

Discussion Guide:

“John Brown’s Body at San Quentin Prison” A Film by Joe De Francesco

Introduction:

“John Brown’s Body in San Quentin Prison” is in retrospect the unlikely of projects. To quote principals in the documentary, this was a “strange” text brought to San Quentin by a director looking for “free actors,” dramatized behind bars by a group of “murderers.” But despite - or because of - its unusual beginnings, the work that resulted in this documentary is not simply a moving narrative, but a potentially rich experience that can open for the audience inquiries that reach deep into the American story, past and present.

Director Joe DeFrancesco reflects early in the film: *“If you talk about American history, you are talking about race, and John Brown’s Body is American history writ large.”* Much of this discussion guide focuses on race and issues directly related to race. The guide can be used to engage viewers around critical contemporary debates over the impact of the prison system, the relevance of Biblical narratives in shaping understandings of justice, the contemporary legacy of slavery, and the deep and rich layers of American history embedded in this epic poem.

The guide can be used as a curriculum initiated by a screening of the film, incorporating other resources along the way, or it can be a “menu” of choices useful for facilitating a discussion targeted to your particular audience or classroom. The contents index will help discussion leaders and educators navigate the available resources and choose what they find most useful, most provocative or most relevant for their purposes. A series of “Background Briefs” provide context - in most cases relating directly to a particular discussion exercise. These can be used as a discussion leader’s resource, handouts to your group or general background for viewers.

Most of the exercises and suggested questions can be used as catalysts for group discussion, adapted to research projects and essay assignment, or even to frame debates. Choose subjects, exercises and questions that best match the group’s interests, time frame and resources. We’ve also included notes on a successful community screening that used the film to raise awareness of critical current issues of mass incarceration and re-entry for formerly incarcerated persons.

Contents

Background Brief: Steven Vincent Benet & “John Brown’s Body”	3
Background Brief: Slavery	5
Background Brief: John Brown, the Abolitionists & Harper’s Ferry	7
Background Brief: John Brown’s Song, Julia Ward Howe & “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”	10
Background Brief: Abraham Lincoln	12
Background Brief: The Civil War	14
Background Brief: The Legacy of Slavery	16
Background Brief: Mass Incarceration - “New Jim Crow”	21
Background Brief: San Quentin Prison	25
Discussion Exercises: John Brown and Harper’s Ferry	26
Discussion Exercises: Abraham Lincoln	27
Discussion Exercises: The Failure of Reconstruction, the Rise of Jim Crow and the Legacy of Slavery	28
Discussion Exercises: Larry Miller, the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power	29
Discussion Exercises: Mass Incarceration - The New Jim Crow?	32
Discussion Exercises: “John Brown’s Body in San Quentin Prison” - Challenges for Faith Communities	34
Discussion Exercises: The Prison Experience - Walk in their Shoes	36
Discussion Exercises: Redemption	37
Discussion Exercises: Art Behind Bars	37
Discussion Exercises: John Brown’s Song - Music & Social Protest	38
Discussion Exercises: “Fat Aunt Bess” - Graciousness Founded on Hopeless Wrong	39
Discussion Exercises: “Murderers!”	39
Discussion Exercises: The “N-Word”	39
Engagement Resource: Volunteer Programs in Prison	41

Background Brief: Steven Vincent Benet, author of “John Brown’s Body”



From The Poetry Foundation's biography of Steven Vincent Benet:

Between the years 1928 and 1943, Stephen Vincent Benét was one of the best-known living American poets, more widely read than Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, or Wallace Stevens and as well respected in book review columns. He was a rarity among twentieth-century authors, a poet whose books sold in the tens of thousands and who was honored in the poetry workshops and lecture halls of prestigious universities...

He won his first poetry prize from St. Nicholas Magazine at thirteen, sold his first poem to The New Republic two months before his seventeenth birthday, and had his first volume of poetry, Five Men and Pompey, published in winter 1915. (He entered Yale at the age of seventeen)...and quickly became a major contributor to The Yale Literary Magazine...

In 1925, he approached the Guggenheim Foundation with a proposal for a long historical poem on the Civil War, requesting a grant of \$2,500 to support himself while he researched and wrote it. The foundation gave him his grant, and he set out for Paris, where he and his family could live more cheaply while he worked on the poem ..

Supported by his fellowship and the fees for a few magazine short stories, Benét actually completed his 15,000-line panorama of the Civil War in less than two years, a monumental outpouring of sustained effort that left him exhausted for months afterward. Measured by almost any standard, the result was worth the investment. “John Brown's Body” (1928) was the magnum opus that elevated Benét's status from that of a promising young poet-storyteller to that of a national hero and a prodigy of popular success unknown among American poets.... In its first two years, the poem sold more than 130,000 copies. It has since gone through dozens of printings...

Before anything else, “John Brown's Body” is a history of the Civil War - in some respects, (renowned Civil War historian) Bruce Catton has said, the best single book ever written on the subject...

The poem "begins shortly before John Brown's raid upon Harper's Ferry," Benét noted. Its action is continuous, ending "just after the close of the war and Lincoln's assassination."

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/stephen-vincent-benaet>

Novelist John J. Miller, reflected on the epic nature of Benet's poem in his WSJ essay, "John Brown's Body' Exhumed":

"John Brown's Body" runs almost 15,000 lines, making it a little shorter than "The Iliad" and a little longer than "The Odyssey." Because of its length and grand subject matter - the Civil War, from its causes to its conclusion - the poem is often dubbed an "epic." Benét resisted this label. "I do not particularly like the word," he wrote. "It instantly suggests a portentousness and a presumption which I do not wish to claim."

Still, the poem itself all but begs for this tag. It begins with the epic-like invocation of an "American muse, whose strong and diverse heart / So many men have tried to understand." Then it covers the major episodes and personalities of the war and finishes with a metaphorical reconciliation between North and South. Benét hardly could have chosen a more ambitious topic to put to verse.

The poem came out to immediate popular acclaim...it went on to win a Pulitzer Prize. For a while, Benét was America's most famous poet—and very possibly its most famous writer.

Wall St. Journal Oct. 15, 2009

A dramatic version of "John Brown's Body" was performed on Broadway in 1953 as a staged reading, directed by Charles Laughton and starring Tyrone Power, Judith Anderson, and Raymond Massey. The performance included a choir that sang Walter Schumann's compositions for the production, as well as providing occasional sound effects and spoken responses in the manner of a Greek chorus. In 2015 the Laughton recording of the performance was inducted into the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry for the recording's "cultural, artistic and/or historical significance to American society and the nation's audio legacy".

Joe DeFrancesco's documentary, "John Brown's Body at San Quentin Prison," brings Benet's poem into a dramatic setting that gives his themes a very contemporary resonance. As for the text itself, Steven Vincent Benet describing his craft and intent as a poet could be speaking to the hip-hop generation:

Most of the basic rhythms of poetry are very old ones—rhythms hammered out...to tell a story or convey an idea more intensely, more swiftly and memorably... poetry itself is not restricted to any special class, to any special section of life. It is open to any reader who likes the sound and swing of rhythm, the color and fire of words.

The complete online text of Steven Vincent Benet's "John Brown's Body" is available at the link below:

<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0700461.txt>

Background Brief: Slavery

Much of Atlantic civilization in the nineteenth century was built on the back of the enslaved field hand...The rapid rise of “the Cotton Kingdom” wrought a momentous transformation. Cotton became a driving force in expanding and transforming the economy not only of the South but of the United States as whole - indeed of the world. While the growing of cotton came to dominate economic life in the Lower South, the manufacture of cotton textiles was fueling the industrial revolution on both sides of the Atlantic.

- Historian David Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought? (2007)



The labor of enslaved people underwrote 19th-century capitalism...four million people worth at least \$3 billion in 1860, which was more than all the capital invested in railroads and factories in the United States combined...The United States, as W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, was “built upon a groan.”

- Walter Johnson, professor of history and African & African-American Studies at Harvard University, “King Cotton’s Long Shadow,” New York Times, 3/30/13.

In the history of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (1525-1866), 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World. 10.7 million survived the brutal Atlantic Middle Passage, to be sold as slaves in North America, the Caribbean and South America.

In the first three and a quarter centuries of European activity in the Americas, 1492 - 1820, five times as many Africans went - forcibly - to the New World as did Europeans.

Children typically comprised a quarter or more of a slave ship’s human cargo.

Slave marriages and family ties were not recognized by American law. Any owner was free to sell husbands from wives, parents from children, and brothers from sisters.

Slaves constructed more than 9,500 miles of railroad track by 1860, a third of the nation’s total and more than the mileage of Britain, France, and Germany.

Importing slaves into the United States was banned by Congress in 1808, yet by 1860, the nation’s black population had grown in 52 years from less than 500 thousand to 4.4 million, of whom 3.9 million were slaves. (This was primarily the result of births.)

The Underground Railroad was a secretive, well-organized effort by black and white abolitionists between 1816 and 1865 to help fugitive slaves escape to freedom - often to Canada. Quakers, Baptists, Methodists and other religious groups helped operate the safe houses and way-stations of the Underground Railroad.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 - part of the Compromise of 1850 admitting California to the Union as a free state - declared that all fugitive slaves anywhere in the US must be arrested and returned to their masters. This was affirmed by the US Supreme Court in the infamous Dred Scott Decision of 1857, establishing the rights of slaveowners in every state of the Union.

