the crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society...The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions...To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

- James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers"

As *The Neutral Ground* highlights, one of the most effective campaigns for falsely positioning this fiction as "history," and inserting Lost Cause myth into national memory was through the United Daughters of the Confederacy's (UDC) *propaganda* campaign in public schools. The UDC, and supporters, focused most of their energies, power, and money on creating textbooks, lessons, and filling public schools with portraits of Confederate figures that supported this inaccurate historical narrative. The UDC established standards for assessing history textbooks to ensure they reflected Lost Cause fictions with guidelines like, "reject a book...that speaks of the slaveholder of the South as cruel and unjust to his slaves." Historically, public education prepared students to think about slavery and race in ways that were consistent with the centrality of white supremacy in American law, society, and politics. This approach highlights the power of education and ensured that even when Confederate veterans and pro-Slavery white supremacists of the past died, their ideas would live on. In fact, up until 1980 Mississippi public schools exclusively used Lost Cause textbooks when they were forced to change by a Federal Court decision (*Lowen vs. Turnipseed*). We continue to witness the centrality of education in battles for racial justice today as states across the US seek to implement policies that would ban Critical Race Theory (the practice of teaching history from perspectives that have historically and structurally been marginalized). Education, in this sense, has the potential to complexify how power works in shaping singular "truths" and to intervene in oppressive structures and systems.

In the film, C.J. asks, "why is it so hard to break up with the Confederacy?" While we aren't often asked to consider the role of emotion in conversations about "history," justice, or education, the answer to the question can be realized when we frame the Lost Cause as what it was: a fictional story.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Emotional attachment, nostalgia, and fear of losing power motivated white Southerners and those white Confederates also happened to be the people with power to script and publish the stories that would legitimize their violent practices and ideas. Though, why is C.J.'s question still relevant in the 21st Century? Any attempt to address the question of white supremacy and racism in the present must also address slavery and colonialism in the past, but in order to confront these realities they must be taught in an historically-accurate way. The long history of education's role in misrepresenting and erasing the realities of slavery; however, has perpetually failed to name the perpetrators of the atrocities and still impacts educational institutions and curricula today.

Like any good story, the fictions constructing the "Lost Cause" narrative, conjure a lot of feelings. Emotions are powerful political motivations, especially when accompanied by ideas of morality, superiority, and bolstered through power structures. Much like the *ideas* historically used by whites to justify the forced enslavement of people of African descent did not suddenly vanish when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation; the emotional connections to ideas of whiteness, the "goodness" of the South, or desires for whites to claim innocence and to sustain power are still very much alive. Importantly, this false history and its contemporary manifestations are not only tied to power in the form of supremacist ideas, but also to money. Colonization and land theft in addition to the institution of slavery as the first economic framework in this country - is foundationally connected to the wealth of white people, institutions, and communities and undgirds the systemic economic disparities people and communities of color face in America today. In this way, as historian Ira Berlin (2006) states, "Slavery thus made class as it made race, and, entwining the two processes, it mystified both."

Despite Jefferson Davis's 1881 claim that, "As a mere historical fact, we have seen that African servitude..." was "the mildest and most humane of all institutions to which the name 'slavery' has ever been applied" (Davis, 1881), slavery was neither mild nor humane. Since the perpetrators of violence, who benefited from colonization and slavery, also had the power to frame the violence they enacted against Black and Indigenous people, the foundations of our contemporary understandings of colonization, white supremacy, and anti-Black racism were unequal from the beginning - particularly with regards to power and race. For people of African descent who were enslaved, the truth of slavery was suffering and death. For white Americans who forced human beings into bondage, the truth of slavery was life and prosperity (Horton, 2006). *The Neutral Ground* invites us to consider how, what scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) refers to as "the afterlives of slavery," haunt and harm us today.

To counter the notion that the past should remain in the past, we can point to other truths like how the Lost Cause myth has been put to use to benefit white supremacy and how the life of ideas has social, cultural, and material consequences. An example of this is the second emergence of the KKK as a response to the swan song of the Lost Cause, "The Birth of a Nation" by D.W. Griffith. The wildly popular film retells the Civil War while employing blackface to paint Black Americans as violent savages. It plays on fears of Black uprisings, effectively encouraging white Americans to take up arms against the mobs of invading negroes. Or the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre when white mobs burned an economically thriving Black community to the ground. Or the January 6, 2021 insurgence at the Capital by white supremacists and in contemporary political debates that are challenging Critical Race Theory and its effectiveness in schools.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

CONNECTING SYMBOLS TO SYSTEMS: UNDOING WHITE SUPREMACY, UNDERSTANDING POWER

“Since they don’t want to move fast enough, we need to bring attention to all symbols to white supremacy. You need to know that it is representative of the same kind of state sanctioned violence that allows for all of these brothers and sisters who have been gunned down with no consequence from police because the reality is when we talk about symbols they are representative of oppressive systems.”

