

Overview

MATTERS OF RACE is a four-part documentary series that explores race, culture, and identity in the United States today. Each of the 60-minute programs focuses on a single story or set of stories that reveals how “matters of race” continue to shape and misshape American life. Each program challenges conventional thinking about difference. Each also raises important questions:

- What is race? How does it shape identity and inform relationships between self and other?
- How do notions of race shape a community? A nation?
- What is the relationship between race and culture?
- What is the relationship between race and power?
- How are long-held notions of difference based on race changing today? How are those changes redefining what it means to be an American?
- What meaning, if any, will race have for future generations?

ROJA Productions, under the leadership of executive producer Orlando Bagwell, has brought together a diverse group of filmmakers to create documentaries that address such questions. Each program focuses on one or more communities in which racial attitudes and beliefs are being challenged. These stories reveal how the past informs the present and shapes the way we imagine the future. Author Jane Lazarre says of such stories, “By telling one’s own story honestly and deeply and with all of the contradictions included, you begin to tell the story of a culture, and even many cultures within a nation.”

Program 1: The Divide Until the 1990s, Siler City, North Carolina, was a small town about evenly divided between black and white residents. Today, about 40 percent of Siler City’s population is Latino. Many are recent arrivals from Mexico and some have entered the nation illegally. The changes that are taking place in Siler City mirror those in other parts of the nation. Throughout the documentary, authors Eric Liu and Ruben Martinez reflect on the meanings many Americans attach to race and discuss their personal experiences with both race and racism.

Program 2: Race Is/Race Ain’t The second program chronicles the impact of race on the King-Drew County Medical Center in South Central Los Angeles. It explores how race can be divisive even in an institution that considers diversity necessary and desirable. The personal reflections of authors John Edgar Wideman, Jane Lazarre, Luis Rodriguez, and Angela Oh underscore key ideas and deepen understanding of the ways a diverse hospital staff responds to race and charges of racism.

Program 3: We’re Still Here The third documentary is a study of two communities that are struggling to maintain their cultural identity—Lakota families on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and Native Hawaiians. Each provides insights into the legacies of race and the power of culture and tradition to unite a people.

Program 4: Tomorrow’s America The fourth program consists of three 20-minute documentaries produced and directed by young filmmakers. Each examines race and its meanings through the eyes of a new generation.

EveryOther uses satire to highlight the issues in the debate over racial classifications on the 2000 census. The film raises the question of what it means to define oneself as a person of “mixed races.”

Who I Became is the story of a young Cambodian American who struggles to find his way in American society.

I Belong to This considers what it means to be both Navajo and American as young parents examine what aspects of their heritage they would like to pass on to their children.

The Study Guide

This study guide is designed to help teachers use MATTERS OF RACE in the classroom by providing activities, information, and questions that prompt discussion and reflection. The guide is divided into three parts: **PreView**, **Spotlight**, and **Reflections**.

PreView prepares students for the series by raising questions about such key concepts as race, identity, culture, and history. It contains three short readings. Each is followed by “Connections,” a set of questions and activities. Connections encourage critical thinking and deepen understanding of key concepts. They also help students link abstract ideas to their lives today.

Spotlight provides suggestions for using the six documentaries in the classroom. This section of the guide contains a summary of each film, curriculum connections, a central question, and activities that explore that question from various vantage points. The structure allows teachers to use the various programs in a variety of courses and adapt them to particular courses of study. In the **Reflections** section, questions and activities encourage students to evaluate what they learned from the series as a whole and consider how they might apply their insights and discoveries to their own communities.