During the Civil War, 140,500 freed slaves and 38,500 free Northern blacks served in the Union Army.

References: H.L.Gates, "Slavery by the Numbers," PBS.org
Hugh Thomas, [The Slave Trade](#)
David Eltis, "Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade" -
<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/>
Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Background Brief: John Brown, the Abolitionists & the Impact of Harper's Ferry

John Brown had never shared the commitment of most abolitionists to nonviolence...Brown's God was the Jehovah who drowned Pharaoh's mercenaries in the Red Sea; his Jesus was the angry man who drove money-changers from the Temple. *"Without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin"* was his favorite New Testament passage (Hebrews 9:22). Bondage was *"a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of masters against slaves"*... Victory over these *"thieves and murderers"* could only be won by a revolution. *"Talk! Talk! Talk!"* exclaimed Brown in disgust after attending a meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. *"That will never free the slaves. What is needed is action-action."*

- James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988)



As the historian James McPherson notes, the abolitionist movement was mostly comprised of people whose religious ethic rejected violence. They mostly agitated against slavery through speeches and the abolitionist press, and acted to assist fugitive slaves reach safety in Canada or free states by a secret network known as the Underground Railroad. But violent conflicts over the issue of slavery broke out in the 1850s in border regions, particularly Kansas and Missouri. In eastern Kansas, where John Brown's family had settled, the conflicts took on the character of open warfare directed at anti-slavery settlers by "border ruffians." Elections were characterized by voter fraud and armed intimidation.

Douglas Linder of the University of Missouri at Kansas City offers these insights into how the border wars in "Bloody Kansas" radicalized John Brown:

Missourian General B. F. Stringfellow urged his fellow pro-slavery supporters, *"To those who have qualms about violating laws, I say the time has come when such impositions must be disregarded...I advise you, one and all, to enter every election district in Kansas...and vote at the point of the bowie-knife and revolver."* The ruffians, having organized a bogus legislature, pushed through legislation imposing years in prison for publishing or even possessing an abolitionist publication and promising the death penalty for anyone urging slaves to revolt. Killings occurred with distressing frequency...

Events of the first half of 1856 radicalized Brown and pointed him toward the incident that changed the terms of the national debate over slavery and remains

controversial to this day: the slaughter of pro-slavery settlers near Pottawatomie, Kansas on May 24, 1856...In April, Brown's outspoken attacks on the pro-slavery legislature led a pro-slavery judge to issue warrants for the arrest of him and his sons. On May 21, 751 border ruffians and southerners, waving banners proclaiming the supremacy of the white race, swept down on the anti-slavery town of Lawrence, ransacking the presses of two anti-slavery presses and burning and looting homes and businesses. Following news of the fall of Lawrence, a friend described Brown as "wild and frenzied."

The next day, May 22, South Carolina Senator Preston Brooks took his gold-topped cane and, on the floor of the U. S. Senate, clubbed senseless Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner after he delivered an abolitionist speech, "The Crime Against Kansas." When Brown received word of the caning in Washington, according to his son Jason, *"it seemed to be the finishing, decisive touch."* Brown told his supporters, *"I am entirely tired of hearing that word 'caution.' It is nothing but the word of cowardice."*...

Brown and six others set out...on May 23 with rifles, revolvers, and swords heading toward proslavery territory. Around ten o'clock the following night Brown's men, announcing they were from the Northern Army, broke into the home of pro-slavery activist James Doyle. Doyle and his two older sons were led into the woods near the cabin and hacked to death. The group then headed to the cabin of Allen Wilkinson, a pro-slavery district attorney. Wilkinson met the same end as the Doyles. A short time later, the fifth and final victim, William Sherman, was taken and killed. Brown directed the killings; he did not, it seems, participate in them. Afterward, he remained unapologetic. *"God is my judge,"* he said. *"It was absolutely necessary as a measure of self-defense, and for the defense of others."* Pottawatomie changed the way southerners viewed northern abolitionists. No longer did they see them all as toothless pushovers--they began to see them as radical and potentially dangerous.

Douglas Linder, "The Trial of John Brown,"

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownaccount.html>

Brown's radicalism culminated in the doomed 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry - intended to spark a slave uprising and which Benet uses to frame "John Brown's Body."

Historian Steven Mintz of Columbia University describes the impact of Brown's capture, trial and public execution on the abolitionist movement:

Had Brown died in the attack, he might well have been dismissed as an incompetent fanatic.

At first, Brown was widely denounced in the North as a murderer, criminal, and madman, leading conservative unionists to feel confident that his actions would unite the nation against extremists, South and North. But during the forty-five days between his capture and execution, he was transformed, in the eyes of thousands of northerners, from a brutal terrorist into a prophet and avenging angel...

Brown himself played a crucial role in reshaping his public image. His calm demeanor and fierce commitment to the anti-slavery cause persuaded many that he was a Christ-like martyr, not a murderer or traitor. He was helped by abolitionists (who believed that his execution would do more for the anti-slavery cause than his acquittal or rescue), editorialists, eulogists, and speechmakers, as well as members of the clergy like the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, and poets and writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Even Abraham Lincoln, who condemned Brown for committing “violence, bloodshed, and treason,” also applauded the old man’s motives and lauded his “great courage” and “rare unselfishness.” ...

- “John Brown: Villain or Hero,” Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/failure-compromise/essays/john-brown-villain-or-hero>

William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the abolitionist newspaper, “The Liberator,” and one of the best known of the agitators against slavery who advocated nonviolence, delivered a speech two weeks after Brown’s hanging that contained these lines:

I not only desire, but have labored unremittingly to effect the peaceful abolition of slavery, by an appeal to the reason and conscience of the slaveholder; yet, as a peace man—an “ultra” peace man—I am prepared to say, “Success to every slave insurrection at the South, and in every slave country”... Whenever there is a contest between the oppressed and the oppressor...God knows that my heart must be with the oppressed, and always against the oppressor. Therefore, whenever commenced, I cannot but wish success to all slave insurrections... Rather than see men wearing their chains in a cowardly and servile spirit, I would, as an advocate of peace, much rather see them breaking the head of the tyrant with their chains.

From “John Brown’s Day of Reckoning,” Fergus Bordewich, Smithsonian Magazine:

The tide of anger that flowed from Harpers Ferry traumatized Americans of all persuasions, terrorizing Southerners with the fear of massive slave rebellions, and radicalizing countless Northerners, who had hoped that violent confrontation over slavery could be indefinitely postponed. Before Harpers Ferry, leading politicians believed that the widening division between North and South would eventually yield to compromise. After it, the chasm appeared unbridgeable. Harpers Ferry splintered the Democratic Party, scrambled the leadership of the Republicans and produced the conditions that enabled Republican Abraham Lincoln to defeat two Democrats and a third-party candidate in the presidential election of 1860.

Read the complete essay here:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/john-browns-day-of-reckoning-139165084/#O9F7qfObWKORG5VB.99>

For further reading, W.E.B. DuBois’ complete 1909 biography, John Brown, is available online: <https://archive.org/details/johnbrown00dubo>

Background Brief: John Brown's song, Julia Ward Howe & The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

In the spring of 1861 the Boston Light Infantry was sent to Fort Warren in Boston harbor to drill. A quartette was formed among the soldiers to sing patriotic songs and for them was contrived the verses, "*John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, His soul is marching on,*" etc.



This was set to the music of an old camp meeting tune — possibly of Negro origin—called, "Say, Brother, Will You Meet Us?" The regiment learned it and first sang it publicly when it came up from Fort Warren and marched past the scene where Crispus Attucks fell. Gilmore's Band learned and played it and thus "the song of John Brown was started on its eternal way!"

- From W.E.B. Dubois' John Brown (1909)

"How Julia Ward Howe wrote 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic...'"

- Excerpts from Michael Ruane's essay in The Washington Post (Nov. 18, 2011)

Julia Ward Howe (whose husband had funded the militant abolitionist John Brown) remembered years later that she had awakened around dawn in her room in Willard's Hotel with the lyrics (to John Brown's song) floating in her head. It was November 1861, and she was on her first trip to wartime Washington, with her husband and her minister.

The day before, she and thousands of others had attended a review of Union troops at Baileys Crossroads. In the traffic jam on the way back to town, she had joined in singing the new soldiers' song, "John Brown's Body."

"John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave. His soul is marching on..."

Her minister, James Freeman Clarke, suggested that Howe, an accomplished poet, write better lyrics...in the dim morning light of her hotel room, new words began to form.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." ...

(T)he intense, apocalyptic "poem" that came to her that morning in Washington has outlived...its author...

On June 8, 1968, as the 21-car funeral train bearing the body of assassinated U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy from New York to Washington crept through Baltimore, a lone mourner in the crowd began slowly singing, *“Mine eyes have seen the glory...”*

Others in the throng of stricken bystanders picked up the lyrics and the melody: *“Glory, glory, hallelujah. Glory, glory, hallelujah.”*

Soon, as millions watched on television, thousands of people lining the tracks were singing Julia Ward Howe’s century-old lyrics — somehow still fitting, and comforting, as an American song of grief....

It was sung at the funeral of Winston Churchill in 1965 and at the Washington National Cathedral after the terrorist attacks of 2001.