Angela Kinlaw
Take ‘Em Down Nola

A confederate monument is not neutral. Monuments, like that of Robert E. Lee, represent celebrations of racial violence and make them ordinary features of shared, public spaces. For Black and Indigenous people of color whose right it is to use these spaces; attend public schools named after segregationists; or, who live on streets named after white supremacists, these “memorials” are reminders of violent histories and their enduring structures. A study by the Southern Poverty Law Center identified 1,747 publicly sponsored symbols honoring Confederate leaders, soldiers or the Confederate States of America. These include monuments and statues, flags, holidays and other national observances; as well as the names of schools, highways, parks, bridges, counties, cities, lakes, dams, roads, military bases and other public works. (See this interactive map to learn more: [Confederate Monument Map](#)). These include: 780 monuments and 103 public schools and universities named for Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis or other Confederate icons; 80 counties and cities named after Confederates; 9 observed State holidays in Five States; and 10 U.S. Military bases.¹ In the 21st Century why is there so much resistance to revising the names of these places, removing the statues, and releasing the myth of the past? What, precisely, do these monuments ask us to remember or be reminded of; what are they preserving; and for whose benefit do they still stand?

In the film, C.J. documents the 2017 white supremacist gathering at the University of Virginia (UVA) that was organized after local community members in Charlottesville expressed to City Council that they considered the statue of Robert E. Lee to signify values that should be contemporarily repudiated (Mason, 2018). Charlottesville and UVA’s historical significance as a home in which white supremacist ideology would be celebrated and cultivated was an important organizing factor for white nationalists who identify with the legacy of Lost Cause mythology and many organizers were alumni of UVA (commonly referred to as “Jefferson’s University”). C.J. captures white nationalists chanting “Blood and Soil,” one of the Nazi Party’s populist slogans from the 1930’s as they marched through UVA’s campus holding flaming torches. As viewers, we must grapple with how - on the one hand white people defending Confederate monuments suggest it has nothing to do with histories of white supremacy; but on the other - how white nationalists who fight to defend symbolically significant spaces and statues repeat chants that echo historically genocidal ideas rooted in racial violence.

¹ This list, however, is specifically Confederate figures and does not include monuments or street names dedicated to slave owners, segregationists, and/or colonizers. Inclusion of these additional markers would increase the number of what is considered monuments in this study tremendously.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Whiteness, often, gains its power from its invisibility - in other words, how it has been covertly made into “normal” aspects of systems, structures; or, as we see in the *Neutral Ground*, statues as part of the infrastructure of American cities. It has also been framed as a force, a framework, and a set of ideas that is bound by relationships of power. Contemporary examples of white supremacy have been fought in public and intentionally made visible by white people supporting racist values and ideas like in Charlottesville in 2017, or on the U.S. Capitol grounds in January 2021. Even if everyday white Americans disagree with these violent actions, what are they called to do to actively resist it? How can white people understand their unique inheritances with regards to history? How can white people use this to inform contemporary responsibilities to resist and refuse systems and structures of white supremacy, and to fight for racial justice?

Douglass Blackmon (2008) wrote, “When white Americans frankly peel back the layers of our commingled pasts, we are all marked by it. Whether a company or an individual, we are marred either by our connections to the specific crimes and injuries of our fathers and their fathers. Or we are tainted by the failures of our fathers to fulfill our national credos when their courage was most needed. We are formed in molds twisted by the gifts we received at the expense of others. It is not our “fault.” But it is undeniably our inheritance.” Black activist and organizer, Kwame Ture made the distinction that expressions of racial violence and racism is a white peoples’ problem, but that it became a problem for People of Color when people harboring racist views are granted power to exercise violence with impunity. This is evidenced in the UDC’s propaganda campaign the power white Confederates held to script the Lost Cause and name it “history.” In Ture’s words, “Racism is not a question of attitude; it’s a question of power.” The questions *The Neutral Ground* invites us to grapple with are, ultimately, questions of power, historical inheritance, and responsibility. The questions this film leaves us with are urgent. As a nation, we are reminded of the need to grapple with our different histories, with the history of this country, especially if we collectively aspire to unravel and undo the contradictions that founded this country’s present.

