

DISCUSSION GUIDE



How did three U.S. towns make African Americans disappear? Marco Williams, award-winning filmmaker of *TWO TOWNS OF JASPER*, visits some of the whitest counties in the country to confront the legacy of “banishment”—a wave of racial purging that tore through the South 100 years ago. Williams sits down with KKK leaders, white residents of these all white communities, as well as descendants of the banished alike, opening the wounds of history. Will he help these communities heal? Is reconciliation possible? Or reparations? Or both?

MY SOURCE

[ITVS]
COMMUNITY
CINEMA

NBPC

tw
tone
productions



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INDEPENDENTLENS

FROM THE FILMMAKER

Every filmmaker wishes for his or her work to speak for itself, to be self-explanatory, to convey the emotions latent in the material, but rare in fact is the occasion that I have not shown my film and I have not been asked questions. The most surprising question is why did I make the film? I think what this question seeks is to learn what is my personal connection to the material; what compelled me to spend two plus years of my life, to sit across from avowed racists, to watch black and white Americans struggle to with our racial and historical legacy, and a few to even attempt to reconcile this shameful past.

BANISHED is deeply personal. It is deeply personal on a couple of levels. I was chased out of Charlestown in Boston, MA by a mob of angry whites simply because I am black. While I was only an individual, the intention of this mob was to keep the neighborhood white, not unlike the racial cleansings that I investigate in BANISHED that happened in the early 1900's. But I made BANISHED because I wanted to make a film that explored prospective solutions to the racial divide. In the horrible history I saw an opportunity for Americans to consider forms of reparation as a means of reconciliation.

This wish poses a formidable challenge to viewers. What role will the viewer play in this experience, what will the viewer take from the film that they can apply in their own lives? It is always my fear that viewers will not see themselves in my films. When watching people do horrific things one doesn't want to identify with those acts, one much prefers to disassociate from any possible connection to those actions. But BANISHED is about us, about America. It is about our sense of justice and our sense of fairness. It is about the question of how to redress the past? It is about how to repair what is broken and ultimately how to reconcile our differences.

Traveling to three of at least thirteen communities in America where white citizens expelled their black neighbors and where these said communities remain virtually all white, I did discover prospects for redress, reconciliation, and reparation. I think that monuments, scholarships and even task forces are viable solutions, especially if they acknowledge the transgression. I think that some consideration on how to return or compensate African Americans for the land and property they lost is equally crucial. If African Americans were able to recover and subsequently return to the land that was lost and stolen from their ancestors the prospects for a more diverse and dynamic community would result.

-Marco Williams



THE FILM

BANISHED tells the story of three counties that forcefully expelled African American families from their towns one hundred years ago. More than an historical documentary, or even a portrait of families looking to rediscover their roots, this 90-minute film is an examination of the legacy of racism. As descendants and viewers discover, the population of all three communities is, to this day, virtually all white.

Filmmaker Marco Williams does not seek easy answers, nor does he shy away from difficult issues. Through conversations with current residents and the descendants of those who were driven out, he challenges viewers to contemplate questions of privilege, responsibility, denial, healing, reparations, race relations and identity.



Voices from *Banished*

Forsyth County, Georgia

Elliot Jaspin, Cox Newspapers
Dean Carter, march organizer
Rev. Elisabeth Omilami, activist
Brian Spears, civil rights attorney
Phil Bettis, Chair, Biracial Committee
Alfred Brophy, law professor

Descendants:

Carl Dickerson
Dorothy Pemberton
Lillie Nash
Charles Wiley
Leola Strickland Evans
Edith Lester
Phyllis Minley

Pierce City, Missouri

Murray Bishoff, managing editor,
Monett Times
Carol Hirsch, former mayor
Don Lakin, county coroner
Sue Grand, psychologist
Mark Peters, mayor

Descendants:

James Brown
Charles Brown

Harrison, Arkansas

Wayne Kelly, pastor
George Holcomb, reporter
Ken Ball, Fayetteville parent
Layne Wheeler, Chamber of Commerce
Terrica Morris & LaConya Polk,
scholarship recipients
Sherrilyn Ifill, law professor
Carolyn Cline, race relations task force
Thom Robb, KKK
Bob Scott, retiree
David Zimmerman, historian



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Forsyth County, Georgia – current population, approximately 151,000, over 95 percent white.