And Martin Luther King Jr.’s last public address — his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech the night before his assassination — ended with *“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”*

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/how-julia-ward-howe-wrote-battle-hymn-of-the-republic--despite-her-husband/2011/11/15/gIOAnORaYN_story.html

Background Brief: Abraham Lincoln

Benet's Abraham Lincoln in "John Brown's Body":

*They come to me and talk about God's will
In righteous deputations and platoons,
Day after day, laymen and ministers.
They write me Prayers From Twenty Million Souls
Defining me God's will and Horace Greeley's.
God's will is General This and Senator That,
God's will is those poor colored fellows' will,
It is the will of the Chicago churches,
It is this man's and his worst enemy's.
But all of them are sure they know God's will.
I am the only man who does not know it...*



*If God reads
The hearts of men as clearly as He must
To be Himself, then He can read in mine
And has, for twenty years, the old, scarred wish
That the last slave should be forever free
Here, in this country.
I do not go back
From that scarred wish and have not.
But I put
The Union, first and last, before the slave.
If freeing slaves will bring the Union back
Then I will free them; if by freeing some
And leaving some enslaved I help my cause,
I will do that - but should such freedom mean
The wreckage of the Union that I serve
I would not free a slave.
O Will of God...*

Historical Background:

Horace Greeley was the most prominent and powerful newspaper publisher of the day. He was fervently anti-slavery and had helped form the Republican Party. As editor of The New York Tribune he directed a pointed editorial at President Lincoln entitled "The Prayer of Twenty Millions", criticizing failure to act decisively to abolish slavery as part of the Union cause.

The key words of Lincoln's putting saving the Union over ending slavery in "John Brown's Body" are taken directly from the letter Lincoln wrote in response to Greeley. Lincoln sent the letter with a draft of The Emancipation Proclamation already on his desk. The question remains, was Lincoln's rhetoric and delayed action calculated as a complex strategy by a master politician - but carefully presented as the plain-spoken reflections of a "prairie lawyer" who had risen to the Presidency?

The actual timing of emancipation is generally seen by historians as a measure to advantage the North militarily when the Confederate armies were showing strength. The following excerpt from an essay by historian James McPherson considers Lincoln's intentions in context of his response to the Greeley editorial:

The military-necessity argument took on added urgency in the summer of 1862 as Confederate counteroffensives in Virginia and Tennessee reversed earlier Union gains. Slaves constituted the majority of the Confederacy's labor force. They sustained the South's war economy and the logistics of Confederate armies. A strike against slavery would be a blow against the Confederacy's ability to wage war.

Such a strike would have to be justified politically in the North not on abolitionist but on military grounds. The cause of the Union united the North; in 1862 the issue of emancipation still deeply divided it. In August 1862 the influential New York Tribune published a signed editorial by Horace Greeley urging Lincoln to proclaim emancipation. The president had already decided to issue an emancipation proclamation but was waiting for a propitious moment to announce it.

Greeley's editorial gave him an opportunity to respond with (what has been described as) "a masterpiece of indirect revelation."

"My paramount object" in this war "is to save the Union," wrote Lincoln in a public letter to Greeley, "and is not either to save or destroy slavery." If "I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Here was something for both radicals and conservatives—another hint that emancipation might be coming, but an assertion that if so, it would happen only because it was necessary to save the Union.

The complete McPherson essay is online:

<http://www.salon.com/2015/03/28/>

[lincolns_civil_war_brilliance_the_real_story_of_the_political_savvy_that_helped_end_slavery](http://www.salon.com/2015/03/28/lincolns_civil_war_brilliance_the_real_story_of_the_political_savvy_that_helped_end_slavery)

Background Brief - The Civil War

The Civil War is the central event in America's historical consciousness. While the Revolution of 1776-1783 created the United States, the Civil War of 1861-1865 determined what kind of nation it would be...whether this nation, born of a declaration that all men were created with an equal right to liberty, would continue to exist as the largest slaveholding country in the world.

- Historian James McPherson *



In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected President on a platform opposing expansion of slavery into U.S. territories. Before the new President was even inaugurated in March of 1861, seven southern slave states with cotton-based economies broke from the United States to form the Confederacy, followed by four more for a total population of nine million, including nearly four million slaves. The remaining Union would comprise twenty states and a population of over twenty million.

The reasons for secession were outlined clearly in the slave-holding states' declarations of secession. Mississippi's "Declaration of Cause" stated:

Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery-- the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth... These products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization... [Abolitionism] advocates negro equality, socially and politically, and promotes insurrection and incendiarism in our midst. It has enlisted its press, its pulpit and its schools against us, until the whole popular mind of the North is excited and inflamed with prejudice.

Open warfare began on April 12, 1861, when Confederate forces fired upon Fort Sumter, a key fort held by Union troops in South Carolina, which had been the first state to secede.

According to historian C. Vann Woodward, American lives lost in the Civil War exceed the total of those lost in all other wars the country has fought added together...More than three million men fought in the war. More than 620,000 - two percent of the total population - lost their lives.

African Americans constituted less than one percent of the northern population, yet by the war's end made up ten percent of the Union Army. A total of 180,000 black men, more than 85% of those eligible, enlisted.

-July 4, 1861 - Lincoln, in a speech to Congress, states the war is... "*a People's contest...a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men...*" Congress authorizes the call for an army of 500,000 men.

-September 17, 1862 - The bloodiest day in U.S. military history as Gen. Robert E. Lee and his Confederate Army of 50,000 are stopped in their push North at Antietam in Maryland by a force of 90,000 Union soldiers. By nightfall 26,000 men are dead, wounded, or missing. Lee withdraws to Virginia.

-January 1, 1863 - President Lincoln issues the final Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in territories held by Confederates and emphasizes the enlisting of black soldiers in the Union Army. The war to preserve the Union now becomes a revolutionary struggle for the abolition of slavery. January 31, 1863, Congress passes the 13th amendment abolishing slavery, to be ratified by the states.

-March 3, 1863 - The U.S. Congress enacts a draft, affecting male citizens aged 20 to 45, but also exempts those who pay \$300 or provide a substitute. "The blood of a poor man is as precious as that of the wealthy," poor Northerners complain. That summer anti-draft riots break out in New York City, including arson and the murder of blacks by poor immigrant whites. At least 120 persons, including children, are killed. Union soldiers returned from the battlefield are called in to restore order.

-July 1-3, 1863 - The tide of war turns against the Confederacy, as their armies are defeated at the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. The following November, President Lincoln was invited to offer a "few appropriate remarks" at the opening of a Union cemetery at Gettysburg. Lincoln offered just 269 words in his Gettysburg Address.

-April 9, 1865 - Gen. Robert E. Lee surrenders his Confederate Army to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at the village of Appomattox Court House in Virginia.

-April 14, 1865 - The Stars and Stripes is ceremoniously raised over Fort Sumter, where the war's first shots were fired. That night, Lincoln and his wife Mary see the play "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater. During the third act of the play, John Wilkes Booth shoots the president in the head. He never regains consciousness.

-April 15, 1865 - Vice President Andrew Johnson assumes the presidency.

-December 6, 1865 - The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, passed by Congress on January 31, 1865, is finally ratified. Slavery is abolished.

* Read all of Dr. McPherson's brief, excellent essay, "A Defining Time in American History" here: <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-overview/overview.html>

References:

<http://www.historyplace.com/civilwar/>

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/secession/>

<http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/facts.html>

Background Brief: The Legacy of Slavery

The Confederacy was decisively defeated in the Civil War, and American slavery was unmistakably destroyed. But the great challenge of Reconstruction was to determine just how defeated the South really was, and to establish how free the emancipated slaves really were...
- David Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (2001)



The Failure of Reconstruction and the Rise of Jim Crow

In the wake of the defeat of the Confederacy and emancipation, Congress implemented a plan for the secessionist states called Reconstruction - enforced by Federal troops - which lasted from 1866 to 1877. Reconstruction set the terms for readmitting the southern states into the Union and the means by which whites and blacks could live together in a democratic society. It was a period in which former slaves exercised the vote and were elected to legislatures. Thousands of Northerners came South - as missionaries, teachers, businessmen and politicians. White Southerners were resentful of their defeat, of federal supervision and what they considered the intrusion of Northerners, whether on a mission to aid the former slaves or to establish themselves amid the ruins of the Confederacy. The Republican Party itself was split over the extent of Reconstruction, but President Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877) supported "Radical Reconstruction" and enforced federal protection of African-Americans in the South.

The democratic initiatives of Reconstruction effectively ended when the Presidential election of 1876 resulted in Samuel Tilden winning the popular vote over Rutherford B. Hayes - but a split in the electoral college over "undecided" state electors not bound by the popular vote gave Hayes an opening to barter his way to the Presidency.

The Compromise of 1877 decided the outcome of the controversial presidential election of 1876 through a series of back-room discussions between Congressmen and private interest groups, and resulted in the retreat of the federal government from enforcing the 14th and 15th amendments for blacks. The Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act in 1875, making it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, but there was a national backlash against civil rights that led to the Supreme Court's nullification of the Civil Rights Act in 1883...

