

Spotlight

“The Divide”

Overview

“The Divide” focuses on Siler City, North Carolina, a small town that is rapidly changing. According to the US Census Bureau, the town had a population of 4,808 in 1990. That year, about 70 percent of the town was white, 27.3 percent African American, and 3.1 percent Latino. By 2000, about 40 percent of the town’s 6,966 residents were Latino. Many were drawn to Siler City by jobs in chicken-processing plants, textile mills, and other factories. “The Divide” explores how the people of Siler City, both longtime residents and newcomers, have responded to the changes in the racial makeup of the community.

Curriculum Connections

“The Divide” focuses on “race,” membership, immigration, and change. It can be used in US history, sociology, and ethnic studies courses to explore the legacies of segregation and to examine the impact of immigration since the passage of the 1965 immigration act. In literature classes, the film can deepen discussions of novels and poetry that explore identity, race, and ethnicity. If the film cannot be shown in a single class period, it may be divided into three parts. Such a division will allow time for discussion and reflection at the beginning and the end of each class period.

Key Question: How does the arrival of immigrants to a community divided by race complicate notions of race, identity, and class in the United States?



Siler City Rally, 2000
Photographer: Sara Davis, Herald-Sun

Psychologist Deborah Tannen writes, “We all know we are unique individuals but we tend to see others as representatives of groups. It’s a natural tendency; since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn’t be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn’t predict a lot about them and feel that we know who or what they are.” Although it is “natural” to generalize, stereotypes are offensive. A *stereotype* is more than a judgment about an individual based on the characteristics of a group. Stereotyping reduces individuals to categories. In *House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros explores the way stereotypes shape our view of the world:

Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.

But we aren’t afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davy the Baby’s brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that’s Rosa’s Eddie V. and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he’s Fat Boy, though he’s not fat anymore nor a boy.

All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes.¹⁰

Cisneros refers to outsiders as “those who don’t know better.” What is she suggesting about the way ignorance shapes *their* perceptions of *us*? What does her story suggest about the way ignorance affects *our* views of *them*? *Our* behavior? How does knowledge affect the way *we* perceive ourselves? How does her short story relate to the way people in Siler City view one another? How does Cisneros suggest that the cycle she describes can be broken?



One way that people come to know one another is by listening to one another’s stories. What do we learn about the newcomers from their stories about how they came to live in Siler City? What do we learn about their experiences since their arrival? What do we learn about Siler City from the stories told by African American residents of the city? From the stories told by white residents of the city?



Individuals have an identity. So do communities. Create an identity chart for Siler City. (See Reading 1 in the PreView section.) What are the words or phrases that residents use to describe their town? In a second color add the labels that others might attach to Siler City. What part has race played in shaping Siler City’s identity? What other factors have shaped the town?

Some longtime residents of Siler City view newcomers as “aliens.” Others speak of their arrival as an “invasion.” Maria Palmer of the North Carolina School Board says of their responses, “People are seeing their racial mix change. Not just a different accent that they think, ‘Okay, we’ll take care of that in the next generation.’ They see this is going to permanently change the racial makeup of the state. And for some people that’s scary.” What is a “racial mix” and for whom in Siler City do changes in that mix seem particularly scary? Would the arrival of large numbers of Canadian immigrants be equally scary? How do your answers relate to the title of the film? What divides Siler City? How deep does the divide seem to be? What sustains it?



In response to the arrival of the newcomers, county officials like Rick Givens travel to Mexico on a “fact-finding mission.” What are the “facts” they hope to uncover? Why do you think they did not begin their mission by meeting with new residents to discuss problems, raise concerns, and seek mutually acceptable solutions?



LaShanda Brower says, “I think I became very race conscious when I got to the high school because things were so separate. They didn’t want to see diversity and change. They’re just so used to the way things were and change was not an answer.” What does she suggest is the answer? When did you become aware of race? What prompted your awareness?

Why do you think that tensions in the larger community are reflected in schools? To what extent do schools in every community mirror the larger society?



The film refers to several racist incidents in the schools. Adolfo Aguilar tells of teachers who made his and other Latino children feel unwelcome. Two African American students, LaShanda Brower and Chris Taylor, describe photographs in the school yearbook showing white students holding nooses as if they were preparing for a lynching. Rick Givens, the county commissioner, receives a tape recording of a one-sided conversation in which the principal of the high school calls a student a “nigger.” Each of these incidents sends a message. What is that message? Why do you think it is addressed to African American students as well as Latino students?



As a result of the furor over his racist remarks, the principal of the high school resigned. What message did community leaders send when they allowed him to quietly leave? How did African Americans in the community respond to that message? How does the incident help us understand why the film is called “The Divide”? Who benefits from the divide? Who maintains it? What role do the schools play in preserving it? How have the newcomers threatened the divide? How do groups like CRISIS try to bridge the divide? In what other ways might individuals and groups in the community bridge the divide?

Maria Palmer, a member of the North Carolina state school board, says of the new arrivals, “This is a permanent change. We’ve had articles in the newspapers saying the solution is just teach ‘em all English and teach ‘em how to act American.” If the solution is to teach them “how to act American,” what is the problem? What does it mean to “act American”? What does it mean to be an American? When does an immigrant become an American? Who gets to decide who is an American and who is not?



Journalist Ruben Martinez says of himself as a boy in California, “Through my first 16 years I did everything I could to become white from plucking a five-string banjo to buying Beach Boys’ albums.” Crystal Ocampo, a Siler City high-school student nominated for homecoming queen, tells an interviewer, “You say the term ‘American’ I think of the blonde, and the blue eyes, and the white skin. And, of course, I could never be American in the full sense because of my skin color and my background.” Where do you think they got the idea that to be an American they had to be white? A stereotype is often referred to as a script that someone else expects you to follow. How did stereotypes shape the way Martinez and Ocampo viewed themselves and others? How has each tried to defy those stereotypes? How has each tried to write the script for his or her own life?

Ralph Ellison once wrote that as an African American, he is invisible “simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed everything and anything except me.” The distorting mirrors are stereotypes. To what extent are Latinos “invisible” in Siler City? What does the film suggest about the importance of seeing one another without the distortions that render some of us invisible and turn others among us into perpetual foreigners?

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