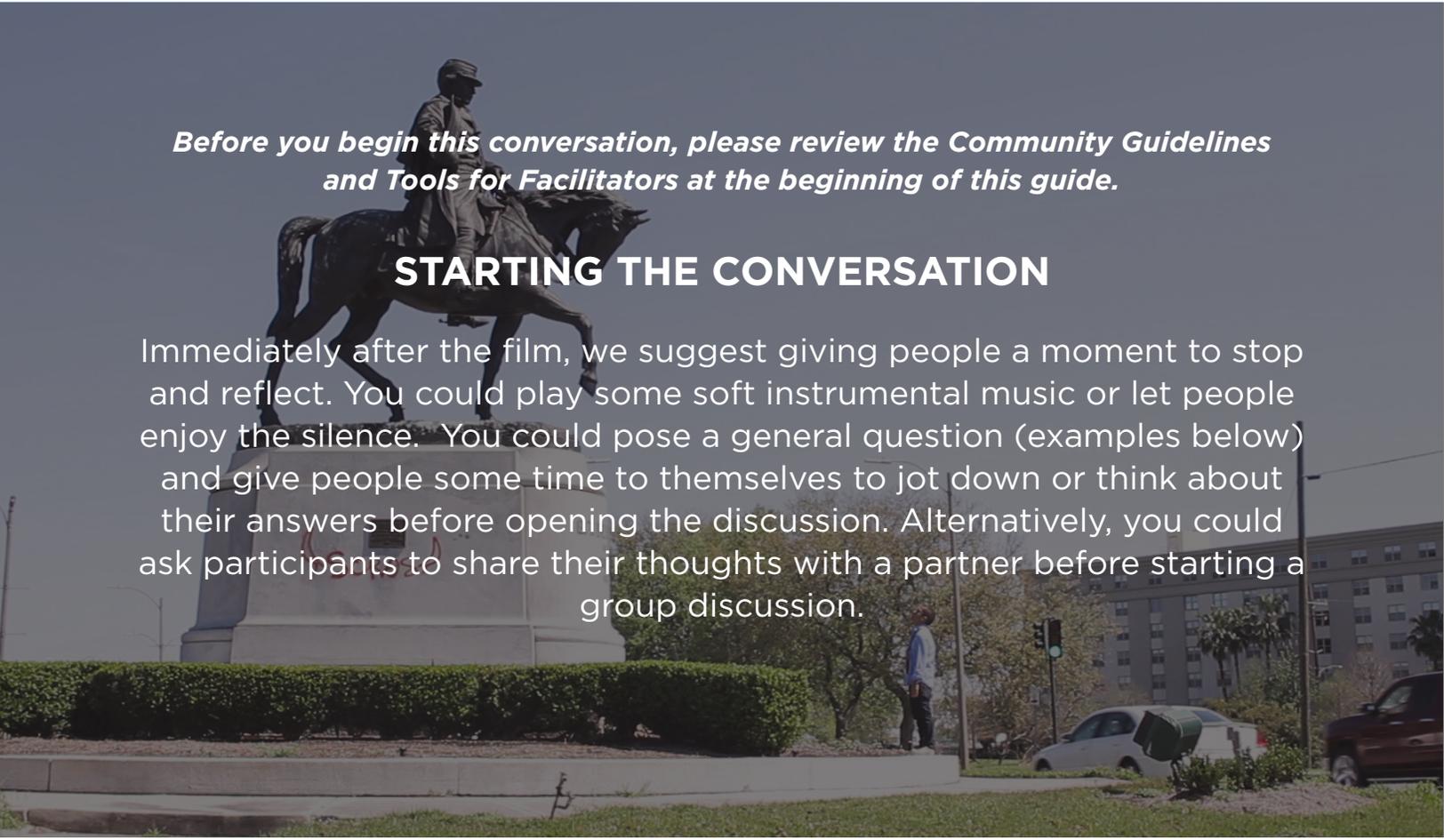
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Before you begin this conversation, please review the Community Guidelines and Tools for Facilitators at the beginning of this guide.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION



Immediately after the film, we suggest giving people a moment to stop and reflect. You could play some soft instrumental music or let people enjoy the silence. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What are your initial thoughts/feelings after watching the film?
- What part of the film did you identify with most? Why?
- Which aspect of the film caused feelings of estrangement/discomfort? Why?
- Did any moment in the film inspire you? If so, which part?
- Did anything surprise you while watching the film?
- What was the most challenging part of the film to watch?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What did you learn that you had not heard of before?
- Is there anything you're hoping to learn more about?
- In what ways, if any, does this film inspire you towards action?
- How does the film help you see systematic oppression more clearly? How did the film add to your previous understanding of systematic oppression?
- Historian, David Blight, wrote that "Memory is not history. Memory is passed down through generations, reflects ownership, and feelings of belonging."
 - In what ways did this film make you think differently about the relationship between history and memory? What new questions or ideas do you have with regards to the relationship between them and the power they hold?
 - In what ways can memory impact our capacity to face the truths of history?
- In the film, Thomas Taylor causes CJ to seriously ponder the grief of the Confederacy by asserting that monuments serve as headstones for the unknown and unburied Confederate soldiers. What is being spoken when the Lost Cause narrative asks people to understand the grief of the wives of Confederate soldiers while erasing the grief and terror that enslaved people had to endure?
 - In what ways is the historical grief of white Confederates *not* a valid justification for the erection (or continued presence) of these monuments?
 - How does the opposition to statue removal under the justification of "heritage," connect to white grief from the past?
 - How does the opposition to statue removal under the justification of "heritage" distract from the continued violence and harm these statues enact today?
 - In what ways is it historically and contemporarily *impossible* to separate this "heritage" from hate?
- In the film, C.J. refers to the Lost Cause as "the story that reunited a nation." That it was "A lie born in the South. Bronzed in the North." How does this make you think differently about the North's complicity in strengthening foundations of white supremacy and anti-Black racism?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STATUES, STATUTES AND SYSTEMS

- In what ways are racism, colonization, and white supremacy never neutral? Who would benefit by framing these realities as neutral?
- Take a moment to consider the statues and memorials in your hometown. What, upon critical reflection, are these artifacts asking you to remember? What histories are they connected to and from whose perspective is that history being memorialized?
- What are some things that Confederate monuments in public spaces communicate without words?
 - What are some ways the presence of these monuments continue to enact harm?
- James Baldwin wrote, “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.” In what ways does *The Neutral Ground* expose the truths of Baldwin’s statement?
 - How does the film force you to think differently about a “we” or “us” that you might imagine? How do you carry these histories differently than others?
- How does learning about the UDC’s educational propaganda campaign make you reflect, think differently about, or want to know more about, the way you were taught “history”?
- Why is establishing a more historically-accurate truth of history and oppression a crucial first step towards reconciliation and repair?
 - Why is it important to recognize and name those who were historically-responsible for violence in order to move towards a vision of equality?
 - What might reckoning with the past look like? How can we understand this reconciliation as an ethical and democratic necessity in America?
 - What would be some markers of success in a project of reconciliation:
 - in our economy?
 - in public spaces?
 - in healthcare?
 - in schools?
 - in community?
 - in policy?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does power inform the stories that we tell and in what ways does *The Neutral Ground* illuminate the way power has historically worked to shape narratives to benefit oppressors?
- Today there are bills in state legislatures to ban using [Critical Race Theory](#) as an *orientation* to how we teach history, and to ban specific materials like the [1619 Project](#) in schools. How does this legal campaign mirror the UDC propaganda project, and how do you think it does or doesn't protect white supremacy?
- What historical connections can you make between systems, structures, and power to what we see happening today?