Many Southern blacks had become politically active after the Civil War, but after 1877, most lost the right to vote or to hold government positions. In 1878, the Congress forbade the use of the Army to protect black voters from the intimidation and physical violence... - PBS.ORG - Jim Crow

Racial terror and systematic re-subjugation of black people under brutally enforced “legal” segregation and discrimination dubbed “Jim Crow” became the norm in the southern United States. Lynching was the common tool to maintain this system.

(D)uring the period between Reconstruction and World War II. Equal Justice Initiative researchers documented 3,959 racial terror lynchings of African Americans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia between 1877 and 1950 - at least 700 more lynchings of black people in these states than previously reported in the most comprehensive work done on lynching to date...Lynchings were violent and public events that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials.

Equal Justice Initiative - <http://www.eji.org/lynchinginamerica>

A system of legalized segregation and disenfranchisement robbed black people of the promise of Emancipation for nearly a century. The consequences were catastrophic in every area of life: jobs, education, housing, medical care, voting rights, policing, the courts, brutal intimidation and the countless daily indignities of overt discrimination.

The Legacy of Slavery & the 21st Century

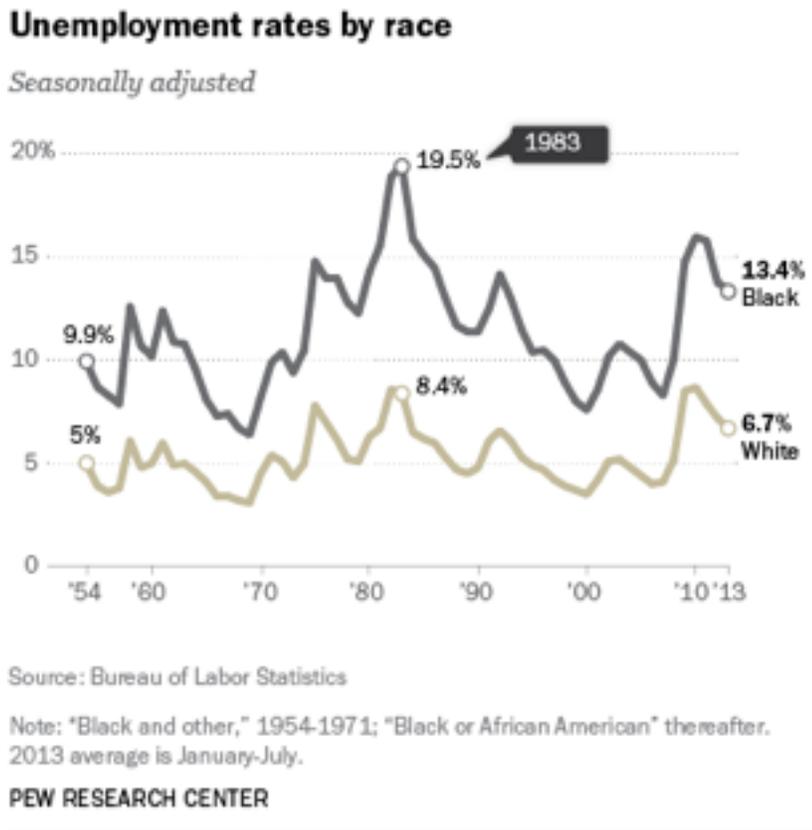
Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences - deep, corrosive, obstinate differences - radiating painful roots into the community and into the family, and the nature of the individual. These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice.

- President Lyndon B. Johnson, in his historic 1965 civil rights speech.

Militant civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s - Freedom Rides, The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1964 Freedom Summer and the Selma March - achieved much in the legislative arena to end “legal” Jim Crow with the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Act, but one underlying and fundamental factor that has remained constant - and periodically has gotten worse in the past half century - is an unemployment rate among African-Americans consistently twice that of whites.

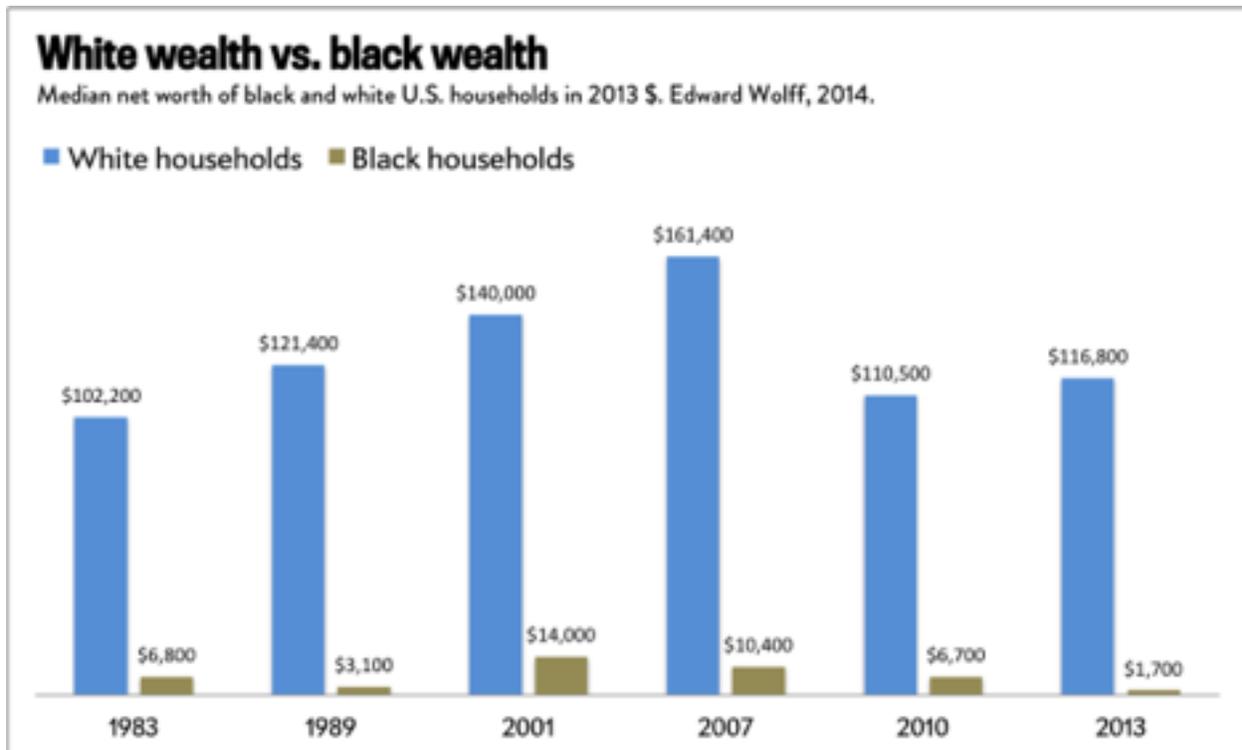
(Note: For an understanding of the broad range of issues raised in context of the civil rights movement, see the agenda and demands of the 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs & Freedom,” linked in the “Civil Rights” discussion resources, p. 31.)

The worst gaps, with black unemployment as much as 2.77 times that of white's, rose in the 1980s, as manufacturing sectors that employed a large proportion African-Americans - especially black males in urban centers - disappeared in the wake of globalization and technological change.



Further, the black-white “wealth gap”, which measures not simply differences in income between blacks and whites, but family wealth which is a major factor in access to housing in better neighborhoods, educational achievement and generational mobility, is more stark than economic disparities based on employment.

Over a quarter of the black/white wealth gap is rooted in homeownership and historical patterns associated with housing. The overwhelming impact of housing on black wealth became evident in the foreclosure crisis resulting from the 2008 financial collapse. "Overall, half the collective wealth of African-American families was stripped away during the Great Recession" according to a study by the Institute on Assets and Social Policy at Brandeis University. (ref. - Jamille Bouie, The American Prospect)



One of the most compelling recent essays on the continuing socio-economic impact of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow and of institutional racism on the black community is Ta-Nehisi Coates' *"The Case for Reparations,"* published in *The Atlantic* in 2014. In particular, Coates pays careful attention to the impact of post-WWII federal housing policies in enforcing systematic discrimination. The entire essay is a "must read."

From Ta-Nehisi Coates - **The Case for Reparations:**

The laments about "black pathology," the criticism of black family structures by pundits and intellectuals, ring hollow in a country whose existence was predicated on the torture of black fathers, on the rape of black mothers, on the sale of black children. An honest assessment of America's relationship to the black family reveals the country to be not its nurturer but its destroyer.

And this destruction did not end with slavery. Discriminatory laws joined the equal burden of citizenship to unequal distribution of its bounty. These laws reached their apex in the mid-20th century, when the federal government—through housing policies—engineered the wealth gap, which remains with us to this day...

The complete essay, which is a fertile and compelling resource for in-depth discussion can be read here: <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

Housing segregation effectively reinforces other patterns of discrimination. As one example, according to Steven Hsieh writing in *The Nation* (3/21/2014), a quarter of the schools with the highest percentage of black and Latino students do not offer Algebra II. A third do not offer chemistry, and black students were more than three times as likely to attend schools where fewer than 60 percent of teachers meet all state certification and licensure requirements.