In 1912, whites violently expelled all people of African American descent (over 1,000 people, approximately 10 percent of the local population).

In January 1987, a civil rights march intended to help counter Forsyth County's image as racist was met with violent opposition. The next week, in response to this event, a much larger march took place, involving thousands of civil rights activists from across the country. An estimated 5,000 counter-demonstrators also showed up. This large demonstration cost Forsyth County approximately \$670,000 in police overtime, angering many local taxpayers who were unhappy at having to foot the bill for what they saw as outside agitators. The town subsequently levied huge parade permit fees to discourage future demonstrations, but that effort was disallowed by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Forsyth County, Georgia v. The Nationalist Movement*, 1992.

Pierce City, Missouri – current population, almost 1,400, over 96 percent white.

In 1901, white residents went on a 15-hour rampage with weapons stolen from a state militia arsenal, violently banishing approximately 300 African Americans. The violence was reputedly started in response to the murder of a 23-year-old white woman, but reporter Murray Bishoff also discovered evidence that some townspeople wanted to follow the lead of nearby Monett, which had expelled its African American population seven years earlier. To explain what had happened to the black population, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* actually described Pierce City as "Monettized."

The city has designated June 5 as a day of remembrance for the banishment, and the Pierce City Museum houses an exhibit on the topic (created by Murray Bishoff), but it refused James Brown's request to pay for the exhumation of his ancestor. In 2003, much of Pierce City was destroyed or damaged by a major tornado. The town is still in the process of rebuilding.

Harrison, Arkansas – current population, just over 12,000, approximately 97 percent white

According to historian James Loewen (*Sundown Towns*), "In late September of 1905, a white mob stormed the jail, carried several black prisoners outside the town, whipped them and ordered them to leave. The rioters then swept through Harrison's black neighborhood, tying men to trees and whipping them, burning several homes and warning all African Americans to leave that night. Most fled without any belongings. Three or four wealthy white families sheltered servants who stayed on, but in 1909, another mob tried to lynch a black prisoner. Fearing for their lives, most remaining African Americans left. Harrison remained a 'sundown town,' [i.e., a place that threatened, 'Nigger, don't let the sun go down on you here'] until at least 2002." As part of an effort to promote healing, the town has created a college scholarship for black students named after Aunt Vine, a prominent member of the original African American community. Ironically, though she was buried in Harrison, her grave is unmarked.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

General

- Describe a moment in the film that you found especially disturbing or especially inspiring. What was it about that moment that touched you?
- If you could talk with the family members of those who were banished, what would you say?
- How would you answer these questions posed by the filmmaker:
 - Whose story is the true story?
 - Who has a right to the land—the whites who live on it now or the blacks who abandoned it in terror in 1912?
 - The request to exhume the body of James Cobb seems like a simple request. Why do you think the community was so hostile?
 - The Klan is an easy target for blame. Are they really the cause of Harrison's negative image, or a symptom of it?
 - The town's efforts seem sincere, but is the scholarship or monument really enough?
- African Americans who would be eligible to receive reparations need to articulate what those reparations should look like and what reparations would mean to them.
 - Whites need to give something, not as a way of adequately compensating for the injury, but as a way of participating in the process, i.e., doing something, not just feeling something. Expression of sorrow or guilt are not enough.
- Imagine that one of the towns profiled in the film invited you to serve on a compensation task force. What would you recommend? Does a legal solution look different than what you would consider to be a just or moral solution and what are the implications of those differences?
- Law professor Alfred Brophy suggests that reparation “holds out the promise of reconstruction of the African American community, the reconstruction of the morality of the white community and the reconstruction of the entire American community.” Others, like Pierce City Mayor Mark Peters counter that money cannot “fix the hurt.” What are the reparations defined in the film? What do you feel constitute reparations? In your view, are reparations a good idea? Why or why not? What are the benefits and limitations of reparations to help communities heal? If reparations were ordered, who should be responsible for implementing them and why?