DOCUMENTING THE PAST TO SHOW THE RECEIPTS OF INHERITANCE

- Why were the confederate reenactors so reticent to accept slavery as the cause of the Civil War if its clearly written in secession documents?
 - How does this scene make visible the power of emotion and sentimentality in regards to resisting the historical truths of slavery and the Civil War?
 - How does this scene underpin the importance of teaching critical media literacy skills (ex: Critical Race Theory) when engaging with texts?
- In which ways have states' rights been used to excuse or hide atrocities in local communities?
 - What are common comparisons that come to mind? How does language work to cover violent ideas?
- What is the irony in the reenactors blaming Harriet Beecher Stowe and "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as the source for misinformation about the institution of slavery and the causes of the Civil War?
 - What does this illuminate about the necessary power of education as a critical intervention towards truth and reconciliation?
- What do you admire about C.J.'s decision to engage with Butterbean and Dan at the Civil War reenactment? What lessons does C.J. teach us in this scene?
- What were the potential risks of C.J. engaging with white neo-Confederates who seemed bent on sticking to their comfortable version of history?
 - What other obstacles to dismantling white supremacy does this conversation suggest we, as a nation, have to confront and undo?
 - Imagine yourself in C.J.'s position in this scene. Would you have more, or less, to risk in this scenario? What, specifically, would make you more (or less) vulnerable in that moment? What does this teach you about the very real differences BIPOC and white people face when confronted with whites supremacists?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- How does this realization make you think differently about your individual role in confronting white supremacy and fighting for racial justice?
- How can one have a conversation about the Civil War that does not acknowledge slavery?
 - How does refusing to acknowledge slavery as the cause of the Civil War make recognition of contemporary historic and systemic injustice impossible?
 - In what ways did people in the film who refused to acknowledge slavery as the cause of the Civil War also refuse to acknowledge the way(s) they benefited (and continue to benefit) from historic and systemic racial injustice?
- When do you remember first learning about the experiences of native communities and in what ways were these narratives and experiences framed?
 - How is America's systematic oppression revealed through the exclusion of indigenous people in contemporary conversations about race and equity?
- How are structures of oppression revealed through attempts to minimize the severity of slavery and efforts to diminish its direct role in establishing America's economic systems?



WHITE RAGE THEN AND NOW: TERRORISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2021 white supremacist groups, and racially or ethnically-motivated terrorism, was determined by the United States government to be the greatest domestic terrorism threat facing the US.

- How do the scenes from Charlottesville in 2017 illuminate the ways ideas, sentiments, and justifications of white supremacy that founded “The Lost Cause” narrative are still being used today?
 - Where, specifically, did you witness these connections? Were they embedded in language, symbols, ideas, systems, etc?
- In what ways is there no validity to the former President’s assertion that there were “fine” people on both sides in Charlottesville?
 - What does this statement expose about the lasting impacts and force of Lost Cause mythology?
- How is the violence of colonization and white supremacy incomparable to resistance against these forms of violence?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What would it look like for white people and communities to take responsibility for the violence still perpetrated in the name of confederate monuments?
 - What might possibilities for accountability and responsibility-taking make possible?
 - What do you think holds white people back from acknowledging this inheritance and committing to more just futures?
- Are there any similarities between The White League referenced in the film and The Proud Boys (or any other neo-confederate/white supremacist groups local to your area)?
- How does CJ's identity as a Black/Filipino person invite us to think about intersections of identity and how they inform movements to build coalitions for racial justice? How does identity determine historical inheritance in dynamic, multiple, and more compelling ways that lend to multi-racial solidarity?
 - How can power be gathered through connections and awareness of multiple identity positions and the differences they determine?
- Black activist and scholar, Fred Moten writes, "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's [messed] up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's [messed] up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this [white supremacist violence] is killing you, too, however much more softly..." (2013).
 - In what ways are movements and struggles for racial justice beneficial to all of us? In what ways is your experience of freedom and safety bound to another person's experience of freedom and safety?
- How can communities, or local governments, engage in processes to repair this long history? Specifically, what must be done after Confederate Monuments have been removed?
 - What are some concrete steps that could be taken to make current conditions and structures more equitable for Black and Brown communities?
- In what ways are white supremacy, histories of colonization, and contemporary struggles for racial justice a very real concern for the entire nation, not just the Southeast?
 - What dangers exist in imagining yourself, your region, or community, as having progressed "beyond" these structures, systems, and histories?

CLOSING QUESTION/ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL)

“Proper remembrance, not reverence.” -Mitch Landrieu, former Mayor of New Orleans, in relation to Confederate monuments.

In the film, Mitch Landrieu talks about how he used to see Confederate monuments and not think much about them. However, when a friend of his asked him to consider how the monuments could make a person of color feel when they walked by them, he began to see the monuments differently. When Mitch was able to make a personal connection through his friend, he made the transition of being indifferent to being an advocate. The connection activity is a way to illustrate the importance of connection in our communities.