Voter Restrictions and Race in the 21st Century

Center for American Progress:

An estimated 5.3 million Americans are denied the right to vote based on a past felony conviction. Felony disenfranchisement is exaggerated by racial disparities in the criminal-justice system, ultimately denying 13 percent of African American men the right to vote. Felony-disenfranchisement policies have led to 11 states denying the right to vote to more than 10 percent of their African American population.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/03/13/11351/the-top-10-most-startling-facts-about-people-of-color-and-criminal-justice-in-the-united-states/>

Recent Laws Restricting Access To Polls

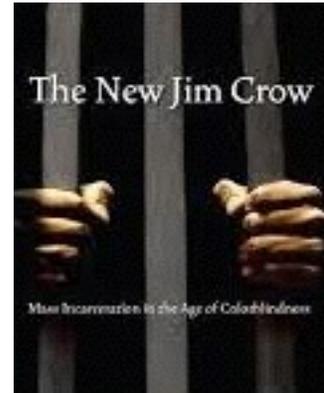
The Brennan Center for Justice:

Following the 2011-2012 state legislative sessions, 24 laws and executive actions restricting access to the polls were passed, with more pending, in various state legislatures across the country. Only five fewer laws restricting access to the polls passed in the last 24 months than during the entire century that Jim Crow laws proliferated across this country.

While these laws are allegedly passed to secure elections, they impact communities of color in ways only reflected in our Jim Crow past. Looking at voter ID laws alone, we know that although 11 percent of Americans lack government-issued photo ID, 25 percent of African-Americans, 16 percent of Hispanics, and 18 percent of elderly voters do not have this form of ID. States have also passed restrictions on early voting and community voter registration drives. Communities of color are more than twice as likely to register to vote with these groups, and they use early voting days at a much higher rate than the general population.

<http://www.brennancenter.org/blog/jim-crow-legacy-continues-today>

Background Brief: Mass Incarceration - The Rise of a “New Jim Crow” in the late 20th Century?



While the men in the “*John Brown’s Body in San Quentin Prison*” cast were all convicted of very serious crimes, no discussion of the contemporary prison experience can avoid confronting the reality of “mass incarceration” that has spiraled far beyond containment of criminals who pose a danger to society or deserve the most serious punishment.

- The US prison population grew by 700 percent from 1970 to 2005, a rate that was far outpacing crime and population rates. Today, the US has 5% of the World population and has 25% of world prisoners. African-Americans and Latinos make up about 30 percent of the United States’ population, while they account for 60 percent of the prison population. 1 in every 15 African American men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated versus 1 in every 106 white men.
- In the “War on Drugs”, African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a drug offense.
- One in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime...A report by the Department of Justice found that blacks and Hispanics were approximately three times more likely to be searched during a traffic stop than white motorists.
- African Americans were twice as likely to be arrested and almost four times as likely to experience the use of force during encounters with the police.
- In 1980 there were over three times as many black men in college and university as in prison and jail...Twenty years later the number of black men in college and university was actually fewer than the number behind bars...
- The war on drugs and harsher sentencing laws in the 1980s and 1990s led to an increase in the proportion persons imprisoned for low-level or non-violent crimes. Almost half of state prisoners are convicted of non-violent crimes...
- African Americans serve virtually as much time in prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months).

References:

The Sentencing Project

Human Rights Watch

NAACP - <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

Center for American Progress (3/13/2012)

Polikoff, Racial Inequality and the Black Ghetto -

<http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=njlsp>

Michelle Alexander: “The New Jim Crow”

Law professor Michelle Alexander has written the most powerful clarion call against the crisis of mass incarceration, framing the systematic impact on black communities as a “New Jim Crow”:

Today, due to recent declines, U.S. crime rates have dipped below the international norm. Nevertheless, the United States now boasts an incarceration rate that is six to ten times greater than that of other industrialized nations— a development directly traceable to the drug war. The only country in the world that even comes close to the American rate of incarceration is Russia, and no other country in the world incarcerates such an astonishing percentage of its racial or ethnic minorities.

The stark and sobering reality is that, for reasons largely unrelated to actual crime trends, the American penal system has emerged as a system of social control unparalleled in world history. And while the size of the system alone might suggest that it would touch the lives of most Americans, the primary targets of its control can be defined largely by race...

The shift to a general attitude of "toughness" toward problems associated with communities of color began in the 1960s, when the gains and goals of the Civil Rights Movement began to require real sacrifices on the part of white Americans, and conservative politicians found they could mobilize white racial resentment by vowing to crackdown on crime. By the late 1980s, however, not only conservatives played leading roles in the get-tough movement...Democratic politicians and policy makers were now attempting to wrest control of the crime and drug issues from Republicans by advocating stricter anticrime and antidrug laws—all in an effort to win back the so-called “swing voters” who were defecting to the Republican Party...

(excerpt - <http://www.kropfpolisci.com/racial.justice.alexander.pdf>)

Economic Underpinnings of Mass Incarceration

Loic Wacquant, a sociologist at UC Berkeley, emphasizes the economic underpinnings of the racial disparities evident in mass incarceration. Wacquant prefers the term “hyperincarceration” as a better descriptor: ***“hyperincarceration of one particular category: Lower class black men in the crumbling ghetto...inmates are first and foremost poor people.”***

Wacquant underlines the fact that mass incarceration’s most severe impact is on poor, socially isolated, minority neighborhoods characterized first and foremost by extremely high rates of unemployment. Following is an excerpt from Wacquant’s essay in Race, Incarceration & American Values (Glenn C. Loury, principal author, 2008):

Ethno-racial makeup of convicts has flip-flopped completely in 4 decades, turning over from 70% white and 30% ‘other’ at the close of WWII, to 70% black and Latino and 30% white by the centuries close...

Penal expansion after the mid-1970s is a political response to the collapse of the ghetto. But why did the ghetto collapse? One cause is the post-industrial economic transition that shifted employment from manufacturing to services, from central city to suburb, and from the rustbelt to the sunbelt and low-wage foreign countries...this shift made black workers redundant and undercut the role of the ghetto as a reservoir of unskilled labor.

(Another factor in) the collapse of the ghetto...(was) political displacement provoked by the Great White Migration to the suburbs. From the 1950s to the 1970s millions of white families fled the metropolis in response to the influx of African-Americans from the rural south...

(The ghetto) was left to crumble upon itself, abetted by the joint withdrawal of the wage-labor market and the welfare state, while the growing black middle class achieved limited social and spacial separation. As the ghetto lost its economic function...the prison was called upon to help contain a population widely viewed as deviant, destitute and dangerous. In so doing it returned to its original historical mission: not to stem crime, but to manage dispossessed and dishonored populations marginalized by economic transformation.

The Perverse Consequences of Mass Incarceration

Excerpted from Inimai M. Chettiar, writing in *Atlantic Monthly* on “*The Many Causes of America’s Decline in Crime*”:

Research shows incarceration can actually increase future crime. Criminologists call this the “criminogenic effect” of prison. It is particularly powerful on low-level offenders. Once individuals enter prison, they are surrounded by other prisoners who have often committed more serious and violent offenses. Prison conditions also breed violent and anti-social behavior.

Former prisoners often have trouble finding employment and reintegrating into society due to legal barriers, social stigma, and psychological scarring from prison. Approximately 600,000 prisoners reenter society each year. Those who can find employment earn 40 percent less than their peers, and 60 percent face long-term unemployment. Researchers estimate that the country’s poverty rate would have been more than 20 percent lower between 1980 and 2004 without mass incarceration...

Can the United States safely reduce its incarcerated population? After all, it would be too bad if reducing incarceration yielded a spike in crime.

Fortunately, there is a real-time experiment underway. For many reasons, including straitened budgets and a desire to diminish prison populations, many states have started to cut back on imprisonment. What happened? Interestingly, and encouragingly, crime did not explode. In fact, it dropped. In the last decade,

14 states saw declines in both incarceration and crime. New York reduced imprisonment by 26 percent, while seeing a 28 percent reduction in crime. Imprisonment and crime both decreased by more than 15 percent in California, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Texas...

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/the-many-causes-of-americas-decline-in-crime/385364/>

This last question is obviously key to our communities - can we reduce incarceration without seeing an increase in crime?

The evidence is becoming increasingly clear that mass incarceration has, if anything, perverse consequences, and not only fails as a solution to perceived problems but is a problem itself that adds to the multiple challenges faced by the communities most affected by crime.

Background Brief: San Quentin Prison

Located in Marin County, in view of the Golden Gate Bridge on the San Francisco Bay, San Quentin is the oldest prison in California, operating since July 1852. The original structure was built by inmates, housed on a prison ship in the Bay. A dungeon built at San Quentin in 1854 is thought to be California's oldest surviving public work. The current prison houses the state's only death row for male inmates, the largest in the United States.

As of 2013 the prison had an intended capacity of 3,082 but an actual prisoner population of 4,223 - an occupancy rate of 137 percent. The institution consists of Level I housing ("Open dormitories without a secure perimeter"); Level II housing ("Open dormitories with secure perimeter fences and armed coverage"); a Reception Center (RC) which "provides short term housing to process, classify and evaluate incoming inmates"; and a Condemned unit ("Death Row.") The prison has over 1700 staff - guards, service providers and administrators. San Quentin is one of the largest US prisons. San Quentin housed both male and female inmates until 1933 when the women's prison at Tehachapi was built.

