

**Discussion Guide for
The KUUMBA Players'
Production of**

PURLIE



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Brief History of the Jim Crow Era

Young people, especially, need to understand that racism comes in faces other than the white-sheeted Ku Klux Klan member and the police officer with attack dogs and fire hoses. Eliminating legal segregation was only one part of dismantling the continuing vestiges of institutionalized racism. This brief history will explain why the civil rights movement took longer to reach sharecropping communities such as Purlie's.

The modern Civil Rights Movement (1965 – 1968) describes a period in U.S. history when ordinary people and organizations mobilized to destroy the segregation (the “Jim Crow” laws) and second-class citizenship of African Americans, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and Indigenous Peoples encoded in laws, and enforced by the proliferation of violence at all levels of society and in every region of the country.

The civil rights movement can best be understood within the larger context of the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877), an attempt to reconstruct the U.S. economy and expand political democracy following the end of the Civil War in 1865. By 1865, over four million formerly enslaved people began transforming themselves into free laborers and equal citizens with no land, no money, and no laws to protect their rights. They worked extremely hard and successfully to create their own societies in a hostile environment. For a brief period, the federal government also helped them gain a basic education, an opportunity to work for pay, and voting rights. Yet, the process of amending the U.S. Constitution and providing federal resources to the freedmen angered many white women suffragists, southern landowners, white-dominated labor unions, and poor whites, often to the point of violence against African Americans and repressive state laws. In the meantime, the federal government continued its campaigns to appropriate Indian land, to deny citizenship to Asian immigrants, and to oppress Mexicans.

Reconstruction ended when federal troops abruptly left the South in 1877. By 1896, the white citizenry succeeded in enforcing domination over people of color, most notably through a U.S. Supreme Court decision – *Plessy v. Ferguson* – which encoded separate but equal public accommodations. This backlash to Reconstruction (often called the Jim Crow Era) made racism legal in every institution of society. As the character Gitlow states, mob and police violence were used legally, systematically and frequently – against people of color and white allies -- to enforce racism.

In the period between Jim Crow and the modern civil rights movement, houses of worship, schools and universities, civic and fraternal organizations, labor unions, cultural institutions, and businesses were established to sustain the people living in segregated communities and to develop the leadership of men, women and youth. It was much more difficult to organize people in sharecropping communities such as Purlie's because working conditions were very similar to slavery and violence was a legal way to reinforce segregation laws.

For example, the characters Missy, Idella, and the other women have witnessed the lynching of many of their men, usually on false charges and for actions far less bold than what Purlie is proposing. The church was often the only institution that Black people controlled, but only if they owned the building.

Gaining ownership of Big Bethel Church – by any means necessary – was the way to economic and political freedom for the men and women of Purlie’s community.

Glossary of terms

Bullwhip: a device to torture people and animals

Confederacy: the government formed by Southern states (1861-1865) to preserve the right of states to continue slavery

Jim Crow: a “nickname” for any law or behavior that reinforced racism

Lynching: killing people by mob violence, usually in graphic, public ways

Negras: another, more “polite”, form of the word “nigger”

Negro: what African Americans called themselves during the Jim Crow era

Poultice: a healing paste, usually made from medicinal herbs

Racism: In the U.S., *institutionalized racism* promotes the idea that: (1) there are separate races determined by skin color; (2) the “white race” (people with lighter colored skin) is superior; and (3) this supremacy must be reinforced (violently, if need be) in all the institutions that govern daily life, with the purpose of exploiting other “races” and preserving privilege for “whites.” Racial prejudice is an *attitude*; racism is a *behavior* that combines racial prejudice with institutional power.

Sharecropping: a system of agricultural labor where workers were paid according what they earned minus what they owed to the landowner. Due to forced illiteracy and dishonest bookkeeping, workers seldom got out of debt, were never paid for their labor, and seldom were free of back-breaking labor.

Skinning a cat: a metaphor for “getting what you want”

White supremacy: the belief that people with lighter skin deserve more than people with darker skin

Ways You Can Be an Ally Against Racism

- Name racism for what it is, rather than offering polite explanations for racial inequities and injustices.
- Defend people of color (African Americans, Latinos/as, Indigenous Peoples, Asian Americans; in the US and internationally) in their/our various strategies for eliminating racism (skinning the cat).
- Be silent and listen to people tell their own stories, without interrupting. Ask questions rather than make assumptions.
- Promote the leadership, voice, expertise, and power of people of color, even when it means the loss of unearned white privilege.

Discussion Questions

- How do whites and people of color perpetuate white supremacy in 2007?
- In what ways does the current economy support ongoing white supremacy?
- What are the similarities and differences between sharecropping and:
Undocumented workers? Farmworkers? Sweatshop workers? Military workers?
Domestic workers?
- Dissent is often difficult to exercise—especially in the face of racist violence—but it has always been part of the fabric of “race” in the United States. What are the ways that you can actively resist racism or dissent against white supremacy?
- What is the most important thing to teach children about racism and white supremacy?

Further Resources

Books:

Acuña, Rodolfo. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*. Longman, 2004.

Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

Louie, Steve and Glen Omatsu, eds. *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*. UCLA Press, 2001.

Menkart, Deborah, Murray, Alana D., View, Jenice L. eds., [*Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching*](#), Teaching for Change and Poverty and Race Research Action Council, 2004

Takaki, Ron. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Back Bay Books, 1994.

Williams, Juan. *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience*. Sterling Publishing Co., 2004.

Websites:

www.civilrightsteaching.org
www.teachingforchange.org

Video/DVDs:

Eyes on the Prize : Series I America’s Civil Rights Years 1954-1965: Documents the Movement from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the Voting Rights Act

Eyes on the Prize II: Series II America at the Racial Crossroads 1965-mid 1980s

At the River I Stand

Freedom Song

Standing on My Sister’s Shoulders

Incident at Oglala