Connection Activity:

(Adapted from a nonviolence activity by New Way Revolution Nonviolence practitioners)

Step 1: Have a few volunteers that would be comfortable with physical contact come to the front of the room. Ask the volunteers to stand shoulder to shoulder and link their arms together. Talk about how the group is connected to one another through proximity.

Step 2: Gently pull one of the group members forward by the arm, while everyone still has their arms linked together. This will demonstrate the impact of being connected. Ask the people watching and participating what they observe after you pulled one person forward. Explain that when you pull one person, all the others move in the same direction as that person. Everyone is instantly affected by what that person being pulled by is affected by.

Step 3: Have the group unlink their arms. Gently pull one person forward. This will demonstrate that without connection, something could happen to someone near us, even our community, and we would not be affected. Ask the group about their observations after you pull one person forward.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Follow up questions:

How can this be a demonstration of what happens within our communities?
How do you see this demonstrated in the film? How about in your own communities?
What are ways we can “link arms” within our own communities? What might coalition-building do for our communities?

**

This activity is a visual example of the importance of being willing to connect with others, even with those of different points of views, in order to understand the impacts of what each person is affected by. In the film, CJ put himself in a situation to have conversations with people who believed in the principals of the Lost Cause when he participated in the Civil War reenactment. Although the other participants were willing to talk to CJ, they were not willing to connect with CJ by visiting a slavery museum to better understand the impacts of the narrative they held so strongly as truth.

Close the activity by reading an excerpt from the poem, “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman.

...And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.

We are striving to forge our union with purpose.

To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man.

And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES / TAKING ACTION



Research, learn about, and support Black and Indigenous led organizations leading the movement for racial justice.

Learn more about movements to take down Confederate symbols and signifiers in your local community and get involved!

Connect:

[M4BL - The Movement for Black Lives](#): Join the movement for Black lives to learn how to join a national coalition of others fighting against white supremacist, state-sanctioned violence

[Hatewatch](#): a blog from Southern Poverty Law Center that monitors and exposes the activities of the American radical right.

[Showing Up for Racial Justice](#): For white people committed to resisting white supremacy and building coalitions to enact change, join a local chapter and continue engaging.

[Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative](#): SPLC Initiative that enlists and trains volunteer lawyers to provide free legal representation to detained immigrants facing deportation proceedings in the Southeast.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES / TAKING ACTION**Read:**

[“Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities”](#) (2009). By Eve Tuck

[“Decolonization is not a Metaphor”](#) (2012). By: Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang

[“Before Dispossession, or Surviving it”](#) (2016). By: Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective

[“Decoding the Hate Symbols seen at the Capital Insurrection.”](#) (2021) By: Kristin Romey

Listen:[1619 Project](#)

An audio series on how slavery has transformed America, connecting past and present through the oldest form of storytelling. (Hosted by: Nikole Hannah-Jones)

[The Henceforward](#)

A podcast that considers the relationships between Indigenous peoples and Black people on Turtle Island.

[Sounds Like Hate](#)

A podcast from Southern Poverty Law Center that tells the stories of people and communities grappling with hate and seeking solutions. [Season one](#) takes a deep dive into the realities of hate in modern America: how it functions, how it spreads, who is affected and what people are doing about it. [Season two](#) examines the distorted history of the Confederacy some people accept as truth, and how the people we love the most could be guided toward violent extremist beliefs. (Executive Producer, Geraldine Moriba)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



AHMARIAH JACKSON

Ahmariah Jackson is the Griot, nestled somewhere between the raucous ideology of Gil Scott Heron and the subtle subversion of James Baldwin. Words are his sword and shield. He views education as a noble revolution and values the holistic growth of students over any standardized assessment. He re-invented the poetry club and dubbed it “The Griot Circle” where he fosters empowerment through expression. He is an emcee and a devotee of Hip Hop as culture, movement and music and folds all his passions into his classroom.



CORA DAVIS

Cora Davis is a former militant, angry protester turned reconciler. Her life has been transformed by the principles of nonviolence that are the foundation of how she lives and interacts with others. She teaches middle school students that their voices matter by fighting for her own and she has created an effective after school (and weekend and lunch hour and anytime) club for the “at risk” students otherwise falling through the cracks of the system. She believes a willingness to look at ourselves first is the key to bringing unity to the hurting world around her and is now convinced we cannot fight hate if it is in us, no matter how justified it is.

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