History

- In many instances, current town residents recall the history of banishment differently from the version reported by journalists or uncovered by descendants of those who were forced out. In your view, what accounts for the differences? Whose interests are served by each version of events? What is the cost of denying history and who pays that price? In your town, who records or retells the history? What are the effects of the version of history they tell?
- Prior to viewing the film, what, if anything, did you know about the history of banishment of African Americans? What is taught in your school district about these events?
- What do you notice about similarities in each of the three towns profiled? How would you describe the links between the history of the towns and their current demographics and actions?
- What did African American descendants lose as a result of banishment? What did communities who banished African Americans lose? What did the white community lose?
- The appointment of title attorney Phil Bettis to Forsyth County's Biracial Committee
- Pierce City's refusal to pay for the exhumation of James Cobb
- The confederate flag flying in front of official Harrison office buildings
- The creation of the Aunt Vine scholarship How do people interpret these symbols differently? What is the power of symbols to unite or divide communities? What are the powerful symbols in your community and what messages do they send?

Reparations & Healing

- Rev. Omilami asks, “Don't they owe us the land?” How would you answer her? Phil Bettis asks, “What if your grandfather grew up here? Do you owe reparations because he grew up here?” How would you answer him? Is it fair to hold people responsible for their ancestors' illegal actions? Is it fair for people to retain benefits from their ancestors' illegal actions? Journalist Elliot Jaspin asks, “How do we come to terms with this? What do we do?” How would you answer him?
- List the various things suggested or done by people in the film to encourage healing (e.g., placing historical markers, paying reparations, creating a scholarship, etc.). In your view, which are most effective and why? Which ones meet the steps of healing described by psychologist Sue Grand:
 - Uncovering the truth about what happened, especially when those who perpetrated or were privileged by the events help in the pursuit of the facts
- What did this film teach you about white privilege?
- What is your reaction to the use of the term “ethnic cleansing”? Why do you think the filmmaker used the term?
- At the end of the film, the filmmaker cites several instances in which victims of injustice have been paid reparations. In your view, what made these situations similar to and different from African Americans? What accounts for continuing resistance to reparations for slavery when efforts to gain reparations for other groups have succeeded?
- Civil rights attorney Brian Spears observes that the loss of land only happened “because it was allowed by the greater society.” Do you agree? If so, what responsibility do people other than those directly involved as descendants or property owners have to engage in the healing process? What might participation in that process look like?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

Investigate land ownership in your community or neighborhood. Prepare a public display (perhaps at your library, school, religious institution, Web page etc.) about the original owners or inhabitants and the ways in which their presence is reflected in the community today.

- Educate other community members about banishment in the U.S. and as a group, identify strategies for how your community can assist with reparations and healing.
- Identify the organizations in your community that focus on improving race relations, pursuing social justice or providing anti-bias education. Find out how you can help.
- Convene a study group on lynchings, banishments and other racially motivated violence in the U.S. and in your town, past and present. Use what you learn as context for a discussion about appropriate responses to contemporary issues, such as use of the “n” word.
- Brainstorm ways that towns or communities can take responsibility for their history. Compare your list with what your community does to acknowledge its history. Use the comparison to suggest actions that your community might take.

For additional outreach ideas, visit pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY & ACTION

To Start

<http://banishedthefilm.com/> - The official Web site of the film includes links to interviews with filmmaker Marco Williams.

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/twotownsofjasper/resources02.html> - The Web site for one of Marco Williams' previous films, *Two Towns of Jasper*, provides a variety of helpful resources and an excellent set of links related to race, racism, privilege, dialogue and healing.

Reparations

http://www.house.gov/conyers/news_reparations.htm - On this site, Representative John Conyers explains H.R. 40, a bill that calls for reparations. The site also provides links to the bill and related discussion.

Community Dialogue

Those looking to facilitate interracial community dialogue might want to seek training from organizations such as: Center for the Healing of Racism – <http://www.centerhealingracism.org>; National Conference for Community Justice – <http://www.nccj.org>; or National Coalition Building Institute – <http://www.ncbi.org>.

Anti-Bias Education

<http://www.tolerance.org> - The Teaching Tolerance project of the Southern Poverty Law Center provides basic information and ideas for anti-bias education strategies. Recommended for beginners. Those ready for more advanced work might contact Facing History and Ourselves, <http://www.facinghistory.org>.

BANISHED WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON February 19, 2008. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

BANISHED is a co-production of The Center for Investigative Reporting & Two Tone Productions and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), in association with the National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC). The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.itvs.org/outreach.