Over the years San Quentin prison has become a familiar fixture in popular culture - film, literature and music. Numerous feature films from 1937's "San Quentin" with Humphrey Bogart to the recent "Fruitvale Station" have used San Quentin as an actual location. Susan Hayward won the Academy Award as Best Actress for her portrayal in "I Want To Live" (1958) of condemned inmate Barbara Graham who was executed at San Quentin,

Neal Cassady, vagabond buddy and inspiration to counter-culture novelists Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey served time in San Quentin in the late '50s for marijuana possession. Condemned inmate Caryl Chessman became famous as an author who galvanized the anti-capital punishment movement in the early 1960s. San Quentin housed Black Panthers and prison authors Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson. Jackson died there in a controversial violent episode. More recently, Crips co-founder, convicted murderer and prison author of numerous books Stanley "Tookie" Williams was executed in San Quentin in 2005, after becoming the subject of an extensive movement to gain clemency for him

Country music star Johnny Cash recorded a live album at San Quentin, as did blues icon BB King. Singer-songwriter Merle Haggard served time there in the early 1960s and says that a San Quentin performance by Cash inspired him to become a professional musician when he got out.

San Quentin is notable in the state of California's prison system for the extensive volunteer programs promoting education, rehabilitation and the arts.

For current news from inside the prison, written by inmates, check out The San Quentin News - the only inmate-produced newspaper in California and one of the few in the world: <http://sanquentinnews.com>

Discussion

John Brown and Harper's Ferry

From "John Brown's Body":

*Sometimes there comes a crack in Time itself.
Sometimes the earth is torn by something blind...
Call it the _mores_, call it God or Fate...
That force exists and moves.*

*And when it moves
It will employ a hard and actual stone
To batter into bits an actual wall
And change the actual scheme of things.*

John Brown

*Was such a stone--unreasoning as the stone,
Destructive as the stone, and, if you like,
Heroic and devoted as such a stone.
He had no gift for life, no gift to bring
Life but his body and a cutting edge,
But he knew how to die.*



Exercises: (Use the background brief, John Brown and the Abolitionists, p.7, as a discussion leader's resource or a group handout.)

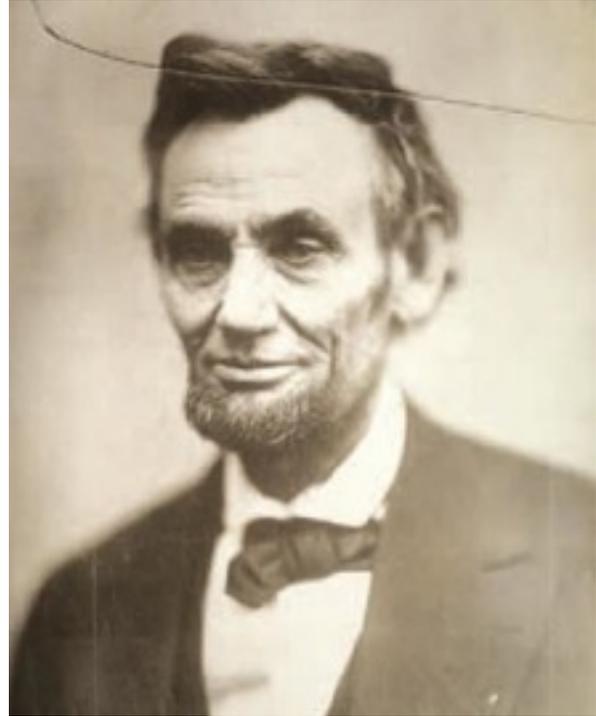
- How did Brown emerge in historical memory as a hero rather than a failed zealot or even a terrorist? Brown had led deadly confrontations with pro-slavery settlers in Kansas, he was a failure in his attempt to ignite a slave rebellion, but he became a celebrated figure of "metaphorical triumph" in his trial and execution, galvanizing the country around the cause of abolitionists against the slaveholders. Discuss the apparent paradox of John Brown.
- Consider the role of the press, the role of his abolitionist advocates and his own conduct at his trial. How did subsequent events elevate rather than obscure Brown's memory and make him appear prescient rather than delusional? Did Brown's actions have a significant impact on the ways in which those events unfolded?
- How are "definitive" versions of history constructed? By whom? Why? Use other examples than John Brown and his raid.

Discussion

Abraham Lincoln: the complexity of a great leader.

“That he was thinking about not freeing the slaves, it blew my mind. I just saw him as this giant force moving to free the slaves. But actually he was just a man like everybody else - he had doubts, he had fears, he was worried, he was concerned - and I felt that.”

- Ronin, who plays Lincoln in the performance of “John Brown’s Body”, reflects on Abraham Lincoln’s complex character in JBBSQP (72 min version.)



Exercises: (Use the Background brief on [Abraham Lincoln](#), p. 12 as a discussion leader’s resource or group handout to amplify the exercises.)

- Write on a large sheet or chalkboard various group reactions to the character of Abraham Lincoln as presented in the play. What forces - personal, social and political - make a figure like Lincoln more complicated than he is often perceived?
- Assign individuals to find other examples in our history of renowned political leaders trying to “do the right thing”, but appearing to hesitate or compromise principles in the course of events. (One possible area of research might be how the regional coalition of the Democratic Party under FDR had an impact on implementation of New Deal legislation, notably the original Social Security Act. Another area might be the debates over how the Affordable Care Act, intended to provide comprehensive health care, would ultimately be constructed to pass Congress.)

Discussion

The Failure of Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow & the legacy of Slavery

Exercises: (Use background brief on The Legacy of Slavery, p.16, as the discussion leader's resource or a group handout)

- **Emancipation:** Enumerate the Rights established for former slaves under Emancipation, the 13th and 14th Amendments and Reconstruction Laws.
- **Reconstruction:** Research the reasons Reconstruction failed and discuss as a group.
- **Find contrasting narratives of the reconstruction era** - those common to contemporary descendants of the Confederacy and those common to African-Americans and historians who study African-American history. Compare and discuss.
- **Jim Crow:** Enumerate the rights for former slaves which were lost as the re-subjugation of black people took hold throughout the old South. Why was the rise of Jim Crow allowed take place? How was it enforced?
- **"Post-racial" racism?:** Discuss how long-standing disparities in wealth and income inequality, apparently "race neutral" policies and shifts in the economy can mask or legitimize the persistence of fundamental racial inequities. Examples.
- **In what ways are voting rights being called into question** in the current political environment? What is the rationale for laws restricting voting and what are the outcomes? What is the impact of judicial inequities and incarceration on voting rights for African-Americans? (The last question is also addressed in the discussion "Mass Incarceration: The New Jim Crow?")



Discussion

Larry Miller, The Civil Rights Movement and Black Power



Exercises: (See suggested resources for use with these exercises below, p. 30-31)

- **The Civil Rights Movement:** Larry Miller talks about his discomfort watching non-violent civil rights protests on TV as a young person. Discuss. What were the philosophical roots of the civil rights movement? Outline the movement's key strategy and tactics, their strengths and weaknesses.
- What were major accomplishments that can be attributed to the civil rights movements of the 1940s, '50s and '60s?
- In retrospect, what are ways the movement fell short of its goals? (See "Demands of the 1963 March on Washington" in appended resources, p. 31, as a key reference for this discussion.)
- **The Emergence of Black Power:** How did Black Power and more militant movements that inspired Larry Miller as a "street soldier" emerge in context of the civil rights movement?
- What was the strategy and philosophical basis of the militant Black Power movement as exemplified by Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and others? Strengths? Weaknesses?
- What were major accomplishments that can be attributed to the rise of "Black Power" or black nationalist movements?
- In retrospect, what are ways that the promise of "Black Power" fell short of the goals?

- **Larry, Cudjo and Spade:** Larry Miller raises the issues of the non-violent civil rights movement and the “Black Power” era “street soldier” in context of his discussion of Cudjo and Spade - the subservient “house slave” and the rebellious “field slave” respectively. The civil rights movement of the mid-20th Century challenged white supremacy with a strategy of non-violent civil disobedience, mass protests and legal/legislative redress, but individuals had to live with the system on a daily basis. **Research/discuss the complexities of individual survival in the Jim Crow system, even as the movement was taking hold.**
- The Cudjo v. Spade characters Larry refers to represent adaptive or survival modes for black people living in slavery and a Jim Crow system. Find real or fictional characters from black history or literature that clearly reflect these two archetypes.
- Could ordinary people navigating that system find that these archetypes weren't always mutually exclusive? Since this is a discussion of a dramatic performance, think of these archetypes or personalities as masks. Could the same individual wear a “Cudjo mask” as a survival tactic in certain situations and express the militance of “Spade” in another? Can you find a character in black history or literature that reflects tension between the two in a single individual?
- Lead the group in discussion of why Larry ends his observations on his experience of the ‘60s with the line, “I needed to be jailed. I was a danger to myself and everybody around me.” Was this surprising, coming from an avowed “street soldier”? Does it make sense in the context of Larry’s story as he tells it in the film?
- **Accommodation v. Protest in African-American History:** The two most prominent black leaders of the early 20th Century were Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Washington was an open advocate of accepting segregation while focusing on job skills and black economic advancement. DuBois was a fierce critic of white supremacy who helped launch the early civil rights movement. Their respective positions are linked below. Have the group debate the pros and cons of each position.

Booker T Washington - Atlanta Compromise Speech
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>

WEB DuBois criticizes Booker T Washington (from “Souls of Black Folks”)
http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/40

- Research: How were Washington’s and DuBois’ views received in the black community? How were they received by whites, in particular those who held political power?
- How has history treated the social and political legacies of Washington and DuBois respectively? What is the legacy of Washington? What is the legacy of DuBois ?

Further Resource and Research suggestions:

Popular films and videos:

Feature films: “Selma” and “X.”

“Martin Luther King: Montgomery to Memphis”, a definitive documentary of Dr. King and the civil rights movement, is available in several parts on Youtube.

Malcolm X’s speeches are extensively available on Youtube -

Ex. - “Harlem - Mississippi/Freedom Democratic Party Speech, Dec. 24, 1964” is a post-“Nation of Islam” speech by Malcolm that gives a good outline of his positions and his differences with the mainstream civil rights movement.

Readings:

Malcom X - [The Autobiography of Malcolm X](#)

Dr. King - “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/04/martin-luther-kings-letter-from-birmingham-jail/274668/>

Dr. King - [Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?](#)

[http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/1%27ve been to the mountaintop.pdf](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/1%27ve%20been%20to%20the%20mountaintop.pdf)

“Program and Demands of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom”

<http://www.crmvet.org/docs/mowprog.pdf>

(Note: One of the demands, a \$2/hr. minimum wage in 1963, would be approx. \$13.40/hr in 2013 dollars)

Discussion

Mass Incarceration - The “New Jim Crow”?



Exercises: (Use background brief on Mass Incarceration, p. 21, as discussion leader’s resource or a group handout)

Key Resource/Exercise: watch this video of *The New Jim Crow* author Michelle Alexander, in conversation with Bill Moyers - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om2hx6Xm2JE>

- In what social and political contexts did the policies that bred mass incarceration become “the norm” over the last 40 years?
- What are the effects of mass incarceration on black communities? On families - parents and children? Ask the group to bring their own stories of families or friends.
- Compare the impact of mass incarceration on poor black communities to the impact on predominantly white and economically stable communities?
- How has the reality of mass incarceration had an impact on perceptions of the legitimacy of the criminal justice system and law enforcement? Discuss the implications for policing and for communities. Suggested reading: Ta-Nehisi Coates - “**The Myth of Police Reform**,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-myth-of-police-reform/390057/>
- **Engage the current political debate over mass incarceration:** Is mass incarceration increasingly losing legitimacy as social policy? Have the group research recent policy interventions to reduce mass incarceration in various states - ex. in California: Proposition 47 and AB109 - “Realignment,” shifting state prisoners to local community supervision.

- What has been the impact of these policies? Why have they been gaining support? What are the “politics” of the current debate around mass incarceration?”
- Who is making the arguments around incarceration and from what positions? What is the confluence of interests - racial justice, ethical considerations, fiscal/pragmatic arguments, criminological and legal?
- What are the social purposes of local policing, of the criminal justice system and of prisons? Discuss varying approaches to offenders - diversion, punishment and rehabilitation. What actually happens? Again, ask the group to bring their own stories of family or friends.
- **Felonies and restrictions on voting rights:** What are the implications of mass incarceration for African-Americans in context of the history of denial of voting rights.
- **Re-entry of former felons:** Are there critical social imperatives - i.e. benefits to society as a whole - in an agenda of rehabilitation and assimilation for formerly incarcerated persons?
- As a group exercise, construct a list of effective programs and services for the formerly incarcerated to successfully re-enter mainstream society.
- What does the group see as barriers to successfully instituting your program?
- What organizations in your community have been working on providing essential re-entry services to former felons? Invite a speaker from one of these groups to discuss their work.

A community screening:

A model for using the documentary for community engagement to raise issues around prisons, re-entry and mass incarceration was the screening organized in West Oakland, CA in the fall of 2014 in conjunction with Oakland Community Organizations and a dozen faith communities. A ballot initiative, Proposition 47, designed to end imprisonment on felony charges for non-violent drug crimes and petty theft, was scheduled for the early November elections. Several months prior, the screening organizers did outreach to local churches and synagogues, community organizations and activists working on the campaign, developing flyers, pulpit announcements and press releases. Direct contact was made with local pastors and active members of various congregations. A large centrally located church venue that is familiar to the local faith community was selected. Speakers were invited - formerly incarcerated persons who could lead discussion and address the issues. The director and two cast members who live in the area were available to speak. Discussion focused on the personal journeys of the formerly incarcerated men. In conclusion to the organized post-film discussion, the audience of approximately 300 were asked to participate in the Proposition 47 campaign. Event staff of about a dozen people drawn from sponsoring congregations handed out literature on the issues and around 50 people signed up to get involved in Proposition 47 activities. This was an unusual opportunity to link the film’s message to a very concrete issue, but similar public screenings can be used as general forums to get community members and congregations engaged with organizations that are working to end mass incarceration. The key is good planning, developing a committed team and engaging in energetic outreach.

Discussion

John Brown's Body in San Quentin Prison: Challenges for Faith Communities

From "John Brown's Body":

"The (slave ship) Captain closed the Bible carefully, putting it down as if his fingers loved it."

John Brown:

"I see a book kissed which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do unto me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right.



Abraham Lincoln:

*They come to me and talk about God's will
In righteous deputations and platoons...
It is this man's and his worst enemy's.
But all of them are sure they know God's will.
I am the only man who does not know it...*

*The will of God prevails. No doubt, no doubt--
Yet, in great contests, each side claims to act
In strict accordance with the will of God...*

Exercises:

- In the "John Brown's Body" text, slave traders and abolitionists alike honor the Bible. Discuss how the authority of the Bible was used historically to support opposing views during the conflict over slavery. What were the "relevant" texts and how do you interpret the context?
- Have the group research their own faith tradition's positions and action - or inaction - in the period of slavery and abolitionism.
- Research and discuss the role of various faith traditions in the context of the modern civil rights movement. Were there patterns similar to the period of slavery and abolitionism?
- Discuss the role faith communities can play today in the context of justice issues related to policing, prisons and re-entry for the formerly incarcerated. (Use the "Mass Incarceration"

discussion exercises, p.29, to amplify your discussion. Also "Redemption" discussion, p 37.) How are prisoners and the promise of redemption considered in scripture?

- What are current examples of religious texts being used to validate contentious or opposing views around socio-political, social justice or ethical issues?
- Research and discuss the unique character of African-American Christianity in which Biblical stories have connected directly to a people's lived experience in the periods of slavery, Jim Crow, the modern civil rights movement and current activism around prisons and policing.

Scripture resources:

Old Testament

Hebrews 13:1-3 - *Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

Psalms 79:11 - *Let the groaning of the prisoner come before You; According to the greatness of Your power preserve those who are doomed to die.*

Psalms 69:33 - *For the LORD hears the needy And does not despise His who are prisoners.*

Psalms 102:20 - *To hear the groaning of the prisoner, To set free those who were doomed to death...*

Psalms 146:7 - *Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free.*

Isaiah 61:1 - *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me...he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.*

Exodus tells the story of Moses, a fugitive from justice whom God called to bring His people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses had killed an Egyptian, buried him in the desert, and fled the country to escape execution. (*Exodus 2:11-15*). But he was used by God to lead the Jewish people to the Promised Land and to proclaim the Ten Commandments.

New Testament

Matthew 25:36 & 49 - *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me...Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters, you did for me.*

Luke 23:39 - *One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" 40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" 41 "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" 43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."*

Discussion

The Prison Experience - Walk in their shoes

"You walk in here, you think twice"
"It's rough, tough and dangerous"
"Anything to get me out of that cell was important"
- Cast members of "John Brown's Body"



Exercises:

- Early in the film cast members are asked to identify themselves by their prison CDC numbers. One of them, Ronin, strongly objects and will only say his name. How does this response help the group to imagine the experience of institutionalization affecting one's sense of self and one's identity? What do you see changing for a person when they walk in the door of a prison, beyond the physical restriction?

Group "Brainstorm":

- Ask the group to put themselves in the shoes of a recently incarcerated person facing, say, a 10-20 year sentence. What would be your initial fears, goals, priorities? (Make lists)
- Ask the group to put themselves in the shoes of an incarcerated person who has served half of a 10-20 year sentence and sees the possibility of parole in a few years. What would be your main fears, goals, priorities mid-way through?
- What experiences or opportunities might help you move forward? What might halt your progress?
- Discuss the differences between the two lists.
- Put yourselves in the shoes of a person who has served a lengthy sentence and is being released on parole with a serious felony record.
- What would be your main fears, goals priorities?
- What experiences might help you move forward? What might halt your progress?
- Brainstorm some re-entry programs and services that might help you achieve your goals as you emerge back into the outside world.
- **Follow-up research project:** What re-entry services for formerly incarcerated persons actually exist in your community. Do they appear to be adequate? What local groups are involved in the issues of re-entry and social services for formerly incarcerated individuals?
- **Speaker:** Invite a formerly incarcerated person to come and speak with your group about their own experiences.

Discussion

Redemption

- Discuss “*John Brown’s Body in San Quentin Prison*” as a narrative of redemption - of lives being radically transformed and becoming a “new person.”
- Invite the group to bring other famous redemption narratives to the discussion. * Example: Malcolm X - go to his autobiography for reflections on his prison experience, how it impacted his worldview and rhetoric. Consider also, the story of Moses referenced in the “Faith Discussion”, p 35.
- Discuss Malcolm X on “learning to read” in prison. Reference: <http://www.deltacollege.edu/emp/pwall/documents/LearningtoRead.pdf>
- How does the experience of Malcolm X compare to Larry Miller’s discussion of his immersion in classic books when he emerged from solitary confinement?

Discussion

Arts Behind Bars

From “John Brown’s Body in San Quentin Prison”:

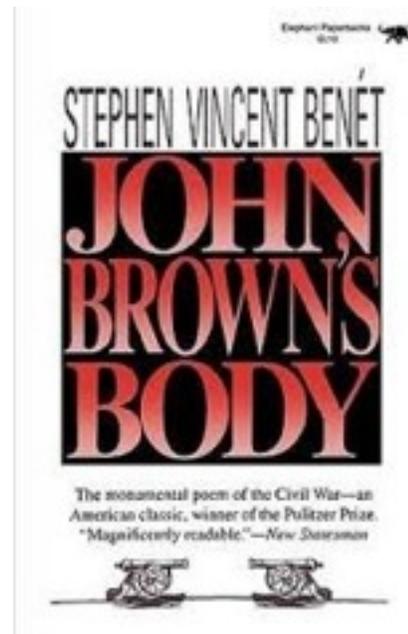
Larry Miller: *“Two of my supervisors came to see the play. It affected them so much they cried. That made me feel powerful.”*

Cast Members:

“Up to the point that we did the play I had never been forced to be responsible. This is one of those times I was supposed to be responsible.”

“It gives me another dimension of who I am - another dimension of life”

“Playing two white guys..you take on a persona to become something that you’ve been told as a child to stay away from...”



- How do the comments by cast members of “John Brown’s Body” in the documentary exemplify the role of arts and literature as a transformative experience? How did the experience of enacting the play change the men’s lives?
- What are common perceptions of incarcerated persons that the documentary challenges or changed for the audience?

- Ask the group to share experiences in their own lives which suggest the transformative potential of the arts or literature.
- Find examples outside the JBB@SQP documentary of people facing challenges whose lives have been dramatically changed by the experience of the arts and literature. (One popular example of literature as transformative that's familiar to many students is Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", in which she describes being rendered mute after a rape and her eventual encounter with Mrs. Flowers who encourages her reading.)

Further research:

A short essay on the potential of theater in rehabilitation can be found here:
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/12/18/prison-could-be-productive/prison-theater-transforms-inmates>

Interview with Rhodessa Jones, founder of The Medea Project, Theater for Incarcerated Women - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15146105>

The popular NPR show, This American Life, has an episode devoted entirely to the story of a group of high-security inmates staging Hamlet.
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/218/act-v>

Discussion

John Brown's Song: Music & Social Protest:

*"There is a song in my bones. There is a song in my white bones...
 That is my song. It is made of water and wind. It marches on...It will grow stronger..."*
 - John Brown's Body

Exercise: (Use the Background Brief "John Brown's Song...", p.26, as a discussion leader's resource or group handout.)

- John Brown's song became an anthem of the Union soldiers during the Civil War and the inspiration for "Battle Hymn of the Republic", one of the best known American patriotic anthems that survives to this day. Have the group bring other examples to discuss how songs have played a significant role in social movements throughout American history.

John Brown.
 CHORUS, FOUR PARTS. Made arranged by G. S. HARRIS.

1 John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
 John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
 His soul's marching on!
 Glory, Hallelujah! Glory, Hallelujah!
 His soul's marching on!

2 He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
 He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
 He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
 His soul's marching on!
 Glory, Hallelujah! Glory, Hallelujah!
 His soul's marching on!

3 John Brown's banner is straggled upon his back,
 John Brown's banner is straggled upon his back,
 His soul's marching on!
 Glory, Hallelujah! Glory, Hallelujah!
 His soul's marching on!

4 The pot boils will heat him on the way—
 The pot boils will heat him on the way—
 They go marching on!
 Glory, Hallelujah! Glory, Hallelujah!
 They go marching on!

5 They will hang Jeff Davis in a tree!
 They will hang Jeff Davis in a tree!
 As they march along!
 Glory, Hallelujah! Glory, Hallelujah!
 As they march along!

6 Now, some raising cheer for the Union!
 Now, some raising cheer for the Union!
 As we are marching on!
 Glory, Hallelujah! Glory, Hallelujah!
 Now, some raising cheer for the Union!
 Now, some raising cheer for the Union!
 As we are marching on!

Published by C. S. HARRIS, 254 Mass Street, CHARLESTOWN, Mass.
 Reprint, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1861, by C. S. HARRIS, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts.

674

Discussion

“Fat Aunt Bess” - Graciousness Founded on Hopeless Wrong

From “John Brown’s Body”:

*They have made you a shrine and a humorous fable,
But they kept you a slave while they were able,
And yet, there was something between the two
That you shared with them and they shared with you,
Graciousness founded on hopeless wrong*



Exercises:

- Have the group bring examples of characters in literature or film who embody this often apparently ambiguous relationship between a subordinated woman doing child-rearing or domestic work and the master or employer. (Examples from popular films include the character famously portrayed by Oscar-winner Hattie McDaniel in “Gone With the Wind” and, in a more modern setting, Viola Davis’ character in “The Help.”)
- Discuss how the relationship and perceptions played out from both sides and what the differences signify about the individuals and their understanding of the other.

Discussion - Murderers!

- Cast member Noble describes the “John Brown’s Body” cast as “a bunch of murderers.” Three of the men tell their stories of a homicide conviction that landed them in San Quentin for decades. Does the way in which each man tells his story suggest any thoughts or questions to the group about the actions and the criminal conviction? Or about their personal journey in prison and their self-awareness in retrospect?

Discussion

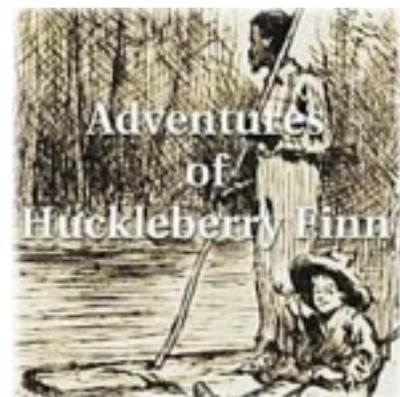
“The N-Word”

From “John Brown’s Body in San Quentin Prison”:

“There were some folks who had trouble with the word ‘nigger...We decided not to use the word...we replaced it with ‘slaves.’”

Larry Miller: *“In my opinion it took away from the essence of what this is about...Let’s keep it real.”*

Warden Jeanne Woodford - *“The issue of slavery and language are very sensitive outside of prison, but they are incredibly important inside the prison”*



Exercises:

- Was Larry Miller right that in changing the word they weren't "keeping it real"? Can there be legitimate use of this word - that is almost universally seen as one of the most offensive - in an artistic or social context?
- What are examples? What is problematic in the examples?

Suggested reading for this discussion:

Ta-Nehisi Coates in the New York Times - **"In Defense of a Loaded Word"** :
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/opinion/sunday/coates-in-defense-of-a-loaded-word.html?_r=0

- Larry Miller references Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn." For more on the long-standing "Huckleberry Finn Debate" see this discussion linked below:
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/01/05/does-one-word-change-huckleberry-finn>
- Should a book like "Huckleberry Finn" be assigned in classrooms without any changes to the language? Discuss the "whys" of differing views among the group.
- What are some examples of the use of the word in today's popular culture? (See notes on "Comedy and the 'N-Word'" below.)
- How does context alter the audience's perception of intent? Is it as simple as "if a black person says it, it's okay?"

Notes for popular culture discussion - Comedy and "The N-word"



Black comedian/social commentator Dick Gregory, who became popular during the era of the civil rights movement, titled his memoir, Nigger. The outsider Jewish comedian/social commentator Lenny Bruce had a routine where he repeated the word over and over and over, in what he conceived as a ritual to diminish its power.

Black comedian/social commentator Richard Pryor used the word liberally in his performances for years, and then quit after a trip to Africa that he attested had elevated his own perceptions of black people.

Chris Rock has a famous routine where he uses the word to differentiate black people who engage in behavior he doesn't respect from most black people who he respects and loves. Like Pryor, after several years, during which it became a signature of his comedy, he decided to quit performing it. Rock: *"I've never done that joke again, ever, and I probably never will. 'Cos some people that were racist thought they had license to say nigger. So, I'm done with that routine."*

Engagement Resources

Volunteer Programs in Prison

“San Quentin is known for its wide-ranging rehabilitation efforts and programs using a vast number of community volunteers. By one measure there are more volunteers assisting San Quentin programs than the combined number of volunteers at California’s other 33 adult prisons.” (San Quentin NEWS)

- If the group is interested in further engagement in this area you can find more extensive information on California State Prison rehabilitative and volunteer programs at these links:

<https://www.facebook.com/PrisonArtsProject>

<http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/>

<http://www.prisoneducationproject.org/>

<http://ca-reentry.org/>

<http://theprisonartscoalition.com/programs/>

<http://www.insightprisonproject.org/trainings.html>

http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Facilities_Locator/docs/Program_inventories/SQ-inventories.pdf

You can research information about volunteer programs in prisons in other states online.